THEY SERVED IN SILENCE

The Story of a Cryptologic Hero
SGT James D. Pirtle, USA

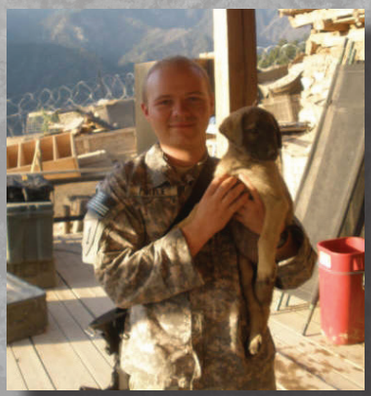
In wartime the ability to provide and protect critical information is essential to achieving victory and saving lives. From antiquity to the present day, commanders have depended on individuals skilled in the art and science of cryptology to provide them the facts and information they need to achieve success. SGT James Pirtle, of the Special Troops Battalion, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division was very much a part of this long and noble tradition. May 2009 would find him on his first deployment in Afghanistan supporting Operation Enduring Freedom.

The series of events that brought SGT Pirtle to the harsh and unforgiving battlefields of Afghanistan were anything but typical. He was born and raised in the beautiful city of Colorado Springs, Colorado; and like so many natives of the Centennial State, he enjoyed spending time in the outdoors playing a wide range of sports such as baseball and Frisbee golf. Fishing was one of his favorite pastimes.

Dina Wood, a former teacher and friend recalled that "at first glance, he did not appear to be someone who was headed for a career in the service." The first time she ever laid eyes on Jim he had his hair dyed green and styled into spikes. He also had a reputation for being a bit of a free spirit. On one occasion during his high school years, he dared a group of friends to duct tape him to a tree. They were more than happy to oblige. A teacher noted that "It took two full rolls. We left him out there for a while."

But this free spirit would, just like many members of his family had done in the past, make the decision to devote his efforts to something greater than himself. In 2006 he decided to join the United States Army. After his initial training, he became part of the 1st Infantry Division, the Big Red One, a unit that had once landed on Omaha Beach and fought in countless battles right up to the present day. Like so many young men, the Army changed his life for the better. Andrew Thurn, one of his best friends noted that, "He was still the same Jimmy with the same goofy grin, but…It was as if the Army upgraded him. Like Jimmy 2.0." Again, to quote his former teacher Ms. Wood, the Army turned "a good boy into a really good man."

The motto of the 1st Division is "No Mission Too Difficult, No Sacrifice Too Great." SGT Pirtle had developed a reputation for



living up to his unit's motto by frequently volunteering for missions that he knew would be exceedingly dangerous. In May 2009, his unit came under fire in Afghanistan. SGT Pirtle and two other American heroes would perish in the attack. He was 21 years old at the time and was due to rotate home in June. He left behind countless friends and loving family members.

Armies are commanded by generals, but, in the end, wars are fought and won by the Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Marines who somehow find the courage to place themselves in harms way to defend their nation and their comrades in arms.

President Theodore Roosevelt once noted that "the men and women who have the right ideals ... are those who have the courage to strive for the happiness which comes only with labor and effort and self-sacrifice, and those whose joy in life springs in part from power of work and sense of duty."

Roosevelt's words could be applied to the countless men and women who have served in the armed forces of the United States. But in particular, they also aptly describe men such as SGT James D. Pirtle of America who, through his devotion to his nation, gave his life in order to preserve freedom and liberty, not only in his time, but for generations to come.

Jim's mother said it best, "He had a real zest for life and a real desire to help people. He was a great person and a hero to me."

It is in this spirit that we honor and remember SGT Pirtle, a Soldier, cryptologist, devoted son and brother, but most of all, a true American hero.

SGT James D. Pirtle
10 Jan 1988 - 01 May 2009

Photos courtesy of the Pirtle family
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