
'In my heart, I don't believe it was suicide': Cadet's father

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Local News - People who were closest to Joe Grozelle refuse to believe he took his own life, for the first time publicly questioning the investigation of his mysterious disappearance and death.

The Royal Military College cadet's family fears that investigators and the community suspect Grozelle threw himself into the Cataraqui River and drowned.

"In my heart, I don't believe it was suicide," his father, Ron Grozelle, told The Whig-Standard in an interview.

Grozelle's girlfriend, Melissa Haggart, who has not spoken publicly since Grozelle vanished and was later found dead, shares the family's skepticism.

"I think I'm a pretty good judge of character," she said in an interview yesterday. "If that did happen, then I was totally fooled and I was totally to blame because something was wrong that I didn't see."

Grozelle's body was pulled from Kingston's inner harbour Nov. 13 after passersby spotted it floating in the river near the La Salle Causeway.

Haggart, who is a third-year cadet at RMC, revealed yesterday that she took a polygraph test last Wednesday administered by the National Investigation Service, the military agency probing Grozelle's death.

Haggart said she passed the test, given, she was told, to put to rest any concern that she concealed a suicide note.

"I tried to tell them, 'Do you think I'm the type of person who would sit there and look at his family in the eyes and tell them I didn't know anything?'"

She told the newspaper that she did not speak publicly before because she was so distraught about losing Grozelle.

"He loved life. He loved his niece and nephew. He loved going home. He loved his family. He loved his friends. He loved his basketball team. He loved being here.

"He loved me."

The couple had been dating for nearly two years.

She said she could always tell from Grozelle's face what was going on inside his head and nothing about the way he acted in the days before he disappeared seemed out of the ordinary.

She said people have told her that stress can sometimes build up and cause someone to snap and make an irrational decision. But the couple told each other everything.

"There wasn't any sign that stress was getting to him or he couldn't handle it, or he didn't want to

handle it,” she said in a 90-minute interview in her dorm room.

While Haggart completes her final exams, Ron Grozelle is pressing people for answers.

Troubled by the pace of the official inquiry, he has quietly begun an independent probe that has uncovered perplexing details. He has come to Kingston several times from the family home in Muirkirk, near Chatham.

He shared some of his findings that he believes raise doubt about a suicide theory.

“If it’s not suicide, then something happened to Joe,” he said. “Whether it was intentional or not, I have no idea.”

The anguished father, desperate for answers, and his son Dan talked with The Whig for three hours.

Joe Grozelle vanished from his dorm room at the military college Oct. 22. Despite an intensive land, air and water search, investigators uncovered no solid clues about his fate until his body was found when a violent wind and rain storm battered Kingston.

It’s believed that 80 km/h winds and swirling river currents somehow brought his body to the surface.

Ron Grozelle is puzzled by two facts: his son was found shirtless and his body was first spotted south of the causeway, a detail not reported publicly before.

Details of Grozelle’s last day on campus also have been a public mystery, given Haggart’s silence.

Haggart said Grozelle hoped next year to be picked as cadet in charge of his squadron. He had a good chance of getting the position, she said, because he had high marks, was a varsity basketball player and a sports officer for his squadron. It would have been an extra-time commitment and added responsibility, but Grozelle was looking forward to it.

Haggart said Grozelle had a tough time in his first year. He failed his first military exercise, basic training, because he got sick.

The experience shook the confidence of the small town hero who had been named his high school’s male athlete of the year.

“He played all the sports, he helped coach teams. He was Joe Somebody, ” she said. “He came here with a big blow because he had never really failed anything that big before in his life and the first thing he did in the military – that first experience – was ‘Oh, you’re not good enough.’ ”

Grozelle was dreading having to retake basic training and talked about dropping out of first year and going to a regular “civilian” university.

He passed his basic training and by second year he was loving his business courses and his basketball games. The pressure of being a freshman was gone and Haggart said Grozelle found that his methodical personality fit with the rigid RMC schedule.

He was always concerned about his performance at basketball, the fact he wasn’t the team’s best player and was never given a lot of court time. It was hard for the two of them to talk about it because Haggart was one of her varsity soccer team’s strongest players.

But Grozelle was training hard to bulk himself up and improve his game. He was also the kind of

guy who wanted his team to win and understood that sometimes meant he would have to sit on the bench, Haggart said.

