IN MEMORIAM

Corporal Coty James Phelps


A GREAT FRIEND TO ALL

Ask me why I’m here
Why would I do this?
So far from home
It’s so hard to describe
Through words in a poem

Ask me why I’m here
It really doesn’t bother me
Go ahead it’s fine
Trust me I’m a Soldier
The choice was all mine

Ask me why I’m here
Even sometimes I wonder
Why I’m here in Iraq
Why we sit here awaiting
Some form of attack

Ask me why I’m here
Why should I bother?
We’ve lost so many brothers
But trust me my friends
There will be plenty of others

Ask me why I’m here
For some it is different
Often in the company of jokes
But the reason is simple
I am here for my folks

-- Poem composed by CPL Coty James Phelps in Iraq, February 2007
In the early afternoon of 17 May 2007, on a dusty stretch of road in South-Central Iraq between Forward Operating Base Kalsu and Forward Operating Base (FOB) Iskandariyah, Corporal (CPL) Coty James Phelps was killed while riding in a combat logistics patrol on his way to assist with a claims mission. His vehicle was struck by an explosively formed penetrator killing him and two other Soldiers in the vehicle. Corporal Phelps died doing his job—both as a Soldier and as a paralegal.

He died at age twenty; a month shy of his twenty-first birthday. A short existence in quantity of years, but a rich life measured in terms of quality and in impact upon those who knew and loved him. He brought tremendous joy and happiness to all those who came in contact with him. This memorial is a tribute to him from those whose lives he touched.

Coty James Phelps was born on 16 June 1986, in Lake Havasu City, Arizona. His family moved to Kingman, Arizona, in January 1993. In high school he was involved in many activities including football and softball. He made the decision to serve his country by joining the Army Delayed Entry Program in February 2004 before graduating from Kingman High School North in May 2004. He formally enlisted in the United States Army on 2 September 2004, in Phoenix, Arizona and graduated from Basic Combat Training and Advanced Individual Training (AIT) at Fort Jackson, South Carolina on 12 November 2004. He then went on to Basic Airborne Training at Fort Benning, Georgia.

During Basic Training and AIT, he first met up with Specialist (SPC) Adam Welch and SPC Aaron Stein—two paralegals who would be soon paired up with him in Alaska and in Iraq. Specialist Welch recalls his initial impression of then Private Phelps as a “fun-loving type of guy” who made friends easily.

Upon completion of Airborne School, he was assigned to the 4th Brigade Combat Team (Airborne), 25th Infantry Division at Fort Richardson, Alaska. On 11 May 2005, he signed into the unit, the second member of the newly forming 4-25 Brigade Operational Law Team (BOLT) to arrive on station. The Brigade would not officially activate until 14 July 2005, but Coty Phelps, whom everyone referred to as simply Phelps, was on the ground and assisting with building an office and a team from scratch.

Phelps immediately gained friends within the BOLT and the Brigade. He became known for his sense of humor, self-effacing attitude, and his enthusiastic love of life. He was everyone’s friend in the Brigade largely because he so willingly brought all those he met into his life.

To truly gain an appreciation of Phelps, one had to see him with children. Major Rich DiMeglio, the 4-25 Brigade Judge Advocate, recalls:

Phelps was the one adult who at any office party or social, could be found running around and playing tag with all the young kids. Children absolutely adored him—and he was tremendous with them. All of the children in our office instantly gravitated towards him. He was the only adult I ever knew who could physically exhaust a group of young children. I’d often say to Phelps that I would love for him to baby-sit my seven-year-old son—but was fearful of what my house might look like when I returned. I always referred to him as a nine–year-old trapped inside a twenty-year-old body.

Sergeant Joshua Kramer, a paralegal in the 4-25 BOLT, remembered an evening when he asked Phelps to baby-sit his two younger boys.

My wife Trish and I returned to our home later that evening to find Phelps on the floor sound asleep, with one of our boys cuddled up in his right arm sleeping, and our other son in his left arm, also sleeping.

Chief Warrant Office Three Manny Molina from the U.S. Army Alaska Office of the Staff Judge Advocate, recalls a barbecue that he had at his home that Phelps attended:

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PVT Phelps was shy when I first met him. I took him to the back of my house for some BBQ. The back of my house had a pirate’s castle, a Barbie house, and huge swing set. He asked me, “Chief, is it ok for me to play with the kids?” I told him yes. Without hesitation he took off! Coty was a kid at heart, my daughters were just in love with that boy. There was one point during the BBQ where he was piled on by at least ten kids from the neighborhood.

As the BOLT stood up, Phelps was assigned to be the sole paralegal for the 725th Brigade Support Battalion. With nearly 1000 assigned Paratroopers, it was the largest of the six battalions in the Brigade. Despite the enormous mission and workload, he immediately took ownership of his responsibilities and his tasks.

As the months passed, the 4-25 BOLT became a team, both at work and outside the office, as they trained for their pending combat deployment to Iraq. Physical conditioning was an important aspect of their preparation and team building and it was an area where Phelps consistently stood out. He was a great runner and consistently scored a perfect 300 on his Army Physical Fitness Test.

