

Chapter 1: Searching for Answers

THE HORIZON UNFURLED along the westward road as distant figures slowly came into view.

Neglected orchards dotted the landscape. Ochre-colored mountains sliced across the smooth expanse. Dust devils flared across the horizon, tightened into long, thin funnels, whipped across the plains, and dissipated into light wisps of sand. Oil refineries chugged away, clouding the air with thick fumes. As the road curved and sloped uphill, a large prison complex, encircled by glistening coils of concertina wire, punctured the sky and interrupted the placid scenery that surrounded it.

An American soldier scanned the scenery.

“It reminds me of Iraq,” said Adam Gray. He was now back home in Tehachapi, California. His stepfather, Roy Chavez, was driving him home while Adam sat beside him, gazing at the familiar landscape and quietly reminiscing.

After serving a year-long tour in Iraq, Adam went on leave to visit Roy and his mother, Cindy Chavez.

“It really shocked me when I picked him up at the airport. He wasn’t in his uniform; he just had his regular clothes,” said Roy. That he had changed clothes might have seemed like a small detail, but it surprised Roy, given how much pride Adam took in his military service. “I don’t know if he was just sick and tired of it and [thought] ‘I’m on leave, I don’t want to deal with this anymore. I just want to have a good time, see my mom, just be a regular normal person.’ ”

Regaining that normalcy wasn’t easy for Adam. The jagged bluffs that encircled his hometown area were remarkably similar to the scenery he had seen in the Middle East, and they plunged him back into a time and place that had irretrievably affected him.

Other members of Adam's Army unit also had great difficulty making the transition back to the US. The camaraderie that bound them was no longer intact; each went his separate way after their unit returned. They were no longer linked by a common purpose; their mission was over. "Accomplished," said some.

Yet it was unresolved for Adam and others in his unit, Battalion 1-68. They still carried unsettling memories and tried to slowly digest them as they readjusted to their old lives back in the States.

I first learned about Adam Gray in 2006, when I met some soldiers who had served with him. Jonathan Millantz, an Army medic who was assigned to Battalion 1-68, first told me about the life and death of Adam. Millantz sensed that Adam was haunted by what he had seen and done in Iraq. At first, Millantz would only talk cryptically about those events. But he often stressed that he empathized with his former war buddy and shared many of the traumas that plagued him during his own return to civilian life.

Other soldiers who served with Adam puzzled over what happened to him and mentioned that his mother was also struggling to make sense of his experience. And so, in mid-2006 I called Cindy Chavez in Tehachapi. Her husband, Roy, answered the phone. He welcomed my call, but he was firm with me.

"I'm going to give the phone to Cindy, my wife," he said. "But I want you to promise me that you're going to be very careful with her, because she has already been through a lot."

I promised, and he passed the phone to Cindy. We talked extensively and traded phone calls for several months. After nearly a year of conversation, Cindy agreed to meet and discuss her story in person. In August 2007, I traveled from San Francisco to see her and Roy at their family home. My colleague Michael Montgomery, a producer with American Radio Works, came along to interview them.

Part of our drive followed the very same westward route that Roy and Adam took from Bakersfield to Tehachapi. As we scaled the Tehachapi Mountains—a chalky, rugged range that links Bakersfield to Mojave—I tried to imagine Adam's earlier homecoming. During our visit, dense wildfire smoke filled the valley with choking fumes. Soot coated the sunset with a rusty orange haze, turning the evening sky into a dramatic, apocalyptic backdrop. Such striking imagery, like the area's harsh and arid landscape, truly seemed evocative of Iraq's scenery. After five hours

of driving, Michael and I pulled up to Roy and Cindy's house, where assorted wind chimes fluttered in the breeze. A Green Bay Packers flag, set beneath an American flag, waved above their driveway—Adam and his mother had originally hailed from Wisconsin. Cindy and Roy greeted us warmly and welcomed us into a cavernous living room with an aqua-blue carpet, assorted antiques, and a big-screen TV tucked into the corner.

