



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Fred Akshar

## Senator Fred Akshar Inducts SSG. Willis W. Smith into the 2019 Senate Veterans Hall of Fame

FRED AKSHAR May 23, 2019

| ISSUE: **VETERANS HALL OF FAME**



For Immediate Release:

May 22, 2019

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(ALBANY, NY) This week Senator Fred Akshar inducted Staff Sergeant Willis W. Smith into the New York State Senate Veterans' Hall of Fame Class of 2018 in Albany.

Each year, the New York State Senate honors veterans who have distinguished themselves in both their military and community service.

SSG Smith joined the Army Reserves in 1985 as a Heavy Equipment Operator, eventually transferring to the National Guard, where he would complete numerous state active duty assignments including the recovery of TWA Flight 800.

In 2009, he deployed to Afghanistan, overseeing multiple missions from building barricades, drainage systems and roads, to rebuilding an Afghanistan police station that had been bombed. SSG Smith was awarded the NATO Meritorious Award for his leadership working directly with Afghanistan soldiers on various projects and providing instruction while overcoming the language barrier.

In 2001, SSG Smith deployed to Ground Zero to aid in the immediate recovery from the 9/11 terrorist attacks as a member of the 827th Engineer Company. In addition to his 22 years of military service and his civilian career as an ironworker, SSG Smith served his community as Deposit Village Trustee and Mayor of Deposit.

As Mayor, his leadership helped the small Deposit community survive and recover from the devastating flood of 2006. Organizing the fire department, village public works, police and

EMS to ensure safety and support for community members, SSG Smith also arranged for FEMA applications to be taken door-to-door to ensure all applications for disaster assistance were returned to the federal government in record time.

After retiring from the National Guard in 2014, SSG Smith returned to local government and was instrumental in the creation of Eastern Broome Emergency Services, which combined EMS services for multiple rural areas by sharing resources, improving coverage and reducing costs.

SSG Smith passed away in 2018 at age 50, leaving a legacy of community-minded leadership and service, including 22 years of military service, eight years in local government and 30 years of marriage.

Smith's son, Aaron Smith attended the Hall of Fame Ceremony on SSG Smith's behalf.

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*“SSG Willis W. Smith devoted his life to serving his country and his community in a variety of roles both at home and abroad.” said Senator Fred Akshar. “His tireless dedication to service deserves to be celebrated and will always be remembered. On behalf of a grateful state and a grateful nation, we thank SSG Smith for his service and thank the entire Smith family for allowing us to honor his life.”*

#### **SSG Smith's Short Bio:**

Staff Sergeant Willis W. Smith gave a lifetime of service to both his country and his community.



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**SSG Smith's Long Bio provided by the Smith family:**

Willis born October 10, 1967 to Anthony and Joyce Smith. He was the fourth born of six children. He had three older brothers, a younger brother and sister.

Willis grew up in a small area in Central New York known as Deposit. When he was very small his family lived near the Delaware river. He would spend hours with his older brothers roaming the nearby corn fields looking for arrowheads. This may have been what started his love of history and the outdoors.

When he was about 7 years old his moved to the other side of the village where he had a creek that he played in and fished. This was where he met the girl that would later become his wife. While living here he developed his love for hunting, fishing, and riding dirt bikes. He enjoyed playing baseball and football with the neighborhood kids.

It was a young age that Willis knew he wanted to join the Army. He and his cousin decided during a sleep over they were going to join, once they were old enough. That childhood plan would eventually come true. Willis had an uncle that served in Army during Vietnam that he was very close to and admired. He was a large part of why Willis wanted to join the Army. He wanted to become a Sargent just like his Uncle Doug.

When he was 12 years his uncle was diagnosed with brain cancer from his exposure to agent orange during his two tours. He lost his battle with the cancer and Willis suffered his first great loss in life. This didn't change his feelings towards his career path of the military. He signed up with Army Reserves at the age of 17. The day after his high school graduation in June of 1985, he was on his way to the first half of his training at Fort Leonard Wood Missouri. Willis did what they call "split training" because he was also going to college for

welding as his civilian career. He was heavy equipment operator in the Reserves.

