

IN MEMORIAM



Sergeant Michael M. Merila

17 February 1980 – 16 February 2004

AN AMERICAN SOLDIER

My estimate of [the American Soldier] was formed on the battlefield many, many years ago, and has never changed. I regarded him then as I regard him now – as one of the world’s noblest figures, not only as one of the finest military characters, but also as one of the most stainless. His name and fame are the birthright of every American citizen. In his youth and strength, his love and loyalty, he gave all that mortality can give.

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I do not know the dignity of his birth, but I do know the glory of his death.

— General Douglas MacArthur¹

Generations of Americans have sacrificed to establish the title “American Soldier” as one that needs no qualifiers – it is a title of honor in and of itself. This proud service has been on American soil and upon far flung battlefields across the globe. The Soldiers of this generation are continuing to build upon this storied legacy in places like Iraq and Afghanistan. While the honor that comes with holding the title of American Soldier belongs to all who sacrifice and serve, soldiering does come more naturally to some than to others. For some new recruits, fitting into the Army is painful – like trying to hammer a square peg into a round hole. For others, like Sergeant (SGT) Michael M. Merila, soldiering comes as naturally as breathing. These Soldiers seem to stand a little straighter; they are confident and assured; they shine. From the start, it was apparent that Michael Merila was going to shine. He truly seems to have been born to serve his country. One of four children born into an Army family, SGT Merila’s father, Chief Warrant Officer Four Michael Merila is a retired aviator, and his mother,

¹ General Douglas MacArthur, Thayer Award Acceptance Address at the U.S. Military Academy, West Point, N.Y. (May 12, 1962) (paraphrasing a selected portion of the published remarks), available at <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/douglasmacarthurthayeraward.html> (last visited Feb. 10, 2005).

Lieutenant Colonel Susan Merila is a retired Military Intelligence Corps officer. After graduating from Buena High School in Sierra Vista, Arizona, in 1988, SGT Merila enlisted in the Army in 2001. He attended basic training at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, where he received a Certificate of Achievement for graduating in the top ten-percent of his class. He entered advanced individual training (AIT) as a legal specialist where he, again, finished at the top of his class as the distinguished honor graduate for which he received the Army Achievement Medal, a Certificate of Achievement, the Adjutant General's Branch coin, and a coin from the Post Command Sergeant Major.

When I first came to Fort Lewis in 2003, I was afraid I wouldn't fit in with the crew. Right away Mike took me around and made me feel very comfortable. In the summer, I was dealing with some personal problems, and he was always right there beside me helping me out. I don't know how well I would have made it, or if I would have made it at all if it weren't for him. That's what friends are for, and he was that and then some. In the military, friends come and go, but the good ones are always there no matter the time and distance between them.

— Sergeant James Kuykendall

Sergeant Merila's first assignment was at Fort Lewis, Washington, as a paralegal specialist for the 1st Squadron, 14th Cavalry Regiment, 3d Interim Brigade Combat Team. He arrived in October 2001 and quickly established himself as something special. Although new to both the Army and also the JAG Corps, SGT Merila won the 2001 I Corps and Fort Lewis Paralegal Specialist of the Year board only months after arriving. Sergeant Merila was much more than just a great paralegal; he was a great Soldier. In 2002, he was twice recognized for excellence by the Army's senior leadership. On 3 October 2002, SGT Merila received a coin for excellence from Major General James M. Collins, the I Corps Deputy Commanding General, for his performance as a paralegal during the preceding year, as demonstrated by the results of the brigade's annual command inspection. On 5 November 2002, SGT Merila received two coins from Sergeant Major of the Army (SMA) Jack Tilley for his excellent performance as a Soldier in support of the brigade's Warfighter exercise and the brigade's certification as the Army's first Stryker Brigade Combat Team (SBCT). When SMA Tilley asked the First Sergeant of Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 3d SBCT to name his top three Soldiers in the company, the First Sergeant named SGT Merila. As his fellow Soldier, Specialist (SPC) Danile Gonzalez, recalls of SMA Tilley's visit:

We were doing a preventive maintenance inspection [PMI] at the place inside the airfield where it's all electronic. [SMA Tilley] briefed the Soldiers on the new changes the Army is going through which included transformation. After the brief the SMA asked our 1SG "give me the name of your best soldier in the company." 1SG replied without hesitation, "Specialist Merila." I knew he was going to say his name. I just knew it. [Mike] was that type of Soldier.

Almost immediately after certification, the recently renamed 3d SBCT received orders to deploy to Iraq. Sergeant Merila had been in the brigade for over two years and was due to rotate to another unit. When offered the opportunity to transfer to a different unit, he refused. He could not abandon the unit he had helped establish or the Soldiers with whom he had served shoulder-to-shoulder. It was this action of which Lieutenant General Edward Soriano said, "It speaks volumes about this young man, and his character, his upbringing and his values."²

It's been hard to express just how well loved Mike was. He was someone that made you happy every day. There was something memorable every day. He was so full of energy, youth and charisma. I miss his company. He brought something to the group that nobody else did. He was truly unique.

— Sergeant Dennis Robertshaw

I don't think that there was a day that Mike didn't do or say something that made me laugh. He was an absolute joy to work with.

