

# Ultimate sacrifice by modest son serving in Helmand province

By [Barbara Davies for the Daily Mail](#)

Updated: 14:34, 13 November 2010



Whenever Tony Woodgate asked his son about life as a soldier serving in Afghanistan, he was generally met with a wall of silence.

‘Oh, you know Dad, I’ve just been doing stuff,’ was a typical response given by Lance Corporal of Horse Jonathan Woodgate to his father’s questions.

Looking back now, Tony understands that Jo (as he was affectionately called by his family), who was killed by a grenade in Helmand Province in March, simply didn’t want to worry him.

But a hefty dose of modesty also prevented the 26-year-old from ever talking up his achievements in the Blues and Royals, one of the Army’s most senior regiments and part of the Household Cavalry.

The full measure of Jo’s courage and dedication has only become clear since his death. In the eight months that have passed since, 57-year-old Tony has finally built up a picture of his son, the soldier, thanks to the memories and reminiscences of those who served with him.

The final, most symbolic piece of the jigsaw slotted into place this week when Prince Harry, who served alongside Jo in Afghanistan, hugged his mother Susan and then took his grieving father's hand, looked straight into his eyes and told him of their friendship. Jo, said the Prince, was 'a very special chap'.

Those words have provided some solace to Tony in the run-up to Remembrance Sunday as he tries to balance the grief he still feels so keenly with the pride his son's sacrifice arouses in him. 'The boy was an absolute hero. And I didn't know it until he'd gone,' he says.

Until his royal audience, which took place at the opening of the Royal British Legion Field of Remembrance in Wootton Bassett, Gloucestershire, Tony — who lives with his second wife, Jayne in Monks Eleigh, Suffolk — had no idea that Jo had been such close friends with the Prince. Harry planted a cross in remembrance of Jo.



Lance corporal Jonathan Woodgate (left) D Squadron Household Cavalry Regiment, Helmand Province, Afganistan

But war is a great social leveller. And what set Lance Corporal Woodgate apart on the battlefield, where it mattered, was his cool head, his desire to lead from the front and his unwavering determination to put the safety of others before his own.

They were attributes that would ultimately cost him his life.

‘It was because of his capabilities that he was chosen for some of the more dangerous missions,’ says Tony. ‘In one way, his success was his downfall — but I know I can’t think like that.’

‘At the end of the day, it’s what he wanted to do from the word go. He didn’t want to kill - people but the Army was his life.’

Sacrifice is etched into Woodgate family history. Jo's great-grandfather, Tom Elly, was a Lance Sergeant with the Lancashire Fusiliers who fought during World War I and was killed

at the age of 30 in August 1917 at Passchendaele in Belgium. Jo's grandmother, Lottie, served as a Wren during the Second World War.

Signs that Jo wanted to follow in their footsteps were there from the earliest days of his childhood, growing up with his older sister Amy on the family's beef and arable farm in Chelsworth in Suffolk.

'Jo hated mud so he was never going to be a farmer,' says Tony, who now works as an equestrian surfer — constructing and maintaining riding surfaces. He and Jo's mother Susan separated over a decade ago and have both since remarried.

He recalls how, as a boy, Jo liked to dress up in camouflage gear and leap out of trees and hedges at unsuspecting hikers who walked across the family's land near Bury St Edmunds.

'But he could also be very quiet, very insular,' adds Tony. 'There weren't a lot of other boys to play with out where we were living.'

Jo was also a fanatical collector of miniature Warlord military figurines and spent hours in his bedroom painting them in historically accurate colours.

'They were absolutely pristine. His eye for detail was unbelievable. He was a brilliant little artist. He used to draw cartoons as well.'



Line of fire: British soldiers on the alert in Afghanistan

They were skills which in later life would prove to be invaluable during reconnaissance missions when Jo would sketch unfamiliar territory in perfect detail for his commanding officers.

His decision to join the Army after leaving Great Cornard Upper School, near Sudbury, was always his own. 'He came up to me one day and asked me to take him to the Army careers office,' says Tony. 'He was only 16 and quite a chunky lad and they told him to lose some weight and get fit and come back.'

