

Local soldier dies in Afghanistan

21-year-old from Delta Twp. killed in helicopter crash

Friends say a 21-year-old Delta Township man had a "servant's heart" and was doing what he loved when he died in a helicopter crash in Afghanistan.

Jason Plite, a senior airman in the Air Force, was aboard an HH-60G Pave Hawk helicopter on its way to rescue two injured Afghan children when it went down late Sunday, killing all six crew members.

"He was there to pick up the people who are broken," said Plite's neighbor, Michael O'Berski. "He paid the ultimate price for it."

The crew was within a couple weeks of completing its tour of duty and returning to Moody Air Force Base in Valdosta, Ga. Officials said the crash was not believed to be the result of enemy action.

Friends say Plite, a 1999 Grand Ledge High graduate, excelled at his grueling training - similar to the Navy SEALs' - but was just as tickled when he helped deliver a baby for the first time.

And he relished his role as big brother to 10- and 12-year-old sisters, attending their plays and other functions.

"He had a soft heart and was tough outside," said his best friend, 22-year-old Dan O'Berski. "You wouldn't have even known he was in a special, elite group."

The O'Berskis met Plite about seven years ago when his family moved into their neighborhood near Mt. Hope Highway and Canal Road. Plite often snuck over for ice cream.

"He had the key to our hearts and the key to our house," said Michael O'Berski, Dan's dad.

Plite stayed in steady contact with his family and his girlfriend through e-mails and phone calls from Afghanistan. Last week he e-mailed another good friend, Andy George, that he was bored.

"I said, 'Good, stay that way,' " said George, 22. "I know he wouldn't have changed a thing. That is really what he wanted to do."

Plite was a successful swimmer and a talented artist in high school. He painted a mural for the previous owners of the Perk Up coffeehouse in Grand Ledge. It featured five jazz musicians.

Current owner Samantha Parks had hung a quilt over the painting because it didn't fit her redecoration. But she removed it Monday, attaching a note asking people to pray for Plite's family.

"Everyone is just pretty shocked," Parks said.

Friends are focusing on Plite's accomplishments and plan to set up a memorial fund in his honor. They want to establish anything from a plaque in his name to a college art scholarship.

"At 21 he made a difference that our children will be grateful for," Michael O'Berski said.

The Pentagon identified the others who died as 1st Lt. Tamara Archuleta, 23, of Los Lunas, N.M.; Staff Sgt. Jason Hicks, 25, of Jefferson, S.C.; Master Sgt. Michael Maltz, 42, of St. Petersburg, Fla.; Lt. Col. John Stein, 39, of Bardolph, Ill.; and Staff Sgt. John Teal, 29, of Dallas, Texas.

Killed in action: Jason Plite of Delta Township, a senior airman in the U.S. Air Force, died Sunday when the helicopter he was in crashed in Afghanistan. All six crew members were killed in the crash.

Killed in duty

- Name: Jason Plite
- Age: 21
- Hometown: Delta Township
- Job: Senior Airman, U.S. Air Force
- Unit: 41st Rescue Squadron, Moody Air Force Base in Valdosta, Ga.
- Background: 1999 graduate of Grand Ledge High School

Jason Plite Funeral

WILX - Lansing, MI by Lori Jane Gliha

Nearly 1,000 family and friends paid their respects during a funeral for senior airman Jason Plite.

The Grand Ledge man was killed when his rescue helicopter crashed in Afghanistan on March 23. Plite was on a mission to save a couple Afghan children when he died.

People who knew Plite say he lived by the Air Force Pararescue motto, "That others may live."

Family members are asking people to donate money to a memorial fund rather than sending flowers. A fund is set up with:

Flagstar Bank
914 Charlevoix Suite 100
Grand Ledge, MI 48837

They say the memorial fund will help carry on Plite's love for the arts and swimming

The following email was received on April 4, 2003 from retired Pararescueman Herb Kee regarding the funeral of Jason Plite

Jason's funeral was held on April 3rd at South Baptist Church, 5250 Cornerstone Drive. Instead of flowers, Plite's family requested that donations to the Jason Plite Memorial Fund be sent to Flagstar Bank, 914 Charlevoix Dr. Suite 100, Grand Ledge, MI 48837.

Deb and I were able to go to Lansing and attend the funeral. Approximately 600 people attended the service which lasted for two hours. The service was very moving and inspirational. Five active duty and two retired PJ's were present. Also present were several members of the armed services, The Lansing Fire Department, Lansing Police Department, Michigan State Troopers, and members of the Sheriffs Department. The active duty PJ's were:

- 1st Lt. Rob Taylor
- MSgt Dan Horton
- SSgt Chis Trisko
- SRA Sean Cunningham
- SRA Luke Naughton

Retired PJ's:

- MSgt Herb Kee
- MSgt Craig Newman

The procession to the grave site was nearly two miles long. The Honor Guard was from Wright-Patterson AFB and performed their duties with all honor and dignity. The family was very appreciative of the PJ's attendance and support. "That Others May Live."