

Memorial Day Remarks
Rich Debany, Colonel, US Army
May 29, 2017; Springfield, PA 19064

Mr. Polidoro and members of American Legion Post 227, Chaplain Johnson, Colonel Gubler, other distinguished attendees, fellow residents of Springfield, family members of our fallen heroes, and, especially, the family of Mike Smith...thank you for attending.

Rocco, thank you for inviting me again to contribute in this very special way to our community's Memorial Day remembrance. It's a privilege and I'm truly honored.

In addition to recognizing our fallen, Springfield and the nation also recognize the special sacrifices Gold Star Family members made when their loved one died and the grief they've endured since. Let me begin, as it is only appropriate, with special recognition of the Gold Star families in the audience and in our community. We're all humbled by your sacrifices and inspired by your resilience.

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. They were men and women who came from every corner of the country... and of the world. Some were born American, some were immigrants, many were not American citizens at all – just grateful for the opportunity to have a better life for their families. No matter the path they followed, each raised their right hand and swore an oath to protect and defend our Constitution just the same.

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 lieutenant Anais Tobar, 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. Let's again hope and pray that these newest 30 are the last additions to whom we must pay tribute.

While Springfield has contributed in blood to the cost of our nation's freedom in nearly every war since the Revolution, the exact number and many of the names of those heroes before 1941 have been lost to time. Since then though, our little community alone has paid the price of 42 young lives. 42 neighbors. 42 sons. 42 families left to mourn. Countless broken hearts. The most recent was Michael J. Smith, Specialist, United States Army. Forever 24 in the hearts and minds of his family and his fellow soldiers.

Mike was born October 13, 1980 to Nancy and Jim Smith. He grew up near the corner of Springfield and Norwinden, not even a third of a mile from here. Mike attended Scenic Hills Elementary and ET Richardson Middle School. In the springs, he played little league through the Springfield AA just like lots of kids today. When Mike was just 15, sadly, his mom passed away. Although a smart kid by all accounts, he eventually left Springfield High and he and his dad moved to Media. Mike worked odd jobs, he sang in a heavy-metal, punk, goth style rock band... I'm not sure if his dad or bother knew what to call the style. He liked skateboards and video games. His waist-long hair and lifestyle didn't outwardly make him appear destined for the military service but destined he was. 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. Whatever it was, he eventually chose to serve in the Army. Mike worked hard to earn his GED and when he was just a few weeks over 22, he enlisted in the Army and became an infantry soldier.

After basic and then infantry training at Fort Benning, Georgia, Mike was assigned to Headquarters and Headquarters Company, or HHC, 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 by those with whom he served, found his calling. The Army was a good fit for Mike and he was good soldier – popular with his friends and his leadership alike – a soldier who tried hard and who could be counted on to do his job. He was even selected to serve as his Battalion Command Sergeant Major's driver – a job that required intelligence, diligence, dedication, and resourcefulness. Smitty took his responsibilities seriously. As the driver, one of his first duties was to keep the Sergeant Major's vehicle and its communication and other equipment in top condition. According to his friend and 1-503rd teammate, then Specialist Kurt Clardy, of Ancortes, Washington, Mike spent a tremendous amount of time in the motor pool making sure everything was just right. He would get so extraordinarily greasy working on the vehicle that his buddies sometimes, affectionately, referred to him as 'Grimes'. Kurt said Smitty was full of pride and enjoyed doing what he did. During this period, Mike suggested to his family that he was planning to reenlist and, potentially, make the Army a career.

In Korea, Mike met a beautiful young lady from Russia named Oxana. He fell in love and quickly married her just a month prior to the battalion's deployment to Iraq.

Then Army Specialist Patrick "Sean" Timmins of Columbiana, Alabama, considered Mike his best friend. Sean always called him 'Mikey'. Ostensibly because the name Smitty was so common, too generic to use for his best friend, the real reason, of course, was because Mike absolutely hated being called Mikey. Teasing aside, he said Mike was "the greatest guy ever." On being a soldier, Sean said his friend had an uncanny ability to achieve excellence but, because of the way he achieved it, he would sometimes be chewed-out before he was celebrated!

In Aug 2004, Mike deployed with the 1-503rd, organized under the name "Task Force Rock," to Iraq. Soon after its arrival, the battalion moved to the city of Ar Ramadi; 68 miles west of Baghdad. Task Force Rock had the mission to ultimately foster the development of a representative local Iraqi government and effective Iraqi security forces. At the time, Ramadi was a city teething 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.

Sean Timmins, who himself was later injured in Afghanistan on his fifth deployment, after 12 years of reflection and comparison to subsequent combat deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan, characterized the situation in Ramadi at the time, simply as "the worst ever." The intensity of his later deployments didn't compare to what he experienced in 2004.

Despite austere conditions, constant attacks from the enemy, daily casualties, and frequent combat losses, according to Sean, Mike was very happy and proud to be a part of the First Rock. By all accounts, he was glad to be in Iraq with his friends.

Sergeant First Class James Hunter of New Orleans, Louisiana, the Operations Non-Commissioned Officer in Charge and acting Operations Sergeant Major, said that Smitty was eager to go on missions. Eager to contribute as an infantryman. Always ready to volunteer despite the danger.

