

# **Fort Taber – Fort Rodman Flag Honors New Bedford's PFC Justin C. Kirby**

During the month of March, the 31st Lights for Peace flag to fly at the Fort Taber – Fort Rodman Military Museum honors the memory of PFC Justin Candido Kirby, a New Bedford native who was killed at the age of 21, two years ago, on March 9, 2020, in a training exercise at the Fort Irwin National Training Center in CA.

Justin was born on April 13, 1998, in Brockton, MA, the son of Robert J. Kirby and Patricia (Cox) Kirby, both of New Bedford. He attended the Global Learning Charter Public School in New Bedford from 5th to 12th grade, graduating in 2016. Principal Lena Pires recalled “the amazing growth that that young man experienced, and I don’t think it was just our school, it was his own amazing growth.” She had seen him while he was on a break from training. “My last memory is of him happy, healthy, talking with a sparkle in his eye about what he’s doing in the military.” She could tell he was living his passion.

He graduated from Bristol Community College in Dec. 2018 with honors, earning an Associate Degree in Fire Science and successfully completing the Emergency Medical Technician program. According to his family, it was his intention to serve in the military and eventually become a firefighter. He had already committed to serving in the military for an additional 4 years.

PFC Kirby enlisted in the United States Army in January 2019 and completed Basic Training at Fort Jackson, SC. Upon completion, he attended Advanced Individual Training (AIT) and graduated as a Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear Specialist from Fort Leonard Wood, MO.

While participating in Basic Training, Justin shared his experience with his family through letters. On January 20, 2019, he wrote, "I'm slowly losing touch with the civilian style of life, and I am adjusting well to the soldier lifestyle. The days are pretty long so it feels as if I've been gone a lot longer than I have been." Then nearly two months later, on March 18th, Justin wrote about his excitement about becoming an Army soldier. "As of yesterday, I'm officially a soldier. We completed the forge which forged us into soldiers. We stayed in the woods for 3 nights and four days. It poured nearly the entire time and was freezing. We are given a small tarp and some rope and 3 stakes and just kind of make a canopy on a tree for shelter. We marched a total of 50 miles in those 4 days, going from location to location with our gear." He was excited to have completed the training and was proud of his accomplishment.

PFC Kirby then moved to Fort Benning, GA in June 2019 to participate in the Ranger Assessment and Selection Program. In September 2019, he moved to Fort Irwin, CA where he was assigned to the Regimental Headquarters and Headquarters Troop (RHHT), Regimental Support Squadron (RSS), 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment (ACR) as a member of the Regiments' Smoke Platoon.

According to Fort Irwin, as a member of the Smoke Platoon, PFC Kirby participated in nine obscuration missions in support of the Brigade Tactical Group during three Decisive Action rotations at the National Training Center. He enabled Smoke Platoon to achieve 100% on their Platoon Mission Essential Tasks external evaluation during Rotation 20-01 He also led training for over eighty 2916th Aviation Battalion Soldiers in November 2019 which enabled them to become proficient at CBRN-related tasks and gain confidence in their equipment.

Kirby was taking part in a "large-scale" exercise within the center's training grounds at the time of his death. Conducting combat maneuver operations in an M1113 High Mobility

Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle, known as a Humvee, when a "vehicle accident occurred. Col. Scott Woodward, 68th Colonel of the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, said Kirby was well known across the regiment and "his passing has deeply affected us all."

Jason Miller, from Fort Irwin's Public Affairs office, told the California Daily Press that the military exercise involved approx. 7,500 soldiers who were in the center's training area at the time of the accident. "This number includes personnel from the National Training Center as well as approx. 5,000 soldiers who (were there) for training." The National Training center conducts 10 training rotations annually, training Brigade Combat Teams to build and sustain readiness to fight and win." The soldiers were conducting what Miller described as "realistic training reflective of the complexities our nation could face in combat."

