

Jennifer Harris' family attends memorial service from 3,000 miles away

Tom Dalton

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The parents of U.S. Marine Capt. Jennifer Harris of Swampscott could not attend her memorial service yesterday at Camp Pendleton in California, so the service was brought to them.

Through the technological magic of videoconferencing, Rosalie Harris, who is confined to a wheelchair, and her husband, Ray, sat in a small room at St. John's Prep in Danvers and watched their daughter being mourned 3,000 miles away in a chapel on a Marine Corps base.

From a basement room in the Catholic school library, they saw an overflow congregation pay their final respects to Harris, 28, a helicopter pilot, and three other Marines shot down with her Feb. 7 in Iraq. On her third

tour in that war-torn country and just days from coming home, Harris was flying a rescue mission near Fallujah, transporting injured Marines and two U.S. Navy sailors back to a military base, when the helicopter was shot down by enemy fire.

Harris' parents also could see the altar, draped in purple in honor of their daughter's squadron, the legendary Purple Foxes. A photo of Harris was displayed on an altar table, and, in front of it, her helmet, boots and flight gear.

Several times they saw their daughter's smiling photo projected on a large screen in the chapel, and they heard her eulogized by a fellow Marine.

"Anyone who flew with Jennifer knew she was a great pilot. ..." said Chief Warrant Officer Brian Santucci, a former classmate at the U.S. Naval Academy. "She was so good because she cared so much. She knew people would be depending on her, and she never wanted to let anyone down."

Santucci told the congregation to remember Harris in life, not death, and to think about her photo — a picture of the Swampscott High graduate smiling out from under her helmet.



Chief Warrant Officer Brian Santucci holds back tears as he speaks via video broadcast from Camp Pendleton about longtime friend Marine Capt. Jennifer Harris. Some family members attended the memorial service for the late Marine in California, and those who could not watched from St. John's Prep in Danvers.

Mark Lorenz / Staff Photo

"She was without a doubt the nicest person I ever met and had a huge heart," said Santucci, who also served with Harris in Iraq. "I want you to look at that picture, and I want you to look at that smile, because that smile is who she was."

The emotion in the chapel reached all the way to the basement room at The Prep, where Harris' parents and other family members did their best to hold themselves together. Among the dozen relatives who watched the live video were grandparents Pat and Jean Macone of Nahant. An aunt and uncle, Anthony and Linda Macone, attended the service at Camp Pendleton.

The memorial service was arranged by the Freedom Calls Foundation, a public charity that conducts almost 2,000 videoconferences every month between soldiers in Iraq and loved ones back home. They have helped soldiers attend marriages, adoptions, births and other family milestones. But they had never done anything like this.

"This one is kind of unusual," said John Harlow, executive director of the New Jersey-based foundation. "It's our first memorial service."

When contacted weeks ago by Camp Pendleton and told of the family's plight, Freedom Calls went to work to make sure Harris' parents could be there — if only through an Internet connection — for the memorial tribute to their daughter. "We had to act," Harlow said.

Freedom Calls hooked up with Verizon and with St. John's Prep, which has a teleconferencing room where students in a social studies class titled "War and Peace" recently talked to four Marines in Iraq.

From that same room yesterday, the Harris family was able to take part in the memorial service. When members of the congregation in California stood for the national anthem and a Marine Corps hymn, the Harris family stood along with them.

When a Marine officer at Camp Pendleton read roll call at the end of the service, the emotion at Camp Pendleton was just as great in Danvers. Three times the officer called the name "Capt. Jennifer Harris," and three times there was no response. There was silence in the chapel in California — and silence in the small basement room at St. John's Prep.