

IN MEMORY OF
PRIVATE JAMES PROSSER



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SARAH ADAMS

Interview by Katy Regan

Sarah, from Cwmbran in Wales, lost her son, Private James Prosser, a warrior infantry vehicle driver serving in the 2nd Battalion The Royal Welsh when he was killed as a result of an explosion in Helmand, Afghanistan on September 27th 2009. He was 21.

When James was little, he liked to dress up as a super-hero. One of my most vivid memories is of James dressed as Batman, standing on a wall in the back garden. I was looking at him from the kitchen window and he was going “Mummy, I can fly!” and I’m trying to say “no you can’t” but then he did, and it was a trip to A&E again. There was nothing he wouldn’t attempt.

On the day James pledged his oath to the country up at the Newport Army Recruitment Office, I was proud of him for having the courage of his convictions but I was scared, but I always tried to be positive about his choices and anyway, at that point, I thought there was every likelihood he wouldn’t stick it out. That’s until we went for a family day six weeks later and I could see he was thriving.

He joined his battalion - the Second Battalion Royal Welsh based in Tidmouth at the end of February 2009. We knew he would be going to Afghanistan very soon; so it was just complete fear, because you see him maturing and being confident in himself but it’s a very different world when you get out there fighting. My thing

was to watch everything I could about Afghanistan (for example the Ross Kemp series). I could see it was horrific and there was the temptation to just say, “Don’t go!” right up to the time I took him to fly to Afghanistan. In fact, he was so quiet on the drive up there that I was worried and so I called the Welfare Officer, Justin Moynihan when I got back, just to check James was ok, but he was just so very typically army, stiff upper lip. He said, “you’re one of the lucky ones; your life is still going on. Imagine if you were a wife. Their husbands have gone whilst their life is still on the base.” I wanted to say, he might just be a soldier to you, but he is my child. I immediately thought “I don’t like you.”

James flew to Afghanistan on 27 July 2009, and was killed on September 27th. On the Friday before, he’d told me on the phone that he was coming home in 10 days for his R&R and I can remember saying to him “great, what food do you want in?” and his reply was “Burger King!” Then at about quarter to eight on the Sunday morning, I was up early with Josh, my youngest, because he had a basketball event when there was a knock at the door. I

went into the living room to look through the window to see who was at the door. It was then that I saw a man in a suit and another in army uniform behind him and I just knew. The man in the suit asked my name but I didn't want to listen and I just remember hearing Josh crying in the kitchen and me saying "no" over and over again.

By the afternoon, there were already Press on the doorstep and James' friends had to tell them to go away - it was tough for them to do that at such a young age. At one point, I remember looking out of the living room window to see all these boys and girls crying and holding each other and I just thought, how are we going to get through this? It was just horrendous, the worst pain.

I believe that not only are soldiers badly treated but also the bereaved families - it's what I've been fighting for ever since James was killed. For a start, it was clear that the visiting officer, (when he arrived after the notifying officer) did not want to be doing that job. Not that I'm blaming him - it's a very hard job - but at the time in 2009, it was rank driven; you got told it was your turn to do it and you had to do it. So it was really

difficult for him and we didn't connect: he couldn't deal with my directness and need for answers. Also, he couldn't say "James," it was just "the body" and "your son." In the end I lost the plot and screamed. "His name is James!" It's why I'm passionate that these jobs should be taken up by people who want to do it and who are trained; because the majority of people they have to go and see are emotional women, and that's hard for any guy to deal with. The day after, I received a visit from someone who introduced himself as Captain Moynihan, Welfare Officer of 2 Royal Welsh. And instantly I remembered what he'd said on the phone 9 weeks prior and I said, "I'm not the lucky one now, am I?" My brother said he just stood quietly and apologised and then started looking after us all. I think he respected my directness and we got on well afterwards; never once did he dodge a question and trust me, I asked many.

