'She was tough'

Robinson is first Thornton grad killed in Afghanistan, Iraq

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BY LAUREN FITZPATRICK Staff writer

Simone Robinson was a smart, funny girl; a promising student who showed up for her freshman yearbook photo in a sparkly Army brat T-shirt, and graduated from Thornton Township High School in 2005 with excellent grades and a start date with the Illinois National Guard.

On Wednesday, word spread among her former classmates and colleagues that Robinson had died from the burns she suffered during a January attack in Afghanistan. It was her first deployment.

Amanda Manson, a friend since the days the girls attended eighth grade at Rosa Parks Elementary School in Harvey, said Robinson was "real sweet, and she was funny, too."

"She kept me laughing and others around her," Manson said. "She would help you when you came to her if you had problems with your work. I don't think she ever got bad grades.

"It ran in the family (because) her sister was smart, too," Manson said of Simone's sister and best friend, Sharmonique Robinson.

Sharmonique's Facebook page was covered with condolence messages Wednesday from friends who changed their profile pictures to images of Simone.

Robinson, a 21-year-old single mother of baby Nyzia, was Thornton's first alum to be killed in the wars in Afghanistan or Iraq, Principal Betheny Lyke said.

"We definitely are in mourning as a school," Lyke said. She described Robinson as an excellent student whose death shook up her former teachers. Lyke said the school's flag was flying at half staff and further plans to mourn Robinson or celebrate her life would depend on her family's wishes.

Her parents released a written statement Thursday through the National Guard:

"Nothing compares to what our family is experiencing at this time, with the loss of Simone. She was devoted to her friends, her family, her country and most importantly to her daughter, Nyzia.

"She wanted nothing more than to be a good role model for Nyzia and was dedicated to working hard to provide for her. Simone had a smile that could easily light up a room and an angelic voice.
heard by so many. Simone sang her way through life, getting her through so much. She is truly our hero and will always be in our hearts. We thank you for your support at this difficult time and ask media to respect our wishes not to be interviewed."

The Guard also announced Robinson was posthumously promoted to the rank of sergeant and awarded a Bronze Star medal. After the attack, while in the hospital, she also received a Purple Heart, Sgt. April Haas said.

Her other awards include a Combat Action Badge, National Defense Service Medal, Afghanistan Campaign Medal, Global War on Terrorism Service Medal, Armed Forces Reserve Medal with M-device, Army Service Ribbon and NATO Medal.

A guardsman from her unit has flown to Texas to escort her body home. According to military tradition, Robinson’s commander First Lt. Beth Roxworthy said, the body of a fallen soldier is not left alone until burial with full military honors, but all funeral details are up to the family.

Funeral services are set for Saturday at Great Hope Church in Robbins, said Roxworthy.

Robinson herself used to preside over veterans' funerals as part of a National Guard detail, Roxworthy said. Based at the Crestwood Armory, she deployed in August with Company E, 634th Brigade Support Battalion based in Joliet to Afghanistan as part of the 33rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team to provide force protection for Camp Eggers and to be the quick reaction force for the Kabul area, officials said.

Her former colleague Anthony Caples often was her partner during a two-man flag fold ceremony. And sometimes she'd fire a rifle as part of a 21-gun salute.

"She was a young rookie, she was quiet, laid back, always had a smile," he said. "She had a positive attitude. She was tough."

Her movements were "crisp," as she helped lay soldiers to rest, including a few killed in Iraq, the 47-year-old said. "I only went with the best ones."

Now Robinson, who returns to Illinois escorted by a member of her Crestwood unit, will be buried with military honors, he said.

She was wounded during a Jan. 17 attack outside a U.S. military base in Kabul. The attack immediately killed another U.S. service member and four Afghan civilians and wounded eighteen other troops.

Badly burned during the explosion, Robinson initially was taken to the Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany for treatment and later was taken to Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio. One of her legs had to be amputated.

On Sunday she died, surrounded by her parents and sister who stayed by her bedside the past few weeks.

Longtime neighbor Victor Willis said he got the call Sunday night that Robinson had died. He had just received a flyer announcing the creation of a trust fund to care for her and her 2-year-old daughter. The flyer featured photos of the baby girl and of Robinson in full uniform, and urging friends to help support her.

"She was still fighting and stuff," he said. Willis used to play next door around the little ranch home in Robbins owned by Robinson’s grandparents - a house which on Wednesday was silent.

Then one day, the young woman everyone described as tiny, little or petite showed up in her military togs, catching Willis off guard.

"I didn't think she was old enough to be in the service," he said.

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