

A true hero gets his dying wish granted

When people think of a “hero in the sky” most people think of a comic book hero. However, in real life there are heroes in the sky everyday through the aviation units of local and state police departments, the Coast Guard, and EMS.

In Philadelphia, one of those heroes is Sergeant Chris Clemens, a 35-year veteran of the Philadelphia Police Department, who rose through the ranks with assignments in the Patrol Bureau, SWAT, and the Aviation Unit. Once assigned to the Aviation Unit, Sgt. Clemens was designated the Chief Pilot and responsible for the safe operation of four police helicopters that routinely fly over the Philadelphia metropolitan area.

During Covid, Sgt. Clemens developed a cough and went to see his flight physician. After ruling out Covid and conducting a chest x-ray, the doctor did not like what he saw. After further testing, it was discovered that Sgt. Clemens, a non-smoker who is routinely evaluated pursuant to FAA regulations, had cancer throughout his lungs. Once they tested his lungs, the doctors realized it was a GI cancer that had metastasized from a small tumor in the duodenum to infect both lungs.

Unfortunately, the prognosis is not good. This type of cancer is stage IV, incurable, and is very difficult to treat. They gave Sgt. Clemens about a year to live. So far, the first two chemotherapy treatments were ineffective and the third (and final available chemotherapy) is having little to no impact on the cancer in his lungs.

After receiving this diagnosis, Sgt. Clemens, a devout Catholic, had a wish to visit with the Holy Father in Vatican City and receive his blessings. In fact, Sgt. Clemens was on police duty when Pope Francis arrived in Philadelphia in September of 2015. During the Papal visit to Philadelphia, Sgt. Clemens was responsible for all motorcade and helicopter aerial security for the Holy Father. He personally mapped out all egress landing zones to facilitate the evacuation of the Holy Father if called upon to do so.

The visit of the Holy Father to Philadelphia was a most memorable one for the entire Clemens family. Sgt. Clemens and his wife Colleen are the proud parents of three teenage boys: Jude (19) Patrick (17) and Andrew (14). Each member of the Clemens family has attended Philadelphia Parochial schools from kindergarten on. Colleen currently serves as a Church vocalist during Mass at two Catholic Churches, St. Albert The Great and St. Timothy's.

Ever since the Pope was in Philadelphia, Sgt. Clemens had discussed traveling to Italy with his friend



Scott Sigman (who is a dual US/Italian citizen) for a vacation. Sigman, who actually grew up in the same neighborhood as Sgt. Clemens in Northeast Philadelphia, became a close friend of Sgt. Clemens after Sigman was assigned to the East Police Division as an Assistant District Attorney over 20 years ago.

When Sigman heard his friend had cancer and wanted to get blessed by the Pope, he knew he had to make it happen. Sigman started the process by reaching out to a core group of mutual friends from the Philadelphia Police Department,

Custodes Pacis, the Fraternal Order of Police, American Legion Post 405, and others. The planning for this pilgrimage began in November of 2021.

In December of 2021, Sigman and Clemens were both supposed to be at the Army Navy Game at Met Life Stadium, but Clemens was not feeling up to it. As if by some divine intervention, Sigman went to the game and was introduced to Cass Forkin who runs the Twilight Wish Foundation. Once Forkin heard the story of Sgt. Clemens and his wish for the blessings of the Holy Father, she told Sigman to apply for this wish which she called the "Vatican Wish."

