

Family dedicates headstone for fallen hero

by [Dean Cousino](#) , last modified April 11, 2011 11:59AM

Michael Ingram Sr. and Julie Ingram no longer will stare at an empty headstone when they visit the grave of their son and stepson, Army Sgt. Michael K. Ingram Jr., at St. Joseph Cemetery.

A large black granite marker now sits on his grave in the Ingram family plot following a dedication Sunday afternoon held by more than 100 friends and family members. The ceremony included prayers for troops overseas, music and a biker's tribute to a fallen local soldier who was killed in combat while serving in Afghanistan on April 17.

The new stone arrived Friday and was covered by an American flag before the ceremony as the crowd waited for the family to arrive. Pastor Sean O'Neal from Stewart Road Christian Ministries Center welcomed the throng with Scripture and a prayer to honor Sgt. Ingram as "our hero."

"We gather today to celebrate his life and the legacy of all our troops that serve overseas," Pastor O'Neal said.

"Like Leonidas, king of Sparta, who was preparing to make a stand with his Greek troops against the Persian Army in 480 B.C., Sgt. Michael Keith (Mikie) Ingram Jr. held his mission in the service of his country as his first and foremost priority. It is the purpose for which he paid the ultimate price on April 17, 2010."

A parade of more than 60 riders on motorcycles — members of the Patriot Guard, a Vietnam veterans motorcycle group — escorted the family into the cemetery. The bikers, many with American flags whipping in the breeze, passed the family plot one by one, their bikes glistening in the sun. Then the bikers dismounted and formed a single line as an honor guard.

In his remarks, Pastor O'Neal called Sgt. Ingram a warrior and a hero.



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— Evening News photos by BRYAN BOSCH

The family of Sgt. Michael Ingram Jr. — (from left) his stepmother, Julie Ingram; father, Michael Ingram Sr.; mother, Patricia Kitts; stepfather, Ron Kitts, and sister, Chelsea Ingram — look at the unveiled headstone for Sgt. Ingram during a ceremony Sunday at St. Joseph Cemetery. Sgt. Ingram was killed April 17 while serving in the Army in Afghanistan.

“Looking around our society, there is seldom doubt and little wonder that true heroes are difficult to identify and hard to find,” he said. “These few heroes march confidently in step supporting the reality that their presence, as soldiers in the theatre of war, their presence on the battlefield, their willingness to stand and fight, is the assurance of the freedom that each and every citizen of the United States enjoys each morning when they wake up and each evening when they go to bed. It is this cause, this purpose, this commitment to our nation that Sgt. Ingram believed in, fought for and gave his life for.”

Master Sgt. Jeff Rector, a Vietnam veteran, and Staff Sgt. John Meyer stood at attention over the headstone while Sgt. Christian May played “Taps” on a bugle. When the two servicemen uncovered the stone, they folded the flag and placed it on top of the marker. Annie Ingram, Sgt. Ingram’s grandmother, sobbed as she watched the folding and listened to the playing of “Amazing Grace” played by guitarists Steve Pichan and Josh Famie and violinist Stephani Pichan. Mrs. Ingram wore her grandson’s dog tags around her neck along with Mikie’s Minutes card, the foundation the family established in his memory to provide free calling cards for soldiers.

The headstone sits adjacent to two other family members who died — Sgt. Ingram’s grandfather, James F. Sr., who died in 2001, and Samantha Ingram, his cousin, who died of cancer in 2003 at age 16.

“Calling home, that’s what he talked about,” the grandmother said. “That’s what he wanted to do, serve in the Infantry like his grandfather.”

On one side of the monument is the inscription “Heaven Needed a Hero.” On the other side is a cross designed by his younger brother, Jason, and a short essay by Sgt. Ingram about how quickly life passes by and making the most of every moment with people you love.

“Because we do not know when we will die, we get to think of life as an inexhaustible well... How many times will you remember a certain afternoon of your children, an afternoon that is so deeply part of your being that you cannot conceive of your life without it? How many more times will you watch the full moon rise?... And yet it all seems limitless.”

The bikers added another tribute, singing “God Bless America” to conclude the ceremony. Mr. Ingram said after waiting about 10 months, it was good to finally have a headstone. Both he and Ron Kitts spoke to the crowd.

“I’m not much for speaking,” Mr. Ingram said. “I just want to thank the Patriot Guard and everybody else who came out today.”

Mr. Pitts, Mr. Ingram’s stepfather, said the community’s support for Sgt. Ingram “has just been amazing.”

The soldier's legacy will live on in a documentary being produced by Keith Famie, who filmed much of Sunday's ceremony. Mr. Famie said he hopes to complete the film soon to be shown on PBS. He is planning a premiere showing in Monroe later this year.

James and Melissa Atkinson of Petersburg brought their four children, ages 1-7, to watch. The couple said they attended the funeral and were inspired by the turnout and the many signs of support from businesses they saw that day.

"That funeral changed our lives," Mrs. Atkinson said. "We cherish our kids more every day and have a better understanding and (compassion) for those who have" lost a loved one in the military.

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