

## **April Veteran of the Month**

*By Sherri Onorati, Special to The Leader*

War is never easy, and for those brave souls who have survived battle, know all too well that the passage of time does little to ease a tormented soul or erase the memories of comrades lost.

The Tipton County Museum, Veteran Memorial and Nature Center and the Tipton County Veterans Council recently honored Robert Jacob “Jake” Spradley as April’s Veteran of the Month.

Nominated by his mother, Christina Spradley, the former Marine Corps sergeant was overwhelmed by the attention he received at the reception held in his honor and hesitant to talk about himself.

“He’s been through a lot but he’s overcoming it all,” said his mother. “He’s a wonderful dad, a wonderful husband and he goes to work everyday no matter how much he hurts. He’s made a lot of sacrifices.”

“We are so proud of him,” added his father, Robert Spradley.

The Munford resident, originally from Missouri, says he was heading down a bad path when he made the decision to join the Marine Corps while still in high school, after witnessing the transformation of a close friend.

“It wasn’t because I didn’t have parents who cared,” he said of his past troubles. “I was just making stupid decisions. I was young and I knew deep down joining the Marine Corps would force me to grow up.”

That decision found him raising his hand, coincidentally, on the morning of Sept. 11, 2001. After graduating from high school, Spradley was shipped off to boot camp in San Diego in May 2003. After receiving additional training as an electronic repair specialist, he was deployed a year later to Fallujah, Iraq on his first of three tours to the embattled country.

“I really wanted to be an infantryman like my father, but mom didn’t want me to do that. She wanted me to do something that would give me a good job when I got out,” Spradley said, explaining the reason for his choice of career. “I was really mad at myself for not being an infantryman, ‘cause I had it in my mind that I wanted to do more than work on electronics equipment. I was lucky when I graduated that I was put with the 1<sup>st</sup> Combat Engineer Battalion. I got to go out with combat engineers attached to infantry, so I ended up right where I wanted to be,” he added with a slight smile.

His second tour in 2005 found him back in Iraq with the 13<sup>th</sup> Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) along the Syrian border and a participant in Operation Steel Curtain. It was

during that tour that he helped secure a city so that the Iraqi people could participate in their first democratic elections.

“Securing the city allowed them to vote democratically for the first time and I know that I did something positive to help them out,” he said.

His third deployment to Iraq in 2006/2007 brought him back to Fallujah and ultimately his toughest tour of duty, something obviously painful for him to talk about.

“We had to look for IEDs all the time,” he hesitantly explained. “I don’t like to make a big deal of it... no matter what happened, I wasn’t forced to go there. It was my decision to join. I lost some friends that were really close to me and I feel really weird being in the spotlight and center of attention. It should really be about them more than me and I feel guilty about that.”

A dedicated family man, Spradley was discharged in 2007 and moved to Munford to be close to his parents and brother, who had moved to Tipton County several years earlier. The father of two beautiful daughters, Lilly, 7 and Kaylea, 5, Spradley and his wife, Jodi, are expecting another daughter in September. Employed as an application engineer by Cummins Mid-South in Memphis, he also attends college, continuing his education in engineering.

“I really enjoy living in Tipton County and being with my family,” he said. “I guess in a perfect world, I’d like living on the beach with my family, but this is as good as it gets – at least I’m with my family.”

Kathy Desjarlais, the 2015 Chairman of the Tipton County Veteran Council, read Spradley’s certificate of honor, “It is with heart felt appreciation for your tireless efforts in support of our United States military, the Tipton County Museum, Veteran Memorial and Nature Center in partnership with the Tipton County Veterans Council gratefully acknowledge the selfless service of our veteran of the month for April 2015.... Your dedication to our country is commendable and an honorable addition for the fight for freedom throughout the world.”

“Thank you to everyone for putting this on,” Spradley said during the short ceremony. “It really is special for me and my family and I’m really honored to be here. Some of the best and worst times of my life I spent over there, but I’m really proud of everything that we did while I was in. Thank you mom for nominating me and to my family – I love you all so much.”

The Veteran of the Month program is sponsored by the Tipton County Museum, Veteran Memorial and Nature Center and the Tipton County Veterans Council. The next honoree will be named on Tuesday, May 12 at 6:30 p.m. The public is invited to both make nominations and attend the ceremony.