After his training was completed his unit was the 464th in Hillcrest New York until the government started to close units down. He then transferred into the National Guard and served out of the 204th in Walton New York. Willis would go on countless SAD's during his time with Walton. One that stands out for him would be the Recovery of flight 800. This was a volunteer SAD that would forever change him. He was a father by this time and seeing the debris being pieced back together of the crash was hard on him. Knowing that there were young children on the flight made him think of his own children. This gave him more reason to continue his time in the National Guards. He wanted to protect this country and all that resided within her borders.

On his civilian front Willis was working for a small company that worked with bottling equipment. He traveled a lot for this company often being taken away from his family for weeks at a time. He didn't like how often he had to go away, but it was what he had to do to provide for his family. Willis was one of the most hardest working people. He would work 70-80 hours a week while out of town. It was a difficult time for him trying to balance work, guards, and family. Some how he managed to push through for 10 years with this company before making the change in career. It was in October of 1997 that he joined Ironworkers Local 60 out of Syracuse.

As an apprentice with Ironworkers it requires that you attend apprenticeship classes for 4 years. Now he was juggling his job, Guards and apprenticeship. The more he had on his shoulders the better he performed. The 4 year program was completed in three. Willis excelled and managed to graduate early. He was picked up by company out of Syracuse where he eventually was promoted to Foreman. He also got into local municipal politics. He was elected to the village board for Deposit in the spring of 2001.

2001 was a life changing year for Willis. He started his political career and went to the most horrific SAD to date....9/11. 9/11 changed us as a country. Willis was at ground zero for two weeks. His unit then was the 827th. He never talked much about this SAD, but something changed inside him. His enlistment was up in March of 2004 so he decided to take a break and pursue his political career and run for Mayor of Deposit. He wanted to be sure he could dedicate himself to the position at the level he needed to. He soon became one of the best Mayor's Deposit has ever had. He served his village as trustee from 2001 until 2004 when he was elected as Mayor. He would hold the position as Mayor until the end of summer in 2009. During that time he would be responsible for the needs of a village that was financially in trouble. He would spend countless hours going over the budget to try and save the taxpayers money. Deposit is a community that the majority of residents are low fixed income families or seniors with fixed incomes. Willis worked hard for his community during the flood of 2006. There was little assistance from any outside agencies for this small town. With the leadership qualities that Willis displayed this village was cleaned up and FEMA paperwork was submitted in record time. He organized the fire department, village public works, police and EMS to ensure that all community members were provided for and supported. He arranged for FEMA applications to be taken door to door so that the community members impacted by the flooding could stay with their homes to clean up. All applications were taken to the village hall where a FEMA rep would pick them.

In 2009 he would deploy to Afghanistan as a Sgt. It was about 2 months into the deployment when he approached by his senior officers and was requested to take over at the squad leader position. He overseen multiple missions during the year long deployment. Building barricades, drainage systems, roads, and rebuilding an Afghanistan police station that had been bombed. Willis was awarded the NATO Meritorious Award for his leadership of a group of Afghanistan soldiers. He worked directly with these soldiers on projects giving them

instructions while overcoming the language barrier.

In April of 2014 Willis retired from the Guards after serving for 22 years. The Guards had been a big part of his life. He passed down the core values to not just his soldiers, but to his family as well. Willis was a teacher and mentor. He enjoyed sharing his knowledge and helping others to grow and learn new things. The Guards was a perfect setting for his leadership skills to develop more. He was a born leader that just became so much better with his Guard family. His men looked up to him not just while they were at drills or on deployment. They trusted him with their lives and looked up to him for life advice.

After retirement he got back into village politics. He worked closely with the EMS department and was instrumental in the creation of Eastern Broome Emergency Services. Again, he pushed for this because it would combine EMS for multiple rural areas sharing the cost across many making it better and more affordable for the communities.

Willis had managed to accomplish 22 years of military service rising to the rank of Ssgt, 8 years local government, 30 years of marriage in his short 50 years of life. He was a kind man that loved his country and community. He was a coach for little league, he took youth and inexperienced hunters out and mentored them. He believed if you exposed a child to nature and sports, they would make better choices when it came to destructive behaviors such as drugs. He fought for those too weak to fight for themselves. He did the right thing even when it wasn't popular. He was an extremely well-liked man by his community. He made changes that mattered to his community by keeping taxes low while still upgrading the infrastructure of the village.

Willis was one of a kind. Dedicated father, grandfather, son, brother, uncle, and most of all husband. He was the pillar in his family. Everyone looked up to "our hero". He always said that he wasn't a hero, just doing his job. It was about doing the best he could with ethics and



values in place.