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SEAL killed in helicopter crash was UF graduate

• **James Erik Suh was ranked petty officer 2nd class when deployed to Afghanistan this year.**

By TIFFANY PAKKALA Sun staff writer

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A Navy SEAL killed in an Afghanistan helicopter crash June 28 fostered his hopes of joining the elite special forces branch while studying statistics at the University of Florida.

After his first year of college, James Erik Suh came home for summer break transformed from a skinny teenager to a muscular man, said Linda Cleveland, a Boca Raton woman whose son was best friends with Suh growing up in Deerfield Beach.

Suh joined the ROTC in Gainesville and befriended fellow Navy SEAL hopefuls in the program, his high school friend Neil Bradford said. The men exercised together daily, running rigorous courses that included the stadium steps at UF.

"He was always working out, eating right. He definitely stayed in shape because he wanted to be the best, he wanted to be a SEAL and they don't take cupcakes," Bradford said.

Likewise, Suh - a "math genius" according to those who knew him - chose to attend UF because "he wanted to be in the best school in Florida, and that was UF in his opinion," said Frank Portugal, another high school friend.

Portugal and Bradford traveled to Gainesville during those college years to visit Suh, attending parties, football games and Gator Grawl festivities with him.

Suh graduated from UF with a bachelor's degree in 2000, then enlisted in the Navy in 2001. His SEAL training began about five months later.

The 28-year-old was ranked petty officer 2nd class when he deployed to Afghanistan this year.

He was not allowed to tell anyone where he was, but Cleveland "had that feeling in the pit of my stomach" when she heard that a Chinook helicopter carrying a special forces unit was shot down last week in eastern Afghanistan. Suh's sister, Claudia Suh Bown, of San Francisco, later called and confirmed that James Suh was among the 16 soldiers killed. A rocket-propelled grenade hit their helicopter during a rescue mission above the mountains of Kunar Province.

Shortly before the attack, Suh's father, Solomon Suh, found a Father's Day gift hidden in his bedroom with a letter from his son that said, "When we were growing up we were poor. But we never felt poor because you took us to the beach every day, taught us how to play tennis and took us to the library."

The younger Suh was assigned to the Pearl Harbor-based SEAL Delivery Vehicle Team One, so his father moved from Deerfield Beach to live with him in his two-bedroom apartment in Waipio Gentry, Hawaii. Suh's sister said the father was "so

proud of the person (James Suh) had become."

She remembers her little brother playing with G.I. Joe action figures when he was young, deciding at an early age that he wanted to be a SEAL.

"He was dedicated in everything he did," Suh's friend Bradford said. "He was definitely a great friend."

Such a friend that when Cleveland's son, Erik Esposito, was accidentally shot and killed at age 15, Suh legally changed his Korean name, Sung Gap Suh, to James Erik Suh in his friend's honor.

His death was equally honorable, Cleveland said.

"He died a man's man, being a SEAL, a warrior."

Two other Florida soldiers, Chief Warrant Officer Chris J. Scherkenbach, 40, of Jacksonville, and Sgt. Kip A. Jacoby, 21, of Pompano Beach, also died in the helicopter crash.

Scherkenbach and Jacoby were members of the Army's 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment known as the Night Stalkers.

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