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MEMORIAL DAY 2017

SPRINGFIELD HONORS ARMY SPC. MICHAEL J. SMITH, ITS ONLY SON LOST IN IRAQ

THE FACE OF SACRIFICE

MICHAEL J. SMITH
1980-2005

PAGES 4-5

SUBMITTED PHOTO

MEMORIAL DAY 2017

Honoring a man who embodied 'courage'



PETE BANNAN — DIGITAL FIRST MEDIA

Springfield American Legion Post 227 Commander Rocco Polidoro and Jim Warrington place a wreath at the Springfield Memorial Park memorial. Warrington's half-brother, U.S. Army Specialist Michael J. Smith, was killed in action in Iraq in 2005.



ROSE QUINN — DIGITAL FIRST MEDIA

Michael J. Smith's father, James Smith, stands in front of his son's memorial plaque at the Springfield Township Building.



PETE BANNAN — DIGITAL FIRST MEDIA

Members of American Legion Post 227 honor guard stand at attention during playing of Taps at the Springfield Memorial Park Memorial Day ceremony.



In Loving Memory of
Specialist Michael J. Smith

October 13, 1980

Michael J. Smith's memorial card.



Michael J. Smith's Little League baseball card.

Springfield's Memorial Day events dedicated to Michael J. Smith, its only son lost in the Middle East

By Rose Quinn

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SPRINGFIELD » When Army Spc. Michael J. Smith was killed in action in Iraq in 2005, his squad leader heard the rocket-propelled grenade explode from a block away where he'd been talking to a group of children.

"They have called this a three-block war," Staff Sgt. John R. Ivie wrote in a letter to Smith's father a dozen years ago. "On one block you can be handing out candy to a bunch of kids, two blocks

down talking to the man of a local house about different projects we can do for the neighborhood, but in the middle be taking contact from the enemy. That is definitely what happened on Jan. 11."

James Smith of Port Charlotte, Fla., couldn't be more proud of his son, a member of the Army's 1st Battalion, 503rd Infantry, 2nd Infantry Division and recipient of both the Bronze Star and Purple Heart. Still, it's as hard for the widower today to talk about the details of the loss of his only child, or to re-read old military correspondence like Ivie's letter, as it

was in 2005. Michael, who lived in Springfield and Upper Providence, was 13 when he lost his mother, Nancy, to cancer.

"It opens all the old wounds," his father said.

'The words just don't exist'

When he died, Michael left his devoted family and friends with a trove of memories, every one now a treasure.

Whether it was riding his Big Wheel as young boy, the countless lunches at his favorite — Charlie's Hamburgers — with his aunt or playing with his heavy metal/

Goth/punk band in high school, Smith had a spirit for life all his own. He liked skateboards, video games and exploring the beach in Ocean City, N.J. He was funny, easy going and, for the most part, always happy. Undoubtedly, his enviably thick strawberry blond hair that he grew to his waist was his trademark — at least until he enlisted.

"I think about him every day ... I miss everything about him," his father said.

"I can smile at the good times, but it is very sad to lose someone

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PETE BANNAN — DIGITAL FIRST MEDIA

Springfield Memorial Day parade and ceremony honored the U.S. Army Specialist Michael J. Smith, killed in action in Iraq in 2005 at the age of 24. Gathered are Col. Rich Debany, U.S. Army, commander DCMA Boeing; Ed Joy, Smith's uncle; Gerry Joy, Smith's aunt; James Smith, Smith's father; Jim Warrington, Smith's half-brother; Sean Warrington, Smith's nephew; Daniel Joy, Smith's uncle; and Col. Justin Gubler, retired, commander of Mike's patrol.

Courage

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that young," his maternal aunt, Gerry Joy of Brookhaven, said. "I miss him. I can't even tell you."

Michael was born prematurely, weighing only about 5 pounds, his aunt said.

"He was so little I washed him in the mashed potato pot," Gerry Joy said. To this day, it's one of her favorite images of her sweet nephew.

"When he died, he was over 6 foot, a far cry from that little baby," she said.

Gerry Joy last saw Michael at her daughter Colleen's wedding. It was the week before Michael's own wedding to a Russian woman, Oxsana, whom he met in Korea, and it's all he talked about at his cousin's reception.

The aunt said Oxsana does not live in the United States and that she and other family members keep in touch with her through Facebook.

In his letter to James Smith, Ivie said he'd only been Michael's squad leader for a month and a half.

