

**IN MEMORY OF
LANCE CORPORAL
JOHN MURPHY**



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RACHEL MURPHY

Interview by Katy Regan

Rachel, from Bristol, is the widow of Lance Corporal John Murphy who served in the Royal Army Veterinary Corps and after 22 years in the military, took his own life in January 2007, leaving Rachel and their two children; Emily and Steven, who were aged 2 and 3 at the time.

It was John's voice, his Irish accent that I first fell in love with. It was spring 2000 and I'd called a friend of mine, Dan who was also in the army but his roommate answered and that roommate turned out to be John. Before I knew it, we'd been on the phone for two hours and I was meeting this Irish squaddie in London. "You're not what I imagined" he said when we eventually met at the tube station in July of that year. "What did you imagine?" I said and he went "I don't know, but not you." That broke the ice and actually, we were just friends until six months later when I fell ill and ended up in Hammersmith Hospital. I had to have an operation and who should be standing at the foot of my bed when I woke up but John. He told the nurse he'd take me home and look after me. "But what about work?" I said. "I don't care, I'll take time off." I asked him what was going on; that's when he told me he loved me and I confessed I felt the same.

John just had a way of making everything seem like a big joke. He was also incredibly caring but the thing I loved most about him was that he was so in tune with

my feelings. When he was out in Afghanistan he'd write me two or three letters sometimes every day. I remember the first time we talked about getting engaged and his exact words were "when I come home I'd better think about buying you a ring." That was John all over - very down to earth.

He was born to be in the army, both his parents were military and you've never seen a more patriotic house than theirs. He joined the junior corps of the Royal Engineers as soon as he could at sixteen. He was just so proud to support his country.

9/11 happened just after we got engaged - I was 24 and he was 25. He was one of the first British troops on the ground in Afghanistan and it was hell on earth. There were unexploded devices everywhere, no infrastructure, no fresh water or food. During that tour, in early 2002, his friend was killed by a bomb, which struck John too, deflating his lungs. He was minutes from death and when I saw him for the first time in Selly Oak hospital, I didn't recognize him. He'd lost the best part of four stone, he was a wreck and I said, "what do we do now?" and

the doctor said “he’s passed his checks, you can take him home.” Nobody said “are you alright? Is there anything we need to do?” To me that was very bad duty of care. They didn’t even record the accident on his medical records.

That tour in Afghanistan was his first major one; after we married he did another tour there, but in all this time the issues that were in his head after that accident were never reconciled, and also the time that he’d spent in Northern Ireland previously having to deal daily with petrol bombs thrown at you... None of that was addressed.

After his accident he became very disillusioned with the Royal Engineers, so because he’d enjoyed working with dogs so much in his earlier career he decided to join the RAVC - The Royal Artillery Veterinary Corps. That was when he was posted to Bosnia as an explosive detection mine dog handler. So he spent 6 months training this dog to detect mines but a lot of that time was spent in a log cabin with nobody but the dog for company and I think it affected him deeply. He came back for his R&R half way through the tour and when

he went back, I struggled to get hold of him. Then one day, he phoned me and asked me to pick him up at Brize Norton but stood there was a person I didn’t recognize. He had a completely different haircut, he was wearing tight jeans and Converse baseball boots and he wouldn’t have been seen dead in trainers beforehand and he just said, “alright” - no hugging, no intimacy. In his eyes he wasn’t there. It was almost as if I’d picked up a stranger.

From then on his behavior just got weirder. He was hell-bent on going out as soon as we got back to the house and I didn’t see him until the following morning. It was as if his priorities had completely switched, like he wanted to pretend our marriage had never happened and he was back to being a single lad again. Then in September 2004 he got the news that we were being posted over to Northern Ireland. I was pregnant with Emily at the time and I thought great, it’ll be a new start, but as soon as a house had been sorted for us in Carrick Fergus and he was at the barracks in Londonderry, it was almost as if John just brushed me under the carpet again. For those

two years we were in Northern Ireland he grew more distant and aggressive. He used to have fights at social events, which he'd never have done before.

It all came to a head in the summer of 2006. He was here at weekends but he'd often make excuses as to why he couldn't come. Then I broke my arm and said "you have to come back because I need help with the children." Emily was 6 months old and Stephen 18 months old at the time. So he came back and one day I walked in and he was changing Emily's nappy and he looked at me and said "you're fucking useless you are - I'm off." I said "well if you do, then don't come back" and he put all his stuff in the car and drove off back to the barracks. In a way it was a relief and for six months it was peaceful, because we were amicable towards each other, there were even nice times. For example, in the November, John's stepfather wasn't well, so John said we had to put on a pretence and go and stay with him and his mum for the weekend. We got on great, it was almost like old times and then the next day we were all sat on the sofa and his dad got the

camera and took that picture. It's so important to us now, because it reminds me of how happy we were for that brief period. Then I went back to Carrick Fergus and he went back to his barracks and then he got a transfer to RAF Aldegrove and I don't know what that place did to him - but he was a dog handler by himself again - and he would turn up at our house, drunk and making wild accusations about what I'd been up to. It was ironic because he'd be all dressed up and I knew full well he'd gone into Belfast to try his luck with the local ladies.

