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## Family members of slain Canadian soldier want public to share their grief

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By Bill Graveland, The Canadian Press

CALGARY - It's something all military families dread but are forced to discuss when a soldier is deployed overseas - the possibility that a loved one won't come home.

There are always reassurances and a certain level of confidence that everything will work out for the best. For Cpl. Mike Starker, that didn't happen.

"I think that's probably a conversation every spouse has with their significant other who goes over," said Nicole Starker, 35, who met with reporters for the first time Tuesday since her husband's death earlier this month.

"In his true fashion he said 'nothing is going to happen to me, there's nothing to worry about' and honestly I believed it," she said quietly. "I just honestly thought he was too good a guy for anything really to happen to him."

Starker, 36, was a reservist medic with Edmonton's 15th Field Ambulance unit and a former member of the Canadian Airborne Regiment.

He was killed May 6 during an ambush west of Kandahar city in Afghanistan, the 83rd Canadian soldier killed since 2002.

"He was really excited to be there and I know he was working with a great group there. He didn't brag about the fact he was going. He wouldn't tell them he was going unless they asked him straight out," said Starker, who still supports the mission despite her loss.

"What happened to Mike hasn't changed that for me. I think there are a lot of times when people can't see a connection between what we're doing there and what it means for us here," she said. "I think sometimes we don't see that connection every day and obviously now I will."

A public funeral will be held Friday in Calgary. Because of his ties to the city as a paramedic, the funeral will be a "hybrid affair," as described by one military official. Starker will be transported from city hall to the Calgary Roundup Centre in the back of an ambulance.

It was important for the event to be public, say his family, so all Canadians can share in their loss. But they also acknowledge he would be uncomfortable with all the fuss.

"I think he would be laughing his ass off right now, saying, 'I don't know why you guys are making such a big deal of this'," said his sister, Carolyn Straub, laughing.

"He'd be uncomfortable," Nicole Starker agreed. "On the other hand, had this been one of his buddies instead of him, he would have said they absolutely deserve it, every bit of attention they're getting."

It was Starker's second tour in Afghanistan.

The two women refused to dwell on their loss, saying they want to think only about happy memories. Straub admitted it had been difficult because they come from a "small family" and it has been a devastating time for her parents.

Starker said she is being bolstered from support from family, friends and the well wishes of Canadians.

There were no tears during the half-hour interview, but Starker did come close when asked if there would be a sense of relief once the funeral is over.

"I would say yes, because this is a stressful and emotional time," she sighed. "But no, because I don't ever want to say goodbye."

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