As a mum I needed to know what had happened and eventually I got those answers: James had, that morning, had to go out to a compound not far from where the Taliban were keeping weapons. James was the lead warrior driver for the day - there was a gunner

and commander above him. They were driving down the hill with the men who sweep for mines, walking in front slowly. But James was driving down a slight hill, on a bend and he went over an IED. The bomb was directly underneath the warrior, so it killed him. The gunner and commander were fine.

Sadly, his death was not immediate. Initially they thought it was superficial injuries and brought him back to Camp Bastion, but then they realized there was something wrong with his heart, so they did an x-ray and saw he had a tear to one of his major arteries and they had to open him up. He also had severe brain injuries.

It took almost a week for James to be repatriated. Watching the plane come in and him being brought off the place was just horrendous because all I wanted to do was run to the coffin - to go to him. And when you see that box covered with the union jack, you just think, it can't be you in there.

I had to see him in the funeral home, just to make it real. He looked absolutely perfect and I talked to him and put a little note in with him. I didn't want to leave.

Major Tom Richards who'd arranged for the boys to go out

that morning in Afghanistan came to see me, and I remember he sat in the living room and he said, "Sarah, do you blame me?" But I don't. I don't blame him or the army. I'm just angry at the MoD and the politicians, because you're expected to tow a line but in a situation like this you don't know how you're going to be from one minute to the next. I think our soldiers are very poorly looked after and that's where my beef is. It's taken for granted they want to serve their country, even down to wages. Three days after James was killed, we got his wage slip. James had £1200 for 4 weeks in Afghanistan. That's after he'd paid his tax and national insurance and paid his own life insurance and his food. How do they justify paying that to someone who does the most dangerous job in the world? Why do they have to pay their own life insurance on such a small wage? Against a danger we send them on? So that started my fight with the MoD and Government, which still continues now.

He had a military funeral in St Gabriel's church in Old Cwmbran. Again, it has to be how they say. The tradition is that when they get to the crematorium, they take

the flag off the coffin and it's like they're handing him back. I was happy to go along with that as long as his friends could carry him into the crematorium. But even that, the visiting officer said he'd have to check if it was ok as it's not part of a military funeral. I dug my heels in. James had such a lovely group of friends here and I wanted them to play their part. I wanted them to take James back from the army - back to us - and we got it, but everything is such a fight.

So many people took the time to come out to see him off. Cwmbran had it quite tough really, because it's not a very big town but we lost three soldiers here, within the year.

After the funeral is the hardest bit. People say time is a healer, but personally I find it harder now. You learn to deal with it and we're getting on for 6 years now but It's hard because you see what Emma's achieved - she's had the joy of having a family and I watch Joshua growing up and getting jobs and you realize what James has missed out on: he'll never have that girlfriend and the falling in love and having babies. You want your surviving children to be happy, you love seeing them happy, but

it's also very hard seeing that James has missed out. Emma actually said to me I really feel sad that James has never been an uncle because he would have been amazing.

You toughen up - you've got to. The things that bothered you don't bother you so much anymore and everything is before James, or after James. I don't want Emma and Josh to ever think he's the only one you ever think about, but he's the one that's not here so it does seem like my life is governed by the loss: there's September 27th, Remembrance, Christmas is always hard, then you've got Mother's Day, his Birthday on April 14th, and before you know it you're back to 27th September again.

I've got lovely friends and family and work is a good distraction but too much time on my hands is hard work and the night times are the worst. You do just think I should be watching him living his life and making memories ... I'd do his pile of washing in a heartbeat.

All soldiers are advised to write a letter should the worst happen. Some do, some don't. James didn't and I'm glad. I wouldn't have wanted to think of a 21 year old writing something like that. It comforts me that

he wasn't stressing over it.

His ashes have been interred and he's got a headstone at the church now and I go there once a week and put some flowers on. I have pictures of him all over the house, and the big chest in the living room has got all his things from Afghanistan - literally as they were. His room is as it was too. Nearly six years on, I can't even move his aftershave and razor from the shelf.

