

Nation/world

Navy recruit's fear is overcome by death

By Rogers Worthington
Chicago Tribune

APPLETON, Wis.—The last, haunting memories Lynn Johansen has of her brother, Lee Mirecki, are the worried phone calls the young Navy recruit made in the days before his death on March 2.

Mirecki, 19, a student in the Navy's Rescue Swimmers School at Pensacola, Fla., feared he would wash out. He had panicked once during a simulated rescue exercise in which instructors portrayed panic-stricken pilots and airmen downed in a hostile sea.

After an evaluation by base doctors, Mirecki had opted to try again. But the fear was still there, rooted in a terrifying experience at age 5, when he was tossed into the deep end of a pool and repeatedly dunked by older boys.

"He said, 'It's really hard, Lynn. It's the hardest thing I've ever done,'" Johansen, 30, recalls. "I told him, 'Honey, you're a strong kid. If they think you can continue, maybe it's something you can overcome.' I knew he was afraid and under a lot of stress, yet I kept encouraging him."

Four days later, Navy casualty officers arrived in Manitowish Waters, Wis., at the home of Mirecki's mother, Elaine Kitowski. There had been a tragic accident, they said. Lee had collapsed while swimming during a training session and had never regained consciousness.

A Navy telegram to the family stated that Mirecki had died of cardiopulmonary arrest, "which occurred during normal operations."

It made no sense to Johansen that her brother—an all-around athlete and a strong swimmer, despite his fear of water—should die in a swimming pool surrounded by 26 recruits and 5 water rescue instructors.

The Navy psychologist who had recommended that he give the swimming school another try described Mirecki's fear as "neither irrational nor disproportionate," according to a document obtained by Johansen.

"The only thing he absolutely hated was when anyone took him by surprise in the water and jumped on him," said Laurie Radewan, 28, Mirecki's other sister.

Friends recall Mirecki as a tall, lean, amiable youth with a strong competitive nature and a cool head. He ran cross country, played baseball and lettered in soccer at Appleton High School, where he was regarded as a good student.

Roses put air carrier in the red

MIAMI (AP)—An Avianca Airlines cargo jet was seized Saturday and the carrier fined nearly \$8 million after Customs agents found 490 pounds of cocaine stashed in a shipment of red roses.

Avianca is the national airline of Colombia, the point of origin for much of the cocaine brought into the United States, according to federal officials.

"This is the 14th time since January, 1986," that drugs were found aboard an Avianca flight, said Customs spokesman Michael Sheehan. "Avianca is a source of great concern for the Customs Service."

The cocaine was found on Flight 768 from Bogota, which carried 2,000 boxes of assorted flowers, 30 of them listed as containing red roses, Sheehan said. Eight of the rose boxes were packed with cocaine, he said.

"All 2,000 boxes were checked. Each of the eight boxes weighed about twice as much as a normal box, which should weigh about 30 pounds," Sheehan said. No arrests were made.

The carrier's Boeing 747 was seized at Miami International Airport to ensure payment of fines levied for Saturday's cache. Avianca must pay \$16,000 for each pound of cocaine or its plane could be auctioned off, said Sheehan, adding that the airline has paid its past fines and received its planes back.

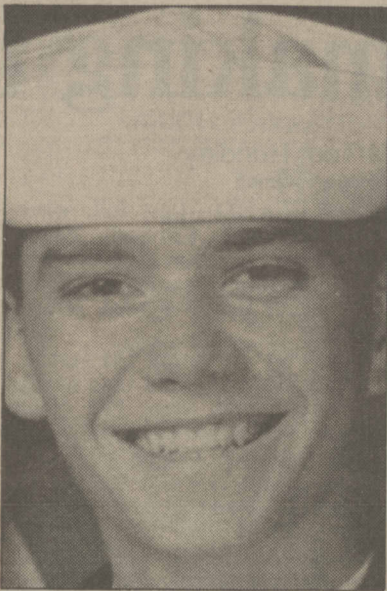
A fine for 490 pounds would total \$7.8 million.

Including Saturday's find, Customs agents have turned up a total of about 5,000 pounds of cocaine on Avianca flights, often hidden in such perishable shipments as flowers or food. Other recent smuggling discoveries here on Avianca jets include 132 pounds of cocaine hidden in a Valentine's Day shipment of roses, and a March 27 find of 35.8 pounds.

