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April 10, 2003

'C-L' reporter killed in accident

By Sid Salter

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Clarion-Ledger Staff Writer James V. Walker was killed Wednesday in a traffic accident in Copiah County while traveling to interview the family of a Mississippi soldier killed in the Iraq war.

Walker, 26, a native of The Woodlands, Texas, had covered military affairs and the environment for the newspaper for the past two years.



Walker

"He was an extremely bright reporter whose future was limitless," said Executive Editor Ronnie Agnew. "We all feel such a deep sense of loss."

Walker, of Jackson, was traveling to Natchez to interview the family of U.S. Army Cpl. Henry L. Brown — who was reported killed in action in Iraq on Tuesday — when the accident occurred about 20 miles west of Hazlehurst on Mississippi 28 near the landmark Union Church.

Mississippi Highway Safety Patrol spokesman Warren Strain said Walker apparently pulled onto the shoulder of the highway in his 2000 Kia Sephia just after noon to check a road map.

Walker's vehicle was struck broadside on the driver's door by a 1970 Buick Skylark driven by Maerean Womack Hollandsworth, 37, of Jackson, as he attempted to pull back onto the highway, Strain said.

Walker was pronounced dead at the scene, Strain said. He was wearing his seat belt and the vehicle's air bag deployed, said Patrol investigators.

Strain said investigators found the road map in Walker's lap.

Hollandsworth was first taken to Hardy Wilson Memorial Hospital in Hazlehurst, then transported to University of Mississippi Medical Center in Jackson, where she was listed in stable condition Wednesday night.

Copiah County Coroner Phil Howard said Walker died instantly from massive internal head and chest injuries.

Walker's trip to Natchez to interview Brown's family came on the same day his Page One story about the combat death of Spc. Larry K. Brown of Jackson was published.

Clarion-Ledger staffers learned of the accident around 3:45 p.m.

The news of Walker's death left many of his colleagues in tears.

"James was just the sweetest guy," said City Hall reporter Laura Hipp, a college classmate of Walker's. "Even back to our college days, he delighted in sticking it to the bad guys and exposing wrongdoing. But it was his nature to take care of people. That's why he liked covering the environmental beat so much."

A passionate environmental reporter, Walker took on the additional role as the newspaper's lead reporter on military affairs after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

Walker quickly mastered the military beat and developed solid relationship with state and federal military sources.

"I worked closely with James on National Guard issues," said Lee Ann Mayo, spokeswoman for Gov. Ronnie Musgrove. "He was extremely professional and thorough, and the newspaper has lost a tremendous asset."

Clarion-Ledger Assistant Managing Editor Deborah Skipper hired Walker and worked closely with him.

"James was the most naturally gifted writer I have ever encountered," she said. "He helped raise the level of storytelling at this paper, and he took pride in doing the best work possible, no matter what the constraints.

"His sole goal was to do his job, to do it well, to make a difference."

Walker joined the Jackson newspaper in 2001 after working at The Vicksburg Post.

Walker was a graduate of McCullough High School and an Eagle Scout. He earned a bachelor's degree in journalism and political science from Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas, where he was editor of The University Daily student newspaper.

Walker was a staff writer for The Beaumont (Texas) Enterprise and served a student internship with The Herald-Democrat in Sherman, Texas before moving to Vicksburg.

"He cared about the stories he was writing because he cared about the state," said Vicksburg Post Managing Editor Charlie Mitchell. "It's a real loss for journalism."

Agnew said he had consulted last week with Walker on his professional performance.

"James was one of our best, and I'm glad I had the chance to tell him so last week," said Agnew. "It's ironic that his colleagues had planned to honor him this week for his thorough, yet sensitive coverage of local people involved in the war effort. Our industry has lost a rising star."

Walker is survived by his wife, Kelyn, and parents, James W. and Katrina Walker of The Woodlands. A memorial service will be held at a later date.

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