"If he stopped talking about it, then I would have known that something was wrong," she said. Even if he felt he couldn't talk to his girlfriend, Haggart said he could always confide in his teammates.

While she said that even talking about Grozelle committing suicide is "insane," if he had wanted to kill himself, he never would have jumped in the water.

"People don't choose one of their biggest fears," she said. "I hate snakes. I'm not going to go out and try to be bitten by one so I can die. There's a lot more peaceful ways I guess you can do it. He liked to sleep. You'd think he would just go to sleep somewhere with pills or whatever."

Grozelle dying at the hands of another cadet, even accidentally, is equally impossible, Haggart said.

RMC is a safe and close-knit environment and at the time Haggart fell asleep, plenty of people would still have been roaming the hallways, she said.

Haggart has talked about the day Grozelle disappeared so much that she can almost recite it without thinking.

What she remembers is what an incredibly normal day it was.

Grozelle got up and went to class: an hour and a half of organizational theory, two hours of history and an hour of French.

Haggart saw him that afternoon at basketball practice after coming back from running on the treadmill at the gym. Grozelle then went to dinner with friends and came by Haggart's room to talk about the law assignment.

Near the end of the night, she said she went to his room to work on the law assignment. Haggart spent most of her spare time in her boyfriend's room.

The two made plans to go out Friday: Haggart would go see Grozelle's basketball game and then they would grab something to eat and catch a movie.

"We just talked about what we were going to do and we were making jokes. It was so normal."

Haggart finished her law assignment and printed it out to proofread. She fell asleep reading on Grozelle's bed around 1 a.m., while Grozelle was at his computer working on the assignment.

He was still wearing the clothes he wore to dinner: a black-hooded Nike sweatshirt over a blue golf shirt, khaki pants and new beige suede shoes.

When she woke up it was 5:30 a.m., Grozelle was gone, but his desk lamp and computer were still on. His chair was moved a bit back from the desk as if he had just gotten up. "It looked like he had just gone to the bathroom and would come right back."

His wallet and watch were still there, as were all his shoes, except for the pair he was wearing the night before.

Haggart said she knew the moment she woke up something was wrong.

Grozelle had never done anything like this before. He loved to sleep – he would even sleep

through classes at the back of the room. He wasn't the kind of guy to just take off for the night.

He also wasn't very spontaneous and kept a strict "to do" list in his agenda. At the end of the day, he would either cross off a completed task or move it over to the next day. Even nights out with friends were usually scheduled.

"He wasn't a very spur-of-the-moment type guy," Haggart said. "Nothing like this had ever happened before."

The two would almost always leave notes for each other to say where they were going. If she didn't know where Grozelle was, Haggart usually checked the shoes in his room. If his runners were missing, he was probably at the gym. But everything was exactly as she had seen it before she fell asleep, Haggart said.

"I thought, of course, there's got to be something, some crazy thing because terrible things don't happen. They don't happen in real life, just in the movies and on TV."

Haggart went back to her room and fell back asleep. Because she didn't have class until 10 a.m., she slept until eight, expecting Grozelle might come by to get her for breakfast.

At 8 a.m., she had a shower, got dressed and went back to his room.

The routine at RMC required cadets to be up and dressed every weekday by 8 a.m. Grozelle also had his law assignment, which she said was mostly finished but still needed to be edited.

When she opened the door, Haggart found the room just as she had left it. She believed he had not been back.

"I think I started crying in his room because my mind couldn't process it. I couldn't come up with any reasons why he wouldn't be there," she said. "It's just not in his nature to go places or go for a walk."

She went to the mess hall for breakfast, but couldn't eat and left without getting any food.

She woke up a friend and started crying. The two female cadets visited Grozelle's friends to see if he had gone to another cadet's room, where he might have ended up playing video games and falling asleep.

Even though the idea was out of character for Grozelle, it was the only explanation. They checked the lounge of his squadron to see if he was sleeping on the couch.

Throughout the day, Haggart returned to his room – she checked it as many as a dozen times – but it was always just as she had left it.

When Grozelle didn't show up for basketball practice that evening, Haggart reported him missing to the cadet in charge of his squadron.