A pile of photos lay on top of a coffee table, chronicling Adam's life in Iraq and back home. Cindy had made two-by-four-inch laminated prints of Adam in his sergeant's uniform, set against the red and white stripes of an American flag background. It captured Adam's smooth, oval face, his buzz haircut, and his gentle features. The bottom caption read:

In Loving Memory Of
Adam James Gray
"The Bomber"
March 20, 1980–August 29, 2004
Our Hero

She handed us two pictures to take home with us: "Just so you have a face to go with the name."

Cindy recalled how Adam had wanted to serve in the military ever since he was three years old. Growing up in Wisconsin, he and his family lived around the corner from a Navy recruiting station. Adam would often return home with military souvenirs, such as caps and pens. His mother saw him as a rollicking, spirited child with boundless energy. Friends and family nicknamed him "The Bomber." The nickname stuck. And Adam's ambition to join the military continued into his teenage years.

Even though Cindy saw a stream of damaged veterans return from Vietnam during the 1970s, she felt she could never discourage her son from pursuing his dreams. Adam jeopardized that future at eighteen when he and local high school friends got arrested for burglary. Cindy downplayed the incident, and said it was quickly settled, but it did leave a mark on his record. The arrest meant he could not enlist in the Navy.

Adam was devastated. But his mother was determined to help him, and together they pushed on. In the end, Adam was finally able to join the Army.

Cindy saw her son and his friends from his platoon after they finished basic training. They spoke respectfully to others and wore neatly pressed uniforms. Cindy didn't even recognize her son after he had finished boot camp.

Who is this kid? she thought.

"Before he went to boot camp, he was a bit of a thug," said Roy. After his training "He grew ... he grew into a man." Adam was fit, pressed, and polite. "The Bomber" had finally become an enlisted soldier.

Adam was always drawn to tanks and planes, and eagerly pursued further training for an armored cavalry unit. Shortly after basic training he was dispatched to Fort Carson, Colorado, home of the "Iron Brigade." There he learned how to operate M1 Abrams tanks and joined Battalion 1-68, a tanking unit with the 4th Infantry Division, 3rd Brigade Combat Team.

Members of Battalion 1-68 remembered Adam enjoying his time in Fort Carson and making close friends on the base. Most of them noticed that he craved to learn as much as possible about tank warfare and seemed excited about joining a four-person tanking crew with the battalion. Adam had finally achieved what he had longed for since he was a young boy. But he was a warrior without a war.

Adam looked forward to taking some time off after he completed his training at Fort Carson. In September 2001, he went on leave and joined his family at Lake Elizabeth, California, near Los Angeles. He spent his evenings chatting with his mother and friends, soaking in a hot tub, and partying into the night.

At six in the morning on September 11, Roy called upstairs to Cindy.

"I just heard something about the Twin Towers or something," he said. "Something is going on."

She ran downstairs and switched on the television. It wasn't clear what she was watching. Was it a movie? she wondered. Cindy focused her eyes on the screen and concentrated on what the TV announcers were saying. It soon became clear to her that it wasn't fiction. She ran to fetch her son.

"Adam, get up! Something's happening."

By the time he woke up and walked over to the television, the second plane had hit the South Tower. The three of them stared at the screen and absorbed what was unfolding across the country.

“Mom, it’s fucking al Qaeda!” said Adam.

“I don’t know who you’re talking about.”

“It’s bin Laden.”

She still didn’t know what he was referring to, nor did she know what to expect. But Adam knew it meant war. He would now finally be able to apply his skills in a meaningful mission.

“I need to get on a plane. I need to get back there,” he said, referring to Fort Carson. “We’re going to deploy, I know it.”

Gray reported to Fort Carson soon after, and there was a nervous, excitable energy on the base. Were they going to Afghanistan? Would they fight the Taliban? Were they going to help take out bin Laden and the al Qaeda camps? No one had answers, and Adam and his unit played hurry up and wait.

