

08-25-2020 Brian Smith - St George Island FA – VFF Swift Water**Brian Stephen Smith**

<https://www.firehero.org/fallen-firefighter/brian-stephen-smith/>

- **Firefighter**
- **St. George Island Volunteer FD**
- **Florida**
- **Age: 56**
- **Year of Death: 2020**

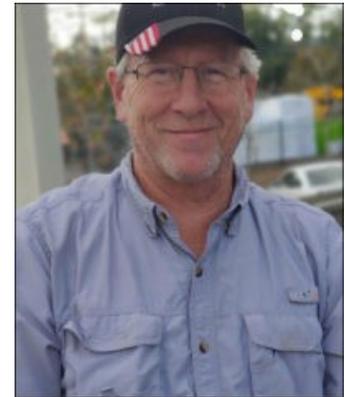
Brian Stephen Smith died in the line of duty on August 25, 2020, while responding to a distressed family of swimmers off the coast of St. George Island in the Gulf of Mexico.

Brian was born in Stamford, Connecticut, to Ruby and Rodger "Steve" Smith. The family moved to Everett, Washington, where Brian graduated from Everett High School in 1981. He served with the Montabello Police Academy in California. In 1986, he moved to Arcadia, California, where he met his wife, Elizabeth Smith. Beth and Brian moved to Everett and had two children, Byren and Rachael. Brian had a passion for billiards, fixing anything that was broken, and playing with his dogs, Skye and Bad Bad "Leroy" Brown.

Brian was a volunteer firefighter and first responder for the St. George Island Volunteer Fire Department for over five years, since moving to the island for work. He turned his passion for fixing and tinkering into a fulfilling career as a property foreman.

Brian's love language was acts of service. Since he was the neighborhood handyman, wherever he went, no favor ever went unanswered. Climbing on a roof to hang Christmas lights for someone who was afraid of heights, mounting a new TV for a friend, or driving to pick up a stranded neighbor was a normal weekend for Brian. He sacrificed and worked hard for his family and friends his whole life, all while making people laugh and smile. Beth always said she married him because, no matter what, he could make her laugh. Brian was always available for a call from his kids. He was just as happy to talk his daughter through a car crisis as he was to talk to his son about the game. Those phone calls and visits from his children meant the world to him. Brian taught his wife and kids how to play pool so they could play as a team, and no matter how busy everyone was, he could count on the family being together once a week.

Brian had a large heart and showed his love to his family and community through actions, so it was no surprise when he announced to his wife that he was joining the volunteer fire department. For over five years, Brian worked 6-7 days a week, responded to nearly every emergency call, and spent as much time as possible with his cherished mother, who lived an hour away. He boasted that he was the happiest he could be. He leaves his beloved wife of 33 years, Beth; his son, Byren, and daughter, Rachael; his mother, Ruby; and his brother, Russell. He was predeceased by his father and his siblings, Jaan Smith and Richard Bridges.



Lodd: Volunteer Fla. Firefighter Drowns During Ocean Water Rescue

<https://www.firerescue1.com/line-of-duty-death/articles/lodd-volunteer-fla-firefighter-drowns-during-ocean-water-rescue-IauuMgWhaGxyiesF/>

Aug 26, 2020 By Laura French

St. George Island Volunteer Firefighter/First Responder Brian Stephen Smith, 56, was swept up by the current while trying to save a man and child in distress

ST. GEORGE ISLAND, Fla. — A volunteer firefighter drowned Tuesday during a water rescue at a Florida beach.

St. George Island Volunteer Firefighter/First Responder Brian Stephen Smith, 56, was swept up by the current as firefighters worked to rescue two distressed swimmers, [according to the U.S. Fire Administration](#). Smith was pulled from the water and transported to the hospital, where he was pronounced dead.

Another firefighter was also hospitalized after the rescue but is recovering, [according to the Tallahassee Democrat](#). Smith and three other firefighters were attempting to rescue a man and child from the water at the time of the drowning; the conditions of the man and child were not reported. Smith had been a member of the St. George Island Volunteer Fire Department since 2016.