Phelps often took it upon himself to bring humor and levity to the daily garrison office routine. One day in the office at Fort Richardson, a First Sergeant and a senior noncommissioned (NCO) came into the BOLT office concerning a legal issue. Staff Sergeant Kimberly Dant, the BOLT NCO in charge, and Captain Cory Young, the BOLT Trial Counsel, got into a debate with them that was just about to crescendo when Phelps suddenly leapt to his feet and yelled: “You can’t handle the truth!” That immediately placed the issue back into its proper perspective and effectively quelled the situation.

In early October 2006, the Paratroopers from 4-25 loaded onto aircraft and headed towards Iraq. Only a little over a year from the day the Spartan Brigade was officially stood up, Phelps and nine other Soldiers from the BOLT were off to a combat zone. During the prior year, Phelps and his teammates had all tirelessly trained in field exercises in the frozen Alaskan tundra in arctic weather and in the heat and humidity of a Joint Readiness Training Center rotation at Fort Polk, Louisiana in August. Phelps was excited about the deployment and ready to do his job in Iraq.

After spending nearly another month preparing in Kuwait, Phelps arrived at FOB Kalsu—a mid-sized FOB south of Baghdad in late October 2006. There, he immediately set to work with the other BOLT paralegals to establish an office. In addition to his assigned duty of handling actions for his battalion, he was eventually given the additional task as the claims specialist. His claims duties required him to assist with the intake and processing of all foreign claims—a duty that necessitated his travel to FOB Iskandariyah every two weeks to handle claims at that FOB. He loved his claims mission, the ability to get off FOB Kalsu, assist claimants, and visit with SPC Stein, who was stationed with his battalion at FOB Iskandariyah.

Captain Sarah Rykowski, who assumed the role of Claims Attorney and Trial Counsel for the BOLT upon her arrival into Iraq in April 2007, had the opportunity to work closely with Phelps on several claims missions. Once, she and Phelps were discussing a claim with two Iraqi women who alleged that the U.S. military was responsible for their husband’s deaths.

I had to tell these two Iraqi women that we found no evidence the U.S. military was responsible for their husbands’ deaths, and therefore could offer no compensation. “What do we do?” they asked. “We’re widows.” Everyone was near tears when Phelps took out his wallet and gave them each a $50 bill. I didn’t expect that, and it warmed my heart. He was an amazing kid.

In April 2007, indirect fire attacks on FOB Kalsu became nearly a daily routine. The Soldiers became accustomed to spending time in bunkers waiting for the all-clear to sound. A unique culture developed from time spent with others in the bunkers. Captain Matt Dyson, who handled Detention Operations and Legal Assistance for the BOLT at that time, recalls:

Phelps was always great at impersonations. I remember one particular night when Phelps and I were in the office getting ready to call it a day. Phelps was impersonating Dane Cook, a favorite comedian of ours. He knew all the jokes and delivered them as if he had actually written them and performed them a hundred times. Sure enough, just before we were heading out of the office we heard three or four explosions. We made our way to the closest bunker to wait out the attack. While in the bunker Phelps told me that he needed to log more “bunker time.” He explained that extended periods of time spent in a bunker was a prerequisite for promotion to sergeant. He made the comment in jest probably to calm my nerves. It worked!
Despite the daily challenges and the demanding work schedules, Phelps still found time to keep in touch with friends and family back in the States. Phelps loved his family dearly and would talk about them often. Phone conversations with his family were coveted in Iraq and every time he would successfully get through to his family he was very happy. In addition to his father Robbie and stepmother Regina, Phelps is survived by an older brother Ryan, a younger brother Robbie, and a younger sister Trisha. On the morning of 17 May 2007, before heading out on his convoy, Phelps was able to get through to his family on the phone and wish Robbie a happy birthday.

Corporal Phelps was a tremendous person, a great Soldier, and a wonderful paralegal. Phelps enjoyed being a paralegal, but he loved being a Soldier. Once, when asked on a questionnaire what his career aspiration was, he listed simply: “to raise a family and retire from the Army.” His awards and decorations include the Bronze Star Medal, Purple Heart, National Defense Service Medal, Iraq Campaign Medal, Global War on Terrorism Service Medal, Army Service Ribbon, Overseas Service Ribbon, Combat Action Badge, Basic Marksmanship Qualification Badge, and the Parachutist Badge.

Sergeant Jennifer Brown, a paralegal from the 4-25 BOLT, offers a final reflection:

Phelps wasn’t only a great Soldier, he was great young man. No matter how bad my day was going, Phelps was there to try to make me laugh and to tell me to just pray about it and leave it to the “Big Guy up there.” It cracked me up when I’d walk in the office singing a song, and he would end up singing it all day. Especially when it was a “girly song” as he called it. I really miss him. I pray that I have another Soldier as hard working, witty, and compassionate as he was. Coty James Phelps will be greatly missed. I believe that right now he is in Heaven making all the angels laugh.