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An Iraq Veteran's Descent; a Prosecutor's Choice

By [DEBORAH SONTAG](#)

TOOELE, [Utah](#) — Not long after Lance Cpl. Walter Rollo Smith returned from [Iraq](#), the Marines dispatched him to Quantico, Va., for a marksmanship instructor course.

Mr. Smith, then a 21-year-old Marine Corps reservist from Utah, had been shaken to the core by the intensity of his experience during the invasion of Iraq. Once a squeaky-clean Mormon boy who aspired to serve a mission abroad, he had come home a smoker and drinker, unsure if he believed in God.

In Quantico, he reported to the firing range with a friend from Fox Company, the combined Salt Lake City-Las Vegas battalion nicknamed the Saints and Sinners. Raising his rifle, he stared through the scope and started shaking. What he saw were not the inanimate targets before him but vivid, hallucinatory images of Iraq: “the cars coming at us, the chaos, the dust, the women and children, the bodies we left behind,” he said.

Each time he squeezed the trigger, Mr. Smith cried, harder and harder until he was, in his own words, “bawling on the rifle range, which marines just do not do.” Mortified, he allowed himself to be pulled away. And not long afterward, the Marines began processing his medical discharge for post-traumatic stress disorder, severing his link to the Reserve unit that anchored him and sending him off to seek help from veterans hospitals.

The incident on the firing range was the first “red flag,” as the prosecutor in Tooele County, Utah, termed it, that Mr. Smith sent up as he gradually disintegrated psychologically. At his lowest point, in March 2006, he killed Nicole Marie Speirs, the 22-year-old mother of his twin children, drowning her in a bathtub without any evident provocation or reason.

“There was no intent,” said Gary K. Searle, the deputy Tooele County attorney. “It was almost like things kept ratcheting up, without any real intervention that I can see, until one day he snapped.”

Clearly, Mr. Smith's descent into homicidal, and suicidal, behavior is not representative of returning veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder. But among the homicide cases involving recent war veterans examined by The New York Times, Mr. Smith's stands out because his identity as a psychologically injured veteran shaped the way that his crime was perceived locally and handled by local authorities.

Mr. Smith confessed to the killing at a Veterans Affairs hospital, which immediately set his crime in the context of his deployment and of a growing concern about care for veterans with combat stress. The fact that Mr. Smith was discharged from the Marines for post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, made the prosecutor reluctant to bring the case to a jury.

“Did we want to go through a trial where basically we were going to have to defend the United States' actions on how they treated him?” Mr. Searle said.

Nobody believes that Mr. Smith's killing of Ms. Speirs can be justified. But many involved in the case have wondered aloud, at some point, whether Ms. Speirs's life might have been spared if the marine's combat trauma had been treated more aggressively.

Ms. Speirs's parents do not engage in such speculation. They view their daughter as a victim of fatal domestic violence and not as an indirect casualty of the war in Iraq.

Last fall, sitting in their living room, across from framed samplers that said "Home Sweet Home" and "Welcome Friends," John and Pauline Speirs remembered their daughter as a shy tomboy, a graphic designer and a proud young mother. In their estimation, Ms. Speirs herself has been ignored in all the attention given in Utah to Mr. Smith as a combat veteran.

"When they mention Nicole, it's like an aside," Mr. Speirs said, his voice quiet, his emotion muted. "I feel like a lot of people are using her death as something against the war. They practically are like saying that President Bush killed Nicole. Well, Walter killed Nicole. The war can be a factor. It's not a reason or an excuse for it."

Mr. Smith himself, in a long, dry-eyed interview in October, almost agreed. "I can't completely, honestly say that, yes, PTSD was the sole cause of what I did," he said, speaking through a plastic partition in a courthouse holding cell. "I don't want to use it as a crutch. I'd feel like I was copping out of something I claim responsibility for. But I know for a fact that before I went to Iraq, there's no way I would have taken somebody else's life."

Off the Preordained Path

As a teenager, Mr. Smith did not fit the prototype of the future marine. He was, in his description, "a loner and a geek" — "a math club, chess club, band and choir geek, with no interest in competitive sports past the age where you get the trophies for just showing up."

Yet at a high school career day, Mr. Smith was drawn to the Marine Corps booth partly because the military seemed like a departure from a preordained path. "Growing up LDS," he said, using the abbreviation for Latter-day Saints, "you're pretty much told what you're going to do. At the age of 19, the young men are supposed to go off on mission."