Franklin County Sheriff A.J. Smith responded to the incident in a video imploring tourists not to go into the ocean when a red flag or double red flag is flying on the beach.

"It was a double red flag day; nobody should be in the water," the sheriff said. "We're all heartbroken about the loss of life today from a first responder who was heeding the call to go rescue someone."

The sheriff said deputies will be patrolling the beaches and arresting anyone who goes in the water after being told not to.

FL Firefighter Drowns During Water Rescue

https://www.firehouse.com/lodds/news/21151841/fl-firefighter-drowns-during-water-rescue?utm_source=FH+LODD+Notification&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=CPS200826092&o_eid=3559H2017934H9X&rdx.ident%5Bpull%5D=omeda%7C3559H2017934H9X&oly_enc_id=3559H2017934H9X

Aug 26th, 2020 Firehouse.com News

St. George Island firefighter Brian Stephen Smith was swept up by the current during a water rescue on Tuesday and pronounced dead at a hospital.



St. George Island, FL, Volunteer Fire Department

A volunteer firefighter on the Florida panhandle has died after being overtaken by the current while attempting a water rescue.

The U.S. Fire Administration [announced in a release](#) that St. George Island firefighter/first responder Brian Stephen Smith, 56, entered the waters on the Gulf of Mexico to rescue a man and a juvenile but was swept up by the rough surf and drowned on Tuesday.

Smith, a volunteer responder for the previous four years, was pulled from the water by colleagues and immediately transported to Weems Memorial Hospital, where he was pronounced dead.

Franklin County Sheriff A.J. Smith posted a 4-minute video to Facebook blaming Smith's drowning on tourists who did not heed red flag warnings posted on the beach and refused to stay out of the water.

"We've asked the tourists repeatedly, repeatedly, and this is who are going in the water - the tourists. It's not the local folks, they know better. It's the tourists," Smith says in the video. "So please don't go in the water or allow your children in the water. You're putting other people at risk. I'm asking all the tourists don't get in the water. If you're in the water and you're told to leave and don't, you'll be arrested. We're serious about this. There's no reason for any other loss of life."

'Don't Go In The Water': First Responder Drowns Trying To Save Swimmers Off St. George Island

<https://www.tallahassee.com/story/news/local/2020/08/26/first-responder-drowns-while-trying-save-swimmer-off-st-george-island/3441666001/>

Jeff BurlewDavid Adlerstein

August 26, 2020 Tallahassee Democrat

A volunteer firefighter drowned after trying to save a pair of tourists struggling in rough surf off the coast of St. George Island.

Brian Stephen Smith, 56, a member of the St. George Island Volunteer Fire Department, went into Gulf of Mexico waters to save a man and a child but went under himself.

Franklin County Sheriff's Office personnel and emergency medical crews tried to get to him in time but couldn't. He was taken to Weems Memorial Hospital and pronounced dead, said Bud Hayes, a member of the Fire Department board.



"He went in to rescue a man and a juvenile and he got swept up," Hayes said. " He was a great guy. It was tragic. He was young and energetic and added a whole lot to the department. He will be missed."

Sheriff A.J. "Tony" Smith confirmed the drowning in a Facebook video posted a couple of hours after the incident. He called the emergency workers "true heroes."

"We're all heartbroken about the loss of life today from a first responder who heeded the call to go rescue someone," he said. "Please keep us in your thoughts and prayers (in this) difficult time."

The terrible drama unfolded early afternoon Tuesday as Hurricane Laura churned toward the western Gulf, bringing high seas and treacherous rip currents to Panhandle and Big Bend coasts. Double red flags flew on the beach, signifying that the water was closed to the public.

"There were six- to eight-foot seas out there — horrific conditions," Sheriff Smith said. "It's hard enough to swim on your own in that, let alone rescue somebody. Nobody in their right mind would go in but they did. I'm proud of their heroism, to keep people safe."



The sheriff warned that anyone who goes into the water while the double flags are flying will be arrested. He said deputies will rove the beach to make sure people stay out. He also urged people to report illegal swimming to the Sheriff's Office.

