

Marine praised as an American hero

Cpl. Bernard Gooden of Mount Vernon died in terrorist ambush

BY STACY BROWN • THE JOURNAL NEWS • APRIL 19, 2003

MOUNT VERNON - More than 1,000 mourners and a host of dignitaries gathered at Mount Vernon's Oneness Rehoboth Apostolic Church yesterday to say goodbye to a hero, U.S. Marine Cpl. Bernard Gooden, who died in combat in Iraq this month.

The three-hour funeral service was filled with soulful musical selections, fervent prayers and poetry. After a reading of the poem "Jamaican Woman" by family friend Andrene Bonner and a stirring song by Maureen Walker, Marines presented a Purple Heart to Gooden's mother, Carmen Palmer-Thompkins.

"Brent's death was a tragedy," said Col. Bill Callahan of the 2nd Tank Battalion.

"He died attempting to secure the freedom of Iraq and the people there. Let there be no doubt that Brent is a genuine American hero."

Callahan offered his remarks to friends and family who flocked to the church where Gooden, nicknamed Brent, had promised the pastor that he would come back one day to preach.

Gooden died April 4 when his battalion was ambushed at At Tuwayhah by members of the terrorist group Islamic Jihad.

The 22-year-old aspiring lawyer and preacher's battalion had successfully defeated the vaunted Republican Guard when it was ambushed by the jihadists, who wore masks and were armed with rocket-propelled grenade launchers.

"We gather here to pay tribute to a hero, to the son of Jamaica," said Basil Bryan, the Jamaican consul general to the United States. Bryan said Gooden made his homeland of Jamaica proud. Cynthia Black, a relative of Gooden's, echoed Bryan's sentiments.

"Brent was a family icon and a true hero," Black said. "We're so proud he served his country so well." Mount Vernon Vietnam War veteran William DuBois said there would always be a bond between all veterans. "Sometimes, it's difficult to put it in words, but if you are in the service it's a brotherhood, a camaraderie," DuBois said. "We're all family."

Gooden was a tank canon loader in the 2nd Tank Battalion, stationed at Camp Lejeune, N.C., with the 2nd Marine Division. In Iraq they fought with the 5th Regiment of the 1st Marine Division out of Camp Pendleton, Calif.

As letters of condolences were read from President Bush, U.S. Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, the Mount Vernon City Council and other dignitaries, a video montage featuring Gooden from boyhood through his

life in the Marines was featured on two large screens inside the church.

A third screen was placed outside the main auditorium for the hundreds who couldn't fit inside. Inside, a large American flag was draped over an entrance. The grief-stricken and clergy alike unabashedly sang "The Star-Spangled Banner" as two life-sized photos of Gooden stood on either side of his coffin. Gooden's sister, Racquel Davidson, and Elizabeth Knox, Gooden's girlfriend of two years, read Bible passages and thanked everyone for supporting the family.

"The family wishes to express our gratitude to everyone for the many expressions of kindness shown to us during this time of grief and loss," Knox said. Davidson echoed Knox, saying, "Smiles, cards, telephone calls, prayers, handshakes, hugs and concern has served to strengthen us at a time when we need it most." Knox's mother, Marie Gavan-Knox, said Gooden inspired many with his outlook on life and people.

"He cared so much for the well-being of others," Gavan-Knox said. "Regardless of ethnicity, race or other things, he saw the good in all." Gavan-Knox's son, Robert Knox, called Gooden a special human being.

"If there was someone that everyone would say is 99 percent bad, Gooden would want to seek to focus on the 1 percent that was good, and that really sums up the kind of person he was," he said.

Mount Vernon Mayor Ernest Davis addressed the crowd and told the family that the city would continue to offer assistance. "Because of the sacrifices (Gooden) made, we are allowed to be here in freedom," Davis said. "He made the individual sacrifice that nobody has asked anyone of us standing here to make."

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