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## Reservist surgeon killed by mortar

A 1984 Shenendehowa High School graduate who was deployed as a combat surgeon in Iraq dies in a Christmas Day shelling

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John Pryor would call home every morning. On Christmas, no call came.

His wife checked CNN. Dr. Pryor was deployed as a combat surgeon in Iraq, and the network was reporting a casualty in Mosul.

"She naturally assumed that my brother was treating this casualty," said Pryor's younger brother, Richard, of Delmar. "It turned out he was the casualty."

John P. Pryor of New Jersey died Thursday in Mosul of wounds suffered when a mortar hit near his living quarters. The 42-year-old had attended a midnight Mass before his death, his brother said.

The blast ended a daring and distinguished medical career that took root in the classrooms, ambulances and Boy Scout gatherings of Pryor's youth in Clifton Park.

The 1984 Shenendehowa High School graduate rose to become director of the University of Pennsylvania's well-regarded trauma program. He described his experiences to a national audience in essays and interviews for media outlets like the Washington Post and NPR, where the decorated Army Reserve major drew links between the urban violence of Philadelphia and the war in Iraq. He was assigned to the 1st Medical Detachment, Forward Surgical Team, based at Fort Totten, Queens.

The longtime member of Boy Scout Troop 30 began caring for the sick and injured at an early age. He got his CPR certification at 14 and joined the Clifton Park-Halfmoon Ambulance Corps at 17. His brother, today an emergency physician at Ellis Hospital, recalled the many volunteer hours John Pryor spent responding to late-night pages, driving to the station to help strangers in distress.

His friends enjoyed hanging out on Caroline Street in Saratoga Springs. But a close high school buddy, Christopher Sheridan, said Pryor would blow them off to ride the ambulance.

"I would have to say it was a fair certainty John knew he wanted to be a surgeon by the time he was a junior in high school," said Sheridan, 43, now a civil engineer in Rochester.

At the age of 39, with young children, Pryor joined the Army Reserve. He volunteered for Operation Iraqi Freedom.

His family was against it, especially the second time he left for Iraq, a deployment that came after his wife had survived and recovered from a brutal car accident that left her near death.

"She didn't want him to go," said Richard Pryor, 41. "I didn't want him to go. Nobody in our family wanted him to go. The risks weren't worth it. He was driven by some sort of duty and honor and need to help other people that we didn't understand."

Pryor grappled with that tension in his obituary — a document that, preparing for the worst, Pryor drafted himself before deploying to Iraq. (He also put together a CD of music for a funeral, picked out a casket and spoke with the funeral director, his brother said.)

Writing of himself in the third person, Pryor described how as a citizen and surgeon he "felt very strongly about his duty to serve, especially during wartime," according to a copy of the obituary that Richard Pryor gave the Times Union.

"His decision was not supported by those close to him, and it was emotionally very challenging to balance his dedication to his duty and hurting those he loved," John Pryor wrote of himself. "He hopes and prays for forgiveness from his family and colleagues."

Pryor had shown the same dedication to service on Sept. 11. When the first tower fell, he threw surgical supplies in the car and sped to New York. He got through the Holland Tunnel by flashing his hospital badge.

He found himself at St. Vincent's doing nothing, his brother said, so he hitched a ride on an ambulance and got to the pile.

Pryor was born in Mount Vernon. He moved to Clifton Park with his family at the age of 8. In high school, he played football under Brent Stuerwald until graduation. He majored in biochemistry at SUNY Binghamton, where he pledged the Sigma Nu fraternity, played club lacrosse and chaired the College Republicans.

He came back to Albany in 1989 to work as director of the Albany Medical Center remote central monitoring station. He finished medical school at SUNY-Buffalo in 1994.

He is survived by his wife, Carmela Calvo; a daughter, Danielle, 10; and two sons, Frankie, 8, and John Jr., 4.

Funeral arrangements were still in flux late Saturday. A memorial is expected to be held in Clifton Park at some point, Richard Pryor said.

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