"Unbelievably there are still people in the water," he said. "The surf was so rough even with flotation devices our deputies were having trouble even saving themselves. Conditions are terrible when there's a hurricane in the Gulf of Mexico."

The first responders managed to pull the two swimmers out of the Gulf. Smith said the Sheriff's Office is investigating and looking into whether children were left unattended on the beach. He said it's possible charges could be filed.

Brian Smith joined the Volunteer Fire Department in 2006, Hayes said. He worked as a property manager at 300 Ocean Mile, a townhouse community next to the state park on the east side of the island.

His wife, Beth Smith, thanked all the first responders in a Facebook post, saying they went "above and beyond" trying to save her husband and rescue the swimmers.

"Brian died today trying to help people. PLEASE just for a day or 2 be nice to each other, many people were affected today," she said. "Check on your neighbors, check on and thank the volunteers at the Fire Department and Sheriff's officers. Today our loss was devastating and it is vibrating through our community."



Lts. Jim Ward and Brad Segree, Deputy Rolf Gordon and first responder Dan Fortunas went into the water to save the two people. Ward struggled in the water as well and was taken to Weems hospital and released.

"Those guys are heroes today, along with the first responders who risked their life," Smith said.

Back story: [Mississippi man drowns in rough surf off St. George Island](#)

It was the second drowning this summer off St. George Island. Last month, a man on vacation with his family drowned in rough waters. Earlier Tuesday, another rescue happened near Bob Sikes Cut though no serious injuries were reported.

The National Weather Service in Tallahassee said a high rip current risk remains through Thursday night for beaches in Franklin and Gulf counties. Rip currents can sweep even the best swimmers from shore into deeper and dangerous waters, the Weather Service said.

"Don't go in the water or allow your children in the water," Sheriff Smith said. "You're putting other people at risk. And we can't have that."

Firefighter drowns in Florida trying to save swimmers amid double red flags in hurricane-rough water

<https://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/florida/os-ne-volunteer-firefighter-drowns-trying-to-save-swimmers-20200827-s6mx5ggymfg7bc2a7wk74qgrze-story.html>

August 26, 2020

ST. GEORGE ISLAND — A volunteer firefighter drowned Tuesday after trying to save a man and child who were struggling in the rough waters off the Florida Panhandle, authorities said.

Brian Smith, 56, was a member of the St. George Island Volunteer Fire Department, the [Tallahassee Democrat](#) reported.

off Mexico waters to save the swimmers, but Smith was pulled under, according to the Franklin County Sheriff's Office.

The swimmers were returned safely to shore, but a deputy who assisted in the rescue was also hospitalized, officials said.

Double red flags had been flying on the beach Tuesday as Hurricane Laura strengthened hundreds of miles to the south in the Gulf of Mexico.

[Sheriff A.J. "Tony" Smith](#) said in a Facebook video that no one should have been going in the water and that deputies were patrolling the beach and ordering people out of the water.

While the outer edges of the storm may have affected the waves off Florida, officials said they didn't consider Brian Smith's death hurricane-related. Sheriff's spokeswoman Christy Thompson said double red flags can happen without hurricane winds, and Smith's death was caused by people not following the flag warnings.

St. George Island is about 70 miles southwest of Tallahassee.

Farewell To A Friend

<https://www.apalachtimes.com/story/news/2020/09/16/farewell-brian-smith-st-george-island-rescuer-who-drowned/5816829002/>

September 16, 2020 by **David Adlerstein** The Apalachicola Times

The many American flags crackled loudly in the brisk breeze, as a gloomy sky threatened at any time to burst again into rain, as it had earlier Sunday morning.

A large gathering of people stood that afternoon on the grass in front of the Lighthouse Keeper's house in the center of St. George Island. The parking lot was filled with fire trucks and ambulances, and quietly lining the brick path leading to the house were many men and women dressed in first responder blue.

The 1 p.m. farewell to the St. George Island first responder, who died three weeks ago from the perils of attempting a water rescue headlong into a rough sea, began when it was supposed to, as the weather had cleared enough to allow a damp gray bluster to descend.