It finally came out that they would not be deployed to Afghanistan. At first, he and his fellow soldiers felt deflated. Everyone was hungry for payback, and it was tough to watch other soldiers march into action. But the call finally came on January 20, 2003: as part of the 4th Infantry Division, Adam and Battalion 1-68 received orders to deploy to the Middle East.¹

President George W. Bush, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, and their allies alleged that Iraq had developed and secretly hidden weapons of mass destruction (WMDs)—nuclear, biological, chemical weapons—designed to inflict mass damage and casualties. They demanded that Saddam Hussein come clean by revealing and destroying Iraq’s WMDs. But none appeared.

Bush pressed on during his 2003 State of the Union address, declaring that the country could not wait. The president insisted that Saddam was disregarding the UN by concealing WMDs from the prying eyes of their weapons inspectors, and that an ominous “mushroom cloud” of devastation loomed if these weapons were left unchecked.² Bush and Blair argued that Saddam was as dangerous as he was intractable, and that the threat from his regime was imminent.

On March 20, Gray celebrated his twenty-third birthday. Just one day earlier in 2003, American forces and their allies pushed through the Iraqi border in the first days of their military campaign. Adam and Battalion 1-68 were on the front lines of battle in Iraq. He was at last a soldier in action.

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After serving a year-long tour in Iraq Adam returned home to visit his family and friends in Tehachapi during March 2004. Cindy clearly remembered the day Adam pulled up to their house in Tehachapi after Roy picked him up from the airport. Adam seemed to have the same weathered disposition as her nephew, who also served in the Iraq war, and Cindy recalled having the same sense about his return.

He was glad to be home; he was safe.

Friends and family warmly welcomed Adam home. But they found it was sometimes hard to engage him in conversation. Adam's mind seemed to be elsewhere. "He would get this glazed look over him and we'd be in the discussion and his eyes would literally get glassy and he would just disconnect," remembered Cindy. Adam was in Tehachapi, but he seemed to be locked onto memories of Iraq. "And you know he was back there because there was something maybe in the background—maybe a song or the TV or something—and he would just stare straight ahead."

You could almost hear the bombs and the noise, thought Cindy.

It seemed something had been growing inside him since he got back from Iraq. "This stuff was building up," Cindy said. "He had to go do something before it exploded." She phoned local veteran groups and asked their advice about how best to approach her son. She spoke to Vietnam vets and those who fought in Desert Storm (the first US war with Iraq in 1991).

"Don't push him," they would tell her. "He'll talk about it if he wants to. Just don't push him, because you don't want to trigger anything ... Don't go up behind him without him knowing. Always speak before you go up behind him. Don't shock him, because you may not come out of it. He doesn't mean anything by it; it's just a reaction."

Cindy took their advice. She would tell Adam she was going out to pick up milk or run errands and wouldn't come back for five hours in order to give him some space. She and Roy had learned that from noon to four o'clock in the afternoon "you didn't talk with him ... you just didn't." Cindy said he would "just get weird. I don't know if he had to just reflect with himself or what, but he could get angry."

"When he came home he was a different boy," Roy said. "He was aggressive. His mood swings were horrible."

Roy saw how his stepson seemed to be deeply affected by his time in Iraq, yet trying to disengage from it while he was on leave. He saw that Adam often remained reticent, latched onto solitude, and mostly

sat in his room for hours. At times, Roy saw Adam's anxiety boiling over.

"You could sometimes hear him screaming in his sleep and not being able to talk about anything," said Roy.

"He would have his dark moments," Cindy remembered. "He'd play his guitar, and he would get into music and just disconnect, but not really disconnect because he always had that kind of glazed look on his face."

Sometimes he would tell his mother, "I shouldn't be here."

"Why shouldn't you be here?" she would ask. If not here, then where? she wondered.

"I should be back there with my guys."

In a way, she wasn't surprised by his state of mind. She had grown up during the 1970s and remembered the empty stares and tensed bodies of returning Vietnam veterans. But it was unsettling to see her son and other returning Iraq war veterans exhibit the same behavior.

"Just looking at him—it was very weird, very surreal," she said. "He was way different, that's for sure ..."

I gently pressed Cindy to further describe how her son had changed. She paused as her mind recreated that visit three years ago.

