

Community mourns death of Sgt. Christopher Hrbek

Wednesday, January 20, 2010

BY MEGAN BURROW
COMMUNITY LIFE

Residents, family and friends mourned the death of Sgt. Christopher Hrbek this past week. Hrbek was killed last Thursday, Jan. 14, when he stepped on an improvised explosive device (IED) in the Helmand Province of Afghanistan, where he was serving with the Marine Corps.

The 25-year-old Westwood resident was a 2002 graduate of Westwood Regional Jr./Sr. High School and a nine-year member of the Westwood Fire Department.

Hrbek comes from a family of firefighters, following his step-father and captain of the department Jaymee Hodges, first joining as a cadet at age 16. His step-brothers Jim and Beau Hodges are members of the New York City Fire Department.

Hodges said from the time he was a little boy, his step-son was interested in the military. After Hrbek took the Marine Corps Agility Test in 10th grade, "he really fell in love with the corps," said Hodges. "He read books, watched movies, anything about the corps he could find."

On his 18th birthday, shortly before graduating high school, Hrbek asked his step-father to take him to the recruitment office in Hackensack to enlist. He left for basic training at Parris Island, S.C. the following January.

"I said to him 'follow your dreams, kid, you're my hero.' He went out the door and came back a marine 13 weeks later," said Hodges.

Westwood Fire Chief Marc Fedorchak said from the time he first met Hrbek when he was only 8 years old, he had been nothing but a "great, great person."

"He would do anything for anybody," said Fedorchak. "He's going to be sorely missed. It's a huge loss for the community." Hrbek had been on military leave, but remained an active member of the department while in Afghanistan.

Councilman William Phayre, a member of the fire department, recalled a young man who always wanted to help others. "This news has had a profound impact on our entire family," Phayre said Friday. "He was one of the three original cadets in the department along with my son Bill. He was just a great young man – if you were with him, you would be smiling."

As the news of Hrbek's death spread, residents and community groups found ways to honor his life and sacrifice, placing American flags outside their homes and sharing stories of the young man in living rooms and on social networking Web sites.

The Borough of Westwood began its Jan. 19 council meeting with a moment of silence for Hrbek, and in honor of one of Hrbek's final wishes, members of the fire department and the Knights of Columbus plan to line the streets Thursday, Jan. 21 holding American flags when Hrbek's body returns home to the borough. At approximately 2:45 p.m., the motorcade escorting Hrbek's body from Dover Air Force Base in Delaware will travel past Westwood High School, where students will pay their respect. The procession will then begin at the A field at Ketler Elementary School on Third Avenue, turning onto Washington Avenue, where it will travel past Veteran's Park, before making its way to Becker Funeral Home on Kinderkamack Road. Residents wishing to pay their respect to Hrbek have been invited to line the streets with flags in

their hands.

Bergen County Executive Dennis McNerney instructed all county buildings to fly federal, state and county flags half-staff in honor of the fallen Marine. "This is about doing what is right for one of Bergen's own," he stated in a press release Tuesday.

Hrbek was scheduled to return home in May and had planned to continue his career with the Marines as a drill instructor.

During his nine years as a Marine, Hrbek opted to extend his service twice. Besides his last mission in Afghanistan, he served three tours in Iraq, and one in Okinawa, Japan. Although he had an opportunity to leave the military and join the New York City Fire Department last year, he chose to re-enlist instead. "He thought about it and said to me 'If I die a Marine I'll die happy,'" said Hodges. "He just loved being a soldier."

Mayor John Birkner said the borough will do everything it can to honor Hrbek's memory "with dignity and respect."

"He paid the supreme sacrifice and for that he deserves every honor that we can give to his memory," said Birkner. "Every night we watch the news and hear reports, but when the report comes home it just truly takes your breath away and makes you reflect deeper on what these soldiers do every day to defend American ideals. It's remarkable, because they have volunteered to put themselves in harms way."

Hrbek will be posthumously awarded a bronze star with valor for saving the life of his sergeant major while on patrol in late December. Hrbek and a Navy corpsman rushed to the man's aid after his legs were blown off by an IED, carried him to safety, and applied tourniquets to stop the bleeding. On Christmas Eve, Hrbek was met by two military generals who informed him he would be nominated for the medal. "I know how proud he was. I'm just happy he knew that he was going to be a decorated soldier," Hodges said. Marines presented Hodges and his wife with a Gold Star for their sacrifice on Tuesday.

Hodges expressed his pride in the step-son he watched grow from a mischievous little boy into a decorated war hero. "He went away to the Marine Corps when he was just a kid, but when he came back he was a man we all admired."

A wake will be held at Zion Lutheran Church on Second Avenue from 2 to 8 p.m. on Jan. 22. A funeral mass will be held at 9 a.m. the following day at the church, with interment to follow at George Washington Memorial Park in Paramus. Hrbek is survived by his wife Jamie Wengerter, mother Cheryl, step-father Jaymee, biological father Richard Hrbek, sisters Amy and Lori and step-brothers Jim and Beau.

E-mail: burrow@northjersey.com

Find this article at:

http://www.northjersey.com/news/82169282_Community_mourns_death_of_Sgt__Christopher_Hrbek.html