

# Slain hero Sgt. Christopher Hrbek begins journey home from Afghanistan

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Ruark/AP

Marines carry remains of Sgt. Christopher Hrbek at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware. Side: Sgt. Hrbek at Fleet Week.

As the nation's attention was divided between Haiti and Massachusetts, the remains of 25-year-old Marine Sgt. Christopher Hrbek began the journey home from Afghanistan.

Hrbek had been called to join his two older brothers in the FDNY, but he decided he was not done being a Marine even after three combat tours in Iraq.

He deployed to Afghanistan in November, just before President Obama officially announced the surge.

Two days before Christmas, Hrbek braved intense gunfire to save the life of a Marine sergeant major who lost both legs in an IED explosion.



Last week, Hrbek stepped on an IED, but he was instantly beyond saving.

On Tuesday, a casualty officer read aloud a letter to Hrbek's family from Sgt. Maj. Raymond Mackey, whose life Hrbek had saved before losing his own.

"Thanking us for having a son who was such a true Marine, who thought nothing of getting in harm's way to save his life," said Hrbek's stepfather, Jaymee Hodges.

This morning, the family will drive to the military mortuary in Dover, Del. They will escort Hrbek's coffin home to the New Jersey town of Westwood, across the river from the city where his brothers serve with Rescue 1 and Engine 59.

The motorcade will proceed down flag-lined streets, passing his elementary school and high school. Students will stand outside in tribute to this magnificent young man who died on a fourth combat tour.

The funeral will be on Saturday. Hrbek will receive the Bronze Star posthumously for actions he described in a phone call to his family on Christmas Day.

Hrbek told them he had been on patrol when there was an explosion 10 paces behind him. He had turned to see Mackey still in the air, both legs gone, an arm in bad shape. Then came the gunfire.

"He said, 'I heard this boom. I saw what happened and dragged him out of harm's way and just started wrapping him with tourniquets with the Navy corpsman,'" the stepfather recalled.

Hrbek said the corpsman had applied seven tourniquets and stopped the bleeding. Hrbek also mentioned that two Marine generals, one a four-star, had sought him out on Christmas Eve to commend him and say he was being put in for a Bronze Star for valor.

"I said, 'A four-star general came?'" his stepfather recalled. "He said, 'Yeah. He's a really nice guy.'"

The stepfather was all the more proud because Hrbek spoke as if he had only been doing what a Marine does.

"When you're humble about things, it means you're doing it from the heart," the stepfather said.

And everybody who knew Hrbek knew how much he loved serving his country as a Marine. He had made his feelings about being a Marine known when he was in New York on Fleet Week and stopped by Rescue 1 to see his brother, Jim Hodges.

"I could do this for the rest of my life!" Hrbek declared.

On into the New Year, Hrbek managed to call home from Afghanistan every few days. He offered a front-line Marine's view of the situation in Helmand Province.

"He said, 'It's bad,'" the stepfather recalled. "He never said that when he was in Iraq."

Hrbek reported to the family that the man he had saved was bound for the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland.

"He said to me, 'I sent word back you and mom would go down to Maryland to see Sgt. Mackey,'" the stepfather remembered.

Two days after the last phone call, the stepfather encountered two Marines as he returned home. He told them he knew why they were there.

"I said, 'When?'" the stepfather recalled. "They said that morning. I said, 'How?' They said, 'An IED.'"

On Monday, a Marine presented Hrbek's mother with a Gold Star in recognition of her unfathomable loss.

The Marine then read the letter from the sergeant major. "He's forever grateful," the stepfather said.

In the days ahead, the stepfather and the mother will be traveling to Maryland to visit Mackey, just as they told their Marine they would.

"As soon as we get Christopher buried and get a little settled," the stepfather said.

He paused.

"It'll be good."

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