Eventually she told the duty officer and gave a statement to the military police, who checked the hospital to see if Grozelle was injured.

Haggart called her mother in Ottawa and told her Grozelle was missing. Haggart's mom tried to comfort her.

"She said there's got to be an explanation. There's got to be something. We'll be laughing about this together in no time."

Haggart knew something was terribly wrong because, short of going to the bathroom or asking for help with his law assignment, Grozelle wouldn't have left his dorm room that night.

It was late, he needed his sleep for basketball practice the next day and he wasn't someone who ever went outside to clear his head.

"There were just huge gaps of time between when I fell asleep and saw him last and what happened. Something happened, some clue, something we're not seeing, no one is seeing. I don't know if we'll ever know what happened in that space of time, why he went from the comfort of his room to the water."

Aside from basketball and spending time with Haggart, Grozelle loved to socialize. He and his basketball teammates would go into the city almost every Saturday night.

Haggart said it's unlikely anyone came by to invite Grozelle out the night he disappeared.

It was also rare for Grozelle to pull an all-nighter. If he had a big project due, he would usually stay up no later than 2 a.m. or 3 a.m., she said. Otherwise, the two were in bed by midnight or earlier after a ball game.

The investigation seemed to move swiftly, she said.

The day after Haggart reported Grozelle missing, another member of the military police interviewed her for two hours, asking about the last time she had seen Grozelle, his personality and his state of mind. That night, the National Investigation Service arrived from Ottawa and she was called to give a similar statement.

She took investigators to Grozelle's room to show them that nothing had been moved or taken.

The next day, Haggart went home to her parents in Ottawa. She returned a couple of times in the next two weeks to speak with investigators.

Haggart considered helping with the search, but said she just couldn't bear the thought of being the one to find him.

"They were looking in Dumpsters and places that I didn't want to be looking for my best friend," she said.

She was last questioned on Dec. 3, when the NIS gave her the lie-detector test. She was scheduled to take the test Nov. 13, but that was the day Grozelle's body was found.

Haggart remembered the night before Grozelle was found. There was a fierce storm that blew through a crack in her window.

The next day, Haggart was scheduled to look at a sweatshirt found during the search. Instead, she and a friend visited investigators and were told only that a body had been found.

Haggart went back to accounting class and then psychology. During a break her squadron commander told her that while there was no positive identification, the body had the same colour hair and clothes as Grozelle.

She went back to her room, where friends continued to come in and out all day. She called her parents. Haggart went on compassionate leave for two weeks to Ottawa.

She used to spend hours in Grozelle's dorm room. But she hasn't even been able to go back to his floor since the day he disappeared.

Haggart was shocked at first that Grozelle was found in the water because, she said, he didn't like to swim.

He had failed his swim test during basic training, although he was able to make it up another way, Haggart said. Grozelle wore a life jacket when cadets went through water combat training and had to swim while carrying mock rifles above their heads.

"I just don't understand how he got in the water," she said. "It was the last place that I would expect."

So far, Haggart said she's received little information from investigators.

People often ask Haggart if it bothers her not knowing what happened to her boyfriend. Of course it does, she said, but she gets some comfort from knowing Grozelle's body was recovered and given a proper funeral.

"It's enough of a gift to have him laid to rest," she said. "I would love to know what happened and have an answer. But I'm not sure we'll ever know."

Even an autopsy, she suspects, might not bring answers.

"If someone asked me a year ago if Joe's was going to randomly disappear into the night one night and then his body is going to wash up on the shores of Lake Ontario, I'd be like, 'Who are you? What are you talking about?' "

Ron Grozelle also has many questions but he refuses to wait for answers.

"Joe had no shirt on [when he was found]." he said. "He was naked from the waist up."

"How he would have come to end up without his shirt on, we don't know. Where his clothing is, we don't know."

Grozelle is hopeful that anyone who knows anything about the clothing will call investigators, police or get in touch with him.

"To me, the fact he wasn't wearing a shirt is an issue I feel should be tracked down," Ron Grozelle said.

Lt. Navy Ryan Snow, on-scene commander from the NIS, said that the missing clothes aren't considered a major piece of evidence. He said there's no evidence Grozelle was even wearing the shirts when he entered the water.