In early 2000, Mr. Smith went off to boot camp instead, enlisting in the Reserves, like many other young Mormon recruits, so that he retained the option of mission duty.

Mr. Smith made an impression on the recruiters, scoring in the 99th percentile on the Armed Forces Vocational Aptitude Battery tests, said Christopher Nibley, a fellow reservist from Utah. "I was doing a stint in the recruiting office then," Mr. Nibley said, "and I remember a recruiter saying, 'Damn, that boy is so smart!'"

On Jan. 7, 2002 — Mr. Smith has a precise memory for dates — he received a phone call. "O.K., Smith, listen up and don't interrupt," an officer began. He read Mr. Smith his activation orders. Mr. Smith took a leave from a job at Wal-Mart and moved to Camp Pendleton near San Diego.

During the next year, when the Utah reservists lived in makeshift quarters on the Marine base, they bonded. Christopher Quiñones, now 32, who shared a bunk bed with Mr. Smith, described him as "a happy-go-lucky, 'I want to go on a mission, I want to marry my high school sweetheart' type."

"Looking back on it," Mr. Quiñones said, "I think Walter and a lot of guys probably should have experienced a lot

more of life before we sent them off to get their heads blown off. But at that time, I couldn't think of anybody else I'd rather go over there with."

Mr. Smith's superior officer, Sgt. Maj. Nick Lopez, was not as embracing. "He didn't stand out as anything special, but he also didn't have anything derogatory," Sergeant Major Lopez, a Salt Lake City firefighter, said of Mr. Smith. "He was a marine who did his job, and he had a tough job, at home and in combat."

In early 2003, the reservists of Fox Company deployed to Kuwait with the First Marine Division. After desert warfare training, they crossed into Iraq during the invasion. Crammed into the back of a large pickup truck, Mr. Smith and the other reservists traveled at a warp-slow speed at the dusty rear of a convoy miles long. Sandbags served as their armor, and, for one week, with a single M.R.E. each a day, adrenaline served as their fuel.

As they moved toward Baghdad, the gunfire cracked like whips around them, almost like sound effects for a war movie. Near Nasiriya, the reality of combat set in when they drove slowly past an amphibious vehicle containing the body parts of dead marines, their uniforms torn to shreds. Their first firefight was soon upon them.

"We were jumping concrete walls and diving headlong into it, and Walter was always putting himself out front," Mr. Quiñones said. "Any sniper could have taken him out, but he was the type to throw himself out there to save the rest of us."

Nothing that came before prepared the Saints and Sinners for April 8, 2003, which a New York Times correspondent later described as one of the war's most "furious engagements."

As dawn broke just outside Baghdad, they woke to find themselves staring at Armageddon, as Mr. Nibley said, with fires burning, helicopters shooting rockets and explosions echoing through the early-morning air. Entering the city, they climbed down from their trucks and fanned out. While the first platoon to move forward took fire immediately — with one marine shot through his helmet — others found themselves walking into the arms of exultant Iraqis.

Before long, however, as they arrived at a five-point intersection near the Republican Guard headquarters and the Defense Ministry, the cheering civilians disappeared, traffic vanished and the streets turned ghostly. As they set up roadblocks, rocket-propelled grenades and machine gun fire began whizzing toward them from the heavily defended compounds.

"I felt like I was in the middle of a duck shoot and we were the ducks," said Mr. Smith, who was a SAW — squad automatic weapon — gunner. "I don't know how many R.P.G.'s we took. One landed about five feet to the right of me and my buddy. I don't know how it did not detonate, but instead it bounced. Bounced! I can't believe we're still alive."

The fighting did not let up for many hours. "Whether or not I actually killed anybody with my own bullets, I don't know," Mr. Smith said. "I suspect so. But there were two to 12 guns going off at once, and only the snipers knew for sure." At a certain point, the Iraqi fighters commandeered civilians' cars, taking them hostage and ordering them to drive straight at the Marine positions. The marines were forced to shoot at everything headed their way.

"We were opening fire on civilians," Mr. Smith said. "We were taking out women and children because it was them or us."

Sergeant Major Lopez, his superior officer, said that his marines were "put in that position" and "trained to protect

themselves first.”

“Our marines tried to limit civilian casualties,” he said. “Not a person there didn’t feel bad. But it had to be done.”

