

IN MEMORY OF
TROOPER PHILLIP LAWRENCE



**IN MEMORY OF
TROOPER PHILLIP LAWRENCE**



AMY LAWRENCE

Interview by Katy Regan

Amy is the widow of Trooper Phillip Lawrence, originally from Birkenhead, the Wirral. Trooper Lawrence served in the Light Dragoons (based in Norfolk) and was killed on July 27th 2009 in Helmand when the vehicle he was driving was in an explosion.

He was 22.

My dad always said when the regiment moved to Derham, where I've lived all my life, "never marry a soldier". There was this prejudice among locals that soldiers were Jack-the-lads and not to be trusted. But my dad adored Phil. My parents used to say, I can tell how much he loves you just by the way he looks at you. And Phil was so proud to be a soldier. He wanted to join up so badly, he went on his 18th Birthday still wearing his birthday badge.

It was Phil's personality that attracted me when we met in a pub in Norwich in September 2006. He was from Birkenhead and was a typical scouser: cocksure of himself and always cracking jokes. He told me he was in the army and that he was going on his first tour to Afghanistan in three weeks so we were just friends at first. I'm a natural worrier and the worse case scenario occurred to me right from the beginning, so I was wary of getting too involved. It was whilst he was on that first tour, however that we realized we had strong feelings for each other. He was always so upbeat and saw the best in people. He was a brilliant brother to his four younger brothers and I knew he'd make a brilliant dad. It wasn't hard to fall in love with Phil.

We'd only known one

another six months when he proposed in June 2007. We got married the following February; the plan was, we'd have kids young, so that when they went to university, we'd still be young enough to travel the world.

Although I didn't know it, I was already pregnant at the wedding in Norwich registry office, then we moved to the army barracks, excited to start our married lives together. Jess was born on November 6th.

My waters had gone in the car - Phil had chance to literally drag me across the hospital car park and ring the delivery suite buzzer, before she was born in reception. It was the first time I'd ever seen him speechless but he was smitten immediately. I remember he held her and she grabbed onto his finger and from then on, for the first few weeks, that's the only way she would settle.

Phil went out on his second tour of Afghanistan at the beginning of April 2009. People say you always believe the worst won't happen to you, but you don't really, there's the permanent anxiety. But soldiers have it drilled into them to put on a brave face. Phil always said, I'm more likely to be hit by a car than to be killed out there and I wanted to

believe it but I didn't, not really. Once he'd gone I organized things to do to keep us busy and our minds occupied. If one of us wives had heard from our husband, we'd tell the others what we knew but they never wanted to talk about how horrific it was out there and we were told we couldn't put anything on Facebook because the Taliban were trying to intercept calls and find out the movements of the British troops all the time.

Sometimes you could tell in the boys' voices how they were or if they'd had a hard day, so you'd try to keep the conversation upbeat. We could send 'e-blueies' - emails that went from us to Bastion and I was sending ten a day about Jess and what she was up to, because he was missing out on all the important milestones.

They'd only been out for six weeks before the first lad was killed. There was a text message service set up and so if anyone got killed, you'd get a text message after the family had been informed and before it went to the Press.

I remember opening that text and thinking, "Oh my God." It brought it all home.

He was out there two and a half months before he came home for two weeks R&R where we thankfully spent time with his family in Birkenhead and also

back home on the barracks. The photo Louis created was taken by a family friend who was a professional photographer. It was a Christmas present from my dad and step-mum. We enjoyed having the photo taken - she had set up a studio in a shed at the bottom of her garden - but at the same time, I was aware that the main reason we had got it for a present was because he was going away again in a few months time... It was only a couple of months before he was going again.

On the day he was due to fly back to Afghan, he drove up to Brize Norton but for some reason they hadn't put his name down to fly. That happened for a week - he kept driving there and then within the hour, he'd be back. It was awful really because it strung out the goodbyes, but it also meant we had an extra week together, and when he was killed everyone said how that was meant to happen.

Jess and I went on holiday with a friend of ours to Scarborough straight after he went. When Phil rang, he said one of his friends had been in his third explosion but was unscathed. "That's how safe the tanks are" he said. But during that week, two men were killed in his regiment. Phil was in the Endorfs troupe and as far as I knew, the driver of a tank.

What he hadn't told me was that he was now doing a lot of things on foot. "Please don't worry" he said but those two lads were on the news all the time whilst we were in Scarborough and it was almost impossible not to.

The last time I heard his voice was a week before he was killed. He called up and said "hello" but then the line went dead and I've lived with the guilt, ever since, that I never got to tell him we loved him.

The Sunday evening before I heard that Phil had been killed, I'd felt really unsettled but put it down to the fact that the next day was my first day back to work after maternity leave from my job working at a nursery. The next morning, I went to work, but when I had my break at around 10am, I saw I had lots of missed calls from a number I didn't recognize but didn't think much of it. Eventually, around 3pm that day, my sister rang and said, "Amy, you need to get home now." It turned out the army official had been pacing around in front of my sister's house all day, asking her when I'd arrive. He'd spoken to friends on the barracks when I wasn't home and found out where my sister lived. When I rushed inside and saw him in a suit, I just knew.

