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Pride and grief of pilot's family. Dead soldier's father tells of two telephone calls that brought first joy and then agony.

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THE distraught father of the pilot of an Army Lynx helicopter who died along with three other British soldiers when it crashed into the Adriatic Sea off Croatia said yesterday that his family had always feared such a tragedy might occur but were still "utterly devastated".

Corporal Pilot Ian Macdonald, 29, whose parents live at Appin in Argyll, was named as one of the victims when the helicopter from 3 Regiment Army Air Corps ditched into the sea on a regular training flight on Sunday.

Yesterday his parents, retired Metropolitan policeman Derek Macdonald, 58, and his wife Josephine, 53, were being comforted by relatives and friends at their home overlooking Shuna Island, Loch Linnhe, after learning of their son's death from his 30-year-old widow.

Speaking as arrangements were being made to bring home the bodies of the dead soldiers, Mr Macdonald told how two telephone calls within weeks of each other brought great pride and grief to his family.

One was to say their son had at last been awarded his sergeant's stripe; the other meant he would never wear it. He had received his navigator's ring five years ago and his pilot's two years later.

Mr MacDonald said: "He got the award for being the most improved pilot on the course, near Andover, and we were told just recently he was to be made up to sergeant. We were very proud but now we will never see it."

He added: "I think obviously all parents, when their sons are in an active duty environment like Northern Ireland and Bosnia, fear the worst but we are still utterly devastated and very distraught by the news."

Ian Macdonald had been married for five years. He met his wife, Jeanette, in 1987 when she was a civilian clerk to the forces in Germany. The couple had no children and lived in quarters in Gutersloh, Germany.

Mr MacDonald said: "When she phoned to tell us what had happened, she was beside herself with grief. We are assuming she will return to England to her parents' home in West London.

"We know no more about the crash than we have heard on television or read in the papers. An officer came to see us, but he couldn't tell us much though the indications are that Ian was flying the helicopter though there was a more senior pilot on board."

0 Ian Macdonald had wanted to be a soldier "since he knew such things existed", according to his father, and became a junior leader in the Army Air Corps at 16.

He went into the regulars at 18 and had completed seven years in Germany and nearly three in Northern Ireland.

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He was also in the Falklands and took part in Nato exercises throughout the world before his secondment to the British contingent of the multi-national Rapid Reaction Force.

He was an all-round sportsman and proficient in squash and ski-ing to Army instructor standard.

The family's other son, Douglas, 31, who is in the Metropolitan Police in London, was yesterday travelling north to be with his parents and the local Church of Scotland minister, the Rev Douglas Robertson, was planning to visit them last night.

Mr Robertson, of Appin Parish Church, said yesterday: "This is a small community which has been saddened by several fatal accidents in recent years and I know there will be a lot of concern and support for the family."

The father of one of the other victims of the crash, Air Trooper Roger **Willingale** of 7 Regt, Army Air Corps, said yesterday that he had "got his wings" just weeks before he died and had "the heart of a lion".

His son had done two tours of duty in Northern Ireland and one in Canada, which finished just before the regiment was posted to Croatia.

"He had seen his fair share of action," his father said.

The other casualties were Sergeant Martin Charles Osbourne, 30, of Wattisham, Suffolk, and 20-year-old Air Trooper Graham Shane Witherstone, from Scunthorpe.

The sole survivor of the crash was Air Trooper Ian Brain, 21, from Loughborough, who was with 3 Regt Army Air Corps, said Major Gerry Bartlett of 24 Air Mobile Brigade, based in Ploce, Croatia.

It was believed the bodies of the four soldiers, retrieved from the sea on Sunday and taken to Ploce, would be flown home next week to RAF Brize Norton in Oxfordshire, said Major Bartlett.

A spokesman for the brigade at its base in Colchester said it was "pretty shocked" by Sunday's accident, which happened five miles off the Croatian coast.

It would "continue as normal" despite its first losses since the brigade deployed in Croatia a month ago.

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