Avianca offices in Miami were closed, and its airport agents said company officials were not available for comment.

Besides seizing the jet, Sheehan said, Customs agents also confiscated the 22 real boxes of red roses and sent them to Baptist Hospital in Miami.

"We hope that some of the patients in the hospital are able to enjoy them," he said.



Lee Mirecki

"He was a super kid, attentive, consistent and up, the kind you'd like a classroom full of," said William Haack, who taught him study skills.

"He was the kind of guy who got along with everybody," said Jim Woller, a high school friend. "He wasn't cocky, and he wasn't a quitter. If he had a problem, he would just try harder."

Mirecki was the baby in his family, the bright young star, and a bit of a practical joker who, his sister Laurie Radewan recalled, "would put tape over a faucet nozzle so, when you turned it on, it sprayed in your face."

He entered Orlando Naval Training Center in October, hoping to become a Navy pilot. In the ensuing months, he wrote and called home from time to time. But when he entered rescue swimmers school, a course with a tough reputation and a 40 percent attrition rate, the calls home came more frequently.

"He told me they wanted to make a man out of him," Lynn Johansen recalled. After his withdrawal from the course, she said, "I told him, 'They wouldn't tell you to go back in that water if they didn't think you could do it.'"

Later, haunted by hindsight, Johansen's grief focused on the drive to know what had really happened in the Pensacola swimming pool on March 2. The drive intensified after a telephone call from a Pensacola News-Journal reporter, who told Johansen she had received anonymous calls saying the Navy had not told the true story.

"My heart just dropped," Johansen said.

Soon, the same reporter told her that the other recruits on the scene that day had been ordered to line up, backs to the water, and sing the national anthem while Mirecki was struggling and screaming in the pool.

Johansen and her husband, Larry, an optician, got a copy of the autopsy report, which ascribed Mirecki's death "to fear, resulting in panic in the water, then followed by cardiorespiratory collapse, resulting in unconsciousness, and then drowning." The report noted

abrasions on his forehead, knees and elbows.

The Johansens kept records and logs. They wrote several Wisconsin congressmen, including Rep. Les Aspin, chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, and Rep. Toby Roth. They tracked down some of Mirecki's classmates at the swimming school. And they committed themselves to talk to every reporter who sought an interview.

Then on May 10, Johansen received a call from Roth telling her that the chief of Naval Air Training had recommended charges against five instructors at the rescue swimmers school and their supervising lieutenant.

Facing charges of involuntary manslaughter and conspiracy to commit battery are: aviation electronics technician 1C David J. Smith; aviation structural mechanic 1C Richard Blevins; and POs 2C John Zelenock, Frankie Deaton and Michael Combe. Lt. Thomas Torchia, chief officer at the school, faces dereliction of duty charges.

The Navy charge sheets sketch a grim scene on the day Lee Mirecki died.

Blevins is alleged to have screamed, "Get him, put Mirecki back into the water" after the exhausted and probably frightened recruit had shouted, "D.O.R., D.O.R.," for drop on request, Navy parlance for indicating he wished to halt his involvement in the exercise.

According to the charge papers,



Appleton Post Crescent photos

Lynn and Larry Johansen can't accept that Lynn's brother died in a pool surrounded by 26 Navy recruits and 5 water rescue instructors.

Combe, Deaton and Smith then broke Mirecki's grip on an equipment rack and forced him back into the pool.

Combe, Deaton, Zelenock and Smith all are alleged to have participated in holding Mirecki's head beneath the water and breaking his hold on a safety rope.

At a Navy hearing in Pensacola Saturday to determine if the six men should be court-martialed for Mirecki's death, four classmates testified that they heard him vehemently insist he did not want to continue the training exercise, called "sharks and daisies."

"He was panicked. He was scared. He was holding onto the equipment rack and screaming

when they pulled him away," said Airman Apprentice Gregory Boos.

But apart from his forceful return to the pool, Boos and the others testified, Mirecki did not receive treatment any harsher than that meted out to other students.

"It's not an easy school. They're not supposed to be gentle," Boos said.

The dead man's family is attending the hearings.

"I'm not a vindictive person," Johansen said. "But Lee was my baby brother, and I think it is a terrible injustice if the allegations are true and he died that way."

"We want to make sure it doesn't ever happen again to another recruit."

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