"Over the past few days, I have tried to think of what words I can say to make the loss of your

son any easier, but the words just don't exist. He came to our platoon after a car bomb sent 15 of our guys to Baghdad with only six coming back. Your son had only spent minimal time in a line company since arriving in Korea and he was asked to go to a platoon that had just been cut in half and do a job that he hadn't had as much training at as the rest of us in a sector that is very dangerous," the letter reads in part. "In only a matter of weeks he became one of our most trusted guys ... I can definitely say Jan. 11, 2005, about (4:30 p.m.) is a time I will never forget, for your son is the first soldier I have lost."

Memorial Day tribute

On Monday, it was a bitter-sweet reunion for some members of the Smith family as the Springfield American Legion Post 227 honored their fallen hero during a Memorial Day service. Smith is Springfield's only casualty from the Middle East conflicts including Iraq.

James Smith drove in from Florida, where he has resided for the last seven and a half years. Michael's half-brother, retired Sgt. 1st Class James Warrington of the Pennsylvania National Guard, a veteran of Desert Storm and Iraq, came in from Downing-

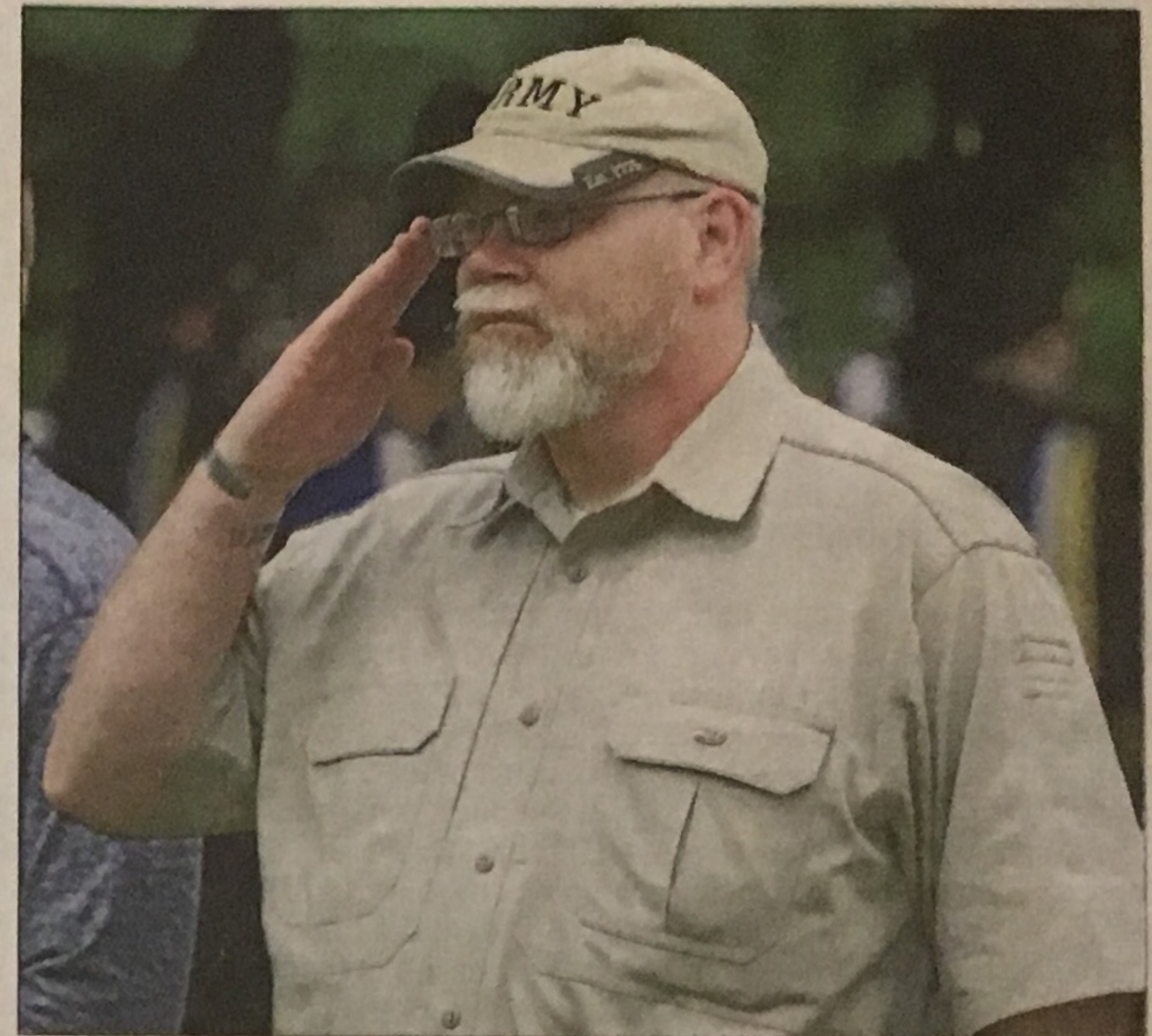
town, and an uncle, retired U.S. Marine Corps Gunnery Sgt. Daniel Joy traveled from Jacksonville, N.C.

