



Lance Corporal Pralli Durrer

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The story of Canterbury's fallen soldier

Dying as he fought alongside his brothers in arms would have meant more to Christchurch's slain soldier than becoming a national hero.

Lance Corporal Pralli Durrer was killed when his patrol went to the aid of Afghan police in Bamiyan province just over a week ago.

The fallen soldier was orphaned at the age of 12, enlisted in the army when he turned 18 and died as a war hero at 26.

Family members who raised Pralli as a son believed he would have accepted his death and been proud to "be one of the guys who had gone that way.

He would take comfort in his death, not because he died a hero but because he died fighting for his mates, his uncle, Joe Durrer, said.

His long-term girlfriend, Casey Maaka, 22, also believed her "first love" would have wanted to die with honour.

"It meant a lot to him to be in the army. When he spoke of being a soldier his face lit up and you could tell he was proud. He wouldn't have wanted it any other way," she said.

After the sudden death of his mother in 1998, the Christchurch boy who had never known his father was raised by his uncle, his aunt, Ani Lhamo, and his grandfather, Jack Durrer.

As a child, Pralli was remembered as a sensitive, laid-back, soft-spoken "boy's boy" who collected Batman and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle figurines.

At Phillipstown Primary School, Pralli used to get frustrated when a group of smitten girls would steal his "starter cap" and make him chase them around the playground to get it back.

He enjoyed drawing "war heroes" and army soldiers fighting one another on his schoolbooks at Shirley Intermediate School.

When Pralli reached high school he "lost interest" for the academic, his uncle said.

"He wasn't a trouble-setter, he wasn't a rugby star, he wasn't an academic genius. He was just a normal kid."

In 2004, at 18, Pralli decided he wanted to become a soldier and enlisted as a rifleman at Burnham Military Camp.

"After going through the death of his mum, he really enjoyed the brotherhood the army offered - the sense of belonging and the idea that you are fighting for your comrades," Durrer said.

The brother-bonding, the comradeship and the "family atmosphere" within the army was what led Pralli to turn down an offer for an Australian mining job that would have paid almost triple his salary last year.

Durrer recalled the advice Pralli had given Durrer's son about enrolling with the army six months ago.

"To be a soldier you have to have amazing heart and absolute drive," Pralli had said.

Pralli embodied these attributes, he said.

"Nobody wants to bury a child in any circumstance, but I take comfort that Pralli's death was not meaningless," he said. "He was doing his role for a nation that needed him. He was fighting for his boys and he was doing what he does best.

"It hurts. It's going to hurt for a long time, but I am extremely proud of what he did. He put it all on the line for us and Pralli will be remembered for a long time."

The soldier's grandfather shares a similar pride.

He said his grandson "became a man" when he joined the army and he "couldn't have been doing any greater thing when he died".

Lhamo said it did not matter that Pralli had become a national hero because the humble soldier had always been a hero to his family.

"He was orphaned at a young age and didn't have a father, but he still made something of himself. He was such a good guy."

She said her nephew would have accepted his death was unavoidable but would have "fought for his life" until the end.

"I know Pralli would have been doing his job to 1000 per cent. In the battle he must have known they were under heavy fire, but he would have given it his all and always would have put somebody else first," she said.

Before Pralli was deployed, Lhamo had warned him of the potential dangers in Afghanistan.

"I told him that he could die. I told him that he could be killed over there . . . but he knew completely what he was in for," she said.

Pralli had also warned his girlfriend of almost five years about the seriousness of his deployment, saying "you know I might not come back from this".

But Maaka had never let herself think the worst. Instead, she was looking forward to his return in October, when the pair had planned to move in together.

Three days before his death, Pralli had emailed her, saying he had been moved to a more dangerous camp but he "never let on that he was worried or scared".

He signed off the email with "wish we could have cuddles", she said.

The couple had spoken about having children and pet turtles in a house together, and Maaka was still coming to terms with the lost dreams.

She said Pralli had wanted to have children when he was 25, but because she was four years younger than him she had wanted to wait.

If they had a son, he had wanted to name him Pralli.

Since his death, the New Zealand Defence Force had offered her and the family "unbelievable support that could not be faulted", she said.

His aunt said the army had "rolled out the red carpet" for his immediate family and "softened" their grief.

Pralli's private memorial service was held on Monday and his remains will be buried in Hawke's Bay at Manutai Marae with his mother and other relatives

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