

Westwood firefighter, marine killed in Afghanistan

Friday, January 15, 2010

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WESTWOOD - Sgt. Christopher Hrbek, a 2002 graduate of Westwood High School and a nine-year member of the Westwood Fire Department, was killed in action Thursday while serving with the Marine Corps in Afghanistan.

The 25-year-old was killed when he stepped on an IED in the Hamal province.

Sgt. Hrbek comes from a family of firefighters; his stepfather, Jaymee Hodges, is senior captain in the Westwood department and his two stepbrothers, Jim and Beau Hodges, are members of the New York City Fire Department.

Hodges said his stepson, who had joined the Marines in 2002, was supposed to return home in May. He had planned to become a drill instructor in the Marines.

"I was proud of him like you can't imagine," he said in a choked voice Friday morning.

He was due to receive a bronze star for saving the life of his sergeant major who stepped on an IED under enemy fire on Dec. 23.

The man's legs were immediately blown off and Hrbek acted quickly along with a Navy medic who was with him at the time.

Together, they applied tourniquets to stop the bleeding, removed him from enemy fire and got him to an airlift so that he could receive medical attention.

The general recommended Hrbek and the medic for awards for saving the man's life. "That was just so humbling," recalled Hodges.

"He lit the room up when he walked in," said his father, Richard Hrbek.

Mark Fedorchak, chief of the Westwood Volunteer Fire Department, recalled a young man so devoted to helping other people he joined the fire department as a 16-year-old. "He joined as a cadet when he was a teenager and then worked his way up the ranks to firefighter. He was on military leave but still an active firefighter up until now," he said.

Joining the U.S. military was something he wanted to do, Fedorchak said. "He was passionate about it. He has two stepbrothers who are NYC firefighters so he took 9/11 to heart. He decided to make the Marines his career goal."

Like everyone in Westwood who knew the energetic 25-year-old, finding out about his death yesterday, he said, was a shock.

"I've known Christopher since he was 8-years old. He was just an absolute wonderful person. He would give you the shirt off his back. That's why he went into the Marines. That's the type of

person he was. This was what he wanted to do. He wanted to make a difference in the world. He was an incredible young man.”

Funeral plans have not been made yet.

Hrbek is survived by his wife, Jamie Lynn Wengerter; mother, Cheryl; stepfather, Jaymee; two stepbrothers, Jim, 31, and Beau, 29; Amy, 33, of Westwood; Lori, 33, of Boonton and his father Richard Hrbek of Emerson.

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