‘I think it was their way of testing to see if someone so young was really determined and focused. They didn’t want to waste their money training someone who wasn’t going to stick at it.’

But within three months, Jo, says his father, was fit and ‘as skinny as a rake’. On his second visit to the Army careers centre, the eager teenager was signed up on the spot and sent off to the Army Foundation College in Harrogate, North Yorkshire. It was the first half of 2001 and 9/11 and war in Iraq and Afghanistan lay just around the corner.

‘We couldn’t see what the future held,’ says Tony, ‘but it wouldn’t have made a difference. Jo knew what he wanted to do and nothing I could have said would have changed his mind.’



Soldiers march on Remembrance Day in Wootton Bassett High street, Wiltshire that has seen many funeral processions

At the end of his training period in Harrogate, Jo’s request to join the Household Cavalry with the Blues and Royals Regiment was accepted. He was based at Combermere Barracks in Windsor, Berks, where he quickly rose through the ranks from Trooper to Lance Corporal and then Lance Corporal of Horse.

Before long, he was sent out to Iraq on the first of four tours of duty, driving a Scimitar armoured reconnaissance vehicle into unknown and often dangerous terrain.

‘I was scared for him,’ admits Tony, ‘but you have to put it out of your mind. It was what he wanted to do and I had to keep reminding myself of that. This is the life of a soldier. This is what he wanted.’

Two early brushes with death did nothing to deter Jo from the path he had chosen at such a young age.



The first, in March 2003, was the highly controversial friendly-fire incident involving two US air force A-10 Thunderbolt II jets which strafed a convoy of Scimitars 25 miles north of Basra.

Jo, who was driving one of the vehicles, walked away with holes in his bullet-proof vest but he was sitting just behind his close friend, Lance Corporal of Horse Matthew Hull, who died as a result of the attack.

‘He saw his friend killed in front of his eyes,’ says Tony. ‘His mother and I were worried that seeing his friend die might have screwed his head up. But he just shook it off. He could have come home at that point but his mates were there. He wouldn’t leave them behind.’

Jo escaped death a second time on his first tour in Afghanistan in 2006 when the Land Rover in which he was travelling drove over a mine which exploded. ‘So he got blown up a second time,’ says his father.

‘But he just got on with it. The younger lads respected him because he was so cool about things. He never moaned about anything, not even the lack of decent equipment.’

Instead, Jo made up the shortfall with items from an army surplus store near Ipswich, buying a light-weight Kevlar helmet instead of the heavy metal one he’d been given and a pair of camouflage desert boots to replace his highly visible black pair.

He returned to Afghanistan last year on what was his fourth and last tour of duty. ‘I told him to keep his head down,’ says Tony.

‘He did say: “Maybe I’m pushing my luck this time. I’ll have to be more careful.”’ Perhaps the greatest irony of all is that Jo was within half an hour of beginning the long journey home when he was killed.

He was on the second day of a two-day reconnaissance mission, patrolling a village in Sangin in Helmand province, when he and his comrades came under small arms fire.

His first thought was for the group of children who had been following them and he moved to get them out of the way.

Later, it transpired that one of the children had used a mirror to reflect the sun in what in all likelihood was a signal to the enemy. Moments later, a grenade was thrown over the wall behind which Jo and his comrades were sheltering.

‘I thought I was dreaming when I heard he’d been killed,’ says Tony. ‘My head was spinning. Then the shock set in. His mother was distraught. Words can’t describe the pain of losing him. I think I actually thought he was invincible.’

That thought was brutally and finally dispelled by the sight of his son’s coffin arriving on the tarmac at RAF Lyneham two days later.

Jo was later buried with full military honours at a funeral held on St George’s Day in The Church of St Peter and St Paul in the medieval Suffolk village of Lavenham.

‘Jo saw more than I have done in my whole lifetime,’ says Tony. ‘He gave his life willingly. He made the ultimate sacrifice. The way he lived his life and lost it — it’s utterly humbling.’