"He looked troubled. I think that's the only word I could say. Troubled for what he saw, troubled for maybe what he had to do," she said.

Why was he troubled? I asked.

"That I don't know, Josh. That's what I want you to find out."

Adam seldom discussed events in Iraq with anyone. At one point, he promised to open up to his family.

"One day I'll tell you guys," he said.

After a long night of drinking, he finally did. He told his mother about some of his experiences, including how his unit went on patrols in Iraq's volatile Sunni triangle. They surveyed improvised explosive devices (known as IEDs) and those who planted them, and occasionally took machine gunfire. One evening, Adam's tank was on patrol and fired on a small group of insurgent suspects, killing two of the three Iraqis they targeted. They later noticed the Iraqis weren't insurgents after all, but a small family that included a little girl.

"Ma, we couldn't see," he told his mother, choking back tears. "It was just the night vision, and all it does is give you a shadow."

Maybe, she figured, it distressed him so deeply because he had such a strong affinity for the Iraqi children he saw. But he was upset about other

experiences as well. Adam told his mother how he and fellow soldiers kept order in a small jail in Balad, Iraq, by instructing their prisoners not to speak to one another. And he described what they would do to detainees who disobeyed them.

“Inevitably one will start speaking,” Adam explained to Cindy. “So then we tie their hands up and then tie them to the highest rung on the [jail] bars. And then they’d have to hang there for a couple of days and they’re not allowed to sleep, drink, eat.”

Adam told her how they kept detainees up all night long by blasting loud music next to their ears, and how troops tried to frighten detainees when questioning them. For example, Adam described how he brought hooded detainees into a room, placed them in chairs, and removed their blindfolds. It took a while for the detainees’ vision to clear, and when they were able to focus they would see that the walls and floor were splashed with blood.

Adam assured his mother that “it wasn’t any human blood—it was chicken blood. But they didn’t know that, because they were blindfolded. And then we’d take the blindfold off and they’d start screaming.”

They screamed uncontrollably. Other detainees would hear their friends shrieking in horror. “And they’d tell us anything because they were so sleep-deprived and hungry and everything else,” he explained to his mother. “That’s when [we] started getting them to spill their guts.”

During that night of heavy drinking, Adam revealed why they felt compelled to abuse their detainees, and he detailed the techniques they used. Cindy patiently listened to her son’s justifications for mistreating Iraq detainees, and yet she felt that Adam was still troubled by what he had done. She told him to stop describing the torture they used—she couldn’t bear to hear any more. It sounded “so incredibly inhumane.”

“I’d rather be shot in the head than have to torture somebody like that,” she said. Yes, she understood it was war. And yes, they faced life-and-death decisions. But as a mother, she still felt sympathy for the Iraqi prisoners.

“They’re people, they’re human beings,” she said. “It doesn’t make any difference who you are, just because they live in a different environment. Those mothers still love their children.”

The evening of beer and confessions wore down, and mother and son finished discussing disturbing wartime memories. After that evening, Cindy partly understood what troubled her son. But she didn’t want that

evening to be his lasting memory of being back home. With limited time to cheer up her son during his short leave in Tehachapi, she offered to take him to Las Vegas. He had always wanted to go there.

“No, mom, I don’t think I could handle the noise.”

But she pressed on, and threw parties for Adam. In fact, she crammed all the year’s holidays into his March visit. They went to a local nursery to buy a tree for Christmas, festooned their house with festive lights, and baked holiday cookies. Then they celebrated New Year’s Eve and quickly slipped in Valentine’s Day. And finally, they commemorated his twenty-fourth birthday on March 20.

Adam left Tehachapi shortly thereafter. During his time off he was able to decompress, unload some of his memories, and be cheered by loved ones. Cindy captured some of the happier moments in photographs. She shuffled through a pile of pictures before her on the coffee table, and softly teared up.

“The very last picture that I got of him was at that birthday party,” she said. “He never came home.”

After his month-long leave in Tehachapi, Adam headed to Alaska to undergo training for armored combat vehicles known as Strykers. According to Adam, the training was delayed because of a hold-up with the Strykers’ production. He quickly found himself stuck in Fairbanks with little activity, few friends, and no battle comrades. He told his mother that he felt lonely and frustrated by the lack of action, and had trouble relating to the soldiers at Fort Wainwright.

