Viet vet's death still a puzzle to coroner

Los Angeles County coroner's officials are awaiting toxicology reports to determine what killed a Vietnam veteran last weekend.

James Hopkins died Sunday in his Calabasas home, two months after he crashed a Jeep into the lobby of a Veterans Administration Hospital in Los Angeles and fired 14 shots at the walls.

The Center for Veterans' Rights planned to demonstrate on the hospital's lawn at noon today to focus attention on veterans' problems.

Deputy Coroner Gregory Myers said Tuesday the additional tests on Hopkins' body are necessary because an autopsy performed earlier in the day had failed to reveal the cause of his death.

The body of the 32-year-old former Marine was found lying on the bed in his mobile home. Investigators said an empty liquor bottle and a pill bottle were found on the night table.

But his wife, Suzanne, said she does not believe Hopkins committed suicide. Because of a sleeping problem, she suggested, he may have taken some of her sleeping pills after drinking bourbon, without realizing the possible lethal effect of the combination.

After his arrest on March 14 for the Veterans Hospital incident, Hopkins told police he was ill because of his exposure to Agent Orange, a chemical defoliant used in Vietnam.

He said the Veterans Administration had tested him for ill effects from the chemical, then lost his records without releasing the diagnosis. He also said hospital officials had ignored his pleas for proper treatment.

He was to have appeared in court in July on charges stemming from the incident.

"We have a number of speakers with parallel stories to tell to the Jim Hopkins tragedy," veterans center co-director Ron Bitzer said. "It's clear that this was not an isolated incident."

He said the group will issue "very specific questions to the Reagan administration" dealing with the problems of delayed stress — trauma being experienced by veterans years after their tour of duty in Vietnam — as well as research into toxic herbicides such as Agent Orange and proposed cutbacks in veteran benefit programs.

JAMES HOPKINS