That day traumatized the reservists. Mr. Quiñones recalled a father carrying toward them the limp body of a young child. His voice cracking, he described a 5-year-old boy screaming as his car “turned into Swiss cheese.”

“I called cease-fire and I wanted to run and grab him, but there were machine gun rounds flying all around,” Mr. Quiñones said. “I watched this kid’s head get blown away, his brains splattering while his screams still echoed. Those images haunt me — haunt many of us — to this day.”

At the end of the day, 11 men in Mr. Smith’s company had been wounded but none were killed. The Iraqis fared worse. The Times’s correspondent, Dexter Filkins, described a fleeing family that lost three men, each slumped over a different car’s steering wheel. And it also described the marines, in tears, helping the wounded members of the family to safety.

Pro Forma Questions

Before they returned to the United States later in 2003, the reservists filled out questionnaires about their mental health. “Then they sat us down one after the other with an officer and he looked over the form, and said, ‘Are you doing O.K.?’ and, no matter what we wrote, we’d say yup, and then he’d say, ‘Next!’ ” Mr. Smith said.

A couple of months later, the Saints and Sinners parted company, but the Saints, some of whom were so saintly that they did not watch R-rated movies, kept close. Mr. Smith soon volunteered to go to Quantico.

After he collapsed on the firing range there, though, he disappeared from his band of brothers. “All I ever heard was Walter went nuts on the firing range, and then I never see this guy again until I see his picture on the front page looking like Grizzly Adams because he killed his girlfriend,” his fellow reservist Mr. Nibley said.

Mr. Nibley, who describes himself as adrift after two tours of duty in Iraq, said he was infuriated to learn later that Mr. Smith had been processed for discharge.

“I can’t tell you how angry I am at the Marine Corps that they just fast-tracked him out,” Mr. Nibley said. “It’s the culture and mentality of: ‘We don’t want a loser on our team. We’re not here to help you, you’re here to help us.’ ”

“I understand that we’re an infantry unit and if you’re not able to carry a gun and go into combat, that’s a problem,” Mr. Nibley said. “But we were his anchors, and we would have been his advocates. He was a mentally injured person because of his service to this country. He should not have been kicked out to go off on his own and deal with it all outside.”

The Marines do not discuss the specifics of any individual’s discharge. But the Marines do not discharge all who are diagnosed with combat trauma, said Major Eric R. Dent, a spokesman. “The goal of our competent medical professionals is to treat and return to full operational duty and full life functioning every marine who is diagnosed and treated with PTSD or any other stress injury,” Major Dent said.

Pillars of Stability Shaken

When Mr. Smith was discharged, he felt unmoored. He resumed his work at Wal-Mart, where he would stay, at one store or another, until he was arrested. He started receiving a monthly disability check of \$661. He bought a place of his own, a century-old fixer-upper in Pleasant Grove, Utah. But because he no longer participated in weekend Reserve training and because he was questioning his faith, he lost touch with two pillars of his existence.

Further shaking Mr. Smith's stability, his parents were going through a bitter divorce after 25 years of marriage and 12 children. Mr. Smith's father moved in with Mr. Smith, his oldest son, and 2004 turned into a very difficult year for both of them.

"He definitely changed," said Mr. Quiñones, a mail carrier, who remained friends with Mr. Smith. "After Iraq, he found it hard to care about life anymore. He became bitter to the point of suicidal."

Mr. Smith was hardly the only one in his company to experience darkness and dysfunction. Of the approximately 40 men in his platoon, post-traumatic stress disorder was eventually diagnosed in at least 10 others, according to several of the reservists. But Mr. Smith carried the dubious distinction of being the first. As a result, he missed out on the group counseling sessions with a Navy psychiatrist that were offered on drill weekends back in Utah.

While his discharge was being processed, Mr. Smith was required to report monthly to an Air Force base in Utah, and he saw a psychiatrist there a few times. He also, reluctantly and at the Marines' insistence, reported to the Veterans Affairs Hospital in Salt Lake City, where he attended a single group session for returning Iraq veterans.

"I'm sitting there and these guys are talking about the hard time they're having because their supply unit heard some fire one time," he said. "They never saw their buddies get hit. They never killed anybody. They had nothing to worry about. I never went back."

V.A. officials, in consideration of his privacy, declined to discuss Mr. Smith's health care. Speaking generally, Dr. Matthew J. Friedman, executive director of the agency's National Center for PTSD, said it was "unfortunately not unusual" for veterans with combat trauma to report "for a session, maybe get some medications prescribed and a therapist assigned and never come back." One of the central symptoms of the stress disorder is avoidance, he noted, and some veterans do not want "to retell what happened" and risk being retraumatized.