“Ma, there’s not one of these sons of bitches up here that has ever been out of the country,” he told her. “They’ve never been to Iraq. They’ve never been to anywhere. Alaska is the farthest away that they’ve ever been from their homes.”

The soldiers at Fort Wainwright sensed his resentment and his lingering feelings about Iraq.

Get over it, they told him. And that only incensed him further.

Some soldiers taunted him about his moodiness and bitterness. Adam seethed with anger, and he finally snapped. He pinned down a soldier who had goaded him and held a knife to his throat.

“If you were over there, you’d be dead right now,” Adam told him.

Soon Adam was called before a board of officers and received a dressing-down. One of them called him a “waste of flesh,” Cindy recalled, and he could only stand at attention and absorb their reprimands.

“I think at that point it crushed Adam’s spirit because he took those men as gods,” Cindy said. He told her he would rather be in Iraq full-time than be in Fairbanks. At least he had a purpose there.

He even considered quitting the service and returning home.

“Adam, when you come back here, then what are you going to do?” his mother asked him. “What’s your plan of attack? I mean, you could be a prison guard, you could be a police officer.”

“Nothing like that,” he said

There were limited options for him in Tehachapi, and few jobs remotely close to what he had hoped to do in the military. “You’re going to be very unhappy,” Cindy warned him.

She reminded him that he always wanted to be in the military, and even wanted to be a tanker since he was a small boy. “That’s what you wanted to do your whole life.”

He paused and reflected on what she said.

Adam seemed resigned to his situation. In the end, he decided to stay put in Alaska and bide his time until he was called up for battle again.

Cindy and Adam talked during the evening of August 29, 2004, when he was in his barracks in Fairbanks. He seemed upbeat and talked about preparing for a getaway with an Army friend during his off days. Cindy could rest that evening without worrying about his mood or career problems. He seemed to be working through his issues.

The following morning, at around eight, she got a call from her ex-husband, Adam’s father, Jeff Gray. He lived in Wisconsin, where they were originally from. Adam’s parents were separated by thousands of miles but remained friends and kept in touch about their son’s welfare.

“Cindy, why would there be a soldier coming here?” Jeff asked Cindy.

“Oh, for Christ’s sake,” she said. She assumed that Adam and his friends went off drinking the night before and got into trouble. “He’s probably coming to find out who wants to bail the kid out.”

They laughed about it, knowing their son’s pugnacious spirit. “Okay, I don’t have this kind of money,” she told Jeff, fearing how much bail they’d have to pay to spring Adam from a night in jail. “Maybe you could do it. And you’re closer to him; you could fly up there.”

In the end, she relented and agreed to come up with the cash. Jeff promised to call her back with an update after he met the officers at his door.

Cindy waited a long time for the phone to ring. When it finally did, she snatched up the receiver.

“Okay, how much do I owe you?”

Her offer was met with a halting silence. And then he told her.

“Adam’s dead.”

“What?”

Jeff repeated the words to her.

“Oh, bullshit. That’s not even funny. I just talked to him last night.”

But Jeff wasn’t kidding, and Cindy froze in stunned disbelief. No, they’ve got the wrong kid, she told herself. After all, Adam seemed to be in high spirits the night before. He was just heading off to bed so that he and his friend could get up early for their trip.

That might have been the case, said Jeff, but the officers who had just visited him said they were sending someone from Edwards Air Force Base to Cindy and Roy’s house in Tehachapi to relay the news about their son.

Cindy waited by the door and held her breath as she peered through the window and watched the cars drift by. One finally pulled into her driveway. Two uniformed officers got out and walked towards the house.

“Then I knew it wasn’t a lie,” she said.

I visited Cindy in August 2007 just a few days before the anniversary of her son’s death. It had been three years since officers walked to her door. Her memories were still fresh, her emotions still raw.

