

Mike Spann Biography

Johnny Michael Spann grew up in Winfield, Alabama, a town of about 4,500 people. His family remembers Michael to be a very ambitious, patriotic, young man who loved his family very much. Mike, always interested in history, spent a lot of time reading history books and encyclopedias. He was always challenging himself to do more.

At age 17 he earned his Private Pilots Licenses and later became a certified rescue diver and parachutists. Michael prided himself in being a very disciplined person. Family and Friends remembered Michael saying he would gladly give his life for his family, friends, or even his country.

Michael's sisters, Tonya Ingram and Tammy Dunavant, say he was very protective of them, and they remember all the fun they enjoyed growing up with him in their home in Winfield. Tonya and Tammy explained, *"We always knew he was there for us, even till his death."*

Others Remember

Odene May, 85, is a retired third grade teacher who remembers something good about each student she taught for over her 42 year career. What she remembers about Mike was that even in the third grade he gave a shoelace to a boy who had broken one of his own. He also brought Mrs. May apples, *"He was not what you would call a teacher polisher,"* she said, *"he did it out of true love."*

Michael was not big in high school, standing about 5 '10" and weighing in at 160 pounds. As a wide receiver and a running back he was muscular and tough.

"He was always giving 120 percent of everything he had," said his coach, Joe Hubert.

Part of that spirit came from the teachings he had at home. His father and mother encouraged and nurtured Mike and his two younger sisters to be all they could be.

"It is very important not to break a child's spirit when they are growing up. But you should build them up and encourage them the right way, then you can give them the ammunition to go and do great things," said Mike's father, Johnny Spann.

Early Ambition

Life in Winfield, Alabama revolved around family, church, duty, working at the family business, and school activities, and Mike Spann embraced them all. He took apples to his teacher, played soldier at recess. A favorite childhood picture shows him sitting on the barrel of a tank. Playing soldier wasn't the only thing on Mike's mind as a young boy. He prayed every Sunday with his family at the Church of Christ and enjoyed the things that all young American boys enjoy. At 16 he knew what he wanted to do with his life. He would be a marine and then serve in the FBI or the CIA.

"Mike was probably the only 16-year-old boy in Winfield, Alabama who knew exactly what he was going to do," said Dale Weeks, a school friend who said that he did not place a lot of faith in the talk of most teenagers. *"But with Mike, you knew, you just knew,"* he continued.

Heading for his future

After graduating from Winfield High School, Mike headed for college at Auburn University. While at Auburn he joined the Marine Corps Reserve in December of 1991. After earning a degree in Criminal Justice and Law Enforcement in 1992 he enrolled in Officers Training School in Quantico, Virginia. He soon became an artillery expert with a specializing in how to direct air and

naval firepower toward the enemy on the ground. By 1996, he was a Captain in command of 25 or more Marines.

"He was a tough guy among tough guys," said Major Tray J. Ardese, who served with him at Camp Lejeune.

"He didn't slack off-ever," said Christopher T. Graves, another fellow Marine. "You never saw him unkempt. I don't know if I ever saw him drink. I always thought he was raised by a preacher," continued Mr. Graves.

Reaching his goals

By 1999 Mike was ready to try something new. He loved the Marines but he had never seen action, and he felt the endless training should not be an end in itself.

Mike considered a number of options but settled on the CIA, which had a paramilitary unit within its Directorate of Operations. The CIA application asked each applicant to describe themselves. Mike wrote the following:

I describe myself as an ordinary person, with a few God-given talents and ample self-confidence that has endeavored to accomplish extraordinary things. I am a dreamer with lofty goals, taking an optimistic outlook on any situation. I have a steady and focused demeanor, not overly emotional but very aggressive as I am always thinking and staying sharp. I have an insatiable drive to do the best I can, looking for a challenge in everything, and working to meet that challenge. I am always determined and positive in my approach to anything in life. I believe in God and have hope in all things, even when it is as bad as it gets. I believe in my country and am very patriotic in my views and think it is important for my family to feel the same. I believe in the meaning of honor and integrity, constantly pursuing them personally and professionally. Although I sometimes fall short, I guide myself by asking, "Is it the right thing to do?"

