



America Reaches Out

Rally Organizer Prepares for Big Day

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By John Valceanu / American Forces Press Service

LAS VEGAS, Dec. 11, 2004 – Phil Randazzo is standing outside the Heinrich Family YMCA in Las Vegas as the sun sets over the Nevada desert. Behind him, a huge American flag covers an entire side of the young Men's Christian Association building. A cameraman is shining a harsh white light on him, as a local television reporter attempts to hook a microphone to his collar. For Randazzo, this will be the second television interview in less than 20 minutes.

Standing just over 6 feet, 4 inches tall, with a broad chest and shoulders, Randazzo towers over the cameraman and reporter, and he looks perfectly natural in the football jersey he is wearing. In fact, a casual observer might easily conclude that Randazzo is a professional athlete giving a sports interview. But the number on Randazzo's jersey is not his own. The number belongs to Army Spc. Pat Tillman, a Ranger who was killed during a combat mission in Afghanistan.

Randazzo is wearing an Arizona State University football jersey in Tillman's honor. He is also wearing an "America Supports You" military-style identification tag on a chain around his neck, a Defending Freedom wristband on his right wrist, and he is holding a teddy bear in his right hand. The teddy bear will be given to the child of a deployed servicemember.

The man is not a sports star. He is not a celebrity. And the interviews he is giving tonight are not about him. They are about the people he is trying to honor in an event on which he has focused almost exclusively for the last two weeks.

The weekend after Thanksgiving, Randazzo came up with the idea of "Operation Holiday Cheer," a rally to be held Dec. 11 to recognize the servicemembers who have served the country, those who are still serving, and the families that support them.

"We didn't have a lot of time to prepare, but I didn't want to postpone (the event). I wanted to do it before the holidays to make sure the families of those who have given their lives and those who are deployed serving our country were recognized during the holiday season, when they cannot be with their loved ones," Randazzo says.

Since coming up with the idea, Randazzo has thrown himself wholeheartedly into the project. He coordinated with the families of a dozen local servicemembers who have been killed -- six Army soldiers, five Marines, and an Air Force airman -- who will attend the rally and speak about their lost loved ones. He arranged transportation and lodging for those families that no longer live in the area.

But that is just a small part of his efforts. He created thousands of T-shirts, wristbands and teddy bears that he will give away. He arranged for local entertainers and elected officials to attend the rally. He coordinated with nearby Nellis Air Force Base for a flyover of two A-10 Warthog combat jets. Even as the final day before the rally draws to an end, the list of tasks continues on in thousands of details and plans Randazzo has created and which he is coordinating and managing.

His cell phone rings just about every three minutes. He's getting calls from entertainers who have heard about the rally and want to be included. He's getting calls from politicians who suddenly found time to be involved. Servicemembers' families are calling him. People who just want more information are calling him. It goes on and on.

Yet, when he's not on the phone or talking to workers who are setting up or being interviewed, Randazzo talks to people who are passing by.

"You're coming tomorrow, right? Tomorrow morning. It's going to be a big event," he says to a passerby. "Come out to support the troops. It'll be great."

His homespun, earnest approach apparently works. Using a grassroots network, Randazzo has managed to get the word out in a big way. Based on feedback he has received, he and local authorities are preparing for 15,000 people to attend, making this event one of the largest rallies held for the troops so far during the war on terror.

Randazzo is not a professional event planner. He doesn't have any ties to the Department of Defense. He is just a private citizen, a businessman who believes it is vitally important for America to honor its troops. For the last two weeks, he's virtually ignored his business and his family -- Randazzo is married to his college sweetheart, and they have two sons, ages 12 and 9, and a daughter, 12.

"I know it's been tough on my family the past couple of weeks, but I tell them, 'You've got to understand that there are more 100,000 dads out there who don't get to be with their families because they're in a war,'" Randazzo says. "What I'm doing is temporary; it's lasted a



Phil Randazzo, sporting an Arizona State University football jersey in honor of Army Spc. Pat Tillman, poses for a photo while preparing for a support-the-troops rally in Las Vegas. Defense Dept. photo by John Valceanu

couple of weeks. But they're out there in the dirt, braving danger, for month after month."

According to Mike Lubbe, the chief executive officer of the YMCA Southern Nevada, who coordinated the use of YMCA facilities for the rally, Randazzo had a unique ability to turn his ideas into reality.

"He's so intense. He's got this great combination of passion, of tenacity. A lot of people have one and not the other, but he's got all this great passion and then the tenacity to follow through and do something about it," Lubbe said.

Randazzo said his desire to honor the troops stems from his interest in history. He said he's long admired the soldiers who fought in World War II, who stormed the beaches of Normandy and parachuted into combat, and he thinks today's servicemembers are displaying the same kind of courage and commitment.

"The one thing I regret is not joining the military when I got out of school," Randazzo says. "I got married young and started a family, and I wasn't really in a good position to join then. My heart goes out to all these guys who are serving for us."

Randazzo said he is particularly inspired by Tillman's story. The former Arizona Cardinals professional football player turned down millions of dollars in order to serve his country as an enlisted soldier. Throughout his service and until his death, Tillman scrupulously insisted on not being treated any differently than his fellow soldiers.

"I have a bumper sticker on my (sport utility vehicle) that says 'Pat Tillman: American Role Model,'" Randazzo says. "And that is who I want to be a role model for my kids -- someone who makes sacrifices to serve his country, not just someone who makes a lot of money."

Operation Holiday Cheer is the second rally organized by Randazzo. The first was an impromptu affair held in March 2003. Though he planned and executed that event in only four days, Randazzo said local law enforcement authorities estimates that between 4,000 and 5,000 people showed up to honor the troops.

"I was fed up with anti-war protestors, and I hadn't seen anyone do anything to support the troops," Randazzo said. "So I decided we should do something to show them that we appreciate what they're doing for us."

That first rally raised more than \$26,000 for the United Services Organization, which helped send personal comfort items to the troops, according to Randazzo.

Randazzo said he was spurred to put together the second rally by seeing the deaths of two 19-year-old Marines during the battle of Fallujah, Iraq.

"I thought back to when I was 19. I was in college partying, and these guys are going door to door clearing buildings, or they're out there doing convoys, dealing with ambushes and explosive devices," Randazzo says.

Finding supporters and coming up with ways to show support seems to come easily to Randazzo, but some aspects of setting up these events are very tough, he said.

"Dealing with families who have lost their loved one is brutal, just brutal," Randazzo says. "Seeing how devastated parents can be after losing a kid, and being so proud of them at the same time."

The fact that it looks like Operation Holiday Cheer will be a huge event, dwarfing Randazzo's last rally, brings him a feeling of accomplishment.

"This is one of the most important events of my life," Randazzo says. "To me, it ranks up there with getting married to the woman I love and having children. I'm so glad to be able to do something for our troops. I'm doing this out of a selfish reason -- it makes me feel awesome. There's just no other way to explain it. Being able to do something for the troops and their families is an awesome feeling, just awesome."



Phil Randazzo, sporting an Arizona State University football jersey in honor of Army Spc. Pat Tillman, poses for a photo while preparing for a support-the-troops rally in Las Vegas. Defense Dept. photo by John Valceanu [Download high res image](#)