She remembered that a chaplain accompanied the military entourage, and how they greeted her. They could tell she was distraught and sensed she had already learned the news about her son.

“Well, by now, I’m sure you heard ...” they began. “We’re very sorry.”

Cindy understood they had a difficult job, but she felt their delivery was cold and rehearsed.

“Then they get up and leave,” she recalled. “You’re in absolute, absolute devastation and shock. You don’t really know what they just said.”

Shortly thereafter, a casualty advisor showed up with a thick stack of documents that Cindy had to fill out. It took until late in the evening. “And you don’t sleep because you’re just entering into the worst nightmare of your life,” she said.

Gradually, she summoned the strength to ask how to deal with her son’s remains and assemble a memorial for him. They held a service in

Wisconsin, and later a second one in California. A handful of servicemen came by, some from Adam's unit, and paid their respects. Much of that period remains a blur to Cindy.

Adam's fellow unit members were also stunned by the news of his death. They remembered his high energy and his enthusiasm for the Army, and would never expect that his life would end so tragically back in the States. There was disbelief, followed by questions about what had happened. Roy sought out answers at Adam's funeral to clarify what exactly had occurred at Fort Wainwright. Until that time, they only had murky details about Adam's death.

"We were under the impression it was a self-inflicted gunshot [or] accidental death," said Roy. "I had to be prepared to find out as much as I could before [Cindy] did."

Roy approached Richard Boone, one of Adam's friends from Fort Wainwright. Boone, too, was a sergeant, and a loyal soldier. He wanted to be faithful to his friend's family by helping answer their questions, but there was an open investigation into Adam's death, so Boone told Roy that he couldn't discuss what went on in Alaska. Roy pressed on.

"I'm not here to crucify anyone," he told Boone. "See that lady?" said Roy, pointing to Cindy. "I gotta get through this with her. I need to be prepared. I just need to know what happened."

It turned out that Cindy and Roy had mistakenly believed that Adam had shot himself. It was difficult for Boone to describe what had happened: Adam was found in bed with a plastic bag twisted over his head, and beside him sat a can of Dust-Off (compressed gas used for cleaning electronics).

Roy took a deep breath. Oh crap. We're in for a long haul, he said to himself. He saw Adam's father, grandmother, and friends, and he felt he couldn't—and shouldn't—divulge what he learned, fearing it would only traumatize them further.

"I wish I didn't know," said Roy. "It was like the devil dropped something on me. I knew his mom. She was going to want to know who was responsible and why. To watch her ask questions when I could have answered them ..." Roy's eyes watered and his voice trailed off as he remembered that time.

The Iraq war exacted a heavy toll on its veterans. Many turned to substance abuse, and suicides steadily mounted.³ The numbers of soldiers diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) steadily climbed.⁴

And, as with Vietnam veterans, soldiers who return with PTSD can also transfer some of their distress onto their families.⁵ Cindy and Roy Chavez were no different.

“We’re human beings, and we find ways to numb ourselves,” said Roy. He later told me how he and Cindy tried to blunt their pain with alcohol after Adam died. But Cindy’s intake turned toxic. According to Roy, she landed in the hospital for twenty-seven days because of “a broken heart and alcohol.”

“It was a scary time. A scary time,” said Roy. “You sit there and go, ‘Oh the war’s going to take another person—my wife. And I’m going to be all alone.’”

Cindy ultimately recovered from her stay in the hospital, and her sharp decline from depression and alcohol became a stiff wake-up call for her and Roy. Afterwards, they agreed to swear off drinking from that point on. Cindy even pursued grief counseling in Tehachapi and felt it helped her better cope with the extreme pain she felt. But she couldn’t put aside her questions about the circumstances of her son’s death.

“It became her quest to find out,” said Roy.

“You just want to know why is your child dead,” Cindy said. “I know there’s more to this story, I just don’t know how to get it. And I’m not going to give up until I find out. I’m afraid as the years go by it will all disappear.”

One of Adam’s Army buddies from Iraq, Tony Sandoval, was also searching for answers to his friend’s death. He faithfully called Cindy, and the friendship he had shared with Adam soon extended to Cindy.

