

Four veterans from one unit have killed self



Credit: Provided

Sgt. April James with a group of Iraqi children on her second deployment.

By [Jessie Higgins](#) of the Evansville Courier and Press

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April James spent hours at Justin's grave.

In Iraq, the two National Guard soldiers needed each other to survive. That continued, in a different way, after they came home. Overwhelmed and grieving, they leaned on each other.

But it wasn't enough.

In November 2013 Sgt. Justin Williams killed himself. He was 25.

On a warm spring day 18 months later, April spent a laughter-filled evening with friends, then curled up with her three dogs to watch TV. Around 3 a.m., she walked to her backyard with a pistol and shot herself.

With that, Sgt. April Lynn James, 32, became the fourth Evansville veteran from the Indiana Army National Guard's 163rd unit to commit suicide since returning from their 2008 tour in Iraq.

Ronald Zeller was the first. He died on March 18, 2011. Then William Waller, July 5, 2013; Justin Williams, Nov. 3, 2013; and April James on May 24, 2015.

"They were all the same," said Justin's father, John Williams. "All of them. Why? Why is there four from one platoon?"

To the families, the suicides seemed to come with little warning. Now they see there were subtle signs all along.

A GOOD MEMORY

April joined the National Guard right out of high school. It surprised her family, but her friends said it was a natural fit. She was adventurous and brave — kind of a tom boy. And the Army would pay for college.

"She was one of the first people I met at the armory here in Evansville," said Shanna Rodenburg. "She was just so sweet. She really stepped in and tried to make me feel like part of the group."

Shanna and April became fast friends.

At that time, they were enlisted in Indiana's 113th battalion — the first local unit that would deploy to Afghanistan. Arriving in that war-torn country was like stepping into a different world, Shanna said.

In their first days, the friends could only linger in the tent city that would be their home that year.

"We got there, and everyone was standing around, and we realized: There was no place to sit!" Shanna said.

April watched in amazement as Shanna marched into the engineer's tent and built them a wooden bench.

"She was so cute," Shanna said, grinning. "She said, 'We have the only place to sit here in this camp. Somebody's going to steal it. We need to put our names on this.'"

Shanna carved their nicknames atop the bench.

"We had that bench the whole time we were over there," Shanna said. "Everyone was so jealous of that bench."

Sitting alone now on the Evansville riverfront, Shanna smiled. From a year full of pain and trauma, it's a good memory.

'ALWAYS SCANNING'

Shanna and April were truck drivers in Afghanistan. In that war, IEDs and land mines were a constant threat that drivers had to avoid.

"You're always scanning, always looking," Shanna said. "You don't want to be the person who hits one and kills everybody."

They saw it happen — vehicles blown into a tangle of wreckage and burnt bodies.

"It's stamped in my head," Shanna said. "I can't unsee it."

Shanna returned from Afghanistan in 2005, left the military and never went back.

But April re-enlisted. And two years later she deployed to Iraq with the Indiana National Guard's 163rd battalion.

The unit provided security for supply runs. Once again, April was in a truck.

It was there she met Justin Williams.

AN INDESCRIBABLE BOND

Justin joined the National Guard right out of high school because it's what his big brother had done.

At just 20 years old, he was scared to go to Iraq. But Justin hid his fear and prepared for deployment with the other soldiers.

Shortly before their departure, the Army randomly assigned Justin to a truck with April James and Boonville native Tom McGinnis.

That assignment would forever change the course of their lives.

"I remember, just before we went into Iraq we all talked," Tom said last week. "I was scared. You knew we'd be in Iraq soon. And April just said, 'We got your back. It will just be us in that truck. It will be our little unit in that truck, and nothing else matters.'"

"From then on, we just stuck together."

The three lived together in their truck 12 hours a day, six days a week for a year. Tom drove, avoiding IEDs and finding the best defensive positions. April was in charge. She communicated

with the rest of the unit, and decided when and how their truck would engage. And as gunner, Justin did the fighting.

"You depend on each other for your life," he said. "The bond you have, it is indescribable."

Tom won't talk about the combat the three saw.

They weren't always fighting, though. The 163rd often spent time in regions where the Iraqi people welcomed them. In those areas, children gravitated toward the soldiers.

April loved that.

"Once, April had her parents send her a doll for this one girl we kept seeing," Tom said.

Tom remembers pulling their truck beside the girl. April handed the doll to Justin who waved the girl over. Her parents stopped her at first. Justin was patient, and eventually lured them over with water bottles.

"That little girl's face just lit up when she took that doll," Tom said. He smiled as his eyes filled with tears. "I'll never forget that."

A HERO'S WELCOME

Justin's mother, Carolyn Williams, remembers well the day the 163rd came home. The entire family lined the streets with thousands of other Evansville residents to cheer the soldiers' return. Officials hosted a parade along the Lloyd Expressway — a hero's welcome.

Carolyn wore a homemade shirt with Justin's picture on the front.

Then the parade was over, and the party ended.

Life was hard for Justin. He returned a different man.

"Things started to crumble when he came home," his brother, Stephen, said.

Justin had symptoms of severe PTSD. He was quick to anger, and took dangerous risks — like he was invincible, Stephen said. He didn't like crowds and was constantly looking for threats.

Justin hid that side of him well. Most people saw a man who was always smiling.

"He would wrap you up in a big bear hug," Carolyn Williams said. "People called it a 'Justin hug.'"

Whatever he was feeling deep down, Justin kept to himself.

THE LAST GOODBYE

The day Justin died, he called April first. She missed the call.

He called his mother next.

"Mom, you know I love you, right?" he said. Of course, she did.

He called his father last.

"I just wanted to tell you I love you," Justin said.

An hour later, Sgt. Justin Williams shot himself.

"It's just like, there's a vacuum on your toe and it sucks all the air out of you," Carolyn said softly. She glanced down at Justin's headstone. It was a late summer evening, and as they do most nights, she and John visited their son's grave.

"You can't respond," she said. "You can't respond because you have no air. I don't think that feeling will ever go away. He's never coming back."

John buried his hands deep into his pockets. As the first tear fell down his cheek, John turned away from his son's grave.

'SO BEAUTIFUL'

April would spend hours at Justin's grave. Carolyn saw her there, talking to him.

To the outside world, April seemed to have it all together.

"She was really happy with her job," said Shanna, April's friend from her Afghanistan deployment. "She loved her boyfriend. She had things going for her. I looked up to her."

The Army did pay for her college. April went to school between deployments and became a surgical assistant. She loved her job, said Libby Hardy, April's friend and long-time colleague.

"After work, she would come in and sit in my office and talk," Libby said. "She would talk about anything and everything."

April rarely spoke of war. But over the years, Libby gleaned some tidbits.

"I know she had trouble sleeping," Libby said. "She didn't like loud noises. She was at a bonfire once and someone set off a fire cracker, and she just hit the deck."

Libby bowed her head, barely noticing the bustle of people at the East Side coffee shop where she sat one Saturday this month.

"She was so beautiful," Libby said, staring at the table. "And she had the most beautiful eyes, but sad somehow."

April was supposed to attend a grave side service for Justin on Memorial Day 2015.

She never made it.

The night before the service, she shot herself.