

IN MEMORY OF
LANCE CORPORAL
DAVID BARNSDALE



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STEVE BARNSDALE

Interview by Katy Regan

Steve, from Tring, in Hertfordshire lost his son, Lance Corporal David Barnsdale, serving in the 33 Engineer Regiment (Explosive Ordnance Disposal) when he was killed by an IED on 19th October 2010.

David was our youngest. He came along eighteen months after his sister, Vanessa and he was just a lovely little boy, always a bundle of laughs.

David did a week's work experience when he was about 14 at Bassingbourn barracks and followed this up with an army recruitment day in Luton after which we said, that he was no longer interested in the army. Then, in March 2002 just prior to his 16th birthday he said that he wanted to join up. The process began and he signed on in September 2002.

He was just going to join the infantry at first but at his interview they said, "no, you should consider the Engineers then you will have a trade when you come out."

His training specialized in air conditioning and refrigeration and he really knuckled down. After he died, I saw some of his study papers and couldn't believe this was the same person - he was so conscientious.

Iraq was going on at the time that he signed up and we were worried but we were also pleased he'd decided on a decent profession. Watching

him going through the training - the change from sixteen to eighteen as he went from a boy to a man was incredible. I don't think we ever said so bluntly "he could die in this job" but both Wendy and I knew he'd be going to Iraq, and that people were dying out there, but it seemed a long way off as he had to do his training first, but then, bang on 18 in 2004, he went.

He went on his first tour of Afghanistan in September 2008. After that, he'd been based in Germany for almost five years and he wanted to come back to the UK. That's when he was transferred to the 33 Regiment EOD section (Explosive Ordnance Disposal) based in Woodbridge, Suffolk and I suppose we were really worried then. Bomb Disposal is the most dangerous job because they're searching for the IEDs using no more than a metal detector, and these IEDs are getting more and more sophisticated. When David died, the boys had already searched that area over a few days. He stood on an IED that was buried so deep, it was actually aimed at a vehicle but because they'd all been walking

back and forth, they'd gradually worn away the soil. Not that we blame anyone, they were just doing their job. The reason David walked on it was because they paint every time they go wider and one of the lads had run out of paint so David, being the team leader, said you stay here and I'll go and get the paint. It was when he was on his way back that it happened. The lad who ran out of paint has left the army now. He was medically discharged and I think it still affects him.

Because he was based down in Woodbridge we saw a lot more of him that last year. He started a relationship with an old friend, Helen and he was home most weekends. We even had holidays; the last one being in Paris for Wendy's 50th which was 6 years ago now.

We had a meal at home the week before he was going to Afghanistan with Helen, Vanessa and her soon to be husband David. It was like a Christmas meal and we were thinking there would be a lot more of these going forward.

We knew he was going away the next week, but although it was a more dangerous job, we were less worried because

he'd been on two operational tours and returned safe.

He went out on the 23rd September 2010 and died on 19th October. On the Thursday night before he died, he called. One of the last things I said to him was, "a speeding fine's come through in the post." He was terrible for getting parking and speeding fines, never seemed to know how it worked.

He phoned his mum the next morning and also his sister. His sister never normally answered if she didn't recognize the number but this time, she did, and we found out that over that 3 or 4 days before he died, he spoke to just about every one of his best friends. Almost as if...

On that Tuesday we found out, I was in London for the evening at a retirement party. At about 6pm, unbeknownst to me, Wendy got a knock at the door and obviously she knew straight away. Wendy was in bits but then had to make a phone call to me in London. Vanessa got over here and I got a taxi back. It was just terrible... we should have been together. I think the driver thought I was drunk because I was such a mess.

David died on the Tuesday

and wasn't repatriated to RAF Lyneham until the following Thursday, 28th October. RSM Justin Lewis who David worked with in Germany, and on his first tour of Afghanistan, came to our house on Thursday 21st October with Lieutenant Colonel Simon Bell and our visiting officer, Warrant Officer Steve Gordon. The fact that we had met RSM Lewis at the medal ceremony from David's 1st tour of Afghan in Germany was a help to us as it was his job to organize the funeral and it was reassuring that he actually knew David personally. He did say that David was a terrific young soldier with a great future ahead of him.

The point where they take you out on the runway at RAF Lyneham and you see that plane come in is when it really hits home. Afterwards in the pub at Wootton Bassett, the landlady said she'd never known so many people turn out for just one soldier.

Two days after his death there had been a shocking picture in *The Times*. A guy called Graham Starkey - a reporter - had been with David's troop out there and he was obviously very close to

the explosion when David died. But he took this picture of the soldiers in the back of a vehicle and you could actually see the blood on their fingers. Many of these families won't have known that their loved ones were even involved until they saw that picture. We've met these lads now and it really has affected them. At least three have left the army now.