The bagpiper Russel Pfofsted keened tunes befitting Brian Stephen Smith, as he stood unaccompanied, a far social distance from others on the grass and from the family, Smith's widow Beth, son Byren and daughter Rachael, gathered on the balcony of the keeper's house.



From Walton County, a fire department honor guard carrying the colors - District Chief Christopher Brown, paramedic Katelin Castleberry, emergency medical technician Josh Brock, and deputies Harold Shover and Jennifer Scott, advanced between the two blue lines.

Flags of both the United States and the State of Florida had been ordered by Gov. Ron DeSantis to be flown at half-staff all day Sunday at the Franklin County Courthouse in Apalachicola, Florida, the City Hall in Apalachicola, the St. George Island Volunteer Fire Department and the State Capitol in Tallahassee.

Fire departments in attendance included the Panama City Beach Fire and Rescue, Thomas Drive Volunteer Fire Department, Panama City Fire Department, the South Walton Fire Department, the Mexico Beach Fire Department, and the Eastpoint, Apalachicola, Carrabelle and St. George Island Volunteer Fire Departments. A family friend, Pastor Jon Bishop, conducted the service, with the reading of the obituary by family friend Larry Kenyon. St. George Island Fire Chief Kevin Delahanty offered remarks on behalf of the fire department.

All three men painted the same picture, of a friendly, devoted, loving man, whose decision Aug. 25 was in keeping with his dedication to duty.

A former Montebello, California policeman, he and his wife had relocated to St George Island, where Smith began a career in property management.

They spoke of his passion for animals, especially his beloved dogs Bad Bad "Leroy" Brown and "Skye" often seen at his side, in the fire truck, on the beach, or at local events.

"He was a coveted trivia teammate, a key volunteer for island fundraisers, and a good friend willing to listen to anyone who needed it," read the obituary. "If something needed to be fixed, Brian was there. If you were feeling blue, it was Brian's laughter that lifted you. If you were in trouble, it would be Brian jumping in to save you. Brian loved being a fireman and first responder and was always a calm head in times of need."

The gathering included many people who had encountered Smith, whether on a call over the five years he served, or as part of his active involvement with local fundraisers, such as Chili Cook-off, Brewfest, and Pink Out.

"He never stopped looking for ways to help people in need," said Kenyon. "Brian cared greatly for others and showed his love to family, friends and his community through actions and service."



In a moving tribute, daughter Rachael offered the eulogy, moving in its simplicity. With her mom at her side, she spoke of family memories, of her dad holding all the children on the shore, each happily hanging on him.

She spoke of the typical phone calls she would make, on everything from how to jump a car or buy one, the kind of thing that her dad would happily help with. And most of all, she told of how all the references to her dad as a hero truly honored him, but that the family knew deeply how what he had done was not something to be seen as unusual, given his commitment as a father, a husband, a brother, a son and a friend.

"This one act was not extraordinary for my father," said Rachael Smith. "It was like another day."

Longtime St. George Island firefighter Mason Bean had the honor of conducting the Bell Ringing Ceremony, with longtime Eastpoint firefighter Chief George Pruett tapping the bell to signal their fallen colleague.

The Honor Guard then presented the flag, with Shover carrying the folded flag up the steps to present it to Beth Smith.



Renae Brannan, head of the sheriff's office dispatch, then gave the last call over the airwaves from an emergency medical unit parked nearby.

Following Bishop's closing remarks, Bean recited the Fireman's Prayer, and the family left, just as the rain started once again, a strong and solemn downpour. The Brian Smith Memorial Fund has been established through Centennial Bank to support the family.

State Urges Better Water Rescue Training In Report On Fla. First Responder's Drowning

<https://www.firerescue1.com/firefighter-training/articles/state-urges-better-water-rescue-training-in-report-on-fla-first-responders-drowning-RYqfbttML2d6U0Fa/>

Mar 26, 2021 David Adlerstein The Star, Port St. Joe, Fla.

St. George Island Firefighter/First Responder Brian Stephen Smith drowned while attempting to rescue two people in August

ST. GEORGE ISLAND, Fla. — A state report on the , who perished Aug. 25 while attempting to rescue swimmers swept up in roudrowning death of a St. George Island first respondergh surf conditions, has come down hard on the island's volunteer fire department.