On January 11, Mike had the task to drive a HMMWV on a tactical mission west of their base camp. On that mission, while in his vehicle, Specialist Michael Smith, 24, husband,

son, brother, nephew, cousin, friend of many, and Springfield neighbor, was struck and killed by a rocket propelled grenade. While Mike may not have lived like a stereotypical hero, he certainly died as one. Because of him, the three other soldiers in the vehicle lived.

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

I asked Sean Timmins a few days ago if there was anything he wanted me to pass along to Mike's family. He simply said "I loved Mikey like a brother and I hate everyday he isn't here." He went on to add that "he also had the sorriest taste in music!"

Speaking of Mike's family, there are many here today:

- His dad, **Jim Smith** who served in the Air Force from 1959 to 1961
- His brother, Staff Sergeant **Jim Warrington**, PA Army National Guard retired
- Mike's uncles Gunnery Sergeant **Danny Joy**, USMC retired and **Ed Joy** who served in Vietnam
- Ed's wife **Sharon**. Unfortunately their daughter, Desiree and her husband, couldn't be here today.
- Ed and Sharon's friend **Trish Freil**
- Mike's aunt **Gerry Joy** and her daughters **Jamie** and **Colleen Grellis**
- Colleen's husband **Joe** and their kids **Abigale** (10) and **Benjamin** (8)

To all of you, we recognize the sacrifice you've made and we're eternally grateful.

To everyone here today, your presence is a tribute to all of our lost warriors and to their families. You clearly understand the solemnness of this day. But today we must also celebrate. Celebrate the lives of those we lost and celebrate the enduring American spirit that is willing to give all because we're a beacon of hope to the world.

I encourage you to quietly sit someday on the bench outside this building that rests under a beautiful dogwood tree dedicated in Mike's memory. You'll find it; the bench has his name on it. *By the way, the flowers that some of Mike's family members are holding include a small branch from his tree.* As Josh Groban beautifully said "I'm still and wait here in silence until you come and sit awhile with me." Sit under Mike's tree today or on a different day and reflect upon every man and woman who risked all and who gave all for you and me. Think of Mike. Think of Mike's 19 American and 25 Iraqi teammates from Task Force Rock who also perished at Ramadi. Think of the three members of his team who later took their own lives and recognize that, while the tallied number of injured was 137, there were many wounds that couldn't be seen -- the emotional scars on survivors cut as deep as the graves of their brethren at Arlington. As you sit and think about all of those that gave so much, I imagine many of them would ask just one thing if they could: "remember me."

For family and friends of the fallen, for their leadership from squad leader to battalion commander and beyond, for the survivors of combat, and for many veterans, Memorial Day is an unimaginably difficult time. Please have compassion for them. Whether it is a son who never met his dad because he was killed in Korea before the son were born, a sister of a Marine killed at 21 in Quang Nam, a Marine who bore witness to the sudden death of 241 of his fellow Marines and 64 others while peacekeeping in Beirut or that same Marine who lost a third of his platoon six years later in a helicopter crash off the coast of Okinawa; a dad, brother, uncle, aunt, or friend who lost their dear Mike on the streets of Ramadi; or his

commander who lost him and scores of others under his command, each person grieves the loss and must accept their own survival in their own way. Memorial Day is personal and unique to everyone individually touched by the human costs of war.

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. Don't let them become faceless names. Know too, that today, more than 186 thousand 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.

On plaques just outside the door, mounted on the front of the township building, are the names, permanently etched so that we never forget, of Springfield's residents who most recently gave their lives to defend our nation and our allies - 30 in World War II, 1 in Korea, and 8 in Vietnam. Today, we'll dedicate an additional plaque to remember those neighbors who lost or who may still lose their lives in the current wars in the Middle East. Mike's name presently stands alone. While we must never lay idle as a nation when threatened at home or abroad, with God's grace, his name will not be joined by any more of those of our loved ones.

Mike was loved by his family and he was loved by his 1-503rd Infantry Regiment brethren. Because of Mike and the sacrifice he made while serving in the First Rock, there will always be a bond between his family, our community, the 1st Battalion, and all the brave soldiers who served in Task Force Rock in Ramadi.

In conclusion, I thank you again for the privilege and honor to speak today in memory of all of our fallen, especially our own -- Mike Smith. I also want to thank the American Legion Post 227 Memorial Day planning committee for their year-long efforts and research to pull this remembrance together. A few people helped edit these remarks, most especially my wife Patty – thank you! Finally, I want to thank Jim Smith, Danny Joy, Jim Warrington and the many soldiers – former members of the 1-503rd – who generously opened their memories and their hearts, often with great pain, so that you and I may honor and know better, at least just a little, their Mike, their Mikey, their Smitty. I'm also grateful to the ones I contacted that couldn't talk. They couldn't talk not because they didn't want to but because the hurt was still too much to bear.

Friends, most of us can only imagine the burden on the shoulders and on the very soul of a commander of troops in combat. Every decision they make and don't make weighs heavily both at the moment and for the rest of their lives. I'd like, now, to introduce a special guest who is uniquely suited to tell the rest of the story. Colonel Justin Gubler, US Army retired, originally from Honolulu, Hawaii, currently lives in Williamsburg, Virginia. A 1985 graduate of the United States Military Academy, he served 30 years active duty as an infantry officer and he commanded many organizations during those years... including the 1-503rd Infantry Regiment from 2003 to 2005 and Task Force Rock at Ramadi from 2004 to 2005.

Ladies and gentlemen, Colonel Gubler...