

# SOUTH DAKOTA FALLEN HERO



*Your  
Memory  
lives on in  
our hearts.*



*In Loving Memory*

*SSG Jeremy D. Vrooman*



*Stouxx Falls, SD*

*US Army*

*2-27-1980 to 7-15-2008*

*Iraq*

U.S. ARMY STAFF SERGEANT JEREMY D. VROOMAN'S STORY  
BY BRUCE AND SHARON VROOMAN

We are Jeremy's dad and stepmom. We lived in Mitchell. Jeremy was nine and his brother Justin was 10, when I (Sue) came into the picture. I brought a son, Brad Steckelberg (16) into the mix, and we became an instant family of five in 1980. It was a very lively household.

Growing up Jeremy had many interests. He loved to fish, hunt, watch TV, and do things as a family. He was a great kid! He wasn't too crazy about school though. He would make up all sorts of excuses to get out of doing homework. Jeremy spent more time trying to get out of it than it would take to actually do it!

Like any child, Jeremy tried out patience many times. He was usually drawn to the kids who liked to look for trouble and he got into it himself sometimes. He always got out of the messes, but later on in high school, he wasn't so lucky. Jeremy was sentenced to the South Dakota Boot Camp for Boys in Custer at age 17.

The Camp was run like an Army boot camp with a structured schedule. Jeremy thrived there. He was a model student and came out of there with his GED and a new lease on life. He was a mentor to the other boys and showed leadership even then. Jeremy made the decision then; that he wanted to serve his country as a U.S. Army Soldier. He wanted to make a difference. The Boot Camp literally turned his life around.

The process of enlisting took over a year because of his record. The Army was pretty strict then. The call finally came – "you're in." Jeremy took his oath on December 28, 1999. He stood so tall and proud that day. The Basic and AIT training took place at Ft. Knox, Kentucky. Jeremy trained to be a Cav. Scout. The Cavalry way is "first in, last out." Jeremy took that to heart. His first base assignment was Schweinfurt, Germany.

Jeremy was at Schweinfurt for two years. His Company Commander was Lt. Colonel H. R. McMaster. Those two had much respect for each other and a friendship developed. After two years, in 2003, Jeremy was given new orders to report to Ft. Carson, Colorado.

He liked Ft. Carson. He met his future wife, Latrecia, there and he got a new commander – his old friend, H. R. McMaster, now a Colonel. Together again! Jeremy would be deployed soon, so he and Latrecia decided to marry. Son Xavier was born during the deployment. While in Iraq, he was promoted to Sergeant.

After his deployment was up in 2004, the family moved to Spokane, Washington to join the recruiting team. But Jeremy missed his old unit and put in a request to rejoin them. Next assignment, Ft. Lewis, Washington.

Jeremy reported to Ft. Lewis in January of 2006. He trained on the Strykers. The Regiment had plans to move to Vilseck, Germany, in August, and was reflagged 2<sup>nd</sup> Stryker Cavalry Regiment. Jeremy was so

excited to return to Germany! His family would be able to experience Germany along with him this time!

The base at Vilseck was pretty sparse – no PX, no commissary, schools, hospital, nothing. They had to drive everywhere to get what they needed, but they made it work. Xavier was learning German, and the family was exploring Germany. That year (2007), Jeremy was promoted to Staff Sergeant, and was the commander of a Stryker Unit (two vehicles and eight troops). Plus, a new addition to the family in September – daughter Jade!

The unit was getting ready for a deployment in February 2008 to Iraq. But Jeremy's commander kept him back on Rear Detachment. Jeremy spent considerable time training his men and he wasn't at all happy about this decision. His unit left without him. Jeremy pestered his commander often to request a trade. Finally, in June of 2008, his commander relented and brought him over. Upon Jeremy's arrival in Iraq, his men stated, "It was like he'd never been away." They picked up where they left off.

July 15, 2008, Jeremy's platoon was needed for a very important mission called "Operation Cougar Storm." It was heavy on staff sergeants and higher ranked soldiers. They were clearing 20 buildings in the town of Kn'aan in the Diyala Province, for the people to go back to work. The mission started at dawn of another intensely, hot dusty day. A total of 90 soldiers were involved.

The plan was: three soldiers per building, total of 60. Jeremy was the team leader and was to give the order for everyone to enter at once. Jeremy was with SSG Robert Mainard and SPC John Humphrey. Jeremy told Mainard that morning that he had a bad feeling about the mission, and to tell his wife and kids that he loves them in case something would happen. For one thing, it was too quiet.

Jeremy made the decision to lead from the front and enter first. Mainard went to inspect a file cabinet; then Jeremy and Humphrey continued on to a door that was closed and stuck. Humphrey braced Jeremy and together they got the door opened. Just then, Jeremy saw something and yelled to Humphrey to run. The building exploded.

In the meantime, other groups were about to enter their buildings. The explosion made them stop and run to help get Jeremy and his men out. They found Mainard and Humphrey right away and got them to the Baghdad hospital. It took a while to find Jeremy because he was completely buried in the rubble. They finally found his boot. An I-beam had fallen on him, so they brought in some equipment to get that off. Jeremy had no pulse. The medics worked on him for 45 minutes and got it going. A helicopter took him to Baghdad, but he succumbed to his injuries during surgery.

Back in Kn'aan, Jeremy's unit was regrouping. They brought in a bomb sniffing dog. The dog sat down at every building. Every single building was wired. An air strike was called. Thus began Operation Cougar Storm II. The Air Force dropped ten 500 pound bombs. They discovered that the buildings were not only wired, they were double wired. There was wiring above and below the flooring.

The Air Force didn't want to use any more of their bombs, so began Operation Cougar Storm III. A platoon was brought into level the rest of the buildings with ground missiles. The reason it was so quiet in that town is that the insurgents cleared it out beforehand. The insurgents took the coward's way, wired buildings and rant. They wanted to kill all 90 men there that day, but they got only one.

Back in Baghdad, the doctors got Jeremy ready for his Hero Flight to Kuwait. Jeremy's men got word of his death and they had a memorial service. Jeremy arrived in Dover from Kuwait, then his final leg of the journey to San Antonio, Texas where his wife and children lived. Jeremy is interred at Fort Sam Houston National Cemetery. He was laid to rest on July 25, 2008. Jeremy's old friend, Col. H.R. McMaster presented flags and medals and even marched in front of the caisson in 95+ degree heat in full dress uniform! Jeremy was given a hero's funeral. He was awarded the Bronze Star and the Purple Heart.

Jeremy is being credited with saving the lives of all 59 men involved in clearing those buildings. He made the decision to enter first because he didn't want to have any other casualties, just in case something went wrong. He had much love and respect for his men. The unit greatly felt his loss.

Jeremy, being the team leader, didn't even have to enter a building. He could have stayed back at his Stryker and ordered his men in. But Jeremy was trained as a Cav. Scout --- lead from the front. He believed it and wouldn't have it any other way. Those 59 men are alive today because of Jeremy's quick thinking -- they are alive today to live the life that Jeremy wanted for them. SSG Jeremy Vrooman is a hero.