"We all would want them to come back and are trying to increase the odds that they will come back by working with community organizations, making follow-up phone calls and educating families through public service announcements," Dr. Friedman said. "Through the retro-scope, there's always something more that could have been done had we been able to foretell the future."

For a while, Mr. Smith took some prescription medications to help him sleep and soothe his anxiety, but he quit the pills when they did not seem to work. Gradually, he felt himself getting worse.

"Nothing seemed to quiet the storm in my head," he said. "I started having nightmares and flashbacks or hallucinations. During the day, I was functioning O.K., but I was feeling antsy. I couldn't find peace."

Two things helped: drinking — 18 to 24 cans a day of Utah's lower-alcohol beer — and pulling a trigger. "One day, I went out skeet shooting with a buddy, and I realized I felt so much better having a shotgun in my hand and watching something explode," he said. He bought three guns of his own.

Very late on the night of July 1, 2004, Mr. Smith reached for one of those guns after an argument with his father.

Slinging it over his shoulder and grabbing 25 rounds of ammunition, he started walking toward the Wasatch Mountains. “I wanted to stop it all,” he said. “I didn’t feel like thinking about Iraq anymore. I didn’t feel like freaking out on the side of the road because someone slammed on their brakes. I didn’t feel like going rigid when I smelled diesel fuel. I was so tired. I just wanted to sleep.”

Mr. Smith left goodbye messages for everyone in his cellphone directory. One of his Fox Company buddies was awake, though, and took his call. He forced Mr. Smith to tell him his location and then he called the Pleasant Grove police. The police intercepted Mr. Smith near a trail head for Mount Timpanogos, and when he saw the officers approaching, he loaded his shotgun. He later told a close friend that he had been hoping for “suicide by cop.”

The police did not oblige. Capt. Cody Cullimore, the former assistant police chief, said Mr. Smith was compliant. He was taken to a mental health center and admitted briefly for observation.

“Sometimes I think,” Mr. Smith said, “that if I had taken my life that day, I would have saved Nicole’s.”

A Call for Help

In the fall of 2004, Walter Smith and Nicole Speirs met on [MySpace](#). On her page, Ms. Speirs — a Scorpio, Honda lover and Utah Career College graduate — said, “I have been described as a preppie, punk, ska8er, tomboy and car chick.”

Mr. Smith and Ms. Speirs went on a few dates. Mr. Smith also dated other women.

In November, Mr. Smith called the Pleasant Grove police asking for help. The officer who was dispatched to his house was the one who had intervened in his suicide attempt five months earlier. Mr. Smith advised the officer “that he was having thoughts of taking the life of his girlfriend while she was asleep,” Captain Cullimore said. “He asked to be transferred to the hospital, which he was.”

That girlfriend was not Ms. Speirs. Once again, Mr. Smith was released after a brief stay.

Mr. Smith said that he slept with Ms. Speirs once. To her parents’ dismay, Ms. Speirs, not quite 21, got pregnant. Mr. Smith accompanied her on her first visit to the obstetrician, where she learned that she was carrying twins, but then he grew doubtful that the babies were his, he said. They broke up. Ms. Speirs was heartbroken. Mr. Smith was not. “I totally forgot about her,” he said.

Mr. Smith then started seeing another woman. One night, he came home with duct tape and demanded that the woman accompany him to the basement, said Mr. Searle, the prosecutor. Once downstairs, Mr. Smith turned to the woman and implored her to get away from him quickly before he did her harm. She ran away. The couple broke up. In a further sign of his deterioration, Mr. Smith filed for bankruptcy and moved in with a marine buddy.

Meanwhile, Ms. Speirs gave birth to twins two months early, in May 2005. Ms. Speirs was a very happy young mother but, she would confess on her MySpace page, lonely.

About seven months after the twins were born, Mr. Smith “popped onto MySpace” to see if Ms. Speirs had posted any news after giving birth. And there were the twins, he said, smiling out at him like carbon copies of his own baby pictures.

When Mr. Smith reappeared in Ms. Speirs's life, she was ecstatic, her relatives said. "She had a perma-grin," her mother said. "She was smiling from ear to ear."

