

ARMY CORPORAL JOHN M. DAWSON

Northbridge mourns death of local soldier

By Sean P. Murphy Boston Globe Staff, April 10, 2015

Mass. soldier killed in Afghanistan recalled as 'great kid'

Neighbors in this town of 15,000 described Dawson as a polite, personable young man, who came from a close-knit family and seemed destined for a successful, rewarding life.

He was a member of the National Honor Society at Blackstone Valley Regional Technical High School in nearby Upton when he graduated 2010. He spent a year at the Massachusetts Maritime Academy, and then enlisted in the Army in 2012. After basic training, he volunteered to become a combat medic.

Dawson was on an escort mission at the provincial governor's compound when an Afghan National Army soldier — an ally, supposedly — turned his weapon on a group of Americans, killing Dawson and wounding others, according to the Defense Department.

Dawson grew up on a street without sidewalks under a canopy of pine trees in a rural section of the village of Whitinsville, about 15 miles south of Worcester.

The American flag next door was at half-staff and someone had tied yellow ribbons on poles and trees nearby.

Next to the flowers on the steps was a vest festooned with the American eagle and other insignia of the Third Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division, based at Fort Campbell, Ky. Dawson shipped out from there three months ago to Jalalabad, Afghanistan.

The vest wrapped in clear plastic on the doorstep came from an unknown soldier. It included a typewritten message that used a nickname for Dawson's unit that dates back to World War II:

"I'm so sorry for the loss of your son and brother. I know there are no words that can comfort your family at this time. But know that all the Rakkasans of every generation send their prayers. Let Valor Not Fail."

Brian Sullivan, 43, a neighbor, said he watched Thursday as people arrived at the house with plates of food and flowers. He has two sons, ages 6 and 3. The younger one played on the street near Dawson's house on Friday afternoon.

Looking at his son, Sullivan said he woke at 2 in the morning on Friday and crept into his sons' rooms. He said he was thinking about the Dawson family's loss while he watched his sons sleep.

Edith Debaggis arrived at the Dawson house Friday hoping to comfort her friend, Rhonda Dawson, John Dawson's mother. The two had planned dinner together on Sunday. But Debaggis received a distressing call from Rhonda Dawson on Thursday.

"She called me and right away I knew something was wrong," said Debaggis, who had brought a large platter of cold cuts and rolls from Stop & Shop in Grafton, where she works. "I asked what was wrong. She said, 'It's my son. He's been killed.' "

"I didn't know what to say to her," Debaggis, 71, recalled. "I said, 'I'm here for you, hon. You call when you are ready.' "

Funeral plans take shape for Whitinsville soldier killed in Afghanistan

WORCESTER TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF, by Susan Spencer Apr 14, 2015

Whitinsville -- As many as 1,000 people, including the governor and lieutenant governor, are expected to attend the funeral next week of Army Spc. John M. Dawson, 22, of Whitinsville, who was killed in Jalalabad, Afghanistan, last week.

Police Chief Walter J. Warchol told selectmen Tuesday the date of the funeral hasn't been decided but it could be as early as Monday or Tuesday. He said the Police Department would put a notice on Facebook and send out a Code Red emergency notification to inform the community once the date is known.

Carr Funeral Home, 24 Hill St., Whitinsville, is handling the arrangements. Burial with full military honors will be at Pine Grove Cemetery on Linwood Avenue.

Spc. Dawson's remains have been in the custody of the Army and have not yet been returned to town.

The Dawson family requested that the return of the remains be private, according to Master Sgt. Paul Reis, Army casualty assistance officer.

Chief Warchol said the funeral Mass will be held at St. Gabriel the Archangel Parish, 151 Mendon St., Upton.

St. Patrick's Roman Catholic Church in Whitinsville is undergoing renovations and wasn't available for the funeral.

In addition to those attending inside the church, many veterans' groups will be staged in formation outside, according to veteran William Audette.

Some 50 to 150 Patriot Guard Riders, veterans on motorcycles, are expected to pay their respects as well.

