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Returned sailor killed flying to see his family

By KATE SHEEHY

U.S. Navy sailor Ruben Rodriguez returned home Sunday after a dangerous seven-month stint in the war zone in Afghanistan — only to die the next day in the Rockaways air crash.

The 32-year-old petty officer spent his last day alive visiting his parents and siblings in Brooklyn before boarding doomed American Airlines Flight 587 to be reunited with his wife and three young sons, who were vacationing in the Dominican Republic.

That day, he also took time for something else: to make an emotional pilgrimage to ground zero.

"He said, 'I have to see it. I have to see what I'm fighting for,'" said Rodriguez's shattered brother, Felipe, 33.

"We walked down the stretch of Broadway. He was very happy to be there. He wanted to take pictures because his friends on the ship wanted to see it."

Felipe said his brother had just returned to Norfolk, Va., with his ship, the aircraft carrier USS Enterprise, over the weekend for a roughly two-week layover before heading back to the Persian Gulf.

A sister drove to Norfolk to pick Ruben up and bring him back to New York for the day. Ruben was then to fly from Kennedy Airport to the Dominican Republic the next morning to begin a brief vacation with his wife and sons, ages 7 months and 3 and 4 years.

It was Felipe who drove him to the airport at 6 o'clock to catch his flight.

"He was so happy he was going to see his family, his sons, after being so long overseas," Felipe said.

Felipe said the extremely close pair talked about many things, including Ruben's time aboard ship.

"He said he went up to the deck one time and 'dedicated' a bomb, writing on it, 'This is for New York City,'" Felipe said.

"He survived Bosnia, he survived Haiti and Somalia and Afghanistan," he said. "I'm sure he thought he could survive" a routine commercial flight to the Dominican Republic.

Felipe said he is now trying to bring his brother's family back to New York as soon as today.

"My brother's 3-year-old son keeps saying to his mother, 'When's Daddy coming? Where's Daddy?'" Felipe said.

He admitted that he's had to let another brother talk to their now-widowed sister-in-law to arrange her flight back because, quite simply, he isn't sure he could handle the sorrow of hearing her voice.

She and the boys had been living with Felipe and his family in Bushwick for the past five months, awaiting her husband's return.

Ruben had only a few weeks with his newborn son before shipping out, Felipe said.

"There is only a certain amount of things I can handle. I can only hold so much pain," Felipe explained.

He said it is the same for their parents, who are "not good."

Ruben was the youngest of six children who emigrated to Williamsburg in Brooklyn from the Dominican Republic in 1987 to begin new lives.

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