

Rochester infantryman recalled as 'always happy' by former co-worker

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A friend of a Fort Lewis soldier from Rochester who was killed in Iraq said Tuesday that she is having a hard time coming to grips with his death.

"Handing out toys to somebody. I can't see that. That's just horrible," said Rose Havard, 29, of Centralia, who worked for a year with Cpl. Christopher J. Nelson, 22, at the Larry's Chevron gasoline station in Rochester.

The Associated Press had reported that three soldiers were handing out toys and other gifts to children Sunday at a playground near Baqouba, the capital of Diyala province, when a suicide bomber detonated explosives.

Nelson, who was posthumously promoted from specialist, enlisted in the Army in January 2004 and arrived at Fort Lewis in June. He was on his second combat deployment.

He worked at the gasoline station before graduating from high school in 2003.

Havard said they worked together on weekends and remembered Nelson for being even-tempered and having a great sense of humor.

Nelson would stop by and chat with his former co-workers after he joined the military. Before he deployed, Nelson complained to Havard that there were no fast-food restaurants in Iraq. She and Nelson joked that they could start a restaurant there and make millions of dollars. At Nelson's request, Havard stocked his favorite frosting-coated sugar cookies at the gasoline station.

"He was just a lot of fun," she said. "He was always happy. I don't ever remember seeing him mad."

Nelson's older brother, Geoff, said he tried to get along with everybody.

"He just wanted everybody to like him," he said.

The Department of Defense identified the other two soldiers killed in the bombing as Pfc. Marius L. Ferrero, 23, of Miami, and Cpl. Jason T. Lee, 26, of Fruitport, Mich.

Ferrero and Nelson died at the scene; Lee died at a U.S. military hospital in Balad.

All three were infantrymen assigned to the 1st Battalion, 38th Infantry Regiment of the 4th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 2nd Infantry Division.

Six soldiers from the brigade died in Iraq in six days, from Nov. 13 to Sunday.

Thirty-three assigned to the brigade have died in Iraq since it deployed in April. The brigade is expected to return home this summer.

One-hundred and seventy-four soldiers assigned to Fort Lewis have died in Iraq since the U.S.-led invasion began in March 2003.

Ferrero joined the Army in February. He reported to Fort Lewis this summer, joining one of its other Stryker brigades before transferring to the 4th Stryker Brigade Combat Team two months later.

He was posthumously promoted from private.

His deployment didn't keep him from enjoying a Thanksgiving dinner. At his request, Ferrero, his mother and his brother sat down for a feast of turkey, ham and cranberry sauce a few weeks before he died, according to The Miami Herald.

"He wanted us to give him a Thanksgiving dinner, and it seemed like it was a farewell," Maribel Rita Ferrero, his mother, told the newspaper. "Sometimes you get a feeling."

Lee joined the Army in May 2005 and reported to Fort Lewis the following year.

Lee enlisted with plans to become a paratrooper, but an injury prompted him to become an infantryman, Thomas Lee, his father, told The Grand Rapids Press.

"He said, 'I am big. I am strong. It's my calling, Dad,' " he told the newspaper. "If it's not me, who else is it going to be?"

During a phone conversation last week, Thomas Lee recalled his son saying, "Dad, I'm making a difference."

All three soldiers have received the National Defense Service Medal and Army Service Ribbon. Nelson received the combat infantry badge, presented to infantrymen who participate in active ground combat.

Fort Lewis has scheduled a Nov. 28 memorial service for three soldiers killed by insurgents in two earlier attacks. Sgt. Christopher R. Kruse, 23, of Emporia, Kan., and Cpl. Peter W. Schmidt, 30, of Eureka, Calif., died Nov. 13. Sgt. Kenneth Raymond Booker, 25, of Vevay, Ind., died the following day.

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