The funeral procession will depart from Carr Funeral Home and proceed from Hill Street to Church Street and Quaker Street in Northbridge, to Pleasant Street in Upton, passing Blackstone Valley Regional Vocational Technical High School, to Mendon Street to St. Gabriel's. It will return along the same route after the Mass, turning at Memorial Square in Whitinsville onto Linwood Avenue to Pine Grove Cemetery.

Hill Street will be closed between Memorial Square and High Street for the funeral procession. A portion of Cottage Street will also be closed. Off-site parking and shuttle buses to the funeral home are being arranged.

Seventy traffic posts will be needed, according to Chief Warchol. State police have been contacted for help, although if the funeral is held on Patriot's Day, they may be on duty at the Boston Marathon.

Fire Chief Gary Nestor said the ladder truck with a large American flag would be posted along the way.

Upton safety officials have been coordinating routes and coverage with Northbridge.

"It is our request that anyone who wants to go to the funeral go to the church that morning," said Heather Carr Reiter, funeral director.

State Rep. David K. Muradian Jr., R-Grafton, said Gov. Charlie Baker and Lt. Gov. Karyn Polito have cleared their schedules to attend the funeral.

Francisco A. Urena, secretary of the state Department of Veterans' Services, commended town officials for their leadership in coordinating the military funeral logistics and for supporting the Dawson family.

"The wishes of the family come first," Mr. Urena said. "It looks like those have been addressed."

"So far it's been a tremendous outpouring this week from the community," Mr. Audette said. "It's been very emotional for the veterans' community."

Charles Ampagoomian Jr., chairman of the Board of Selectmen, said questions from veterans or the community could be addressed to Town Manager Theodore D. Kozak or Annmarie Cleary, interim director of Veterans' Services. Ms. Cleary can be reached at (508) 234-9808.

"Remember, this is all new to us, every one of us," Mr. Ampagoomian said. "We don't ever want to go through any of this again."

Selectmen voted unanimously to donate three cemetery lots at Pine Grove Cemetery to the Dawson family and to place an acknowledgment of Spc. Dawson's death on the sign outside Town Hall.

Father of fallen soldier: 'You will always be our hero, John'

Boston Herald, By Jessica Heslam, April 21, 2015

Whitinsville –

Somehow, Michael Dawson found the strength to stand before a packed congregation yesterday and deliver an eloquent eulogy about his fallen son, Army Cpl. John Dawson, the young soldier from Whitinsville who was determined to serve his country.

"We're thankful for the 22 best years of our lives," Dawson told the mourners at his son's funeral service at St. Gabriel's Church in Upton.

As he performed one of the hardest tasks any father could be asked to do — burying his own son — Dawson told them, "He really made my job as dad easy."

He remembered his son as a kind, respectable, thoughtful, fun and smart youth with a mischievous streak. John respected his teachers and coaches, he said, and school came "natural to him." After school, he'd often visit with his grandmother instead of hanging out with friends.

During his senior year at Blackstone Valley Vocational Technical High School, John talked about joining the Army.

His parents encouraged him to give college a try, his father recalled, and he did. But John ended up enlisting in the Army in 2012, his father said, because of his "insatiable desire" to serve his country.

John chose to become a combat medic — soldiers who are trained to consider it routine to expose themselves to fire to save others. His father asked him why.

"I want to help people, Dad," his son told him.

His son was humble, Dawson said, and never wanted to be "in the limelight."

He was a National Honor Society member, and was given a gold sash to don at graduation, but he chose not to wear it.

He had a good head on his shoulders, his father said. He had money in an IRA and invested in stocks. He paid off his car, a Honda Civic.

On April 8, John was killed in action in Afghanistan while on an escort mission. He was 22 years old.

Yesterday, his town turned out to honor him, along with Gov. Charlie Baker, and some of the soldiers who had served with him.

A pair of soldiers gave John's parents some personal belongings their only son had on him when he died. One was a commemorative dog tag with an inscription about love. On the back it said, "In memory of an American hero."

And at that moment, the stoic father's voice finally cracked with raw emotion.

"You will always be our hero, John," Dawson said.

"You will always be loved and remembered and missed.

We thank you for giving your life for us all.

Rest in peace, my son."