"There is no evidentiary value in that shirt or shirts. If there was, we'd be looking for the shirt," he said.

Snow said because of the currents in the Cataraqui River, it's possible that Grozelle's shirt or shirts were pulled off when he was in the water.

If that happened, and the clothing is now on the river bottom, it's likely that no one will ever see them again.

Ron Grozelle also learned through his investigation that his son made plans to talk with a college professor the day he vanished.

His family wonders why he would make an appointment with a professor if he was planning to kill

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himself that night. And why would he have Haggart in his room?

Dan Grozelle said suicide doesn't make sense. He said his younger brother would have called their mother to say goodbye or he would have left a suicide note.

"All these things, in our opinion, mean that he was a stable guy. He's got goals, he wants to stick around," he said.

Grozelle's body wasn't spotted on the north side of the La Salle Causeway as previously reported.

On Nov. 13, investigators originally said that a 911 caller spotted the body on the north side of the causeway.

Snow confirmed yesterday that Grozelle's body was spotted on the south side of the causeway after 8 a.m.

The body was pulled out at 8:33 a.m. on the opposite side, near HMCS Cataraqui, Kingston's naval reserve unit on the east bank of the river.

Snow said his team learned that on Nov. 13 the currents were moving in reverse – from north to south.

Snow said investigators may never know where Grozelle entered the water. He may have gone into the water north of the causeway, moved south by the currents and then have been pushed northward again. Or, he may have originally gone into the water south of the causeway and moved north on the morning of Nov. 13.

Bodies tend to pop up a couple hundred of metres where they went down.

Snow said the Grozelles and Kingston should also brace themselves that Joe Grozelle's death may always be shrouded in mystery.

Snow said the NIS is waiting for a full autopsy and toxicology report from the Centre of Forensic Sciences. It's expected some time in January or February.

Snow said the report may determined that Grozelle drowned but how he ended up in the water could always be the million-dollar question.

He said there are no indications on Grozelle's body of foul play.

"As it stands right now, it does not appear to be foul play, which leaves two situations: it was an accident [or] suicide but nothing has been ruled in or out," Snow said.

Speaking with The Whig, Ron and Dan Grozelle, 26, looked worn out. Dan Grozelle had dark circles under his eyes.

Sometimes, both men are very honest about how they were feeling. Other times, they both seemed guarded.

They say they're not frustrated with the college or the NIS but they're frustrated that they don't know how or when Joe Grozelle died. Some of the information published by different newspapers also bothered them.

The Whig reported that Lt. Col. Rod McDonald, deputy director of cadets at RMC, said he would find it bizarre if Grozelle's body was found in the water, because he didn't like the water or

swimming and wasn't a strong swimmer.

Joe Grozelle's family said they are sure some people think he threw himself into the water to kill himself.

"The fact that comment ended up in the paper, lends itself very nicely to where he was found," Ron Grozelle said.

"I feel badly because I don't want people to jump to conclusions. The fact he didn't like water? Well, it's my position Joe wasn't afraid of the water. It wasn't his favourite thing but if his friends were going to the lake, he went to the lake with them," he said.

Dan Grozelle said his brother had also told him stories about going cliff diving – jumping off a cliff into a lake – with his friends.

"The public may have the perception that he swims like a rock and that's not true," Ron Grozelle said.

Grozelle said as long as he has leads, he'll pursue them.

"I, as a father, want to do whatever I can to support the investigation because we're working toward the same end," he said.

"But if I wasn't here, it would haunt me for a long time if we didn't find the truth – if we didn't spend the time finding the truth."

When Grozelle was missing, the NIS had people stationed in Kingston. There were eight full-time investigators on the case. Since Grozelle's body was found, Snow and his squad have moved back to Ottawa. He said there are no investigators assigned to work on the case full time but people are working on it on a part-time basis.

He said he doesn't believe there have been any tips or leads called in to police in the past few weeks.

Ron and Dan Grozelle said their family – including Joe's siblings Jim, Nikki and Corri – will celebrate Christmas this year like they do every year – together.

Both men said they would like to find out how Joe Grozelle died so they can fully grieve their dead son and brother.

But right now, investigating takes preference over grieving.

"I've got all my life to grieve," Ron Grozelle said. "Right now, I've got a very short window to do what I've got to do – find some answers."