

IN MEMORY OF
CORPORAL CHRIS HARRISON



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MARTIN HARRISON

Interview by Katy Regan

Martin, from Watford, Hertfordshire lost his son, Corporal Chris Harrison, 26, serving in 40 Commando, the Royal Marines when he was killed in an explosion in Sangin, on May 9th 2010.

Chris is wearing his trademark Crombie coat. My wife Gill bought it for him from us as a Christmas present that year. He loved the film *The Matrix* and wanted a full-length leather coat but we couldn't quite stretch to that - so we got him this! It used to make us laugh that he would walk around in it virtually all day long.

I always got on very well with our sons (Chris and his brother Russell who is two years older.) When they were younger, Gill had to work at weekends so I tended to spend a lot of time with the kids. We were a close family and the boys were effectively best friends all through their youth. They both longed for adventure. As children they camped in the garden and would save up and buy military memorabilia from our town's army surplus shop. After Russell decided he wanted to join the army in the ranks, Chris followed in his footsteps, joining the Royal Marines in spring 2003. There was always a bit of jokey one-upmanship going on where Chris never let Russell forget that he was a Marine not just a 'pongo' (member of the army), as he would call it. They were both bright at school and I would have liked them to follow a more academic route or even officer training but accepted that their future was their choice.

The Royal Marines has a more intense and longer basic training than the army. I think out of the 64 people that turned up with Chris for the 3 day suitability assessment only 8 of them were accepted for training to be a 'Bootneck' so I was very proud. Selection is a lot about determination and Chris was a very determined character. On his first pre-training assessment he was told that he needed to improve his upper body strength, so he found a personal trainer at a local gym and strengthened his shoulders by doing pull-ups through our loft hatch, so, for a while, whenever you came into the house and walked up the stairs you would see his feet dangling down. He passed out on 18th December 2003. He got through his 9 month commando training without being back-trooped through injury or giving up - a rare feat.

He spent his first two years in 43 Commando Fleet Protection Group who specialise in protection of nuclear weapons and (in the Second Gulf War) in boarding ships that were smuggling weapons, enemy fighters, oil and trying to break the NATO blockade of Iraq. He worked from fast rigid raider craft, often in the middle of the night, using grappling hooks to climb up on the bow of ships from below. He then trained as a mortar

man with 45 Commando and later transferred to 40 Commando. He'd heard that 40 Commando would likely be involved in the thick of action in Afghanistan which was exactly what Chris wanted. He eventually came top of a 50 man all-ranks mortar controller course and as he was promoted to corporal rank, was told he was being fast tracked towards being a sergeant within a few years due to his star performance.

Although as I said, the military wouldn't have been my chosen route in life for him, I did feel proud he'd found something that he was passionate about. As time had gone on, we began to realize he was very good at what he did.

He'd talk to me rather than Gill about the specifics of his job and of war. He shielded her from stories about his operational activities. Gill was primarily interested in his welfare. I was interested in that too of course, but I developed confidence in his professional ability. He told me at one stage when I questioned him about the level of risk, "Don't underestimate us Bootnecks; we don't give our lives away cheaply, we look after ourselves and are trained to see ourselves as valuable assets that shouldn't be wasted." He showed me a few unofficial films that he had on his computer. They were

films of action in Afghanistan including him on the battlefield with gunfire ricocheting around him and selected frontline action that he'd witnessed, secretly taken by him or his comrades on the front line at Kajaki Dam in Helmand, I was shocked, but like a lot of military boys, Chris had a very dark sense of humour and laughed off the risks. He and Russell would have conversations about coming back with limbs blown off and ending up like 'chicken dippers' - terrible conversations, really, but I think it's just typical serviceman's 'gallows humour' and is their way of coping with the intense fear and stress.

