

THE MEDAL OF HONOR
AND THE WARRIORS WHO EARNED IT
IN AFGHANISTAN AND IRAQ

UNCOMMON VALOR

FULLY
REVISED
AND
UPDATED



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and JOHN D. GRESHAM

Foreword by Medal of Honor recipient Colonel Lee Mize, USA (Ret.)

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ST. MARTIN'S GRIFFIN NEW YORK



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Paul Ray Smith



Sergeant First Class Paul R. Smith distinguished himself by acts of gallantry and intrepidity above and beyond the call of duty in action with an armed enemy near Baghdad International Airport, Baghdad, Iraq, on 4 April 2003. On that day, Sergeant First Class Smith was engaged in the construction of a prisoner of war holding area when his Task Force was violently attacked by a company-sized enemy force. Realizing the vulnerability of over 100 soldiers, Sergeant First Class Smith quickly organized a hasty defense consisting of two platoons of soldiers, one Bradley Fighting Vehicle and three armored personnel carriers. As the fight developed, Sergeant First Class Smith braved hostile enemy fire to personally engage the enemy with hand grenades and anti-tank weapons, and organized the evacuation of three wounded soldiers from an armored personnel carrier struck by a rocket propelled grenade and a 60 mm mortar round. Fearing the

enemy would overrun their defenses, Sergeant First Class Smith moved under withering enemy fire to man a .50 caliber machine gun mounted on a damaged armored personnel carrier. In total disregard for his own life, he maintained his exposed position in order to engage the attacking enemy force. During this action, he was mortally wounded. His courageous actions helped defeat the enemy attack, and resulted in as many as 50 enemy soldiers killed, while allowing the safe withdrawal of numerous wounded soldiers. Sergeant First Class Smith's extraordinary heroism and uncommon valor are in keeping with the highest traditions of the military service and reflect great credit upon himself, the Third Infantry Division "Rock of the Marne," and the United States Army.

—Medal of Honor Citation, April 5, 2005



There are two ways to come home, stepping off the plane and being carried off the plane. It doesn't matter how I come home because I am prepared to give all that I am to ensure that all my boys make it home.

—Sergeant First Class Paul Ray Smith
(in a letter to his parents)¹

A CAREER SOLDIER

Sergeant First Class Paul Ray Smith was a lanky, six-foot-tall veteran of Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm with piercing green eyes, a well-trimmed mustache, and a tough, no-nonsense attitude toward training and preparedness that had made him the bane of his platoon. Whether or not he'd

ever heard of General George S. Patton's dictum that "a pint of sweat saves a gallon of blood," Sergeant Smith drove his men like he believed it. That hadn't always been the case. Smith had become a tough-as-nails sergeant because of his experiences in the first Gulf War.

Paul Ray Smith was born on September 24, 1969, in El Paso, Texas, the third of four siblings. When he was nine years old, his family moved to South Tampa, Florida, where he grew up. His mother, Janice Pvirre, later recalled, "Paul was a very ordinary boy." He was a quiet kid who enjoyed football, bike riding, skateboarding, and collecting rocks. Another big hobby of his was fishing, though his sister Lisa DeVane later observed, "We'd have starved to death if we'd had to depend on his fishing skills."² In high school Paul displayed an interest in carpentry and got himself a part-time job as a carpenter's assistant. He also enjoyed taking things apart and putting them back together—anything from a radio to an old car was fair game to Paul. One year he restored a dune buggy with the help of a friend.

His mother remembered that, as a teenager, he became "very methodical. He seemed to be plotting ... what he was going to do, and how he was going to do it." It was around this time, she remembered, that he told her, "I'm going to be a soldier. I'm going to join the military, be a soldier, get married, and have children."³

Smith graduated from Tampa Bay Vocational Technical High School in 1988. In October 1989, he fulfilled the first part of his dream by enlisting in the U.S. Army. He completed basic and combat engineering training in early 1990 at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. He was then assigned to the Eighty-second Engineer Battalion and sent to the army's

primary maintenance center in Europe: the U.S. Army Garrison Bamberg, near the German city of Bamberg in the southern province of Bavaria. Once there, the twenty-one-year-old Smith soon discovered the off-post pleasures of German beer, cars, and women. Specialist Smith established a reputation for hard partying, occasionally getting so drunk that he had to be disciplined. This was a far cry from the quiet young man he had been . . . or the grim war veteran he was to become.

In June 1990, while at the Green Goose, a popular local bar for the soldiers, Smith met Birgit Bacher, a twenty-three-year-old German woman from the nearby city of Bayreuth (the birthplace of Richard Wagner and the home of the annual Wagner Opera Festival). It was something of a surprise for Birgit to be in the bar. In a story all too familiar to German girls, three years earlier an American soldier had gotten her pregnant with her daughter, Jessica, and then deserted them. The experience had naturally soured Birgit on Americans. But, upon the insistence of a girlfriend, there she was at the Green Goose, being entertained by Smith and two of his buddies.

The impromptu date continued with a nighttime walk to a nearby park after the bar closed. The evening was capped when, in the courtyard outside her hotel room, Smith (channeling his inner Tom Cruise) serenaded Birgit with a rendition of "You've Lost That Loving Feeling." Birgit responded by showering him with petals from the flower box on her window.

Birgit later said, "In the beginning he was not my type at all; he was not what I was looking for."⁴ Yet she found something in him that attracted her. They dated regularly

until November 1990. That's when Smith and his unit were deployed to Saudi Arabia as part of Operation Desert Shield, and they were there on January 17, 1991, as part of Operation Desert Storm.

