



Pictured L-R: NCOA President Paul Kingsbury, CSM Jacob L. Smith, Smith's fiancé Lauren Dempsey, Mr. Gino Montagno from USAA, and NCOA Chairman of the Board Terry Haines.

The 2022 NCOA Army Vanguard Award, sponsored by USAA, was presented to Command Sergeant Major Jacob L. Smith in honor and memory of Medal of Honor recipient Sergeant Alvin C. York.

Command Sergeant Major Jacob Smith displayed exceptional courage and heroism with complete disregard for his personal safety and life by assisting in the rescue of the driver of an inflamed vehicle that had ignited during a catastrophic car collision. In addition, he willingly placed his own life in extreme peril by entering the cab of a vehicle consumed by a gasoline fire in an effort to save the life of a helplessly entrapped, unconscious, and severely injured passenger. He also rendered medical aid to two of the three occupants of the inflamed truck and assisted Emergency Medical Services with the victims when they arrived on the scene.

On the night of 14 October, 2021 in Watertown, NY, CSM Smith was stopped at a red light waiting to make a left-hand turn when he witnessed a pickup truck speeding at 110 miles per hour collide broadside with another car, severely mutilating both vehicles. The pickup began to roll, ultimately resting on the lawn of an adjacent shopping plaza after striking a light pole. The pickup's gasoline line ruptured. Sparks from the light pole immediately ignited the fuel beneath the engine compartment, placing the lives of the occupants in severe danger and at risk of burning alive. CSM Smith took immediate action and rushed to the burning vehicle.

Upon reaching the scene of the collision, CSM Smith immediately assisted in the rescue of the unconscious driver of the pickup by removing him from the flaming truck and carrying him to safety with three other men. CSM Smith instantaneously recognized the serious nature of the fire as he observed a steady stream of chemical flame pour from underneath the engine compartment. He directed the team to continue to move the injured driver further from the inflamed truck and behind the cover of parked vehicles to protect him from the raging inferno that was sure about to unfold. Once the driver was behind the cover of parked vehicles and protected from the flames, CSM Smith began to medically triage the driver for severe injury using the medical kit he always carries in his truck.

Once semi-coherent the driver made it known that a third passenger remained in the vehicle. CSM Smith made a cursory medical assessment of the driver and determined there were no life-threatening injuries. After directing two bystanders to retrieve fire extinguishers from a nearby restaurant, he made the deliberate decision to enter the fiery wreck in an attempt to rescue the passenger from burning to death.

Before entering the inflamed pickup CSM Smith observed the fire had tripled in size from when he and the others had extracted the driver just a few moments earlier. He could visibly see flames pour onto the ground from beneath the engine compartment. He was utterly aware the fuel line had been ruptured and the fire would very soon consume the vehicle. While roughly thirty bystanders had gathered from neighboring businesses and watched in absolute shock and horror from an unquestionably safe distance, CSM Smith acted with the utmost gallantry in the attempt to save the life of a man he had never met.

One of the observers frantically shouted for him not to enter the vehicle stating the pickup was about to explode. CSM Smith, and everyone who observed his actions, could not have been more aware of the grave peril he faced in the effort he was to embark on. Regardless of the potential endangerment to his own life, he entered the driver's seat of the vehicle without hesitation to assess if the victim was even alive. In CSM Smith's own words, "I knew what I was getting into, but I'm not just going to stand by and watch a kid burn to death without a fight".

The passenger was barely visible due to the crumpled metal and airbags that had consumed him. CSM Smith knew that any rescue attempt from the front seat was futile as the damage to the truck was simply too severe to extract him from that vantage point. CSM Smith climbed into the back seat of the pickup and began to pop the airbags and cut the seatbelt with his pocketknife. Once the main airbags were deflated, the trapped passenger began to cough up blood and demonstrate extreme difficulty breathing, indicating penetrating chest trauma. By this time, thick smoke had filled the cab of the truck making it exceptionally hard to see and breathe. CSM Smith understood the victim needed as much oxygen as possible to have a fighting chance of survival. CSM Smith used his elbow to break the glass from the rear window to allow smoke to escape and increase oxygen flow in an attempt to prevent the passenger from suffocating.

Inspired by CSM Smith's valor, another Samaritan had entered the burning truck to assist in the rescue attempt after watching him break the window. The passenger was so helplessly entangled in the twisted fiery pickup that both men knew that freeing him would be nearly impossible without rescue tools, yet they refused to retreat to safety. Both attempted to reach the seat lever that would lean the seat back and give potential space to free the snarled victim. The damage to the side of the vehicle was simply too great for them to reach the lever. They began to attempt to break the seat by pulling on it to the rear with all their might. While they were able to make some headway, there was not enough to free the trapped man. They attempted lifting the man from the seat multiple times to no avail. CSM Smith came to the rationalization that it was impossible to lift the passenger from his seat from within the vehicle. He told the fellow Samaritan "We have to get the door open".

After approximately three to four minutes inside of the burning pickup, CSM Smith exited the truck and moved to the front passenger side door. He popped the remaining airbags and cut another portion of the seatbelt. Once the remaining airbags deflated, he fully grasped how completely ensnared the passenger was inside the burning vehicle, yet he refused to abandon the victim and flee to personal safety. In a final act of complete desperation, he began to pull on the crumpled doorframe with every bit of his might while the Samaritan frantically attempted to kick the door out from the inside. A few moments later, the Fire Department arrived and relieved the men in their rescue effort. CSM Smith then moved to the second passenger and rendered medical aid until an ambulance

arrived and relieved him. In his rescue efforts, he cut both hands in multiple locations and suffered 1st degree burns to his arms and leg.

Throughout this incident, CSM Smith completely acted on his individual accord and initiative to save the lives of helpless, unconscious, and severely injured strangers. While completely understanding the exceptionally life-threatening hazard of removing the driver from an inflamed vehicle he did so without hesitation. He entered the cab of a burning vehicle on the precipice of becoming a raging inferno in an attempt to rescue a helplessly entrapped passenger without regard for his own life. While dozens of bystanders watched in horror from a safe distance, he took action with exceptional courage in the face of grave and mortal danger to save the lives of others. In a time of grave and mortal crisis he exhibited front-line leadership and heroic inspiration to young men he had never met prior. In the impossible attempt of pulling a gravely injured and entrapped victim from the fiery wreck, CSM Smith refused to relieve himself of his self-imposed duty of saving the passenger's life until the young man was safe from burning alive.

The total disregard for his own safety and total commitment to saving the victims reflect great upon himself and the United States Army.



Pictured L-R: NCOA President Paul Kingsbury, CSM Jacob Smith, and representing the 16th Sergeant Major of the Army Michael Grinston is Command Sergeant Major Todd Sims