“I hope I can be instrumental in finding out what happened, because he was a brother of mine and such a good friend,” said Sandoval. “She’ll be a lifelong friend,” he said, referring to Cindy. “She knows that my mind holds a treasure for her in memories of him.”

Cindy met some of the other soldiers who served with Adam, and through them she learned what many veterans were coping with. The military prescribed Paxil and Valium for them (anti-depression and anti-anxiety medications, respectively), but Cindy felt they never received enough treatment for what they endured in Iraq. She noticed Adam’s friends were frequently getting drunk and getting into fights. They had difficulty focusing on their work and maintaining lasting relationships.

“This is not just about Adam. This is about all of these kids that are in serious trouble,” Cindy said. “I want to be a voice to say that these kids are not getting their medical treatments.”

Cindy felt that such “serious trouble” wasn’t just a result of the difficulties that veterans had faced coming home.

“I just know that something happened in Iraq,” she said. “I want to know exactly what screwed all these kids up in Iraq.”

During the time that Cindy first sought answers, she and Roy received from Fort Wainwright a videotape of the memorial service that the Army put together for Adam in 2004. There were grainy images of a military gathering in a packed auditorium.

“We gather here today to remember Sergeant Adam Gray and bring closure to his death,” began an officer. Minutes later, the same officer described how many on the base thought Adam had committed suicide. Roy and Cindy were taken aback.

What gave him the right to say that? they asked.

Was it, in fact, a suicide? True, he had acute PTSD, but his family believed his condition had been stabilizing. Or did he inadvertently kill himself using improvised recreational drugs? The military assumed it was the latter. Investigators said Adam accidentally killed himself when he inhaled the fumes from the Dust-Off. Others, including Cindy, weren’t so sure. She felt it didn’t add up.

“It was a blow. How can you talk to your kid one night and the next day they tell you your boy is dead?” said Roy, explaining the continued confusion over Adam’s death. “It doesn’t make sense.”

Tony Sandoval agreed. He also puzzled over the military’s response.

“Now if somebody should come back and say, ‘It’s true, it’s positive, he committed suicide,’ then there’s still another big fight,” said Sandoval. “Why? Why did he have to do that? Nobody was there to help him. It doesn’t just happen. How come somebody didn’t notice this?”

Six months after uniformed officers came to their house with news about Adam, Cindy was finally able to start probing what had happened to her son. She first went through the personal effects from his barracks room in Fort Wainwright. Then she tried to make sense of the paperwork that the military sent her. Cindy figured there were more Army documents about Adam and tussled with the military for months just to get basic information.

Eventually she contacted her congressman, Bill Thomas, to apply further pressure on the Army. Thanks to their combined pressure, Cindy finally received a pile of paperwork from the military. Thumbing through the pages, she saw that investigators had classified Adam's room as a crime scene and labeled his belongings in a "Record of Personal Effects." There were also reports about discovering Adam's body and his physical pathology, his medication, a death certificate, and finally a psychological autopsy.

During one of my visits to Tehachapi, Cindy allowed me to examine the files. The pages of the autopsy revealed that Adam "had experienced poor sleep, decreased appetite, stomachaches, headaches, and hyper-vigilance" since returning from Iraq.

"Gray was upset by thoughts of not being a good NCO," the report said. "Gray said that those problems were due to the way he felt about what happened to him during his deployment. Gray said that he could not sleep without alcohol, and that the last time he did sleep without alcohol, he woke up screaming with the sheets soaked with his sweat."

Such symptoms weren't uncommon for veterans who suffered from PTSD. But perhaps the most arresting part of the report was this: "Gray had risk factors for suicide. He had made a suicide gesture three weeks before his death."

On August 8, 2004, a friend of Adam's and his girlfriend entered his barracks room around 9:30 p.m. There they found him hanging by a belt that was fastened to the top bunk bed. Adam was breathing but unconscious. His friends hoisted him up to loosen the belt tied around his neck, then quickly called 911. Adam might have died that evening had they not stumbled into his room and roused him.

