



AMBER MOORE IS RUNNING FOR ARMY CHIEF WARRANT OFFICER 2 BILLIE JEAN GRINDER

25, of Gallatin, Tenn.; assigned to the 1st Squadron, 230th Cavalry Regiment, Tennessee National Guard, Louisville, Tenn.; died Feb. 21 in Qayyarah, Iraq, of wounds sustained when her OH-58D Kiowa Warrior helicopter had a hard landing. Also killed was Capt. Marcus R. Alford.

Gallatin Guard soldier killed in helicopter crash
By Jennifer Easton
The Tennessean

Tennessee Army National Guard pilot Billie Jean Grinder, of Gallatin, was killed Sunday when her OH-58 Kiowa Warrior helicopter made a “hard landing” in northern Iraq, officials confirmed Tuesday.



Grinder’s co-pilot, Capt. Marcus Ray Alford of Knoxville, also died in the crash, which took place near Qayyarah Airfield West about 30 miles south of Mosul in northern Iraq. Grinder and Alford both were members of Troop C 1/230th Air Cavalry, which is based in Louisville, Tenn. in Blount County and was once part of the 278th Armored Cavalry Regiment.

Grinder is the first female casualty of the Tennessee Army National Guard, officials with the Department of Defense confirmed.

Grinder’s sister, Melissa Smith, said the 25-year-old chief warrant officer was deployed to Iraq for her first tour in June 2009. She was scheduled to come home within two weeks, Smith said.

“She was looking forward to helping me plan my wedding. We were going shopping for dresses in two weeks,” said Smith, who lives in Browerville, Minn.



Smith, 27, also served in the Tennessee Army National Guard along with her father, Billy Davenport, and brother-in-law Sam Grinder, Billie Jean’s husband.



Sam Grinder returned from Iraq to the couple's Gallatin home earlier this month, Smith said.

"We're definitely a military family," she said. "That's all we ever knew growing up — that we wanted to be in the military, too."

Smith said she and her family were still in shock but said she was comforted knowing her father, an aviation mechanic with the Tennessee Army National Guard, was stationed with her sister at Camp Speicher in Iraq when the accident happened on Sunday.

"She was the kind of person everyone looked up to and wanted to be like — even me," Smith said.

Grinder enlisted in the Tennessee Army National Guard when she was a senior at Smyrna High School in 2002.

Known for her trademark "giant smile," Smith described her sister as a tough but girly tomboy who rode motorcycles and gave generously to the people in her life.

"She loved to have a good time," Smith said. "She had tattoos and liked going fast and doing things that other people might see as dangerous. She had absolutely no fear.

"She was also the sweetest, kindest person you could ever hope to meet."

Friend and Smyrna High School classmate Brandi Banniza Gibson, of Fort Meade, Md., remembered Grinder as a friend to everyone she met, devoted to her country and being a stepmother to her 10-year-old twin stepdaughters.

"She loved, loved her 'family circle,' and she talked about those girls all the time. She thought of them as her own," Gibson said.

"She had a truly genuine heart and her smile could instantly make you smile with her."

Maj. Randy Harris with the Department of Defense said on Tuesday the accident is under investigation.

"Words cannot express my extreme sorrow at the loss of these outstanding soldiers, and my heartfelt sympathy goes out to the families and friends of these valiant warriors," said Maj. Gen. Max Haston, Tennessee's Adjutant General.