Even though I am demanding and impatient at times, I think I am a genuinely good person with a good heart that cares about people. Fun loving and adventurous, I love to travel and read. I was raised in a great family environment and instilled with a strong sense of what is right and wrong. My family is extremely important to me and I work to be a good father that looks out for my children's well being and future, developing in them strong Christian values, positive self-image, and perseverance that they might be good people and citizens. The type of work I pursue is also very important, as my work must be part of me and something I can believe in.

I am an action person that feels personally responsible for making any changes in this world that are in my power because if I don't know one else will. Having a strong sense of responsibility, I do not hesitate when the time comes to step out front. I am a leader that loves working with people to accomplish team-oriented goals. I believe in leadership from the front and by example, delegating authority but not responsibility. I fully accept accountability for my actions and I hold others accountable for theirs. I feel that I am a good leader from learning first to be a good follower. I am easily approached by subordinates and give them a voice in the decision-making process, realizing that I can learn something from anyone. I am not easily angered and have a very thick skin coupled with an outstanding sense of humor. I know that I make mistakes and can admit it, accepting criticism and using it to correct the fault and drive on. This is all enhanced by the fact that I have unrelenting perseverance in all things.

I am a well-rounded military officer having acquired professional experience in areas such as combined arms operations, logistics, and communications through several assignments throughout the world. As a combat arms officer, I have maintained knowledge and proficiency of several types of weapon systems through hand of training and formal schools. As an instructor, I can express myself very well during formal periods of instruction or public speaking. Possessing above average proficiency as a writer, I have served as a public affairs officer and have written numerous education as a professional officer, I have completed several nonresident courses in military science.

In conclusion, I am a person with a strong set of values that works at living my life according to a strong moral code. I know myself completely and have every confidence in my abilities to successfully accomplish anything I pursue in life.

Mission in Afghanistan

Shortly before he left for Afghanistan only a few short days before he died, Johnny Michael Spann sent an Email to his parents and sisters in reproach to a liberal article that was forwarded to him.

“What everyone needs to understand is these people hate you, “wrote Mike, “they hate you because you are an American. Everyone out there spewing the left wing liberal rhetoric about “We brought it all on ourselves”, “It’s because of our policy on the middle east”, and Mike’s personal favorite liberal quote, “retaliation will only bring more attacks” .
”Should we sit in the corner and be quiet? We were attacked last week by a foreign power. We are at war. Many Americans need to wake up and realize the fact. Somebody wants to destroy what we have and we have to defend against that. Who cares what other countries are saying, they’re not even democratic governments. We must respond to this or run the risk of ceasing to be the world’s only superpower. Write you representative and let them know that the U.S. doesn’t need permission from other nations or the UN to respond to the attack of last week. Our constitution gives us that power. The U.S. can and will deal with this trash. Just support your government, and our military especially, when the bodies start coming home.
The U.S. lost the war in Vietnam because of lack of support at home. When you fight wars, people get killed. Our way of life is at stake here, and we must fight for it. Americans should keep flying their flags, supporting their government and writing their Congressmen.
God Bless America “.

A precious life given in a noble cause

Mike Spann, 32, was the first American killed by the enemy. He is buried in Arlington National Cemetery where he has loved to walk among the headstones of the fallen heroes.

What Mike was doing in the moments before he died is crystal clear although accounts of how he actually died vary.

On November 25, 2001, Johnny Michael Spann, who worked in a little known paramilitary unit of the Central Intelligence Agency’s clandestine service, was interrogating Taliban prisoners at Mazar-e-Sharif. Unbeknownst to Mike one of them was a fellow American; John Walker Lindh who converted to Islam and took up the Taliban cause.

A few short moments after questions posed to Mr. Lindh elicited only silence, Mike Spann was killed in a chaotic prison uprising. Walker-Lindh, who was wounded, hid and was captured seven days later.

It is their encounter, a videotaped face-off between countrymen and enemies, a secret soldier from the small-town and a self-proclaimed seeker of “*a true Islamic state*” that has Mike Spann’s family and other Americans fixated on a particularly painful moment in the war. It was an unthinkable confrontation between two young American men, one fighting for his country, the other against it.

“It was a quest for right that Mike, at his country’s call, went to Afghanistan, “ said George J. Tenet, Director of Central Intelligence, adding. “To that place of terror and danger, he sought to bring justice and freedom.” Mr. Tenet described Mr. Spann, 32 as “an American patriot who knew that information saved lives, and that his collection is a risk worth taking.”