They moved into an apartment together in Tooele. Both of them were working at Wal-Mart, she as a cashier at the Tooele store, he as the manager of the photo lab at the West Jordan store. They did not fight, according to their friends and families, and "he was not mean to her," said Pauline Speirs, her mother.

Nicole Speirs wanted more from the relationship than Mr. Smith was giving her — more communication, more love, a commitment to marry.

In the post-midnight hours of March 25, 2006, the couple took a bath after making love. Ms. Speirs turned to rinse her hair under the faucet, and Mr. Smith pushed her head underwater and held it there until she died. Then he left her in the tub, dressed, fetched the twins, put them in their car seats and drove off, as planned, to a family reunion in Idaho.

From that point forward, disconnecting from his actions, he tried to convince himself that he had not taken Nicole Speirs's life, he said. From Idaho, he called her cellphone and left a message saying that he would be returning earlier than planned. When he got home almost a day later he put the babies to bed and followed the sound of running water into the bathroom. He lifted Ms. Speirs's body from the cold water, laid her on the bathroom floor, tried to perform CPR and covered her with a green towel. He then called 911, telling the dispatcher that he had found his girlfriend "cold and stiff" in a full tub and was trying to revive her. The dispatcher heard the tub draining.

When the authorities arrived, they saw no sign of foul play and, after interviewing Mr. Smith, suspected none, according to a police report written the next day. Mr. Smith had no record of arrests or even traffic violations, the police had never been called to their home and the neighbors reported no audible fighting through the thin walls. The body showed no visible indications of trauma. A plastic shower curtain, which could have been a lifeline for a drowning young woman, was undisturbed.

Mr. Smith called the Speirses. "He said, 'Nicole's dead.' Just like that," Mrs. Speirs said.

"The whole thing doesn't seem real," Mr. Speirs interjected. "It seems like a bad TV movie. But, anyway, we went over. The police were there. She had had root canal in January. There was a half bottle of pills. They went on the assumption that she had committed suicide."

Based on that assumption evidence was not gathered as it might have been if homicide were suspected.

Utah's chief medical examiner performed an autopsy and found no explanation for her death. The police, a small department in a small city with no homicide team and only a handful of murders in the last decade, effectively closed the case, classifying the death as "a drowning from unknown causes."

"The police never asked me if I had done it," Mr. Smith said. "No one came out and said, 'Walter, did you do it?' I don't know what I would have done if they did."

The Confession

The Speirs family placed a death notice in The Tooele Transcript-Bulletin, saying that their daughter had "passed away unexpectedly" and that she would be remembered for her "cute smile, talent of drawing" and her "love for

Walter and their twins and her family and friends.”

Mr. Smith cried once when it came time to choose a coffin. Otherwise, he was unemotional during the funeral proceedings, which some of Ms. Speirs’s friends and relatives noted.

“He threw his corsage on the casket, turned around and walked away,” said Robert Walkenhorst, Ms. Speirs’s grandfather. “It made me so mad.”

Asked about his behavior that day, Mr. Smith said, “Not to be coarse, but I’ve been around a ton of death, and it doesn’t affect me anymore.”

After the funeral, Mr. Smith and the Speirses began, essentially, to co-parent the twins. In the process, they developed a relationship. “I think that’s where he started feeling guilty,” Mr. Speirs said.

The summer after Nicole Speirs’s death, Mr. Smith began dating Michelle Zeller, a sales manager for a film company who supplied the photo labs at local Wal-Marts. Ms. Zeller, 34, knew about Ms. Speirs’s death, which she saw as a tragic accident. By September, Mr. Smith and Ms. Zeller, who has a daughter, were engaged and living together.

“He seemed pretty together,” Ms. Zeller said, “but he has told me since that he was faking it.”

Mr. Smith felt incredibly nervous, he said, that he was starting a new life, with three children involved, and that he had not “worked through my issues,” as he put it. He decided to give the veterans’ health care system another try, and soon he was commuting to Salt Lake City weekly to see a counselor, Ms. Zeller said.

“He told me they were trying to get in his head and help him deal with what had happened in Iraq,” Ms. Zeller said. “When he came home, he’d be distant and go lie down for an hour or so. One time, in late November, he slept for like a day and a half straight, waking up pale and with tremors. He seemed to be getting worse.”

On Dec. 3, 2006, Mr. Smith left the house to buy drywall at a Home Depot and never returned. “I took a left instead of a right and ended up heading to the V.A.,” he said. He called Ms. Zeller, crying, and told her he could not endure the thoughts in his head.

