

SFC Paul Ray Smith
“A Tribute to an American Hero”

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We watch the news stories about corrupt cops, athletes that inject steroids and crooked politicians. My heroes don't play professional sports nor are they elected political officials; they are standing in front of me today. They are America's finest men and women honorably serving their country and most certainly, Sergeant First Class Paul Ray Smith is one of my heroes.

Originally from El Paso Texas, Paul Smith was raised in Tampa, Florida. He was one of three children raised solely by his mother. She worked two jobs to support the family and provided an honest living. Paul enjoyed sports, liked cats, skateboarding, riding bicycles, and playing pranks with friends and his younger sister Lisa. He liked to play football and compared it with teamwork in the military. Paul was neither much of an athlete nor student in high school. He studied woodworking and upon graduation at Tampa Bay Technical High School, he lived from paycheck to paycheck as a carpenter.

Paul Smith enlisted in the Army in October 1989 as a Combat Engineer and began his life long dream as an American Soldier. He married his wife Birgit, had two children and loved leading American Soldiers. He served in Bamberg, Schwienfurt, Fort Riley, Fort Benning and Fort Stewart. Smith held many leadership positions, but found platoon sergeant the most satisfying. He trained his Soldiers to standard and took his job serious.

According to his Paul's sister, "he had an incredible love for the troops under his command. One Christmas, the wife of a Soldier in Paul's platoon had just had surgery and the Soldier and his wife were unable to provide Christmas for their family. So, Paul collected food from the company Christmas party, and he and his wife Birget bought presents for the children, and they took them to the Soldiers home" (Internet 1).

Prior to departing to Iraq for the second time (Operation Desert Shield and Storm veteran), he wrote a letter to his mother. "I am privileged to be given 25 of the finest American Soldiers

to lead into war and there are two ways to come home, stepping off the plane and being carried off. It doesn't matter how I come home because I am prepared to give all that I am to ensure that all my boy's make it home" (Lardner). Sergeant Smith understood his role as a leader. He lived by Army ethics and values. Although not a popular leader with his Soldiers, Paul understood the importance of a disciplined platoon. He had once told his wife that all of his Soldiers hated him, but Sergeant Smith continued to enforce standards, like all good leaders. He knew that his Soldiers would understand why he was so hard on them some day. He would often "chew out" Soldiers with dirty weapons or ones that didn't take their job seriously. Little did they know, they would soon be tested in war.

On April 4, 2003, 1st Brigade Combat Team (BCT) of the 3rd (Marne) Infantry Division mission was to secure objective Lions, Saddam (Baghdad) International Airport. SFC Smith volunteered to punch a hole in the perimeter wall to create a holding area for captured enemy combatants. The only action the engineers had experienced was blowing up enemy ammo dumps.

At this point in the war, Soldiers had spent weeks without a shower or decent food, battled sand storms, and was exhausted with little or no sleep. The morale of the Marne Soldiers was rather upbeat because they thought once Baghdad and the airport was secured, the war would end and America's war hero's could return back home to their loved ones. Some Soldiers even started lighting premature traditional victory cigars.

Before Smith and his men could begin constructing the pen, armed enemy combatants, identified as Saddam's highly trained Republican Guard, were observed assembling and starting to approach the airport, carrying Rocket Propelled Grenades (RPG), AK 47's, and Soviet assault

rifles. Initially it seemed like there were only a few, but the numbers quickly exceeded one hundred of the highly trained enemy soldiers.

Sergeant Henry, a squad leader in the platoon stated “I wanted to start kicking some ass right then and there, but SFC Smith told us to wait” (Blankenship 1). SFC Smith instructed his Soldiers not to make contact with the unit of Iraqi Soldiers, fear that their numbers and weapons exceeded that of the engineers. SFC Smith immediately called for a Bradley Infantry Fighting Vehicle for reinforcement in case the enemy combatants identified the engineers and engaged. Rather than withdrawing his Soldiers from the objective, Sergeant Smith’s platoon defended the objective with anti-tank weapons, grenades and individual weapons. The Americans took casualties immediately from exploding motor rounds that sent shrapnel everywhere. By the time the Bradley fighting vehicle arrived, the engineers were heavily engaged with the enemy. Although the defenders were out-numbered initially, the newly arrived Bradley increased the lethality of the American’s and the odds shifted in their favor. The Infantry vehicle successfully engaged the enemy but sustained damage from a RPG round and was running low with ammunition. At one point, Smith exposed himself to hurl a grenade over the wall to engage the enemy as they prepared to attack.

Unexpectedly, the Bradley withdrew from the engagement of the enemy to re-load without any warning and resulting in leaving the engineers vulnerable again. “Everybody was like, “What the hell?” said Cpl. Daniel Medrano. “We felt like we got left out there alone” (Cavallaro and Cox 1). Once again, the advantage had changed back to favoring the Republican Guard Soldiers.

Smith ordered a M113 Armored Personnel Carrier (APC) with an attached supply trailer up to the vacant battle position of the Bradley. SFC Smith jumped into the APC and manned the

50-caliber machine gun while his driver continued to provide ammunition. He fired over 300 rounds and killed over 50 Iraqi Soldiers. This incredibly brave action provided cover to evacuate his wounded Soldiers. Smith's ceramic breastplate, inside his flack vest for protection, was shattered as he was hit with enemy automatic fire. The battle lasted over 90 minutes. Sergeant Smith's men eventually held off the attack, but at a heavy cost. When the smoke cleared, Soldiers discovered that their platoon sergeant had been fatally struck in the head by enemy fire. Medics worked for over 30 minutes on Sergeant Smith but his life could not be saved. Their leader, SFC Paul Smith, was dead at the age of 33. He was the only American Soldier killed in this battle. He was credited with saving over 100 American Soldiers. Now his Soldiers understood why their platoon sergeant had pushed them so hard in training, to ensure that they would survive and return home to their families.

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His actions were no surprise to the Soldiers who knew him. His battalion commander, LTC Thomas Smith (no relations), said this about his fallen Soldier, "This is a guy whose whole life experience seemed building toward putting him in position where he could do something like this" (Leary 2).

For his actions, exactly two years after SFC Smith's brave event, President George W. Bush presented the Medal of Honor to Paul Smith's son David, 11, daughter Jessica 18 and wife Brigit in the White House. "Sergeant Smith's leadership saved the men in the courtyard, and he prevented an enemy attack on the aid station and Task Force Tactical Operational Center just up the road" (Lardner 2), the President told the crowd. The audience included civilian and uniformed leaders of the military as well as Soldiers from Smith's unit. "We count ourselves

blessed to have Soldiers like SFC Smith, who put their lives on the line to advance the cause of freedom and protect the American people” (Lardner).

SFC Paul Smith was the first Medal of Honor recipient since MSG Gordon and SFC Shugart received the nation’s highest award for their actions in battle of Mogadishu, Somalia, on October 3, 1993. Of all of the servicemen who served in Operation Iraqi Freedom the past 3 years, Paul Ray Smith is the only one nominated and awarded the Medal of Honor, the nation’s highest award for bravery.

In conclusion, Sergeant First Class Smith displayed the morale courage to train his Soldiers to standard and is a fine example for all leaders to emulate. He understood the

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sacrifices and the responsibility of leading Soldiers in combat. He knew that men will be more willing follow a superior who exposes himself to danger, shares their hardships, and shows concern for their welfare (Blankenship).” On April 4th, 2003, SFC Paul Smith did all of those things.

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