In a line of duty death report, completed by Mike Tucker, chief of the Bureau of Fire Standards and Training within the Florida Department of Financial Services' Division of State Fire Marshal, the 10 recommendations included a notice of violation based upon the investigation's findings.

A state report into the drowning death of St. George Island Firefighter/First Responder Brian Stephen Smith found that first responders were not adequately trained to perform water rescues. (Photo/St. George Island Volunteer Fire Department)



A state report into the drowning death of St. George Island Firefighter/First Responder Brian Stephen Smith found that first responders were not adequately trained to perform water rescues.

(Photo/St. George Island Volunteer Fire Department)

The report also stipulated the department provide water rescue training, available through the Red Cross as well as the United States Lifesaving Association, and familiarization in basic surface water rescue to all responders who may be called to enter the water.

"Until the training is completed, personnel should not be allowed to perform water rescues," reads the report.

Authorized by state law to investigate the causes of firefighter injuries, illnesses, safety-based complaints, or line of duty deaths, and to issue recommendations as to the facts surrounding a water rescue line of duty death to arrive at the best means of preventing future injuries, Tucker's report outlines a series of departmental deficiencies that led to the death of Brian Stephen Smith, 56, who entered the water in rough surf conditions to rescue an adult man and his 14-year-old son.

Smith, a member of the fire department for four years, who had completed 206 hours of Florida Firefighter I training in Sept. 2018, "entered the rough surf with no flotation or water equipment to attempt a rescue," read the report.

"Water rescue equipment that is provided by (the St. George Island Volunteer Fire Department) has not been trained on in a practical or realistic setting to include its limitations to ensure competency with the issued equipment," it went on to cite, as a contributing factor to Smith's death, as well as "(a) lack of operational guidelines or policies that outline various steps, and tactical measures for surf rescue events on the beach."

To research his report, Tucker conducted a site visit and interviews on Sept. 3, a little over a week after the incident. He reviewed written statements by members of the department, as well as a group interview with four members of the sheriff's office and one-on-one interviews with four members of the fire department.

"During the interviews it was discovered that none of the individual responders and rostered volunteers have any formalized water rescue or surf rescue training through an official accredited training agency such as American Red Cross or United States Lifesaving Association," he wrote. "According to the fire chief, the individuals identified and rostered as water rescue are some of his younger members."

Tucker found that personal protective equipment used for this incident were two lifeguard water rescue "cans" and two first responder medical bags, to include medical oxygen cylinder and department-issued VHF portable radios. At least two members had water rescue cans assigned to them in the event of a water rescue. On-site interviews revealed the cans were issued though no formalized training or skill check off had been implemented.

"It should be noted that according to the fire chief, both water cans were apparently lost in the rough surf at the incident and were never retrieved," read the report.

"Identify equipment that is specific to water/surf rescue and make it available to those trained in this function," recommended the report. "Maintenance of the equipment needs to be completed and documented."

In his report, Tucker described the weather as sunny and warm with a temperature recorded at noon of 88 degrees, and winds 10-11 mph out of the east-southeast. The report said those interviewed reported "moderate crowds," with about one or two dozen patrons at the beach access where the incident occurred.

"The rough surf conditions (eight to 10-foot swells) to include double red flags flying and the high probability of rip currents contributed to this incident," Tucker wrote.

The report said the call to sheriff's dispatch came in at around 2 p.m. that two swimmers were in distress at 1048 East Gorrie Ave. Chief Kevin Delahanty and two other first responders responded after clearing a prior water rescue incident on the west side of the Island near the Bob Sikes Cut.

Smith was one of the first two members of the department to arrive, and removed his shoes and shirt and entered the water to attempt rescue of the father, and his 14-year-old son, as did the first arriving deputy. Within minutes others from the fire department and sheriff's office arrived, and assisted getting the boy to shore, then entered the water.

"The first arriving deputy began to struggle and was returned to shore for medical evaluation. The second arriving deputy that arrived remove his issued law enforcement gear, checked on the first deputy and then entered the water only to be overcome within minutes and was assisted back to the beach after ingesting large amounts of saltwater," read Tucker's report.