We elected to have a military funeral because David deserved one. I think the army padre was trying to make the funeral too formal but our local vicar and RSM Lewis ensured that we had the personal side. He might have been in the Army, but he was still our son. He came out of the church to 'We are the Champions' by Queen. We chose this as we hoped that QPR would be champions that season and they were!! David must have been looking down. Helen chose 'Lucky' by Jason Mraz as that was a song that they both liked. It was obviously very sad but it was also a celebration of David's life, and there's always humour in dark times. For example, the size of the hankie that the padre brought out of his pocket as he was speaking - it was like one of those clown

hankies that went on and on...!
Wendy looked at me and then
across at the vicar, and you could
tell he thought it was funny too.

After the funeral we met all
David's friends at the local pub
and it was a party atmosphere,
and we shared some great
memories and were told stories
that perhaps no parent should
ever be told about their son!
I didn't sleep that night.

We've stayed friends with the
army lads. They come over to
an annual football tournament
we have for David each October
and on Remembrance Day. We
go down the pub and remember
the good times - you've got to.

About five months after David
died, we got eight years of his life
back in boxes: television, kettle,
all his work books, postcards
we'd sent him from holidays etc.
They stayed in the boxes for a
while and then we started to sort
some out and funnily enough,
last week, four and a half years
since he died, we took a lot of
his clothes to the charity shop.
We've also put pictures on the
wall in his old room. They're
ones he said he would have
liked to put on his office wall
when he became a sergeant.

The trouble is, every time you
throw something out or give
something away you feel as if
that's another piece of him going.
But there will be certain things
that we'll keep forever (like his
size 9 red wedges that he liked
to dress up in when he went out
in drag with his army mates...)
He had a huge sense of fun.

It's hard accepting he's gone.
Wendy and I used to make up
a story that he was on a secret
mission like the Tom Cruise film
where he turned up at his parent's
house years after he'd died or he
was sending money to them. I
think it's called Knight and Day.
I knew it wasn't true though
because I'd seen him in Tring
at the funeral directors. Wendy
didn't want to see him but I went
down there three or four times.
When you see him - yes, it's real.
He's gone, but you know it's him.

He was a big QPR fan and
whenever he came home on leave
he and I would go to watch a
match. I've only been once or
maybe twice since; it just doesn't
seem right without David. I was
his dad but we were friends as
well. I used to drink with him at
football clubs, we had beers but
not as much as I'd like. I miss

other things ... him plonking himself on Wendy's knee and giving her a cuddle and chats with him and Vanessa in the kitchen over wine at the weekend.

The army was good to start with but we've not really heard anything for the last two years other than official invites to St Pauls and The Arboretum following the ending of the Afghan war. His friends keep coming though. A few of them even flew in from Germany last year - even some of the wives. One girl drove up, heavily pregnant from Eastbourne this year because her husband was working, just to make sure they were represented.

We've raised about £10,000 from the football tournaments but it's not just the money, it's having memories of David. I never believed there was an afterlife, but since I lost somebody young, it does make you think, well what is it all about then? I suppose part of me is hoping that I will have that chance to speak to him again.

I don't feel angry towards God or anybody. If I was going to feel angry towards anyone it would be the Taliban who killed him but I'll never meet

that person who laid that IED. I signed the papers to say he could join up at 16, but if I hadn't, he'd have joined up at 18 anyway.

After 3 years we were actually feeling better within ourselves, but this last 12 months has arguably been worse and I'm putting it down to the fact they came out of Afghanistan, so it's been in the news virtually every week. At least I can talk freely about him now. At first, lads at football for example, avoided talking about their kids but everyone knows now and many of them knew David so it's fine. I'm past the stage of automatically telling a new person who comes. They find out eventually.

I do feel some people avoided us during the first few months. Or what normally happened was that they'd say, "how are you?" And you'd say, "I'm OK thanks," thinking I'm not, I'm rubbish ... The best support was people who didn't stop talking about it and didn't stop asking.

We've talked about moving house. I'm not sure it would make us feel better but at least we wouldn't have the constant reminders everywhere. It's right for David's name to be on the

memorial outside the church in Tring for example but it's also difficult to see. At the moment, David's name along with another lad's name is just on a slab of concrete attached to the main memorial but apparently permission has now been given to renovate the current memorial and add a more permanent reference to Afghanistan and David. David is the only person from Tring that has been killed in action since WW2. They didn't lose anyone from Bosnia, Falklands, or even Ireland. I only found that out when he died.

It doesn't make any difference that he died in conflict, we just know we lost our son. We certainly don't blame the army or the Prime Minister. When people try to get into conversations with me about Afghanistan, saying we shouldn't have been there, I cut them off. He was serving his country. Ten years down the line, if they say "we shouldn't have been there" well, we'll cross that bridge when we come to it. No doubt there will be enquiries about it the same as there were for Iraq but I'm not sure what they prove.

To make a donation please
go to www.soldierscharity.org



ABOVE

Before: “Christmas, 2004
at our home in Tring,
just prior to David
being transferred to
be based in Germany.”

RIGHT

After: Same location,
11/02/2015.



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**