

# Iraq war hits home yet again

## New Hanover High alum John `Mac' Smith killed

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Glenn and Judy Smith hold a picture Thursday of their son, Sgt. John `Mac' Smith, who was killed in Iraq.

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Published: Friday, May 13, 2005 at 3:30 a.m.

Last Modified: Friday, May 13, 2005 at 7:13 a.m.

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When two Army officers knocked on the door of Judy Smith's Borden Avenue house Thursday morning, she knew it was bad news.

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LOCAL TOLL IN IRAQ NATIONAL GUARD Spc. Jocelyn `Joce' Carrasquillo, 28, of Wrightsville Beach, was killed in the spring of 2004 in Baghdad, Iraq, by a roadside bomb.

ARMY Cpl. Mark A. Bibby, 25, of Pender County, died in the summer of 2003, in Baghdad, when a rocket-propelled grenade hit his convoy.

U.S. TOLL:

As of Thursday, at least 1,613 members of the U.S. military have died since the beginning of the Iraq war in March 2003, according to an Associated Press count. At least 1,233 died as a result of hostile action, according to the Defense Department. The figures include four military civilians.

Since May 1, 2003, when President Bush declared that major combat operations in Iraq had ended, 1,475 U.S. military members have died, according to AP's count.

The Fort Bragg officers had come to tell her that her son, 22-year-old John "Mac" Smith, a sergeant with the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, was killed in Iraq Wednesday when a roadside bomb hit his convoy.

"We were told from the beginning they'll send somebody, two officers will come, one is a chaplain," said Mrs. Smith, whose eyes were red from crying. "I knew immediately that something had happened, and they said `Mrs. Smith, do you want to sit down?' "

"They told me what had happened as much as they could," she added. "They stayed with me until Glenn could get home, then they said a prayer with us."

Sgt. Smith left for al-Iskandariyah, about 25 miles south of Baghdad, with the 11th ACR from Fort Irwin, Calif., in January. This was his second tour in Iraq. He was helping to train the Iraqi national guard.

He was in the Army JROTC program at New Hanover High School and enlisted before he graduated in 2000, his father, Glenn Smith, said.

"He wore camouflage stuff since he was this big," Mr. Smith said lowering one hand to knee height and wiping off a tear with the other.

"He went to Fort Bragg for a summer camp and he was hooked," Mr. Smith said.

Lt. Col. James Chaffins of the New Hanover High School Army JROTC program, remembered that camp and "Mac" well.

"I'm sad, but very proud that he served his country," Lt. Col. Chaffins said. "He served us all proudly."

Lt. Col. Chaffins said Sgt. Smith was the drill team commander his senior year and would remember him as one of his most dedicated and motivated cadets.

"He was just a good kid, a great guy and we'll miss him," Lt. Col. Chaffins said.

"He was on his road to become a career military man," Mrs. Smith said.

Before he was transferred to the 11th ACR, Sgt. Smith served in the 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Bragg for four years. During that time he spent a year in Iraq.

"He said it was better this time," Mrs. Smith said. "He said he had more access to phones and e-mail and everything."

So the Smiths had gotten accustomed to hearing from their son on a weekly basis.

"It was mostly everyday chit-chat," Mrs. Smith said. "Every time he had to go out of the compound, he called it the office, he'd say `I've gotta go to the office.'>"

Mrs. Smith laughed at the memory, but became serious again.

"The last time I talked to him was Mother's Day," she said. "Well, it was Sunday there, so he really called on Saturday."

Sgt. Smith would ask his mom for things he missed and she would get it and mail it to

him every Saturday.

His most recent request was Spam, Vienna sausages, potted ham, crackers and chili in a can, Mrs. Smith said. "Don't ask my why, but that's what he wanted," she said and fell silent.

Sgt. Smith will never get the care package.

On Thursday afternoon family and friends gathered at the Smiths' baby blue cottage-style house on Borden Avenue to support and seek comfort in one another and to mourn.

The little house where Sgt. Smith lived all his life before joining the Army, was a telltale of parents' love. The walls were filled with the three Smith children's photos, drawings and newspaper clippings.

In the kitchen, for example, hung a little handprint in blue paint, under which read, "Mac 1988." In the den, photos of and taken by Sgt. Smith decorated walls and bookshelves.

It was an emotional older sister, Jill, who pulled out her brother's dog tags that she wore under her shirt.

"When he left the first time, I said 'Will you give me a pair of your dog tags before you go?' " Jill Smith said fighting back tears. "I wear them for good luck. I took them off when he came home and I put them back on when he left this time.

"Now I will wear them forever."