A respiratory therapy nurse on the beach attended to the officer, who was later administered oxygen by a first responder.

Delahanty asked firefighter Jerry Lowe to deploy one of his personal watercraft from his rental location and respond east to the scene, according to the report. Lowe told investigators that "it took a few minutes to get through the rough surf and head east due to the condition of the day but was successful in doing so. "He arrived to find 'several heads' bobbing in the rough surf and he positioned himself with the help of the fire chief directing him via hand signals from the beach to turn away from shore to rescue the distressed swimmers," read the report.

Tucker wrote that when Lowe encountered the father, he "found him to be almost incoherent from exhaustion." He pulled him up onto the jet ski and headed to shore, where first responders and medical personnel with a Weems ambulance were on the scene, said the report.

Lowe then returned on his jet ski to address three firefighters, Smith, George Joslin and Dan Fortunas "who appeared to be close together with one hanging on to the other," read the report, noting Joslin had entered the water wearing a personal life vest, and the two others had rescue bullets.

The report said Smith entered the water with no equipment and Fortunas entered with a rescue can.

"Joslin reached Smith as they would get separated by pounding surf and Smith grabbed onto Joslin from behind, gripping the rear neck portion of the Joslin's life vest," read the report. "At times Joslin stated he had Smith in his arms trying to move them both back to shore before they would get caught again in the rough surf and separating them."

Fortunas headed out with a second rescue can he got from a deputy, and called out to Smith to see if he could hold onto it. "Fortunas stated that though Smith did not verbally reply, he nodded (yes) and motioned towards the can and grabbed onto it," read the report, noting that Lowe had by then taken out three additional life vests from the jet ski compartment.

Fortunas told the investigator that as they were readying to return to shore, "a large wave struck them and as a result the three were separated by an estimated 20 to 30 feet."

When Joslin surfaced, he could no longer see the other two men, "and as a result started making effort towards shore, exhausted."

Lowe and Fortunas found Smith face down in the water, and worked to retrieve him and establish his airway. Lowe jumped from the jet ski to secure Smith, and Fortunas climbed onto the jet ski to pull the other two men in. "However the kill switch key, essential to the jet ski starting, was attached to Lowe's wrist," read the report. "The surf now pushing them towards shore, Lowe began swimming towards shore with Smith, and Fortunas (stayed) on the jet ski and 'surfed' it in to the shore."

A series of back blows to clear Smith's airway, and CPR were administered on shore, as the stricken firefighter was placed on the tailgate of a truck, and later the ambulance and quickly rushed to Weems.

Tucker recommended in his report that the fire department "reevaluate the usefulness of (its) jet ski and consider the placement of more than one along the island that can be available for rapid deployment when necessary." He also recommended having a United States Lifesaving Association certified trainer provide familiarization and skills check off for personal watercraft.

In his report, Tucker said both Delahanty and the sheriff's office noted the scene was "chaotic" and that it was difficult to identify who were the actual victims and who were the rescuers through the course of the event.

He recommended the fire department "work closely with law enforcement officials to create joint training opportunities as well as close coordination and communication prior to a water-related emergency.

"Work closely with local county officials and tourist development council to provide proactive messaging and education regarding beach flags and surf dangers for visitors and residents," was another recommendation, a step that the county, in concert with the Tourist Development Council, quickly put into place.

Tucker recommended the fire department consider purchase and use of a rescue "sled" designed for jet skis in rough surf conditions, and explore grant opportunities for additional equipment and training to protect first responders.

He also called for a complete evaluation of the fire department's water rescue capabilities for its 22-miles of Gulf shoreline as well as the corresponding waterfront on the bayside of the island. He noted that there are no written procedures regarding water rescue incidents for the fire department.

"Generic overview and instructions have been given on the water rescue equipment such as life vests, lifeguard rescue cans and a personal flotation device with a throw rope, though nothing has been documented or provided in skills check off format," Tucker wrote. "Incident management in a rapidly unfolding chaotic event requires establish communication between rescuers and the incident commander."