“Michael would have given his life getting Walker out of that place if only Walker had told him he was an American and what was going to happen,” said Mike’s father, Johnny Spann.

Mr. Spann was the 79th employee of the spy agency killed in the line of duty. Like the 78 agents who died before him Mr. Spann will be honored with the placing of a star in the CIA Headquarters lobby. Roughly half of the stars remain nameless for security reasons, but the CIA officials said that given widespread publicity about Mr. Spann’s death, it made little sense to keep his identity secret.

On the 28th day of November 2001 George J. Tenet made these statements the Director of Central Intelligence on the Death of a CIA Officer in Afghanistan:

'It is my sad duty to announce that one of our officers at the Central Intelligence Agency has died in the line of duty in Afghanistan. Johnny Michael " Mike Spann, who worked in the Directorate of Operations, was where he wanted to be: on the front lines serving his country. Given the nature of the CIA's mission, I can publicly discuss his activities and the circumstances surrounding his death only in broad terms.

Mike was in the fortress of Mazar-e Sharif , where the Taliban prisoners were being held and questioned. Although these captives had given themselves up, their pledge of surrender - like so many other pledges from the vicious group they represent - proved worthless. Their prison uprising, which had murder as its goal, claimed many lives, among them that of a very brave American, whose body was recovered just hours ago.

Mike joined CIA in June 1999. A young man, only 32 years old, he was no stranger to challenge or daring. He came to us from the United States Marine Corps, whose traditions he loved and whose values of courage and commitment he carried with him till the end. Quiet, serious and absolutely unflappable, Mike's stoicism concealed a dry sense of humor and a heart of gold. His brand of leadership was founded not on words, but on deeds, deeds performed in conditions of hazards and hardship.

His was a career of promise in a life of energy and achievement. A precious life given in a noble cause. Mike fell bringing freedom to a distant people while defending freedom for all of us here at home. His CIA family, too, is in mourning. But just as we grieve together, we work together to continue the mission that Mike Spann held sacred. And so we will continue our battle against evil, with renewed strength and spirit.

We owe that to Mike and to every man and woman who dreams of the future free of the menace of terrorism."

Funeral for a Friend

Seven black horses pulled the caisson carrying the flagged draped coffin of Mike Spann. Mike was a former artillery captain in the United States Marine Corp who would leave an abbreviation of that service's motto, Semper Fi, on the screen whenever he signed off the family computer, Shannon Spann said in his graveside eulogy.

"I used to think it was strange that he did that," said Mrs. Spann who also works for the agency, *"but Mike was faithful in giving his life to God and to his colleagues, his friends, his country and his family."*

Mrs. Spann said, *"My husband was a hero not because of the way he died, but rather for the way that he lived. He served his country not only by risking his life but also by being good,"* she said.

"It seemed like when Mike took an oath to protect the Constitution of the United States from all enemies foreign and domestic, that he took that oath for our family as well." she said as the couple's infant son, Jake watched the proceedings quietly from his grandfathers' lap.

"He just thought that it was really his duty as a father to protect his children from terrorism just as equally as he thought it was his duty to provide a roof over their heads."

In her eulogy Mrs. Spann concluded that spiritually she could not comprehend the reason of her husband's death, *"but I know if Mike were here today, he would offer you his strength,"* she said. *"And darling if you were here today, I would tell you I love you and every part about you."*

Through the eulogies, six pallbearers held the flag over Mr. Spann's coffin in perfect stillness, while an honor guard stood in tight formation. The white gloves of the pallbearers glided slowly over the flag as they folded it in a perfect triangle, then passed it on to be handed to Mrs. Spann. As the 200 or so colleagues and friends offered condolences and left, Mr. Spann's parents kissed his coffin. His wife and their children Alison, 9, Emily, 4, and Jake, 5 months, knelt by his coffin, and his wife spoke softly, privately, near him one last time.

Michael's mother, Gail Spann, says it was such an honor to have a son like Michael, knowing he gave his life doing things that made him happy, remembering how he loved his family and gave his life.

Praised by his boss as an "American Hero", and by his widow as one who "didn't separate serving his country from serving his family." He was a man who showed passion for his country and his Agency through his selfless courage. Johnny Michael Spann, an intelligence agent who was the first American killed in the Afghan war, was laid to rest with full military honors under a bleak sky at Arlington Cemetery in Washington, D.C. In the same place where he used to enjoy walking among the hero's, he now lies beside them.