It was at that point that I told him I was going to start divorce proceedings because I'd had enough. Christmas was a nightmare. He phoned me up every 5 minutes and I was like "John you need help." In the end, he did go and see a counselor but he must have turned on the charm because the report she gave back was that he was undergoing mild depression because of marital issues and that he was not a suicide risk. So he was waving this piece of paper in my face saying "see, I'm not the crazy one, you are!" Then on January 6th 2007, he turned up at the house very

drunk. He'd never been physically abusive to me before but that night he was and I called the police because I was frightened for the children. They asked me if I wanted to press charges and I said no, I just want him away from me, and our house. So they took him back to barracks and I never saw him alive again. He sent me a text at 1am saying, "this is all your fault I'm going to kill myself." I phoned the guardroom straight away but whoever answered couldn't have been less interested. I asked him to go and check he was alright and to call me because I was trying his mobile constantly, but he couldn't call me back because he was dead. He'd gone back to his little cabin and hung himself with the dog lead.

I was really cross with the army because it took somebody until 11am in the morning to come round and tell me my husband had taken his own life. I was bruised and battered from the night before and clearing up the aftermath in the living room. I can still remember the song that was playing on the radio. It was Take That 'Patience' - I still can't listen to that song now. I saw these two blokes in suits

coming through the gate - they asked me where the children were and I knew then, something terrible had happened. I went into organizational Rachel mode, making lists of everyone they needed to call. I thought I was coping really well but I wasn't, I was in shock, I just didn't sleep. I saw a doctor but then my friend, who is also a doctor, very naughtily gave me two valium and made me drink half a bottle of wine and I slept for 32 hours. So that was it. Grief makes you run on adrenaline.

Looking back on it, those weeks running up to John's death were a desperate, cry for help and I've spent 8 years feeling guilty for all the help I should have given but didn't because he was just behaving so disgustingly towards me. The children don't know any of this. As far as they're concerned he's hero daddy and that's the way I want him to stay. The fact that he had this dreadful illness is nothing to do with how they should feel towards him or his treatment of me.

John had the full military honours at his funeral - I think he would have appreciated that. I was completely calm throughout the

whole service until they lowered the coffin into the ground and that's when it really hit home and I started screaming. I didn't think I was ever going to stop crying.

When John was clearly unwell, I was saying you really need to go and see someone and he was saying "I don't need no head doctor, what will people think? I'll be a laughing stock amongst the blokes." From the moment you enter the army you are bred to be a fighting machine, to show huge personal courage in the face of adversity. Those are all wonderful attributes but at the same time they can also be detrimental to the human psyche because the brain isn't wired to cope with that amount of stress. If you think about the times you open the paper and see 'squaddie beats up person who looks at him the wrong way' or whatever, while I sympathise with whomever that happened to, to be frank, I'm not fucking surprised. These soldiers spend 6 months in a war zone constantly thinking am I still going to be alive tomorrow?

When John did actually take his own life I knew very little about suicide and PTSD but have since found out that suicide is the

most common form of death in young men under the age of 50 - that's 13 people every day in the UK. I remember also, in the early days coming across a checklist for PTSD symptoms: mood swings, sleeplessness, feelings of guilt... and I was thinking how could I have been so stupid, because they were all there.

The inquest didn't happen until two years later. I said my piece about PTSD but it was horrendous, because the army had quite clearly pointed the finger at our marital breakdown as the cause of his death. There were transcripts of interviews - these soldiers I'd never even met, giving evidence. Who were they to comment on my marriage? I felt violated and so angry... it was almost as if I'd been framed. I tried to talk to the coroner about the accident but he said "well I don't have any record of this." It was bonkers.

Fortunately for soldiers coming through in later years there is support. I know of some of John's friends who have since been diagnosed with PTSD and they are getting the help they need, sponsored by Help for Heroes - but I think the main

thing is actually recognizing it yourself and wanting to get help because nobody can get that for you. There's not a day goes by when I don't think about some aspect of our life together. It could be a facial expression that one of the children pulls or something that they say, or just something on the TV. The German Wings plane crash affected me deeply because of the public's attitude towards mental illness. Calling the pilot a 'suicide murderer' was just horrific, I mean, for God's sake we're in 2015 we need to say this is an illness, stop persecuting people saying that they're all capable of murdering people.

I'm disappointed with the military. There was a really unpleasant character who told me "well let's face it, you're terrible PR for the army aren't you?" and one civilian who will remain nameless, whom, when I joined the Army Widows Association, told me I wasn't a real army widow. "Your old man topped himself; some of these blokes are heroes how can you compare yourself to those other girls?" he said and I said "we're all in the same boat" and he goes "no you're not, your husband was a coward."

That's why I've chosen to do this. I want my husband to be remembered because he served his country valiantly. He had a chest full of medals. My children wear them proudly on Remembrance Day. My kids are my world. Without them, I would probably be an insane wreck. I'm a very busy person, I don't have a spare moment to myself but I wouldn't have it any other way.

I'm also a very logical, methodical person and this has really rocked my world, it's knocked me sideways, because it's just "why?" And the only person who had all the answers, can't tell me.

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ABOVE

Before: “The last photo of all of us in happier times” Rachel, John, Emily and Steven, November 2006.

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After: At home in Bristol, 10/05/15.



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 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**