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Air Force Times

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'it Was Us Against Them' / A Young Airman Remembers The Hike That Killed Micah Schindler

By Airman Basic Carol Braxton

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Airman Basic Carol Braxton will never forget the sight of Micah Schindler having a seizure and collapsing just a few feet from her during basic training last September.

She wrote a poignant six-page letter to Air Force Times in hopes that no one else forgets what happened to him, either. The letter begins below and continues over the next two pages.

Schindler, pictured above, an 18-year-old trainee from Cincinnati, was felled by heat stroke and water intoxication near the end of a 6-mile road march during a new element of basic training called the field training exercise, or FTX. He made it as far as a river crossing and died two days later without regaining consciousness.

According to Braxton, "We got to the river and I heard him say, 'Hey, we made it. I told you we'd all graduate together.' "

Those were the last words she heard him speak.

Schindler's death devastated her and her fellow trainees, Braxton, 18, said in a Dec. 14 interview from her dorm at Tinker Air Force Base, Okla.

"We weren't even allowed to tell our parents at first, just to say, 'Hi, I'm OK,'" she said.

She said she wrote the letter so Air Force Times would know more about what happened, but she didn't necessarily expect it to be published.

She said she also wanted to tell the full story to someone because she did not feel she could do that when investigators asked for trainees' statements shortly after Schindler died.

Braxton, a native of Clifton, N.J., was scheduled to be promoted to airman Dec. 21 after completing Tinker's first-term airman orientation school.

She said she is excited about beginning work as a command post controller but she fears the incident likely has forever colored how she sees the Air Force.

"Most people in the Air Force are nice and sincere, and they care a lot about the young airman," she said.

the young airmen," she said.

"But there's a part of me that can't fully trust them. When the chips are down, I just can't be sure they won't cover themselves instead of covering me."

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'It Was Us Against Them', Continued*By Airman Basic Carol Braxton*

(The letter continues)

They could not remember the trainees who had told them of their ill health and their threats of repeating FTX should they not finish the march for any reason. Perhaps they are all suffering from amnesia brought on by the trauma of Micah's tragic death?

As you may have guessed, I'm very angry about what happened to Micah. Wouldn't you be? What truly hit close to home was our regular training instructors being insensitive and unsympathetic to ours, and Micah's, failing health. That is, until they were told the seriousness of Schindler's condition. But it's hard to forgive the berating we received when we arrived to our home squadron after the end of FTX about how pathetic and embarrassing it was to have had so many of our trainees pass out during the road march. To add insult to injury, our TIs actually blamed us for what happened to Schindler, claiming that had we banded together as a team, he would have completed the march with the rest of us. "Now we got a trainee in the hospital with stinkin' Code Blue!" one of them ranted. "I hope he dies!" That was the straw that broke the camel's back. It wasn't until later on when we were told about what had actually happened to Schindler did our TIs begin to show their genuine grief and concern. The instructor who made that horrible comment later apologized to us for his insensitivity.

Micah collapsed on a Friday. The next day, our squadron commander, Maj. Johnston, visited both flights in our dorms to inform us about Schindler's present condition. We were told of his astonishing body temperature at the time of his seizure (111°

°F),

which automatically meant brain damage. We had been told of his being on life support and having had his chest opened up to have his heart massaged. The major informed us that his family was on their way to Lackland and that he had discharged Schindler the night before.

The next day was Sunday, the first day of our final week of training. A bomb threat of another training squadron upgraded Lackland's THREATCON status and we trainees were confined to our dormitories. Our conversations were of Micah and about the gifts and cards we had bought for him and his family and perhaps gaining the permission to visit Micah in the hospital sometime that week. The following day, Monday morning, Maj. Johnston told us Schindler was dead.

It truly and utterly broke our hearts. In all our conversations and plans we had made concerning Schindler, we never thought he would die. We instinctively believed that he would get through it all and come back to us

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one day. How could one of our own die? He had been one of our strongest. He had been in the running for honor graduate, which was awarded to his family at his memorial (14SEP99), which meant that he had also been one of our best. How could a boy, who had been roughly the same age as most of us, not survive? This is what truly angers me. A kid, straight out of high school, died at basic training. You don't die in basic training. You die in war. And that's exactly what that road march was. It was us trainees against them who were careless with our health. We were left to fend for ourselves.

And still we were forced to go on. The Air Force officials showed their sympathy for us by having our squadron chaplain speak with us and by also arranging therapists to speak with pockets of us, especially the few who had a full eyewitness account of Schindler's seizure (such as myself, who had been standing directly across from him at the time). And still we were told that our main objective was to press on, to keep training. They used the obvious incentive on us: do it for Schindler! They (the instructors) would've used anything on us. We were screwing up retreat and parade practice. We worried about looking terrible on the bombrun. The instructors went with the excuse that we were so torn with grief over Micah's death that we couldn't concentrate. Pretty convincing, except for the fact that we hadn't been doing well in practice even before FTX.

But that doesn't matter anymore. In the end, we did do it for Schindler's memory, demanding that he should somehow be represented at graduation. Our answer to us: a black streamer on each guide-on pole. Also, a "Missing Man" march for Flight 591.

Saturday morning, a week and a day after Schindler's seizure, the day after graduation, we ran our last run for PC (physical conditioning). When we finished, our instructor came out to the running pad and told us that both flights had received zero demerits in both retreat and parade. We were all ecstatic at the accomplishment we had achieved, despite earlier comments by higher NCOs that our flights "sucked." That Saturday morning's PC was ringing with our chants of "Schindler! Schindler! Schindler!" I guess we did it for him after all.

Not one day goes by when I don't think of Micah. I didn't know him well, but I'll never forget him. The lone casualty in our suicide march. His death had better not be in vain. FTX needs changes, starting with the instructors. Julie Schindler, Micah's mother, wants to know who is to blame for his death. The FTX instructors and medics, that's who. They're the ones who neglected and ignored the cries of help from us when we saw Schindler in his seizure. Worst of all, they're denying any knowledge of his being sick prior to the seizure and are maintaining that we are blowing our versions of the situation way out of proportion. There you go, Mrs. Schindler. They killed your son. Now they'll lived with that fact all the days of their lives.

I like what the Air Force has done for me. They've provided me with a good job, decent living quarters, beautiful environment, physical development, free food, great health care benefits ... but, just as my first TI told me, the Air Force is a conspiracy. I've watched as they made excuses for Schindler's death and dismissed our (the trainees) testimonies as products of stress and oppression. Perhaps Micah, in his untimely end, was rescued from this.

Airman Basic Carol Braxton

Tinker Air Force Base, Okla.

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