I learnt later that the regiment Welfare Officer had stayed on the barracks the night before and had looked over at my house with no lights on and thought, I've got to break that poor girl's heart tomorrow. The visiting officer who broke the news to me had stayed in a hotel that night and got totally drunk. I was the first person he'd ever had to tell and I think it broke him.

Phil had never talked about death but the night before he'd gone to Bastion, he'd said, "Look, it's bad out there, I don't want to have to talk to you about this stuff but this is what I want on my headstone, at my funeral, if anything happens..." He'd also gone in to Jess's room and I'd opened the door and seen them cuddled up. Just the look on his face - I'd never seen him that emotional. I knew he didn't want to go back. In fact, after he died I learnt that when he was on R&R he'd met up with a friend and said, "I can't do this anymore, now I have a family. When I come back, I'm getting out because I can't put them through that stress anymore."

After finding out, Mum and Dad came and took me home before taking me to theirs, because I had to get his medals - I was paranoid the army would take them for some reason. I

also had a shirt he'd sprayed with his aftershave, which Jess and I put between us when we slept and so I got that too.

For the next 24 hours I couldn't be near Jess because she reminded me of Phil and I feel awful about that now. But after that, something clicked. There was the fear that something could happen to her too and she was the last piece I had of him, so I just knew she had to be with me all the time.

The army want everything done quick, they don't give you time to process things. I was told on the Monday and then the next day they were coming round to plan the funeral and I was still trying to accept I was a single mum whose husband had just died.

His body was back on the Thursday and I wanted him home, I wanted him back .We went to Wootton Bassett for the repatriation - there were two other families and we were all taken into a room where we met the coroner. I was the last family. Dad asked then if I could see Phil's body, "You are one of the few" said the coroner "who will get to see your husband, because he is one of the few who has come back whole."

I remember walking into the Chapel of Rest and the way his body was laid out, was that his head was at the top, so you

could just see his feet when you walked in and I shouted to my dad, who was waiting outside, "It's not him!" Before I saw of course, that it was.

He just looked like he was sleeping and one side of his face was swollen like he had a really bad toothache but apart from that, he looked normal.

The day it happened, they were on patrol on the tank when the vehicle in front of them had broken down. They'd camped out there for the night because they couldn't move, but unbeknownst to them, during the night, the Taliban had set up an IED and sat in a tree, in hiding. They'd set off the next day, and Phil's tank had gone right over the IED and because he was sitting in the front, it was right under him and he was killed instantly from internal injuries.

He wouldn't have suffered or known anything was going to happen, it would just have been like going to sleep.

Phil had always said he wanted a military funeral and everyone to be wearing a Man Utd shirt and he got his wish. I remember just seeing this sea of red. A lot of his cousins are Everton or Liverpool supporters but to see them all in Man Utd shirts was amazing. I also got Jess a mini kit to wear.

He came out of the church to Elton John's 'I Guess That's Why they Call it the Blues' as that was our first dance at our wedding.

I miss him so much but I'm gutted for him and I'm gutted for Jess that she never knew him. She doesn't have those memories and that frustrates her sometimes, but she's the double of him - in looks and personality. We used to have this 'happy' hour between 5 and 6pm, when Phil used to go crazy and dance and be stupid and Jess has that too!

She had some counseling when she was three, because she was very confused and she didn't like to talk about daddy because she thought it would upset me, but since going to the counselor, she's found ways to.

She knows Daddy was in Afghanistan and that he loves her and was proud of her and that he was out there so she could have a free life; that freedom was what they were fighting for.

You do learn to live with it but it's the little things that floor you, like calling up to renew your car insurance and they say, "Oh, you're a widow? But how can you be you're only 23." When you tell people you can see their faces change. Jess's teacher took me aside one day and said Jess had sat around the table at school and

said, "I've got a daddy but my daddy was blown up in a tank."

Once mum complained that she didn't want her daughter hearing this stuff. I felt like saying, "are you telling me my daughter isn't allowed to talk about her dad?" At the end of the day, I'm not going to stop her talking about her daddy because she's proud of him and children just take things on face value anyway. Recently one friend told me that her little boy (who knows Jess) went past a tank and the little boy said, "He's a hero Mummy, because he fought for his country."

It's been hard these last five years, but I feel I'm at that stage now where at least I can remember the good times.

To make a donation visit
www.armywidows.org.uk and
www.nelsonsjourney.org.uk



Photographed by Mandy Forder at Lady Lou Photography.

ABOVE

Before: “First family photo.” Amy, Phillip and Jess, January 2009. Jess three months old.”

NEXT PAGE

After: Amy and Jess, recreated in Norwich, 9/04/2015.



Before They Were Fallen deals with remembrance. Louis Quail and Katy Regan use the power of photography and testimony together, to link memory, the passing of time and loss to create a body of work which pays tribute to all those British soldiers who gave their lives in the Afghanistan conflict.





B E F O R E

T H E Y

W E R E

F A L L E N

LOUIS QUAIL

**WORDS BY
KATY REGAN**