

Marine Fought for Place in History

Frederick County Native Was Due Home This Month

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Lance Cpl. James W. Higgins Jr. was fascinated by the past. His favorite musician was Frank Sinatra; his favorite comedians, Abbott and Costello; his favorite books, histories -- particularly anything about World War II.

And when the Frederick County native saw his chance to serve his country and become part of history in the making, as part of a new global war, he jumped at it.

He grabbed his piece of history, but it cost him. The Pentagon announced Monday that Higgins was killed Thursday in Anbar province, a desert region in western Iraq that is the heartland of the Sunni-led insurgent movement.

His mother, Deborah Higgins, said he died of a gunshot wound to the chest. His unit, the 1st Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division, is at Camp Fallujah, a base about 35 miles west of Baghdad. The red sign at the camp's gate had been a welcome sight when he returned from missions, his family said.

Higgins, 22, was to return from his tour of duty this month. He had a first-class ticket that would have taken him from his base at Camp Pendleton, Calif., to Baltimore-Washington International Thurgood Marshall Airport on Aug. 26, his family said.

His body returned to Maryland yesterday. After making funeral arrangements, his relatives went back to their two-story home in Thurmont, a tidy place with an American flag, a lawn, a white picket fence.

His younger brother, Joseph, 20, was hardly able to speak in anything but a whisper. He held his brother's big, black Casio G-Shock watch, still set eight hours ahead to Iraqi time.

Pictures of Higgins were piled up on the kitchen table. The family recalled a young man who was naturally disciplined but who had a fun streak.

Higgins made the honor roll at Catocin High School, where he graduated in 2003, and earned several awards for his participation in the Civil Air Patrol. Conscious of his public appearance, he sometimes wore his uniform to class. He showered, shaved and dressed neatly even for a run to the grocery store, his family said. He was also intensely competitive, playing football all four years of high school.

His sister, Melinda Sue, said his final game was memorable: "The guys just wanted to end the season and get on with their lives. But he wanted to win. The game was dead, and all of a sudden you just saw James pick up the ball and score a touchdown."

When he wasn't at school, he was often at home, playing PlayStation 2 and Xbox video games on a 75-inch television or watching TV programs, his mother said. His hero was R. Lee Ermey, a retired Marine gunnery sergeant who hosts the History Channel show "Mail Call."

After a brief time at Frederick Community College, Higgins enlisted in the Marines in April 2005, graduating in the top 5 percent of recruits going through boot camp at Parris Island, S.C. When he got the news that he was going to Iraq, he was excited, writing "OFF TO WAR!" on his calendar for Jan. 19.

"He thought it was an honor to be part of the military," his mother said. "He had his worries, obviously, but he kept saying it'd be all right."

As he neared the end of his tour, he became eager to come home. He sent home a photo of him standing next to a Humvee. His eyes are shadowed, his face harder than in the pictures of him smiling before the war; perhaps because of the bright desert sun, but the symbolism was not lost on his mother.

When she asked about it, he told her: "This place changes people."

Her last conversation with him was July 23. "When he called me Sunday, he told me it was getting really bad," she said. "The danger had escalated so much."

"Be safe," she remembered telling him.

"Always," he said.