

London

Family continues to question findings in the death of military college student

Joe Grozelle's family sent a letter to the Office of the Chief Coroner last week



[Liny Lamberink](#) · CBC News · Posted: Nov 17, 2019 7:11 AM ET | Last Updated: November 17, 2019



Ron Grozelle and Nikki Grozelle want the coroner to review Joe's case, ask police to re-investigate, and submit samples for forensic testing. (Liny Lamberink/CBC London)

Why were his teeth chipped?

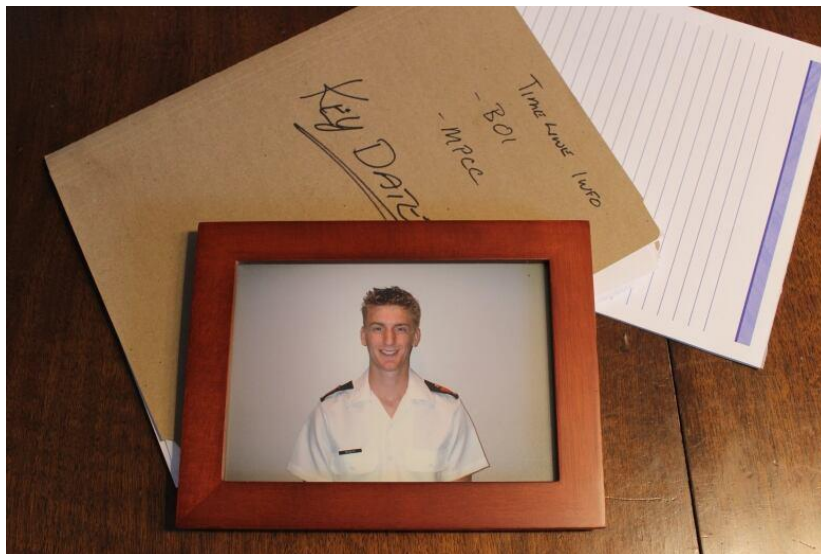
Where did his belt go?

What happened to him, from the time he was last seen, reportedly working on an assignment in his dorm room, to the time — 21 days later — when his body was pulled out of the Cataraqui River in Kingston?

It's been 16 years since Joe Grozelle, 21, died. He was a student at the Royal Military College of Canada in Kingston.

"We as a family are trying to find out the truth about what happened to Joe. That's really all we're looking for," explained Ron Grozelle, Joe's dad.

He and his daughter, Nikki, sent a letter Monday to Ontario's chief coroner, Dirk Hoyer, asking that the case be reviewed.



Joe was a cadet at the Royal Military College of Canada in Kingston, when he disappeared on Oct. 21, 2003. (Liny Lamberink/CBC London)

Grozelle said, from the moment they realized he was missing — they were alerted by his basketball coach that a full-blown military search was underway — they had concerns about how the case was being handled.

7 investigators for one missing person

Sitting at the dining room table of her Strathroy home, Nikki Grozelle, Joe's older sister, explained to CBC News that her mom got a call from the coach on Oct. 21, 2003, asking if there was any reason Joe may have missed practice.

"It wasn't until the next day that the coach called back, saying 'I probably shouldn't be telling you this, but just so you know, they're searching. They're searching for your son all over campus. There are divers,'" she said.

The Grozelles went to Kingston. At that time, the family said the Canadian Forces National Investigation Service (NIS) was leading the search, with help from Kingston Police. The NIS had a team of seven investigators looking for Joe even though they hadn't contacted a family member to ask if he'd simply gone home.

"Why would you send seven investigators down, just to look for a missing person?" wondered Ron.

Joe's body was found floating in the river on Nov. 13. The Canadian Forces initially concluded the death to be a suicide by drowning.

Family and friends insisted that was unlikely, and pushed for another investigation and autopsy.

The Ontario Provincial Police launched a second investigation in March 2004.

Family's push for answers leads to second autopsy

It wasn't until months later, in October 2004, that the Grozelles received a copy of the first autopsy report.

"When dad identified the body, he had questions. Nowhere in the autopsy report did we see any sort of testing or comments made for the injuries that we saw," explained Nikki.

Ron noticed chipped teeth and bruising on his son's lip and on the bridge of his nose. He also noticed that Joe's belt was missing, his shoes were untied, and he wasn't wearing anything from the waist up.



Nikki Grozelle and her mom, Minnie, pour over albums full of newspaper clippings about Joe's death. (Liny Lamberink/CBC London)

Nikki believes that her family's questions, after seeing the autopsy report, are what prompted the coroners' office to exhume Joe's body in November 2004 and do further testing.

"You don't do something twice unless you didn't do it right the first time," said Ron.

Another year later, in November 2005, Ontario's deputy chief coroner, Jim Cairns, said that the OPP had ruled out foul play in the death and they had no reason to believe criminal charges would be involved. At the time, it was still considered a drowning.

Joe died of 'unascertained, non-natural causes': coroner's jury

Two inquests were launched by the Office of the Chief Coroner. The first one in 2006 was shut down because of "procedural fairness," said Nikki.

A second inquest began in March 2007. To this day, the Grozelles are concerned with some of the jury's findings.

"Let me read to you, directly from the coroner's verdict ... date and time of the death. The jury's answer was November 13, 2003, at 8:40 a.m."

"That is not the time of the death, it's the time of recovery. So lacking anything about what happened to Joe, that was the only thing they could put down," said Ron.

Cause of death is another problem for the family. "The jury put down unascertained, non-natural causes," said Ron.

"Unascertained comes from the coroner's report, the autopsy report. The jury added non-natural causes. There was nothing to show that it was anything other than that."

And, the jury's finding about how the death occurred? "It was identified as being undetermined," said Ron.

Medical experts also testified that Joe may have died before ending up in the water.

Military probe

With the inquest into Joe's death complete, the coroner closed its case and the military began its own mandatory board of inquiry.

Its report, obtained by the Grozelles through an access to information request, revealed two medical experts testified Joe may have died before ending up in the water.

"That was a big piece of information for us that helped solidify or confirm our theories from the initial outset. That no, Joe didn't commit suicide. Something happened to Joe," said Ron.

The family thought the testimony would lead to an immediate re-opening of the investigation into Joe's death.

Letter received

Ontario's Chief Coroner, Dirk Huyer has confirmed he has received the letter and information from the Grozelle family.

"I haven't had the chance to look at it. I've been out of the office most of this week," he said. "We get letters like that all the time. We look at that all the time. That's something that we do."

Huyer was unable to say when he'd reply to the Grozelles' letter.

"Not specific about this case, but there are certainly, unfortunately, cases where we don't have answers all the time, because the person who can give us the answers isn't available. It's very tough."

But, for the Grozelles, an "unascertained, non-natural" and "undetermined" death isn't a satisfactory answer. The family is determined to get their questions answered once and for all.

"We believe that somebody knows what happened to Joe."