Chris loved adventure but he was also gentle, fun-to-be-with and loving; and was always especially good to his mum. In fact, before he went on the tour he'd never come back from, he left Gill a birthday card with his wife, Becky, as he knew he wasn't going to see her on the actual day - the 24th July 2010 - and he never forgot a birthday. Two months after Chris was killed, it was Gill's birthday. Becky had given the card to me to decide what was the best way to deal with it. It was an extremely emotional moment because Gill had no idea about the card's existence. She was sitting there, feeling upset, bemoaning

that she would never get another card from him and recalling that he was so good at birthdays, when I produced it from the cupboard where it had been hidden, almost from beyond the grave, it was such an emotional moment. It was the last thing Gill would ever receive from Chris and it had his trademark safety pin drawn on the back of the envelope. Now, every July we get it out and stand it on the mantelpiece in pride of place.

Chris got married to Becky in Taunton halfway through his first tour to Afghanistan in January 2008 while he was home on leave. We always thought the world of her from when we first met her, and we felt she was a steadying influence on Chris. They lived in Taunton on the 'married patch' near his base and whenever he went on tour, he was always very good at allaying Becky's fears. He was convinced he was never going to get killed or injured. The last day I saw him during the last weekend of March 2010 when we went down to celebrate his birthday and he said to me, "This is going to be a really tough tour, harder than before." That's the only time he said anything that wasn't upbeat. I'd always say "Don't forget to keep your head down!" and he would laugh it off and say "Don't worry about me." But you do worry.

When Chris was killed our forces had already been through a year or two of terrible losses in Afghanistan and so we knew he was at high risk. Chris, being so methodical and professional, had actually researched what that risk of being killed was - which included that 3% of troops would be killed in action. The guys were briefed on these matters, he said, but most didn't want to know. The tour when Chris was killed was his third tour on active duty in the Gulf and Afghanistan. He had also been on various shorter active postings. 40 CDO lost twelve lads with many more badly wounded on that 6 month tour in 2010 and Chris was the first one killed.

He'd been away for four weeks. It was enough for us to get a 'bluey' from him which mainly talked about how they were all acclimatising to the heat and described the welfare facilities. When we got that dreaded knock at the door it was about 1pm on a Sunday and I was doing something on the computer upstairs so Gill answered the door. She realized straight away what it was about and screamed up the stairs to me. There was an officer from the Royal Marines and a chap in a suit from the MoD who had been sent to inform us of Chris' death on Becky's request. She'd already been told that morning. I just remember

saying “Is it bad?” and they said “Yes, it’s fatal.” My first thought was Becky. I wanted to get in the car and go and see her but Gill managed to persuade me it was best to leave it until the following day. We phoned Russ who lived nearby and came straight away. He helped us tell other people. They usually put outline news of ‘a military death’ on the television on the evening news on the night that it happens. There is normally a block on Press stories for 24 hours until bereaved families have had the chance to tell their relatives and friends. Chris was named on the 10th May 2010 on TV.

The grief and shock numbs you for the first few days. Russell was a very big comfort and did what he could to help us. For a while, you’re in total shock and beneath it all you’re thinking has it been a mistake? Could it be someone else that they’re talking about?’

I am not an emotional person, but I woke up in the night and burst into tears because it suddenly hit me that Chris was dead. Within days of Chris’ death Russ got a bluey from him. It was probably the last thing Chris wrote – an upbeat letter to his brother. We found out afterwards that in the one square kilometre near where Chris was killed there were 1000 IED’s planted.

Apparently our forces couldn’t move without encountering them but had to carry on patrolling.

Chris’ repatriation and the public respect demonstrated as his body passed through Wootton Bassett on 13th May 2010 actually lifted Gill and I from the numbness which enveloped us. Even though obviously it’s heart-breaking that it’s your own son in that hearse the atmosphere generated by those people coming out in their hundreds, bowing their heads to Chris’ coffin as it slowly went through the town, was so very, very stirring. We felt as though Chris was taking a place in all these peoples’ memories.

