

# 2008 Sergeant William Jasper Freedom Award Winner: Representative James E. Smith Jr.

## Humble Hero



*By: Matthew Gregory*

### *Sergeant William Jasper Freedom Award*

Like many people, South Carolina Representative James E. Smith Jr. lost his cell phone. Only he lost it while fighting the Taliban during his 12-month deployment in Afghanistan.

Established in 1984 by the South Carolina Chamber of Commerce, the Sergeant William Jasper Freedom Award, named for the Revolutionary War patriot, recognizes individuals who have made significant contributions to the freedom of South Carolina and the nation.

As a captain with the South Carolina Army National Guard, Smith arrived in Afghanistan in 2007 to mentor the country's police force. His unit's mission was to establish security, build relationships with villagers and establish a positive presence.

The Taliban had been attacking civilian drivers on a road in the Zabul Province near the southern border of Afghanistan. Being there at the moment of an attack was almost impossible, so Smith's unit needed to learn where the Taliban was coming to and from to execute the attacks. After Smith located a path he believed the Taliban could get motorcycles through, he put together a plan with his operations officer that involved getting to the top of a mountain to watch over possible Taliban movement.



### **Favorite Historical Figures:**

*Thomas Jefferson, John Adams and George Washington (politicians with military backgrounds)*

Once Smith's unit was in position on the mountain, they could hear the Taliban communicating over the radio. Then

Smith received a chilling radio transmission – he had been spotted by the Taliban, and they were about to open fire on him.

### **Favorite Song:**

*Walking on the Moon by The Police or any song by Sting or The Police*

“The moment I got that word, I took two steps and hit the ground. The only piece of cover I could find was this small rock that just rose up in front of me, beautifully placed, I'm certain by the good Lord, who protected me this

### **Favorite Movies:**

Jim Smith

whole time. I hit the ground, and an RPG blew up about three feet or so from my head,” said Smith.

Smith then endured what he estimates was five to eight minutes of sustained fire from about ten Taliban members who were on his position at about 70 meters away. His backup was farther up the mountain and was able to return fire, allowing him to make a move for it.

Smith grabbed his rucksack and tried to get back to a ledge to a safer position. As he leaned over, his rucksack ripped out of his hand and fell about 800 meters down. He then threw himself over the ledge and ended up sliding about another 30 or 40 meters down, shredding the right side of his pants on the jagged rock. His cell phone, which was in his pocket, was left behind with the fabric of his pants leg and found by the Taliban.

“It wasn’t before sunrise that the intelligence officer was getting phone calls from the Taliban,” said Smith. “That meant calling friends at home and telling them they needed to change their numbers. It was recommended to me that they do that.”

How did someone like Smith, a lawyer and representative serving Columbia’s District 72, end up in such a death-defying situation? Smith’s family is familiar with the battlefield, with a long history of service in America’s conflicts. In fact, nearly every male on Smith’s mother’s side and father’s side served in the military. When Smith was just six weeks old, he left Columbia with his mother, Nina Nelson Smith, to fly to the Philippines where his father, James E. Smith Sr., was stationed by the Navy during the Vietnam War.

Smith followed in his family’s footsteps and served as a JAG officer in the South Carolina Army National Guard for eight years. Then he decided he needed a change. After spending an afternoon at Ground Zero in New York City, Smith believed that God was leading him to become an infantry officer fighting alongside troops.

Repeatedly, Smith asked to transfer over and lead a platoon into battle. A four-star general told Smith if that was what he wanted to do, he had to resign and start over. Two days later, Smith resigned his commission. Less than 24 hours later, he enlisted as a private and left in February of 2007 to begin basic training.

Smith said he must have looked like a total failure in life – a 37-year-old man showing up for basic training alongside 17-, 18- and 19-year-olds. He quickly became a target for the drill sergeants, who prided themselves in getting someone to resign. Eventually, a sergeant saw a news story about Smith and learned he was a politician. One

*Saving Private Ryan,  
Schindler’s List*

**Favorite TV show:**

*M\*A\*S\*H*

**Favorite Book :**

*The Afghan Campaign by  
Steven Pressfield*

**Favorite Holiday:**

*Easter*

**Favorite Color Tie:**

*Shades of red*

**Favorite weekend activity:**

*Playing with my kids*

**If I could time travel, I’d go to:**

*Medieval Scotland*

**People might be surprised to know that I:**

*used to make suits of armor and  
fight with swords in the Society  
for Creative Anachronism*

**Carolina or Clemson:**

*Carolina*

sergeant mocked Smith, announcing that “Soldier Smith” had a big leather chair in his office. According to Smith, one drill sergeant was excited because he could “smoke a lawyer, a former officer and a politician all at the same time.”

