

IN MEMORY OF  
WARRANT OFFICER CLASS 2  
GARY O'DONNELL



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## **TONI O'DONNELL**

Interview by Katy Regan

Toni is the widow of Warrant Officer Class 2 Gary 'Gaz' O'Donnell GM & Bar from 11 Explosive Ordnance Disposal Regiment Royal Logistic Corps, who was killed on Wednesday, 10<sup>th</sup> September 2008, in Helmand province. He was 40.

“I diffuse bombs” Gary told me when we first met in a pub in Leamington Spa in 1995 and I thought yeah, course you do. He was very cocksure and I didn’t take to him at first, but he won me round. I knew exactly what I was getting into when I married him in 1998, but he was always so confident. “Don’t worry about me” he’d say, “I’ll be fine.” He was Gary, larger than life; the big, brave lion.

He went on his first tour of Afghanistan in 2007 and he was doing ‘wiz investigations’: basically, if something blew up, it was his job to go and find out what happened and why. It’s a big job: you have to be very sure of yourself and extremely focused, but at home Gary was completely different - singing, mucking about and cooking together - just a normal family man.

Aidan came along in 2000 and we were very happy. In fact, that photograph was taken about 13 years ago at Aidan’s Christening. We had it taken in the Sergeants’ Mess at Kineton army barracks by a photographer who just so happened to be there that day. It was a fantastic day. Gary’s family are all huge

Celtic fans and everybody sat around the telly watching them play after the christening.

I fell pregnant with our second son Ben in November 2007 and in spring 2008 Gary went on his second tour of Afghanistan. I remember very vividly saying goodbye to him - I was pregnant so it was extra hard. But he’d been to Sierra Leone and Iraq by then so you do get blasé. “I’ve got people looking after me” he’d say. “People with guns.” And I’d believe him, because you have to.

Ben was due on 12th July 2008, so Gary, in his wisdom, decided that that would be the day he’d arrive. So he booked his annual leave to come back on the 10th but he missed everything...Ben was born whilst he was in the air.

Those ten days we spent as a family though, were wonderful and I’m so thankful he got to meet Ben. Gary’s parents came down from Edinburgh and Aidan was so excited to see his dad. One of my favourite memories of that time is Aidan and Gary sitting on the sofa strumming away to American Pie; Gary was in a band when he was younger and wherever he went, his

guitar came too. But Gary was so tired. He never complained, but you could see it in his face. Sometimes he was out for hours on his own doing really technical work in the heat and in terrible conditions in Afghanistan, diffusing roadside bombs and it had aged him. It made it harder to say goodbye because I knew he didn't want to go, but the adrenaline always kicked in and Gary was so good at his job.

On Wednesday September 10th, I was at home after school. Aidan was playing outside with his friends when I saw a man and a woman in suits walk up to the door. They showed me their army IDs then the woman said to me, "would you like me to hold the baby?" (Ben was nine weeks) And I said "No," because I knew exactly what she was going to tell me, and there was no way she was holding my baby whilst she told me the worst news of my life.

Memories are vague of that day, I just remember repeating 'are you sure you've not made a mistake? And then, Aidan ran over shouting, "My daddy's dead! My daddy's dead!" and I was just hysterical then. One thing I do remember asking is, 'how am I

going to pay the mortgage'? I'm on maternity leave." I felt awful asking that - it's haunted me - but I'm a practical person, I don't fall to pieces easily and I think it was a way of coping. The next day everyone wanted to help with the baby and I just didn't want anyone to touch him, because he was the only thing I had left of Gary; his flesh and blood.

Aidan knew what job his dad did and I explained it to him (and to Ben when he was old enough) like this: Daddy was really brave, he blew up bombs but he couldn't do this one and it killed him." They're so proud of him, even Ben, and he didn't know him. A few years ago, when Aidan was about nine, CBBC came and filmed him for a programme about kids whose dads were soldiers and Aidan said "I thought I'd be broken-hearted forever. I felt like a chunk of my heart was missing." I didn't hear it till I saw the programme and it still brings a tear to my eye.

I actually found the repatriation worse than the funeral. Gary was the only one who came home that day and they played "The Last Post" as his friends carried him off the

plane and it was just awful, I had to be held up. I can't listen to that music without crying, even now.

We had the full military funeral and it was amazing. Everybody stood by the road saluting him. Aidan thought it was fantastic: police motorbikes whizzing past us, all the roads shut off for his daddy. Gary actually sang himself out of church - a track he'd recorded with his band years ago - and we had three birds of paradise on top of the coffin because that was Gary's favourite flower.

