

Soldiers Run to Remember Fallen Hero

By Sergeant Rebekah Malone

At daybreak on a warm desert morning in Baghdad, nearly 1,000 Soldiers joined together to remember one of their own in a moving tribute. On 5 April 2009, six years after Sergeant First Class Paul Ray Smith of Tampa, Florida, lost his life defending more than 100 troops, Soldiers of the 46th Engineer Battalion (Combat) (Heavy), 225th Engineer Brigade, held a run in honor of his memory.

The run's distance—11.46 kilometers—stood as a tribute to Smith's unit and comrades. The actual battle site served as the starting and ending point for the racers. Casually listening, one could not help overhearing Soldiers use a powerful word to describe their comrade: hero.

A first sergeant who met Smith in 2000 when they served as platoon sergeants of Alpha and Bravo Companies, 11th Engineer Battalion, said that he was impressed by the personal interest Smith took in each of his Soldiers, as evidenced by how all of them had only great things to say about him when he was a platoon sergeant. Specifically, they respected the way he took care to sit down with them and talk to them on a personal basis as well as a professional one.



Photo by Sergeant Rebekah Malone

The watchtower, riddled with bullet holes, is a haunting reminder of the battle that took the platoon sergeant's life.

His fellow platoon sergeant and friend explained that Sergeant First Class Smith lived the Army Values daily and could be described as “an awesome fellow noncommissioned officer” who went out of his way to take care of his Soldiers



Photo by Staff Sergeant Bradley West



Photo by Sergeant Rebekah Malone

A participant of the Sergeant First Class Paul Ray Smith Memorial Run wears a shirt that displays the photo of the fallen hero.

on and off duty. His friend arrived at the 4 April 2003 battle after Smith had been mortally wounded, to assist in securing the area. Smith had manned a .50-caliber machine gun atop a damaged armored personnel carrier after the gunner was wounded, effectively killing 25–50 enemy combatants of the estimated 100 attacking the courtyard by the highway between Baghdad International Airport and Baghdad itself.

Sergeant First Class Smith's actions deescalated the attack and saved reportedly up to 100 Soldiers. What remains are the bullet holes in the watchtower and the memory of a Soldier who stood for other Soldiers, including the more than 4,200 servicemembers who have died during Operation Iraqi Freedom. Smith's fellow platoon sergeant and friend was amazed after five years at how much this area had changed with the buildup of troops; he wanted to find the area where the engagement took place and see if anyone had done a memorial. He discovered that there was nothing there. Until now

On the sixth anniversary of his death and in honor of the fallen hero, Soldiers placed a memorial marker on the concrete wall—riddled with bullet holes—which he had defended during the fight. It is a fitting tribute for Sergeant First Class Paul Ray Smith for what he did in this place for his country and its warriors. 

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Note: On 4 April 2005, Sergeant First Class Paul Ray Smith was posthumously awarded the first Medal of Honor for actions in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. He was the 14th engineer to receive the military's highest award.