When Mr. Smith arrived at the hospital, he told them that he was “homicidal and suicidal.” Soon he was speaking to a counselor.

“I told them that I had done it,” Mr. Smith said, referring to killing Ms. Speirs. “The first person thought I was blaming myself for something I didn’t do. Then my uncle arrived. I told him, and he said, ‘We need to call the police.’ “

When the police arrived, Mr. Smith’s uncle told them that “Walter was essentially a good kid but that his tour in the Iraq war caused him some mental problems,” the police investigative report said.

After detectives advised him of his Miranda rights, Mr. Smith declared, “I am responsible for Nicole Speirs’s death.” It was an odd circumlocution. He declined further questioning until he obtained a lawyer.

Just before midnight, Mr. Smith’s father and uncle went to see the Speirses to tell them of Mr. Smith’s admission, which ultimately came as more of a relief than a shock. “They said Walter confessed because of us,” Mr. Speirs said.

“I think he did care for us.”

At first Mr. Searle, the prosecutor, was cautious. “I didn’t want to just take his confession based on his history that we knew,” he said. Doubt was planted in part by something that Mr. Smith said to the police: “The biggest thing I want to get out of this is help.”

Further, when Matthew Jube, the lawyer hired by Walter Smith’s family, asked Mr. Smith what had happened, Mr. Smith asked him “which version” of events, the one that he had told the police or the one that he saw in his dreams. Mr. Jube began to think that Mr. Smith had given a false confession as a “cry for help,” motivated partly by guilt, both over his relationship with Ms. Speirs and about his killing of civilians in Iraq.

The prosecution had no evidence besides Mr. Smith’s confession. Although the Speirses agreed to allow their daughter’s body to be exhumed, the state medical examiner found nothing new, the prosecutor said.

‘What Is Justice?’

Mr. Smith’s lawyer sent a psychiatrist to see him a couple of times. During the second visit, the psychiatrist came away convinced that Mr. Smith had indeed killed Ms. Speirs, although he never offered any motive.

Asked during The Times’s interview why he had taken Ms. Speirs’s life, Mr. Smith said only: “I don’t feel she really had anything to do with it. Had it been someone else there at that time, it probably would have been them.”

Eventually, the prosecutor determined that Mr. Smith’s confession was valid. Then, the prosecutor said, “We fell back into, ‘What is justice?’ and ‘Justice needs to be done.’ ”

“It goes without saying that Utahans are, based on a religious perspective, very patriotic and loyal to their country,” Mr. Searle continued. “We looked at this case and said, ‘When he presents to a jury that he served his country like his country asked him to serve, and even his country admits, with his discharge and his disability pay, that he has severe psychological trauma’ — we felt there was a very good chance that the members of a jury would find him not guilty and basically punish the government for the position he’s in.”

“Washington, D.C., is 2,000 miles away,” he continued. “It wouldn’t matter to them. But to this community, it’s going to matter. We’ve got a mother of two that’s dead. Her family is affected. Her kids are affected. Walter’s affected.”

Further, Mr. Searle did not believe that Mr. Smith was guilty of murder. He felt that he was guilty of taking Ms. Speirs’s life intentionally “but acting under duress.”

“I can’t justify criminal activity,” he said. “But it would have been unjust to Walter and to society to throw out the circumstances that we as a society put him in.”

Mr. Searle and Mr. Jube negotiated an agreement under which Mr. Smith pleaded guilty to manslaughter, which, according to state guidelines, meant a sentence of one to 15 years.

During Mr. Smith’s sentencing hearing in October, Judge Mark S. Kouris of state District Court asked him if he had anything to say. Mr. Smith hemmed and hawed, mumbling that he had already addressed the judge in writing. In the packed courtroom, the insufficiency of his answer hung in the air like a gasp. Lifting his head, he forced himself to speak.

“I didn’t plan on doing what I did,” he said quietly. “I wish I could take it back, but I know I can’t. All I can say is I’m sorry. I’m not asking for leniency.”

The judge asked him to turn and address his victim’s parents directly.

“I’m sorry,” he said to them, his head falling down once more. “There’s nothing else I can say beside that.” His face crumpled, his voice cracked and his eyes watered. “I couldn’t ask for better people to raise my children,” the former marine continued, adding yet again, as his and her relatives wept, “I’m sorry.”

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