

## Injured soldier among those paying tribute to Roberge

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It was a bittersweet Christmas homecoming for Cpl. Bill Kerr of the 2nd Battalion, The Irish Regiment of Canada.

After weeks of recovery from being seriously injured Oct. 15 in a roadside blast in Afghanistan, Kerr, 41, was happy to be back in Sudbury with his fiancée, Tracy Lachance, and daughters Zoe, 9, and Abigail, 5.

Little did he know when he returned home to Sudbury on Dec. 20 he would soon find himself on a lonely bridge high above Highway 69, waiting for a procession carrying the remains of one of his best friends -- a fellow soldier.

Kerr was among 150 people who gathered in the bitter cold atop the Sgt. Rick McDonald Memorial Bridge late Saturday afternoon to pay respects to Warrant Officer Gaetan Roberge.

The hearse carrying Roberge's body from Toronto was accompanied into the city by dozens of Ontario Provincial Police and Greater Sudbury Police Service officers, determined to give the career soldier a solemn, dignified welcome home.

The Dec. 27 death of Roberge, in the same type of roadside blast, was troubling for Kerr.

"We were very close friends," said a soft-spoken Kerr as he sat in the front passenger seat of a parked vehicle, awaiting the arrival of Roberge's procession.

The two met in 2003 when Kerr arrived in Sudbury from Thunder Bay and joined the 2nd Irish, the regiment Roberge had joined two years early.

The warrant officer, who organized and led training at the regiment, gave Kerr his basic training.

The pair also travelled to Canadian Forces Base Petawawa together for their pre-deployment training before their mission in Afghanistan.

"We drove down (to Petawawa) and came back here on weekends," said Kerr. "I drove him up here. We were very, very close. I was in his wedding. We were very close friends."

Kerr's daughters stood on a snowbank piled against the guardrails on the bridge, waving pictures they had created to demonstrate their love for Warrant Roberge.

Lachance stood on the snowhill with the girls as Kerr looked out at his family and chatted with soldiers and others who passed by his vehicle.

Lachance was devastated when part of the picture drawn by Zoe blew away in the stiff breeze.

Kerr called to his daughter: "Don't worry, Zoe. Gates knows you made the picture. Gates will see it."

The girls joined their father in the heated vehicle before the Roberge procession arrived, crowding in around Kerr.

"I'm doing well. I'm doing phenomenally well," Kerr said. "I have a lot of support. My family has been great. I can't say enough about them. My beautiful daughters take very good care of me."

Zoe and Abigail admitted they were happy to have their father home for Christmas.

"We had so many presents," said an excited Zoe. "(There was) almost no more storage to put them."

When asked if having her father home was the best present, Zoe replied: "Yeah. Tied with the Little Pet Shop Fitness Centre."

Kerr chuckled at the intentional joke his daughter had made.

Lachance dissolved into tears when Roberge's procession arrived in the city. By then it was dark, but the night sky lit up with the red and blue flashing lights of dozens of police cruisers.

Police, emergency and other vehicles lined Highway 69 to the Four Corners, along Regent Street and to where Kerr's body was taken for visitation Sunday at Loughheed's.

Just before it arrived at the funeral home, it passed within a stone's throw of the Sudbury Armoury where Roberge spent so many years training young men and women to be good soldiers.

Roberge's duties in Afghanistan included training officers with the Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police.

Because of the close ties between soldiers and police officers, the latter wanted to do something to honour Roberge's memory.

Const. Dave Hodgins, of the Sudbury detachment of the OPP, wished to provide Roberge with the same type of police escort that accompanies the bodies of soldiers who are flown home to Canadian Forces Base Trenton and transferred to Toronto for military post-mortems.

They are escorted by police along the stretch of Highway 401 that has become known as the Highway of Heroes.

Hodgins said Roberge had many friends in the Sudbury law enforcement community and it was important they show their support and gratitude for the sacrifices made by Roberge and other Canadian soldiers.

Kerr said he will return to Ottawa to continue his rehabilitation "after all of this is taken care of with Warrant Roberge."

Surprising as it was to see him on the Rick McDonald bridge, awaiting the return of a fallen comrade, it was fitting to find Kerr sitting above the North's own Highway of Heroes.

"He (Kerr) could teach us all a lot about adversity," Maj. Rob Hobbs, deputy commanding officer of the 2nd Irish, told The Sudbury Star the next day.

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