A former Global Learning classmate of Kirby's, Eric Santos, explained "It was always his dream to serve his country." He had plans of serving in the Army and then becoming a firefighter. "Justin Kirby is a role model to many, including myself, and a truly exceptional human being." Santos said "he had a very bright future ahead of him, and at the very least he died doing what he loved. I remember him as a great friend, a great warrior and a hero."

During his high school and college years, he worked at Pa Raffa's, his family's restaurant, where he was well known. Justin was also an Instructor at the Community Boating Center, located at the Fort Taber-Fort Rodman Park, where he had taken lessons as a kid. Justin also enjoyed wrestling and boxing. He had a love of music and attended many concerts over the years, including a KISS concert which he recalled in one of his letters to his dad while attending Basic Training.

New Bedford Mayor, Jon Mitchell, ordered flags at city buildings flown at half-staff after Kirby's passing. "Justin's

service to our nation reflected his deep commitment to a cause larger than himself and the values of his family of public servants," Mitchell said in a statement. "It is my hope that the gratitude and reverence of our city for Justin's dedication and patriotism may bring some measure of comfort to Justin's family as they mourn his sudden loss."

Justin's father and twin brother are both in public service, with his dad, Robert Kirby, working as a New Bedford firefighter and Justin's brother, Jason, working as a full-time firefighter/paramedic for the town of Lakeville and a part-time paramedic for the city of New Bedford. Jason's older brother, Richard, also known as "Ricky," is employed as a Project Manager for a security company in Plymouth, MA.

According to his mother, Justin's Readiness NCO, SFC Jason Boyd, from Camp Edwards said, "he couldn't believe he accomplished so much in his short career with the Army." PFC Justin Kirby was awarded the Army Commendation Medal, the National Defense Service Ribbon, the Army Service Ribbon and the Battalion Commander and Sergeant Major's coin for excellence.

Tricia, his mom, explained that Justin's death happened right at the beginning of COVID, when things were shut down. However, she was "overwhelmed with gratitude for the love and grace everyone bestowed upon Justin. I didn't know how everyone knew but they were all there to honor him, even in dark times." From the moment they left Rock Funeral home, on their way to Logan Airport, she was struck by the support of complete strangers. "All of the people on the plane remained (in their seats) until he was released and welcomed home by his family." She goes on to explain that she remembers "Justin and (our) family being honored at every overpass by firefighters, first responders and police! I saw a WWII veteran standing and saluting at the bottom of an exit ramp. All the way home this continued. I'll remember that day all the days of my life." She said it was wonderful to see the

scores of people lined up along Acushnet Avenue, as well as outside Pa Raffa's, his former workplace, and along the Sacred Heart Cemetery to pay their respects.

Justin's dad explained that the day they brought Justin home after his passing was the "Best-Worse day ever." He remembers the amazing tribute Justin received on the car ride from Boston to New Bedford, bringing Justin's remains home. He was struck by the display of support which included shutting down the highway along the route. Each overpass along the way was filled with local firefighters, EMS personnel and police officers paying tribute. "There was one ladder truck with 3 firefighters standing at different levels on the ladder, saluting Justin as we drove by. We can't thank them enough for their support. It really meant a lot."

Justin is survived by his mother, Patricia (Cox) Kirby of New Bedford, his father, Robert J. Kirby and his wife Dawn of New Bedford, his twin brother, Jason D. Kirby of New Bedford, his older brother, Richard A. Kirby of S. Dartmouth, a sister Angela Russano and several aunts, uncles and cousins. He was predeceased by his paternal grandparents William F. and Georgette M. Kirby and his maternal grandmother Cecelia A. Cox.

Linda Ferreira, of **Empire Ford of New Bedford**, researches the life histories of area residents. American flags are provided by Empire Ford of New Bedford. Flags are raised by the staff at Fort Taber – Fort Rodman Military Museum. Those who would like to honor a local veteran in the future can contact Ferreira at [lferreira@buyempireautogroup.com](mailto:lferreira@buyempireautogroup.com).