They, along with Gerry Joy and several other family members walked in a mile-long parade, led by a Legion color guard and featuring the Springfield High School band and apparatus from the Springfield Fire Co. The parade began at Memorial Park and ended at the township building where Michael Smith's nephew, Sean Warrington, led the Pledge of Allegiance. The ceremony also included a brief prayer by Springfield Baptist Church Pastor Wylie Johnson, a retired Army colonel; the raising of the American flag; and a rendition of the Star Spangled Banner by the band. Taps was played and there was a gun salute.

Among the crowd was a World War I re-enactor. Another spectator was Julia Harvey, Michael's fourth-grade teacher at Scenic Hills Elementary School, who said she had to come to the ceremony.

"I'm very teary thinking about what kind of kid he was, a quiet kid," and in the end, "a hero," Harvey said.

For many, Memorial Day is an unimaginably difficult day, said speaker Army Col. Richard Debany, a Springfield resident who



PETE BANNAN — DIGITAL FIRST MEDIA

Jim Warrington salutes during playing of Taps at the Springfield Memorial Park Memorial Day ceremony.

welcomed all the guests, especially the Smith relatives and other Gold Star families in the audience.

"We're all humbled by your sacrifices and inspired by your resilience," Debany said to the families.

"Today, we recognize the service and sacrifice of nearly 1.2 million people who died protecting our security, our freedom, our ideals and principles, and, at some points in our history, the very existence of our republic," Debany said. "Last year, when I stood on this very spot, I expressed my prayers that today we wouldn't have any new names to honor or new Gold Star families to thank. Alas, it wasn't to be. From Air Force Lt. Anais Tober, 25, from Florida who died July 18, to Navy Senior Chief Petty Officer Kyle Milliken, 38, from Maine who died May 5, 30 in all were added to our hallowed rolls.

"As we cherish and preserve their memory, remember that we are still a nation at war. We mustn't become desensitized to the passing of a single son or daughter even after 16 years of continuous conflict. Know too, that today, more than 186,000 soldiers remain deployed around the world; each just as willing as their forebears to fight and sacrifice to

ensure the freedoms of this great nation and its people," he said.

40 young lives lost

Debany noted that Springfield has "contributed in blood to the cost of our nation's freedom in nearly every war since the Revolution," though the exact number and many of the names before 1941 have been lost to time.

"Since then though, our little community alone has paid the price of 40 young lives, 40 neighbors, 40 sons, 40 families to mourn," he said. "The most recent was Michael J. Smith."

Growing up near the corner of Springfield Road and Norwinden Drive, in addition to Scenic Hills Michael attended E.T. Richardson Middle School. In the spring, he played Little League through the Springfield Athletic Association, "just like lots of kids today," Debany said.

Though Michael dropped out of Springfield High School, he earned his GED in order to enlist. He was 22 years old.

James Smith, an Air Force veteran, was working at the former Best Buy store when Michael appeared to tell him the news.

"He came in and he'd cut his hair," his father said, chuckling at the memory.

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Courage

FROM PAGE 5

He said Michael's long hair went along with his music.

"It was a lot of screaming. But he wasn't bad. I saw him once at a Battle of Bands at Springfield High School. They came in second," the father said. "He had a stage presence."

Though some people had described Michael as having little direction in life, James Smith said he always knew his son would choose his path in his own time.

He's not certain, but the elder Smith suspects "Uncle Danny who was Michael's hero," influenced his son's Army choice.

"His waist-long hair and lifestyle didn't outwardly make him appear destined for the military service, but destined he was," said Debany. "Mike's inspiration to serve may have come from

wanting to emulate the service of his dad, his uncles Ed and Danny, or that of his big brother Jim. Perhaps it was just a desire to live up to his potential, to be a part of something bigger than himself, or to serve his nation and help people around the world."

While some in the family including Warrington were surprised by Michael's decision, Dan Joy wasn't at all surprised.

"I moved away and wasn't around in his late teen years ... It was a shock," said Warrington, 31.

"When I joined the Marine Corps it was sudden and right after Iran took over the embassy in 1979," said 61-year-old Daniel Joy, a survivor of the Beirut barracks bombing by terrorists in October 1983.