— Staff Sergeant Vellis Weathers

² Michael M. Merila (Sept. 7, 2004), at http://www.cbsnews.com/elements/2004/09/07/iraq/whoswho641558_0_29_person.shtml (last visited Feb. 9, 2005).

Sergeant Merila was a competent and proficient Soldier. The Soldiers he worked with respected him as a Soldier, a paralegal, and a friend. His AIT roommate, SPC Jon Coen, remembers that, “[h]e was an outstanding Soldier and great person to be around.” His roommate knew even then that “[SGT Merila] would be called on to perform service somewhere.” As his Army career progressed, he remained the same joyful Soldier that his colleagues remember. “You can’t remember [SGT] Merila without some laughter because he was such a joy to be around,” remembers Sergeant Major Jerry L. Gatton, Jr.

In November 2003, SGT Merila deployed with his squadron to Iraq. He worked and lived with the Soldiers of 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry Regiment, sharing their hardships and dangers. His unit leadership did not see SGT Merila as only a paralegal; they saw him as a Soldier. When he was needed for an extended legal mission by the brigade trial counsel, his squadron leadership fought to keep him, because, in words of Major (MAJ) David Athey, the squadron executive officer, “I know he’s a paralegal, and we should be giving him to you, but we need him. You know I wouldn’t be saying that if he wasn’t one of my best Soldiers.”³ According to Captain (CPT) John Wheeler, the Adjutant for 1st Squadron, SGT Merila’s presence was an immediate boost to morale.

Sergeant Merila not only excelled in his legal support to the squadron, but he also stepped outside of his military occupational skill to assist his unit. Sergeant Merila pulled countless hours of guard duty and radio watch in the Combat Training Command Post (CTCP). He quickly became proficient on the radio and became the squadron’s best radio transmitter operator. The CTCP received orders to move forward in support of operations around the city of Samarra. They wanted to keep their footprint small and bring only a few of their best Soldiers. Sergeant Merila was at the top of their list. After the operation in Samarra, the squadron moved to northern Iraq near the city of Tal Afar. Sergeant Merila’s excellent performance continued. In addition to his normal duties, he provided security on convoys. Sergeant Merila’s position of choice on any convoy was the .50 caliber machine gunner. He would often come off of an all-night guard shift or radio watch and roll out on a convoy the very next morning. He did this all without complaint. On 16 January 2004, a convoy SGT Merila was providing security for was attacked by enemy combatants. The convoy reacted quickly and cleared the ambush site with only one officer suffering minor injuries as a result of the attack. In the words of CPT Wheeler, “As a combat arms officer, I was continually impressed by SPC Merila’s calm under pressure. Specialist Merila was not only a great legal clerk; he was a great Soldier and a fellow brother in arms.”

You liked him from the first time you met him. I don’t know if it was his smile, or his self-confidence, or his fundamental goodness that was so readily shown. Whatever it was, he drew people to him. If you were given a tough mission, and you had to pick one Soldier to help you, you would want SGT Merila. He was always ready to sacrifice himself to make you successful. How rare that is. He always looked to build you up, to make you shine, to step into the shadows so you could stand in the light. I have never met anyone so loyal and caring. He was also there to pick you up when you fell. One of our captains, his trial counsel, related how upset she had been when she lost a tough case and how SGT Merila spent hours trying to cheer her up. That was just how he was.

— Sergeant Major Jerry L. Gatton, Jr.

On 16 February 2004, one day before his twenty-fourth birthday, SGT Merila’s convoy was attacked near Tal Afar, by enemy combatants using an improvised explosive device. Sergeant Merila suffered a fatal wound and died doing what he had been born to do, selflessly serving his country. His was the first combat death in the 3d Stryker Brigade Combat Team.⁴ Sergeant Merila’s awards include the Bronze Star, the Purple Heart, the Army Achievement Medal, the Army Good Conduct Medal, the National Defense Service Medal, the Army Service Ribbon, and the Expert Marksmanship Badge.

³ Michael J. Gilbert, *Soldier Remembered for Kindness, Humor*, NEWS TRIBUNE (Seattle, Wash.), Feb. 19, 2004, at 1.

⁴ See *Sierra Vista Solider Killed in Roadside Bombing in Iraq* (Feb. 18, 2004), at <http://www.azcentral.com/specials/special19/articles/0218Soldier-ON.html> (last visited Feb. 9, 2005).

It is impossible to adequately relate the enormity of the loss of SGT Merila to the Army unless you knew him. Specialist Danile Gonzalez and the JAG Corps know that, “[h]e was going to do great things for the Army. He had unlimited potential. But it was cut way too short.” Sergeant Merila is sorely missed.*

If I could have one Soldier to take with me the rest of my career, it would be Mike. No matter how many Soldiers the Army gives me, there will always be one missing.

— *Staff Sergeant Vellis Weathers*

* The staff of *The Army Lawyer* thanks the many people who contributed to this memorial, with special thanks to Sergeant Major Jerry L. Gatton, Jr., for his invaluable assistance. Most importantly, we thank the Merila family for sharing this remarkable Soldier with us.