“He said I was ‘a drill sergeant’s dream,’” said Smith.

After four months of training, Smith was deployed to Afghanistan as part of Operation Enduring Freedom. While it was a choice Smith felt he needed to make, the process was not easy on his wife, Kirkland, and his four children – James, Thomas, Paul and Shannon. Smith said he could not have done it without his family’s love and support.

“There were many times where we fully understood we were writing a blank check and not knowing what it was going to cost for us and for our family, but it’s nothing really that new in my family. It’s just part of who we are and part of what I want my children to understand,” said Smith. “These are the times - and it became very clear if it wasn’t already clear enough after 9/11 - that we all have to find some place in our lives where we are going to advance our democracy for the next generation.”

Given his concern over future generations’ quality of life, Smith developed a special bond with the children of Afghanistan. According to Smith, village elders in Afghanistan typically try to achieve a balance between the deadly pressure they get from the Taliban and the pressure they get from troops to help provide resources, establish security and eliminate fear. Due to this, many elders would often give false information about the whereabouts of the Taliban. Smith quickly learned to send his number two guy to talk to the elder while he’d go talk to the village children.

“Instead of what the elder said, that they were here four days ago and went that way on six motorcycles, [the children] would say they were just here before you got here, there were 24 of them on ten motorcycles and they went that way. At other times a child would say not only did they just leave here, they left one guy on top of that mountain looking at us right now,” said Smith. “I was always very mindful of the world they were in and how I did things so these kids wouldn’t be in any danger.”

While serving in Afghanistan, Smith also had to stay informed about Smith, Ellis and Stuckey P.A., his law firm in Columbia. At an earlier point in Smith’s career, law did not appeal to him. In fact, after graduating from the University of South Carolina with a political science degree, Smith wanted to be everything but a lawyer. His passion for music led to him performing as a full-time

musician for several years in a rock band called The Root Doctors.

With seven generations of lawyers before him, Smith eventually realized that law was too much a part of who he was to ignore and left the band. After obtaining his law degree from the University of South Carolina, he began his legal career at the firm of Nelson, Mullins, Riley and Scarborough LLP. Once Smith decided he wanted to run for public office, he started his own firm. He was elected to the South Carolina House of Representatives in 1996. In his first year of service, he became assistant minority leader. Three years later he became the chief minority whip and then served three years as House minority leader.

While serving in Afghanistan, Representative Doug Jennings cast Smith's proxy votes. In fact, the House passed a rule change specifically for Smith to allow him to do this. Having access to a satellite phone also was beneficial for Smith, as it allowed him to frequently check in with his law practice and with fellow legislators.

Despite the tough balance of being a military captain, a lawyer and a legislator, Smith made it work, which comes as no surprise to Captain Dave Perry, company commander, Delta Company, 3rd Battalion, 60th Infantry Regiment at Fort Jackson, who spent three months training with Smith at Fort Riley in Kansas and nine months on the same team in Afghanistan. Perry said he's never met an officer with the work ethic that Smith has.

"If I had to build a team and go back to Afghanistan, James would be a first round draft choice," said Perry. "If James Smith goes after things as an attorney and a representative as he does as an officer in the military, he's a force to compete with."

As Smith pointed out, it's difficult to say what his future holds considering one week he was having dinner at the governor's mansion and two weeks later he was cleaning a latrine in boot camp. Rumors suggest Smith is considering a possible run for governor in 2010, but he hasn't officially declared himself a candidate. However, he knows he wants to continue serving the people of South Carolina.

"I've been so blessed and fortunate to serve the people of District 72 in the state and the House, and I feel like I've been able to do some things that have been meaningful and long-lasting. And I'm going to continue to look to my future through that and continue to look for opportunity to serve in whatever capacity," he said.

Smith said he has always been and continues to be optimistic for South Carolina's future and he sees so

Jim Smith

optimistic for South Carolina's future, and he sees so much unrealized potential.

"I intend over my next several years of public service to make jobs and economic development a number one priority for me and my public service because I see that as helping us improve our schools and helping give us the ability to protect our environment for the next generation," he said.

Despite his many accomplishments, Smith is quick to pass any recognition he receives to his family, his men and his faith. And given his decision to resign and reenlist, he understands that he wouldn't be a lot of people's first choice for a career counselor.

"Don't come to me for career advice," said Smith. "It's not the recommended path to follow, but it's been one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. I'd have to say the greatest privilege of my life other than the blessing of being my wife's husband and my kids' dad has been the privilege of leading American soldiers in combat."

