

★ Ex-Marine dies in Cancun

■ **Family cites 'mysterious circumstances' in death**

■ **Officials tell girlfriend he fell five floors at hotel**

BY ZACHARY R. DOWDY
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Sgt. Joseph Bitet, a Smithtown native who so loved his country and military life that he completed two tours of duty as a Marine in Iraq — and then enlisted in the Army Reserve — died Saturday under what his family termed “mysterious circumstances” while in Mexico.

Bitet, 30, was vacationing at the Riu Palace in Cancun when

he died, apparently in an early morning accident, said his mother, Annette Bitet, who added that services for her son would be held this week.

“The cause of death was severe internal injuries,” she said last night while en route to Kennedy Airport to meet her son’s body. “We don’t know how it happened.”

Annette Bitet said that she has been contacted by several U.S. officials, including Sen.

Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) and Rep. Peter King (R-Seaford) about the case. She has also hired an attorney based in Cancun to follow the investigation.

Officials could not be reached for comment. A spokesman for King said the congressman had contacted the U.S. consulate in Mexico and was monitoring the situation.

Joseph Bitet was on vacation with his girlfriend, Sgt. Allyson Jo Parla, 29, of New Hyde Park, who served in the Army’s 77th Sustainment Brigade in Iraq and is now assigned to the 311th Military History Detachment in Fort Totten in Queens. Both were photographers.

She was not present with Joseph Bitet at the moment the accident occurred, she said, adding that she was in their room, but received a call from hotel officials, who told her to come to the lobby because Bitet was hurt.

“I saw him on a stretcher being pulled into the ambulance,” she said, adding that she was told Bitet had fallen from the fifth floor.

The couple had been dating for two years, after meeting during training in Fort Meade, Md. They planned to get married, Parla said. “He was the kindest and most compassionate person I’ve ever met,” she said. “I’m going to miss him so much and

I’m not sure how I’m going to make it without him.”

Annette Bitet said her son graduated from Hauppauge High School and enlisted as a Marine. “Ever since he was a little boy, he wanted to be in the military. He enjoyed the camaraderie and had a lot of respect for all the other soldiers.”

Bitet was assigned to the 316th Expeditionary Sustainment Command in Coraopolis, Pa., and he served as a public affairs officer. He had just completed advanced leadership training at Fort Meade.

“He really loved the service,” his mother said. “He really did. He was a good soldier.”

Plastic detects nuclear traits

BY ANTHONY M. DESTEFANO
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Government scientists have developed a next-generation radiation detector that will be cheaper and more accurate than devices now deployed to guard New York and other cities against nuclear terrorism.

A research team at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in California announced today that it has developed a new plastic material that, unlike current detectors, can easily distinguish between gamma rays and neutrons.

Gamma rays commonly come from nonthreatening sources such as stone construction material. Neutrons are telltale indicators of substances like plutonium and enriched uranium that theoretically could be used in improvised nuclear bombs by terrorists, lab officials said.

“We are waiting for full-scale production,” said Russian-born Natalia Zaitseva, a materials scientist who was the lead investigator on the project.



Natalia Zaitseva, a Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory materials scientist, led the research team that developed the detector.

Security officials see the development as a boost for the federal Securing the Cities initiative, which has helped buy personal radiation detectors for local police agencies such as the NYPD and Nassau and Suffolk police.

“With al-Qaida’s stated objective of obtaining nuclear weapons to use against the West, it is welcome news that Lawrence Livermore has made this breakthrough,” New York Police Commissioner Raymond Kelly said in a statement.

Stuart Cameron, chief of the special patrol bureau of the Suffolk

police department and an expert on nuclear terrorism, said, “If viable, this will be a great technology and could allow detectors which are smaller and lighter weight.”

The breakthrough comes at a good time, Cameron said, because a helium gas used in the current generation of detectors is now in short supply. Laboratory-grown crystals, which are also used, take a long time to develop and can lose effectiveness over time, he noted.

Commissioner Kelly and other officials have often said there is low probability now of a

terrorist setting off an improvised nuclear device in the city. More likely, said Kelly, is the use of a dirty bomb — a conventional explosive that would spew radioactive material such as Cesium-137 over a wide area.

The new material, called a plastic scintillator, does not detect such radioactive isotopes, so existing technology would still be needed. But the new plastic should cut down on false alarms, scientists said.

“This material very, very effectively distinguishes [between] those neutrons that are suggestive of special nuclear ma-

terial and all that background radiation,” said Steve Payne, a scientist from Massapequa Park who also worked on the project.

Zaitseva said the enhanced plastic can be made in sheets as big as six square feet for use at shipping terminals, bridges, tunnels and highways. It can also be used in a new generation of hand-held devices, she said.

LNL officials said two companies are in discussions to manufacture the plastic. Payne said it costs as little as 25 cents to \$1 per cubic centimeter to produce, compared with up to \$100 for the same-sized crystal.