

Hundreds in Westwood bid final farewell to fallen Marine

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WESTWOOD — Chris Hrbek simply did not know how to slow down. His stepbrothers good-naturedly called him a “pain.” His sisters remembered a kid whose liveliness was without limit. And his best friend told stories about how Hrbek would get himself in trouble with one crazy idea after another.

In the Marine Corps, however, Hrbek found his true calling — and channeled that boundless energy into singular determination.

On Saturday, hundreds gathered at Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church to pay their respects to the Westwood firefighter, Marine sergeant and native son nine days after he was killed by an improvised explosive device while on patrol in Afghanistan.

“There will never be another Chris,” said his older sister, Amy Dellentash, at his funeral service. “You are one of a kind, my brother, and you are my hero.”

Close to 400 mourners filled the church, and hundreds more stood outside and listened to the service over a loudspeaker.

Police officers and firefighters from dozens of North Jersey towns and from New York City, where Hrbek’s two stepbrothers work as firefighters, held flags outside the church.

Friends and family recalled the 25-year-old as a fun-loving, dynamic young man whose levity in life was matched only by the seriousness with which he took his job.

“He never knew doubt,” said another sister, Lori Hrbek. “He never knew the phrase ‘I can’t.’ Chris lived his life the way most people only wish they could.”

Bronze Star

Weeks before Hrbek’s death, a fellow Marine lost his legs in Afghanistan when he was hit by an explosive device. Hrbek left his covered position and ran to the aid of the man, treating his wounds and moving him to a safe place until he could be rescued — all while under enemy fire.

Hrbek was to have received the Bronze Star for his actions that day.

At the end of the funeral Saturday, the Marines presented his family with posthumous Bronze Star and Purple Heart medals.

Over and over, those who knew him spoke of Hrbek’s military service as a calling. His former commanding officer, Lt. Col. Timothy Parker, said he first got to know Hrbek because, unsurprisingly, Hrbek had gotten himself in trouble.

“He said he would accept the punishment as long as I promised to take him to Iraq,” Parker said.

Hrbek served in Iraq as the lead gunner for the lead vehicle in his patrol and on more than one occasion helped defuse tense situations with quick thinking and a “human touch,” Parker said.

On Saturday, residents lined the street for blocks to the town’s main square, where a massive

American flag hung from a gazebo. Some people outside the church — even those who didn't know Hrbek — said they had come to pay tribute to his heroism.

“This young man gave his life for our freedom,” said Little Egg Harbor resident Richard Deldonna. “This is the least we could do to show our respect. I have children as well. The pain this family must be enduring right now is unbelievable.”

But it was his unflagging vitality that friends and relatives will most remember, they said.

“Chris was loud, full of energy, always getting into trouble,” said his best friend, Billy Phayre. “It was like he was the devil on my shoulder, and I was the angel on his.”

The two friends met as boys at the Westwood firehouse, where Hrbek's stepfather, JayMee Hodges, and Phayre's father were both firefighters. They converted Phayre's garage into their own fire headquarters and spent hours responding to “calls.”

“We may have had the busiest firehouse in Bergen County,” Phayre said. “I can only imagine what the neighbors thought when they saw us riding our bikes in full fire gear, making loud, obnoxious siren noises.”

Family stories

One of Hrbek's stepbrothers, Jim Hodges, said during the church service that he and his brother, Beau, never tired of giving Chris a hard time. But Chris knew how to dish it out as well.

Once, Hodges said, he ran out of gas at 2 a.m. in River Edge. He managed to get the car to a gas station on Kinderkamack Road, but the station was closed, so he called Chris and asked him to bring a gas can.

“True to form, Chris came down with the gas can that I asked for — without a drop of gas in it,” he said, as the church filled with laughter.

“I said, ‘What were you thinking?’ And he said, ‘You told me you were at a gas station.’ Chris would do whatever you wanted him to do — you just had to be very specific.”

Hrbek — who is survived by his wife, Jamie Lynn Wengerter — was buried at George Washington Memorial Park in Paramus following the funeral.

As the procession made its way through the streets of Westwood, residents lined Washington Avenue, clutching flags and putting hands over their hearts when Hrbek's casket passed by.

Nick Benanti, a Westwood resident and childhood friend of Hrbek's, said the entire town is grieving.

“We all feel like we lost a little piece of ourselves,” he said. “It's something you don't think about until it happens.”

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