Getting James' stuff back was dealt with awfully by the MoD. They sent his wallet back without his ID card because I might 'use it fraudulently'. It made me so angry. I thought, it might just be a card to you, but to me, it's another piece of him. You're not even allowed his uniform because it's 'government property'. But who is going to want it? Personally, I think you should be given the choice.

The day James' belongings were delivered, they brought them in and said "I'll leave you to it then." I opened this box alone and the first thing on top was a big plastic bag with red felt tip saying 'T-shirt Warn in incident' that had been put in by mistake. It was cut up the middle and had blood on it. I just don't understand. The staff at the JCCC department of the

MoD (who organize sending the belongings back) are human beings, they've got family somewhere too, how can they make so many mistakes? That said, I wouldn't part with the T-shirt for the world. I've kept it in the bag and it's still got sand on it, but the way it happened was horrendous.

I'm happy when I watch Emma and Josh happy. I'm happy with Riley and Oliver my grandsons, they're just absolutely adorable. You enjoy things but there are so many times it just catches you and you think should I be having fun? He would be 27 now ... He should be the one having fun.

As a mum I felt I should have been with him when he died as I was when he was born and very quickly, I wanted to go to Camp Bastion and see where James closed his eyes for the last time.

In November 2009, I went to see Gordon Brown about going to Afghanistan but also about campaigning for better pay and care of our soldiers. He was lovely and understood completely why I wanted to go but then there was the change of government and David Cameron said no, you can't go. He was arrogant - another person who couldn't manage to

say James' name. This was around May 2010 and David Richards was Head of the Armed Forces at the time. I'd written to him about my wish to go to Camp Bastion and met him at a Remembrance Service and he was fully supportive; in one of his letters he wrote 'it is my wish that one day you will be able to go' and I used that to beg in my meetings with the MoD.

In May 2012, I finally got a 'yes' from the Defence Minister at the time, Nick Harvey and on 1st November 2012, I went to Camp Bastion and it was agreed I would write The Bereaved Military Families report on how to better and more sensitively treat bereaved families - it was so that the MoD could learn lessons.

I didn't want to come home. I felt so much more at peace, and close to James. I went to the Memorial Ground and put some poppies down. I also went to the hospital where he died, met many officers and learned so much.

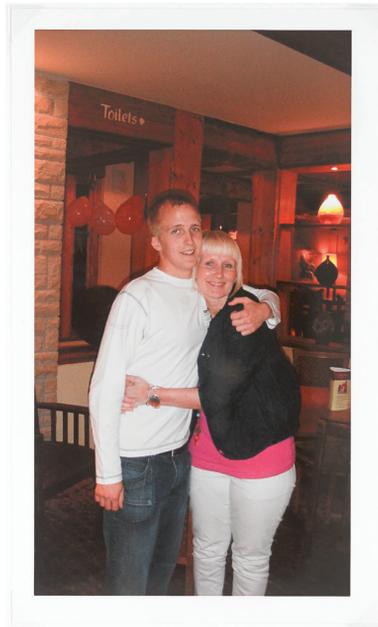
On 20th November 2012, I handed in my report.

A few policies have been changed since the report. All soldiers' belongings are now returned; notifying officers and visiting officers' training has now

been increased to a three-day course, not just one, and it is not just rank driven. The officer has to want to do it as opposed to being told. I was also asked to speak at Cruse Bereavement counselling yearly meeting as they wanted to know more about my experience and how they could help.

It's hard because people say you must be so proud James served his country and I am - just as I am of Emma and Josh from the day they were born. But I didn't want him to be a hero I just wanted him to be James and above all, I wanted him to be here.

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



ABOVE

Before: "A precious hug from James ... How I wish I could have one now." Sarah and James at Ashbridge Inn, Cwmbran, April 2009.

RIGHT

After: Same location, 04/04/15.



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 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**