It was the times after the kids had gone to bed and I was on my own in the months following that were the worst. I didn't cry during the days because I didn't want Aidan to see me cry but I cried at night. My only saving grace is he died instantly, he wasn't injured and in pain. He didn't know what was coming; he just went. Definitely, time does heal and I've never felt sorry for myself. It's my children I feel sorry for but they also keep me going. If I didn't have the kids I'd have gone to bed and stayed there I think.

We talk about Daddy all the time and Ben knows pictures, he knows what happened: "Daddy

was a very brave soldier, he went to fight a war, and the bad men killed him with a bomb" is the story he tells everyone. Not so long ago, there were soldiers collecting in one of the supermarkets and Ben was with my mum, and he marched up to the soldiers and said, "my daddy had more medals than you've got on your chest" - he does brag about his dad even though he didn't know him!

I used to try and stop him because you could see the shock in peoples' faces and I worried they'd think he was lying but now, I let him say it because it's real, it's true and he's proud of his dad. He should be able to tell people that. My mum said those soldiers were nearly crying.

Gary was awarded two George Medals and I'm so proud of him. He got one medal for services in Iraq and then the other, posthumously.

We were driven to Buckingham Palace in a Bentley to collect it: me, my mum, Gary's other two children from his previous relationship, my children, and Gary's mum and dad. We were so well looked after. The kindness of everybody

was fantastic because they were proud of him as well, you know. The Queen was lovely, she asked Aidan which school he went to, and he told her. He came back to school the next day telling all his friends the Queen was going to come and see him. She was very impressive, she spoke to everybody, and she seemed to know about what she was talking about - who Gary was and why he was getting this medal.

I don't miss 'me and Gary' I miss me Gary and the kids, I miss being a family, and the thought that Ben will only have hearsay and photos is hard. Aidan likes to talk about his dad but we don't talk that much in front of Ben because we don't want to make him feel jealous, like it's not fair that Aidan got to play football with Dad and I didn't.

The boys are the spitting image of him, they've got his eye colour, his hair colour; they're mini Garys. Personality wise, they get a lot from me obviously because they haven't got his influences, but sometimes you catch them saying or doing something and you think oh my God that's your Dad. That's nice.

We split Gary's ashes, so we

have half and his mum's got the other. We also have a memorial in Whitnash, where we put cards and wreaths. It's nice to have a personal space to go to because remembering nationally is hard. For example, with the St Paul's remembrance thing, there was a big uproar about who could go and who couldn't, but it's a physical impossibility for the whole nation to remember these soldiers. Having said that, it's nice when they do try and do things nationally because we don't want our husbands, fathers, sons, forgotten; we want to show the country and the world how proud we are.

I love the way that the national Arboretum have done things it's a quiet peaceful place, and I go there quite often. Gary also has a bench in Princess Street Gardens, and a street named after him on a new estate they built in Didcot (which was Gary's regiment.) They decided they were going to name roads and drives after the fallen soldiers, which I think is a really fabulous idea, but I don't need to go somewhere to remember him. He's in my heart, he's in all our hearts; he's in our house. He's everywhere.

I do have a lot of remembrance things and pictures on display and I'd like to think I haven't gone too over the top, but mainly I can't get rid of things because of my kids, they love looking at them. It's about their dad. They've got the dog tags hanging in their bedrooms and they've got a beret. I've got a box full of him in my bedroom and his guitar is under my bed.

There were also things that had gone all over the world with him: his watch and mobile phone, his passport and little cross he had. I've got them all in a box downstairs.

Now that we've had the St Paul's Cathedral service, that's closure for some people but I never want Gary forgotten - I want to talk about him. They're doing what's called a Heroes Square at the Arboretum in the next couple of years and I've bought a paving stone, which will have his name on it. I've also got a poppy from the field of remembrance. I bought two - one for me and one for his mum - and gave it to her for Christmas. It feels like he's everywhere, which I like.

I try not to think about the

war and whether it was worth it, I just think how I wouldn't change Gary for the world because he died doing what he loved. They sign up for this. Gary didn't specifically talk about the possibility of him dying. As far as he was concerned it was never going to happen. I know some soldiers wrote letters in the event of their death but he didn't and I don't mind. I knew what he felt about me. He didn't need to write it down.

A few weeks after Gary's body came back, I got his things in a box. That was really tough, because it smelt of him, it was him. He used to send for these 'Aussie bum pants' from Australia which were bright colours - typical of Gary because he was such an extrovert and that was very emotional because it was so Gary, you know, it was so him.

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**ABOVE**

*Before:* “Photograph of Gary and myself taken at the christening of our eldest child, Aidan. A very happy day full of friends, family and love, taken on 26<sup>th</sup> November 2000 at Kineton Army Barracks in Warwickshire.”

**NEXT PAGE**

*After:* Recreated at home in Warwickshire, 15/04/2015.



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**