I did write an emotional eulogy for Chris’ funeral but included funny stories about him. Humour ran right through Chris’ life and I wanted people to be able to laugh at his funeral, to celebrate Chris rather than mourn him. I do tend to rationalize and plan things.

Chris had a full military funeral with rifle volleys fired over his grave and is buried in a military grave in accordance with his and Becky’s wishes. The Royal Marines lined the middle of Watford with 300 ‘Bootnecks’ at attention with heads bowed as the funeral cortege came through. I feel a duty to keep his grave looking tidy. It’s a lovely shady spot in the cemetery and I

like the idea that he has a visible private monument that we can visit.

After the shock subsides and as time goes on, it is too easy to get into a 'grief competition' with your partner and you do start to ask each other questions like, should we have stopped Chris signing up in the first place?

Losing a child can present a huge challenge to your relationship and I think this has a lot to do with how differently men and women grieve. I am an emotional person but I don't express it easily - Gill does; this difference can drive a wedge between you if you let it.

For Gill, it took a long time before she could, or wanted to, think about anything else but even from day one I wanted both to grieve and to promote Chris' memory. I find I can compartmentalise in my mind; i.e. set a certain amount of time aside to do those things; but also allow time to do other things in my life too. I believe you have to carry on living even if you are grieving, otherwise it's not fair to people around you. But I think that the ability to move onwards has to be a conscious decision and maybe different people come to that decision at different times in their mourning.

Gill couldn't face the inquest but I went to find out if there was anything about his death that I

didn't already know. A Control wire IED killed him - it was an ambush - he didn't stand on it - it was someone lying in wait and deliberately setting off a bomb targeting him. They wanted to kill the person who was leading the patrol and they had identified that person as Chris. One of his best friends was on patrol as medic with him at the time he died and he tried to save Chris. He and a couple of other comrades from Chris' patrol had to give evidence at the inquest and they found it very difficult to testify on the details of his death. It was extremely emotional.

In terms of the war in Afghanistan, many people expect you to condemn it. My standpoint has always just been, no war could ever be worth my son's life but I can't pretend that he didn't know the risk of what he was doing. My views on the war itself are private and not formed by Chris' death.

Losing a son who was becoming a star in life is a shock to your system. Losing a person that you love deeply means that you can't help thinking about what could have been; what would it have been like if he had had children for example. There's a great sense of loss that you have lost that unfulfilled side of his life. We like to preserve his memory and also like to honour his comrades, so we

do some work for military charities.

We recently went to the National Arboretum in Alrewas, Staffordshire to take part in the dedication of the Afghanistan Memorial as we knew that Chris' name was engraved on it as well as his name already being on the main memorial wall in a prominent position with his comrades who were killed in action alongside him. Having been there a few times we find the arboretum itself, very restful and a fitting monument to our fallen servicemen. It manages to capture the mood of the people who want to remember a person without too many trumpets and ceremonies disturbing them. We find great comfort in Wilson, Chris' dog who now lives with us. He provides good memories of times with Chris and he gets me out walking. This gives me a purpose in retirement. He was quite well known amongst Chris's comrades as he used to go with them on their runs, in fact he used to have the run of their base when Chris was there!

Becky has managed to move her life on now and we are glad because we were very worried about her after Chris died. She has two children with her new partner who was one of Chris' best friends. At first it was hard to absorb (we still see her regularly), because you can't help but think, 'those

could have been Chris's children', but our joy for her outweighs our sense of loss; it's bitter sweet.

Russell got married to Alexa this year and is going to be a father in November, which is something for us to really look forward to.

We were warned by our Royal Marines family welfare officer that your house can become a bit of a mausoleum if you let it. We do want Chris' things around us, because he will always be part of our life but we try to keep a balance. This project, however, has reminded us just how precious these photographs, objects and the memories behind them are.

To make a
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ABOVE

Before: “Chris and Dad, Christmas 1999 ‘The Matrix look’ present.”

NEXT PAGE

After: Recreated at home in Watford, 07/08/2015.



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
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