According to the report, Adam "suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder from his experiences in Iraq, and he had a substance abuse problem. Both conditions increase his suicide risk. His status as recently being released from a psychiatric hospital increases his statistical risk of suicide."

And yet the forensic opinion ended with the statement that Adam Gray's "death is best classified as an accident."

Cindy felt that the investigation was incomplete; basic information about the barracks' guard rotations that would have checked in on Adam during the night, the record of his phone calls, and his financial information appeared to be missing. Apart from the lack of investigative follow-up work, there also seemed to be basic unanswered questions

about Adam. If he “had risk factors for suicide”—and even attempted suicide three weeks before his death—why hadn’t the military taken more aggressive measures to monitor and treat him? Why didn’t the military try to deal with the particular “problems ... due to the way he felt about what happened to him during his deployment”?

Was the Army covering something up? she wondered. Why didn’t they seek answers to such seemingly obvious questions?

Cindy tried to contact the doctor who treated Adam in Alaska to see if he could help explain what had happened to her son. But her calls went unanswered. Then she tried to locate former unit members from Alaska. She finally got a reply from Richard Boone’s wife, Lisa, in the form of a handwritten letter. She was contrite about Cindy’s loss and tried to offer some insight into Adam’s state of mind during the time she and her husband knew him in Alaska.

“Adam stated something to the effect that he had a hard time dealing with what he had done,” she wrote.

By way of explanation, she recalled that Adam came over to their house during the summer for a night of heavy drinking.

“That night those boys tied a good one on. I’m talking two cases of beer between them both,” wrote Lisa. As the night progressed, Adam’s friends drifted off to bed. He decided to stay up longer, drinking and smoking on a recliner.

“He was tired, and had way too much to drink, began rubbing his forehead and saying, ‘I just wish I could show them what I had to do,’ ” continued Lisa. “At that point I took the beer away and everyone decided to go to bed.

Her letter then made a vague reference to Adam’s troubled thoughts: “Anyway ... it was the comment he made about the things he did that I was getting to.” Despite the vagueness, Adam Gray’s family and friends agreed that they needed to further understand “the things he did” in order to make sense of his decline.

Throughout the time I reported on Adam Gray and Battalion 1-68, I told Cindy that I was concerned about relaying any new details that would add to her pain.

“I’m not worried,” she insisted. “This chapter has been opened for three years ... I’ve already been through the worst. I just want answers. But I want the truth. I want to find somebody on this planet to find me that information.”

Cindy had already been through the worst. Nothing could undo the loss of a beloved son.

“They’re born with part of your soul,” said Cindy. “And once they’re gone, that’s a whole part of you that’s gone.”

She could no longer sit through any movies that depicted violence. Anything on television that had anything to do with Iraq was impossible for her to watch. But she had also gained an enormous amount of empathy. Her heart sank whenever she glanced at a newspaper that pictured a young soldier who had just been killed in combat. She knew there was a mother out there attached to one of those souls about to go through the worst journey of her life.

“Every time I turn on the news and they have that ten-second segment, my heart breaks for the person that’s on the end of that phone call,” Cindy said. “If I can make any difference in the world with that, that would be an ultimate goal.”

Cindy’s journey, or quest, demanded great courage, since it meant confronting many disquieting facts. “I want to know exactly what screwed all these kids up in Iraq,” she often said.

There are multiple explanations, too varied to cover fully in this book. But answering what happened to Adam James Gray, and by extension others who were “troubled” by their experiences in Iraq, involves looking at individual circumstances as well as common experiences during the war on terror.

Adam and those on his tank seemed upset by the shooting that accidentally claimed the lives of an Iraqi family. But he and others in his unit were also affected by the abuse and torture they inflicted on their prisoners.

To better understand what happened to Adam Gray, and US personnel who shared similar experiences, one needs to answer the following questions: How did American forces turn to torture? And how has the use of torture during the war on terror affected detainees, troops, and our counterterrorism efforts?

Those questions don’t belong just to Cindy Chavez and her quest to understand what happened to her son. The US military and policy-makers want to hear the answers, also; so, too, do the torture victims, other mothers, and the American public.