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Jan 5, 2009 9:00 pm US/Eastern

Funeral Held For Phila. Surgeon Killed In Iraq

PHILADELPHIA (AP) — In every one of his many roles — husband, father, soldier, doctor, friend and colleague — Army Maj. John P. Pryor devoted his life to serve others at home, at work and in war.

"All we can do is what we think is the right thing to do," the Rev. Damian J. McElroy told more than 1,000 mourners during Pryor's funeral Mass on Monday at the Cathedral Basilica of Saints Peter and Paul. "He served humanity generously. He served God generously."

Pryor, head of the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania trauma team and a major in the Army Reserve, died Christmas Day when a mortar round struck near his living quarters in Mosul, Iraq.

The 42-year-old married father of three from Moorestown, N.J., arrived in Iraq on Dec. 6 to serve his second tour of duty with the Army reserves as a combat medic.

He received his medical school training at the State University of New York at Buffalo and arrived in 1999 at the University of Pennsylvania, where he received training in trauma surgery and critical care and became director of the Penn's trauma program.

"Every one of his patients got the best care and his full commitment," said Dr. Elizabeth Dattner, medical director of Penn's department of emergency medicine.

"You would expect that any medical provider would have a dedication to their patients, but it can be hard to sustain in a field where you see trauma over and over again and real heartache and misery," she said. "People wanted to emulate John's commitment to patients. He elevated everyone."

Pryor was described by his colleagues, friends and relatives as a doting father and devoted husband.

"John loved his family, he loved his children. He lived and breathed for them," McElroy, Pryor's pastor at Our Lady of Good Counsel in Moorestown, N.J., said in his homily.

McElroy read parts of a letter Pryor wrote and left with family in the event of his death in Iraq.

Acknowledging that some people closest to him did not support his decision to go to Iraq, Pryor wrote that he "hopes and prays for forgiveness from his family and colleagues."

Rushing to New York after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks and refusing to sit idly in a room with hundreds of other doctors awaiting instruction, Pryor "went out to the street, flagged down an ambulance and went to ground zero," McElroy said.

He enlisted in the Army reserves after 9/11, not only completing the required training but



Dr. John P. Pryor (file)
University of Pennsylvania

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also taking it upon himself to learn Arabic, McElroy said.

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Pryor was serving his second tour with a forward surgical team with the Army's 1st Medical Detachment, based in Fort Totten, N.Y. His first four-month tour was at a combat support hospital in 2006 at Abu Ghraib.

As chief medical adviser to the Red Cross of Southeastern Pennsylvania, Dr. Pryor conducted disaster-relief training for volunteers. In those lectures, he drew parallels between the injuries soldiers experience on the battlefield and the injuries to shooting victims brought to Philadelphia emergency rooms.

A talented writer, Dr. Pryor contributed opinion articles to The Philadelphia Inquirer and The Washington Post, and was interviewed repeatedly by NPR and ABC News.

In a June 2006 column in the Inquirer, Pryor wrote of the personal sense of loss and the intolerable grief that came with every soldier he couldn't save.

He described the death of one young Marine on his operating room table and expressed his sorrow to the family of the soldier, whom he did not identify. Pryor's words about the Marine echo those spoken about him in the days following his death.

"We, more than almost anyone else, know he was a true American hero," Pryor wrote to the soldier's family. "I also want you to know that I will never forget your son, and that I will pray for him and all of the children lost in this war."

Pryor is survived by his wife, Carmela Calvo, a pediatrician at St. Christopher's Hospital for Children; a daughter, Danielle, 10; sons Francis, 8, and John Jr., 4; a brother, Richard; and his parents, Richard C. and Victoria.

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