

Calgary Sun reporter Pablo Fernandez is a serving member of the King's Own Calgary Regiment and was for two years Cpl. Nathan Hornburg's crew commander.

I suppose it was only a matter of time.

After nearly six years of conflict and countless rotations of regimental soldiers into the fray in Afghanistan, members of the King's Own Calgary Regiment were fortunate the only damage they had suffered came in the form of emotional scarring and benign demons.

Being so far into this war, some of us even dared to think that maybe the small but tight family of the King's Own would make it through this chapter unscathed -- at least, that's what we all hoped.

But all that changed yesterday when news that Cpl. Nathan Hornburg had been killed in action sent shockwaves through the unit.

Nathan was the driver of a Leopard 2 Armoured Recovery Vehicle (ARV), an armoured fighting machine with only one purpose -- to help other tanks when they run into trouble.

Then, on Monday afternoon, as a drawn-out engagement raged all around him, his skill and courage were tested when one of the tanks embroiled in the battle became immobilized.Â

Nathan didn't disappoint.

He went in to help, which to those of us who served with the kid, is nothing new.

He's come to our assistance countless times.

He was always there to help when vehicles got stuck in the mud, when somebody needed a hand up or when a friend simply needed a sympathetic ear.

He was the kind of soldier crew commanders fought over to have as their driver and no matter where he went, the tall reservist was always surrounded by friends.

Nathan became the 71st Canadian soldier to die in the war in Afghanistan and the first member of the King's Own to be killed in action since the Second World War.

Having served with Nathan for almost seven years, news of his death left me in a chill that permeated down to my bones -- I found myself taking shallow breaths even after the initial shock wore out.

From the very beginning, Nathan was a hard-working individual, with a tempered demeanour and a will of steel.

Shallow bravado was never his province -- he had too much heart for that.

As a member of the King's Own hockey team, his determination was unwavering.

In the field, his passion and professionalism were contagious.

"He represents the very best this unit has to offer," recalled friend and colleague Master Cpl. Jamie Good.

He was more than a great soldier; he was a kind soul and an iconic young Canadian.

And this loss, which has consumed his family and the regiment, is now everyone's loss.

And in the sorrow that men who train for war find themselves in -- and little able to cope with -- tiny bits of love have started to surface.

A large bouquet of flowers now sits at the entrance of the King's Own offices in Mewata Armouries, dropped off by a local business.

A small card attached to the flowers simply states, "you will not be forgotten."

His loss was also felt in Germany, where Nathan spent six weeks training and where he became involved with a girl who later visited him in Calgary prior to his deployment -- a relationship that blossomed but that will never mature.

The motto of the King's Own is Onward.

Understated and even modest -- but as the unit now sets off to say goodbye to one of its own, sets out to continue training and stay focused on its commitment to the war in Afghanistan, the regimental motto, for the first time in more than six decades, has taken on a poignant and overwhelming meaning.

The full weight of that statement is now clear.

Pushing onward seems like an insurmountable task, but is exactly what the regiment, the army and our nation now demands of us.