Throughout his military career, Daniel Joy said he was stationed all over the world, including Hawaii, Japan, Switzerland, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Afghani-

stan. Wherever he went, he would send his young relatives gifts. For Michael, it was usually a pen knife or some kind of military memorabilia like a lapel pin.

Task Force Rock

After basic and then infantry training at Fort Benning, Ga., Michael Smith was assigned to Headquarters Company of the distinguished 1st Battalion, 503rd Infantry Regiment, the "First Rock" at Camp Casey in South Korea.

"While in Korea, Mike, who came to be known as Smitty, found his calling. The Army was a good fit for Mike and he was a good soldier - popular with his friends and his leadership alike," said Debany.

In August 2004, Michael Smith deployed with the 1-503rd, organized under the name "Task Force Rock" to Iraq. Debany said battalion was quickly moved to Ar-Ramadi and the group had the mission to foster the develop-

ment of a representative local Iraqi government and effective Iraqi security forces.

"At the time, Ramadi was a city seething with insurgents and the Task Force Rock soldiers were targeted daily by deadly small-arms fire, rocket propelled grenades, mortars and improvised explosive devices. The city, at the time, was arguably the most dangerous in Iraq," Debany said.

For retired U.S. Army Col. Justin C. Gubler, his images of Smith date back about 12 years when he was Smith's battalion commander.

"We trained to run the ridge lines of Korea against the North Korean threat. Michael was an enthusiastic and integral part of our team in Korea," said Gubler. Indicative was Smith's selection as the command sergeant major's driver. That was his job when the battalion was given a 45-day notice to deploy to Iraq.

"We were initially committed to preparations for the fight in Al-Fallujah, but pushed to Ar-Ramadi when fighting flared there - the start of a cycle of violence that equaled any in Iraq," Gubler said.

As they shared the city with Marines, Gubler said operations in Ar-Ramadi had three phases: Fighting for control of the city; working to secure the city and enable national elections; and cordoning the city and controlling access.

Over the first three months, Gubler said attacks occurred daily. People who did not evacuate did not go into the street, to work school or the market.

According to Gubler, daily fighting was heaviest in November, and by the time the enemy moved out of the city, "TF Rock" had lost nine soldiers and evacuated 66 wounded. In the months leading up to the Iraqi national elections on Jan. 30, he recalled "TF Rock" conducting patrols to build a relationship with the people, and constructing fortified polling stations.

"To build a positive relationship with the population, we had to treat all Iraqis with dignity and respect. Balancing efforts to selectively kill/capture opposition fighters without alienating the people are tremendously complex and stressful mission conditions," Gubler said. "It was during this critical stage of our mission that we lost Michael and five other 'TF Rock' soldiers."

Gubler said Michael Smith was killed instantly. The company commander maneuvered another platoon and the enemy was cleared.

"The professionalism and restraint our soldiers showed on that day, and subsequently demonstrated to the population of Ar-Ramadi that we were fighting for their security, it made a difference," Gubler said. "When we handed over East Ar-Ramadi to the next unit in August 2005, enemy contact occurred less than once per week. The people felt safer and tolerated or supported 'TF Rock' ... But our most important accomplishment was that we had started a dialogue with the senior tribal sheiks. These talks, combined with much improved condi-

tions in the city, laid the foundation for the Sons of Al Anbar movement, where the majority of resistance fighters switched sides to support coalition forces.

"Although Michael was taken all too early, he was part of our team and shares responsibility for 'TF Rock's' accomplishments in Ar-Ramadi."

If he had to choose a label for Smith, Gubler said it would be courage.

"This is different from bravery ... bravery comes from drill repetition and adrenaline, and can be an automatic response for trained soldiers ... Courage is knowing the danger, fully understanding the risk to life and soldiers' helplessness against chance in battle, yet picking yourself up from fitful quiet and willingly placing yourself in danger over and over and over again because it is your job as an infantryman to seek the enemy wherever he may be," he said.

His son, his hero

"From 365 E. Springfield Road, to Media, to Fort Benning, then to Camp Casey, to Fallujah and then to Ramadi, to finally Section 60 in Arlington National Cemetery, Mike circumnavigated the world in his short life and made a difference to many along the way," said Debany.

James Smith last spoke to his son when he called from Iraq to wish him a happy birthday. It was Jan. 3, 2005.

"We couldn't talk too long. I felt bad about that. We had to hang up abruptly," the father said.

Smith, who was living in Coatesville at the time, will never forget the image of the car and the soldier arriving at his home a week later.

"As soon as I saw him I knew what happened ... I get choked up when I think about it," James Smith said.

"He was a good man. He died a hero," the father said, grateful for the recognition bestowed to his son.

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