

Memorial Day honoring SPC Michael J. Smith, 3/C/1-503rd Inf,

Mr Polidoro, Mr Smith and family members, fellow officers, and members of American Legion Post 227, thank you for allowing me to speak today. It means a great deal to me. My comments will focus on SPC Michael Smith and his unit. COL Debany's eloquence more than sufficed to honor all of our fallen military service members. Please forgive that I will need to read this since my emotions may disrupt my delivery.

Michael Smith, or Smitty as we called him, joined the 1-503rd in Korea. Nicknamed "the Rock," this was an infantry air assault battalion, which means we were carried in helicopters as far as possible, and then we would walk. We trained to run the ridgelines of Korea against the nK threat. Michael was an enthusiastic and integral part of our team in Korea. Of note was his selection as the Command Sergeant Major's driver which he performed in an outstanding manner (always beating out my driver in competition). This was his job when our BCT was given 45 days notice to deploy to Iraq.

Our battalion, the 1-503rd was designated TF Rock. 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. We shared the city with 2/5 Marines, they had the west side, and we the east side. Operations in Ar Ramadi evolved into three distinct phases: in the first, we fought for control of the city; the second we worked to secure the city and enable National elections; and third consisted of efforts to cordon the city and control access. Throughout these phases, TF Rock fought *for* the People of Ar Ramadi – establishing a safe and secure environment and earning their trust and confidence.

The first three months in Ar Ramadi were characterized by multiple fire fights, mortar and rocket attacks each day. People who had not evacuated the city did not go into the street, to work, school, or market. They were scared and refused to talk to or support US forces. There were no ISF; IPs worked w/ the enemy. Electricity was intermittent and there was no running water in half the city. Sewers were clogged and trash was piled everywhere conveniently concealing IEDs.

Daily fighting was heaviest in November, and by the time the enemy moved out of the city, TF Rock had lost 9 Soldiers and evacuated 66 wounded. The next two weeks of quiet, empty streets were eerie. However, People began returning to their homes in the city. After fighting every day, the presence of so many civilians was unsettling.

In the month leading up to the Iraqi National Elections on 30 January, TF Rock conducted patrols to build a relationship with the people and constructed 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. It was during this critical stage of our mission that we lost Michael and five other TF Rock Soldiers.

On the afternoon of 11 January 2005, 3rd Platoon, Charlie Company was on a combat patrol in the Mula'ab district. Michael was a driver of an up-armored High Mobility Multi-purpose Wheeled Vehicle (HMMWV). His platoon was stationary in order for the patrol leaders and interpreter to interact with the local community and discuss the first Iraqi National Election just three weeks away. 3rd Platoon was suddenly engaged with enemy machine gun, rifle, and rocket propelled grenade fire. The patrol returned fire, but the driver's side of Michael's truck was struck by a rocket propelled grenade (RPG). The RPG penetrated the bullet-proof glass window and Michael was killed instantly. CPT Chris Lewis, the company commander, maneuvered another platoon and cleared the enemy. Michael was evacuated to our battalion aid station.

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. 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. In fact, IEDs were ineffective because people reported them so quickly. Life normalized – People drove and walked on the streets; children played. Schools, markets & businesses were open. An Iraqi Army unit worked with us; and IP units were forming. Electricity was restored with power outages only 2-3 times per wk. Running water was restored to the whole city. Sewers were unclogged & trash was usually picked up.

This success came at a heavy cost. TF Rock, 2/5 Mar, (who were replaced by) 1/5 Mar lost 38 Soldiers and Marines. 25 ISF were killed working alongside TF Rock on the east side of the city.

But our most important accomplishment was that we had started a dialogue with the senior tribal Sheiks. These talks, combined with the much improved conditions 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 I had to choose a single label for SPC Michael Smith, it would be courage. This is different from bravery, Michael was also brave under fire – the ability to control fear and focus on your job in spite of the bullet impacts and explosions. Bravery comes from drill repetition and adrenaline, and can be an automatic response for trained soldiers. Bravery is easy until courage fails, then one is left with desperation.

Between fire fights, in the infantryman's endless wait for the next contact, Courage is something you must have. 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.

Courage is assured and reinforced by the fellow soldiers in your team, squad, and platoon. You learn to count on each other, sense when one another is distracted, and compensate for each other; this is part of teamwork. Each team member directly contributes to, or reduces, the collective courage and confidence of the team. This is one reason why a Soldier's loss is felt so acutely in a unit. Michael's loss had such an impact on his unit.

Five days after Michael was killed, inside a small bombed-out warehouse on a fortified compound we called Combat Outpost, we held a memorial ceremony for Smitty. Fellow Soldiers and leadership struggled to find words that would provide closure. The following are my remarks given to the battalion TF that evening:

Memorial Ceremony for SPC Michael J. Smith, C Company, 1st Bn (AASLT), 503rd Inf Regt

16 January 2005

SPC Michael J. Smith was killed on the eastern side of Ar Ramadi on 11 January. Struck by a RPG, he is the *eleventh* TF Rock casualty of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Michael Smith, known as ‘Smitty’ joined the First Rock Battalion in May 2003 and was initially assigned to Able Company. He was later transferred to Hotel Company as the CSM’s driver where he consistently beat-out Pesncik for the *Best Driver* award in the command group.

In Korea, I think he used the field time to catch up on his sleep. I still hear CSM Thompson’s voice echoing through the humid stillness of the Korean summer afternoon, the freezing rain of an autumn morning, or the crisp, biting cold of a winter evening: “Smitty, wake-up! Let’s go!”

He smoked too much. Immediately before & after PT, even after huffing and puffing up Soyo-san, he would light a cigarette.

He found humor in most aspects of military life; the irony in many situations, once highlighted, could cause him to giggle uncontrollably, even when it resulted in getting his butt chewed by the CSM. Here in Iraq, the NCOs decided it was time Smitty returned to the line so that he could gain experience and set him up for future promotion. He was assigned to Charlie Coy, 3rd PLT.

He was dependable. That dependability was grown out of pride. He was proud of his service to the Army and the United States of America. It was the type of pride that reminded you of your grand parents’ patriotism displayed during and after WWII; it was genuine and focused. It is that pride that he sacrificed for. He sacrificed for freedom, the ideals of America and the unit. Thus, he can:

“In the Gates of Death rejoice!
He saw and held good –
Bear witness, Earth, he has made his choice
With Freedom’s Brotherhood!”¹

Smitty joins our ranks of departed Rock Soldiers and Regimental forefathers.

SSG Michael Shackelford

PFC Stephen Benish

SSG Arthur Williams

PFC Daniel Guastafarro

¹ Kipling, *The Choice*, 1917

SGT Wayne Lee

PFC Harrison Meyer

SGT John Trotter

PFC Jason Sparks

SPC Sergio Diaz

PV2 Brian Grant

They have welcomed him warmly and we, on this cold battlefield will press on with our duty; and America will not fail. America will not fail because the men of the 503rd are here. We will take Smitty's example and add it to our own dedication. Truth and honour; they are the First Rock way, and we shall take pride in that as strongly as he.

We will not forget Smitty.

God rest your soul SPC Michael J. Smith. First Rock!