Through the generosity of the Honorable Amato Berardi, Maj. Andre McCoy (USA), George Turak, Capt. Lou Cavaliere (USN), Staff Insp Joseph Bologna (PPD), Andy Waskie, Garrett Smith, Dr. Cathy Greenberg, Ivan Tancredi, Bob Daniels, Dr. Michael Cirigliano, Capt. Lou Campione (PPD), Chief Inspector Tony Boyle (PPD), Mt America Foundation, Marine Corps - Law Enforcement Foundation (MCLEF), Ben Franklin Global Forum, Kevin Cauley, Lisette Tarragano, Dr. Zeff Lazinger, Capt. Jack Lieberman (USN), Carl David, Gen. Randy Marchi (USA), American Legion Post 405, Inspector Dave Jardine (PPD), Sgt. Nancy Quinn (PPD), David Stockman, the Honorable Jimmy Lynn (CCP), Estenier Casana, John Capizzi, Kristie Bergey, Jawad Salah, Dr. Benedict Bachstein, Anthony Mirarchi, Saverio (Sam) Mirarchi, The Union League of Philadelphia, The Chapel of Four Chaplains, Joseph Stivala, Custodes Pacis, the Philadelphia Police Department, Father Steven Wetzl, the Fraternal Order Of Police, and many others the wish was able to be granted.

Clemens and Sigman began their religious pilgrimage on February 22, 2022, traveling from Philadelphia to Rome. They spent their first day in Rome as a special guest of the Honorable Amato Berardi, a former member of the Italian Parliament. Deputato Berardi presented Clemens and Sigman with two tickets to see the Pope. These special tickets with the Papal Seal were stamped ticket 0001 and 0002.

On Wednesday, February 23, 2022, Clemens and Sigman attended an audience with Pope Francis in



Vatican City where they had approximately three minutes to talk directly with His Holiness. Sigman explained to the Pope (in Italian) that Clemens was a Philadelphia Police Officer, a helicopter pilot, helped with security during the 2015 papal visit to Philadelphia, and was dying of stage IV cancer to his lungs. At this moment the Pope moved his hands around the chest of Clemens. Then the Pope put his hand on the head of Clemens. Finally, the Pope made a cross on the forehead of Clemens with his finger. Clemens then handed the Pope yellow (Vatican color) rosaries that he made himself. In return, His Holiness handed Clemens a set of papal rosaries. Clemens wish to be blessed by His

Holiness Pope Francis in Vatican City had been granted and his health and life were truly in God's hands.

After receiving the Pope's blessing, Clemens and Sigman spent the rest of the day touring the Vatican, St. Peter's Basilica, the Vatican Museum, and the Sistine Chapel.

On the following day, Thursday, February 24, 2022, they continued their pilgrimage, traveling from Rome



to Puglia where they went to visit the City of San Giovanni Rotondo to offer prayers to Saint Padre Pio, for whom Clemens has a special devotion. (In fact, Clemens often travels to the largest shrine to Saint Pio outside of Italy which happens to be in Barto, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania).

In San Giovanni Rotondo, Clemens and Sigman went to the resting place of Saint Pio, saw the balcony location of where Saint Pio first had the stigmata, toured the original church of Saint Pio where his body is visible in a glass casket in the crypt, and were given a special tour (by the head physician) of the 900-bed hospital where Saint Pio used to walk the halls and offer blessings to the sick and dying. This hospital, called the "Casa Sollievo della Sofferenza," was founded 65 years ago in 1956 by Saint Pio and is still in full operation today.



The pilgrimage continued with a visit to Sicily where Sigman and Clemens visited Greek ruins including the Temple of Segesta (built in 420 BC), the Sanctuary of Saint Calogero (built in the 1500's) which includes the Antiquarium and various natural caves which emit geothermal gas atop Monte Kronio (these geothermal/volcanic steam vapors are believed to aid healing and cure many ailments), a piazza dedicated to Saint Pio in Sciacca, numerous churches, and even a monetary in Palermo where Clemens received the blessings of a monk of the same order of Saint Pio.

The pilgrimage ended back in Rome with visits to the Spanish Steps, Trevi Fountain, Pantheon, Piazza Navona, Piazza Venezia, and Piazza Barberini.



Clemens and Sigman returned home to Philadelphia on February 28, 2022.

Sgt. Clemens continues to protect and serve the Philadelphia community as a Philadelphia Police Sergeant although he is grounded from helicopter flight pursuant to FAA Regulations and assigned to desk duty. He continues to support his wife and three boys. He also continues to fight for his life each and every day through prayer and through the help of doctors. Chris Clemens is a true hero.