From November 1990 until April 1991, when his unit returned to Bamberg, Birgit received no communication from Paul. Shortly after hearing that his unit had returned from Iraq, she went to the Green Goose hoping to meet him. She was sitting at the bar drinking a soda when Smith walked in, saw her . . . and walked right by without saying a word.

Stung, and baffled, she strode up to him and demanded to know why he was ignoring her. He replied gruffly, "I just don't want to talk."

Birgit realized that the Paul Ray Smith standing before her was far different from the one she had known six months earlier. Over the next several weeks, she discovered just how profoundly the experience of combat had changed him.

Because it dramatically ended in just one hundred hours and was a lopsided victory dominated by the use of airpower and armor, Operation Desert Storm has sometimes been incorrectly characterized as the "100-hour non-war."⁵ Regardless of the campaign's brief duration, it retained all of war's terrible life-and-death intensity. Smith had "seen the elephant"—he had experienced combat. Afterward, in a rare moment of revelation to his relatives, he mentioned that a comrade had died in his arms. There was far more to the story than that. Command Sergeant Major Gary Coker, who fought with Smith in Operation Desert Storm and in Operation Iraqi Freedom, later said that at one point during the assault U.S. helicopter gunships had mistaken Smith's unit

for an Iraqi force and had opened fire on the Americans. According to Coker, "He lost three friends right then and there." When the campaign ended, Coker said that Smith "knew what death was all about . . . what war was all about, and he was determined that it wouldn't happen to his guys."⁶

Gone was the "military goofball"⁷ Birgit Bacher had known, replaced by someone with a new and sharply focused purpose in life. Having decided to make the army his career, Smith also made the decision that he was going to change his life—and spare nothing in preparing troops under his command for combat.

About nine months after his return to Germany, on January 24, 1992, Paul Ray Smith accomplished the next two goals in his life. He married Birgit in Denmark and became the adoptive father of Jessica. Two years later, they had a son, David. Smith was a devoted husband and father. In fact, he became such a homebody that occasionally Birgit grew concerned—and occasionally had to order him to go out and have a good time with his friends.

Smith applied an equally fierce dedication to his army career. He began hitting the books and taking courses to hone his skills and advance in rank. He took advantage of opportunities available to him while stationed in Europe. Already an expert marksman, Smith added to his shooting skills by earning the German Armed Forces Badge for Weapons Proficiency in Gold, which meant he was an expert with pistols, rifles, and machine guns. He also took the French commando course, earning the French Armed Forces Commando Badge.

Not long after his wedding, Paul Ray Smith was pro-

moted to sergeant. For the next seven years, the Smiths led a typical nomadic army existence, traveling from one post to another and halfway around the world and back. In 1999, he was assigned to the Eleventh Engineer Battalion, part of the Third Infantry Division based at Fort Stewart, Georgia.

As he rose through the noncommissioned officer ranks, he strove to make himself what *The Army Noncommissioned Officer Guide* calls "the Backbone of the Army." He took to heart the admonition of retired Army Command Sergeant Major Gary L. Littrell, a Medal of Honor recipient, who wrote in the guide that the primary duty of a sergeant is "to train and take care of [a] soldier's every need." To accomplish that goal, Littrell said the sergeant has to identify the difference between being liked and being respected: "It is human nature to want to be liked, but we can never sacrifice respect for that. The respect you gain through properly training your soldiers to succeed and in ensuring they and their families are taken care of may not always make you popular, but it will earn their respect."⁸

A HARD-NOSED LEADER

Combat engineering is one of the most challenging of military professions. Combat engineers accompany frontline units and assist in such tasks as bridge building, mine laying and mine clearing, demolitions, the construction and repair of facilities, and logistics support. Many of these tasks are required to be conducted while under fire. The elite of the combat engineers are called "sappers" and are distinguished by a sapper tab worn on their left shoulder. The term *sapper* comes from the French word *sapeur*. The seventeenth-century French military was the first to use troops

trained in engineering skills designed to “sap” the defensive strength of an enemy.

Smith was extraordinarily proud of being a sapper. In addition to the red and white sapper tab sewn on his dress uniform, he wore a subdued-colored sapper tab under his battle-dress-uniform pocket flap, and later in combat he wore a sapper tab just above his chest nameplate on his body armor. On the platoon wall behind his desk he hung a large painting of a sapper tab. And he chose for his call sign “Sapper 7”—the “7” signifying his role as the senior non-commissioned officer in the company. Sergeant Daniel Medrano, then a corporal in Smith’s platoon, later said that Smith “was always trying to push you to go to sapper school. He knew what he was talking about, and he was always willing to share that knowledge.”⁹

During the 1990s, Smith would go on to serve tours of duty with the First Engineer Battalion, based in Fort Riley, Kansas; the 317th Engineer Battalion in Fort Benning, Georgia; the Ninth Engineer Battalion in Schweinfurt, Germany; and, in 1999, the Eleventh Engineer Battalion, the “Jungle Cats” (a nickname acquired during a 1920s tour of duty in Panama), in Fort Stewart, Georgia. With each assignment, his men abruptly learned that their new noncom was holding them to a higher standard.

In 1995, he was part of the stabilization force following the NATO air campaign in Bosnia that lifted the siege of Sarajevo. And, in 1999, he returned to the Balkans as part of the operation that forced the withdrawal of Yugoslav troops from Kosovo.

But Smith’s dedication and army-to-the-core attitude was not appreciated by everyone. Long before Paul Ray Smith