

Geneva man sentenced to 11 years after paralyzing soldier

Special to The Sun

Kenneth Earl Smith, 38, of Geneva, has been sentenced to 11 years in prison after pleading guilty to charges of first-degree assault and driving under the influence.

In June of 2007, the vehicle Smith was driving collided into a car occupied by two Fort Rucker helicopter students, Daniel Vinson and Florian Hinrichs.

Hinrichs became permanently paralyzed from the shoulders down due to the injuries he suffered from from the collision.

According to Alabama State Trooper Sam Pickett, Smith blew a .22 on a breathalyzer test two hours after the accident. Smith's blood alcohol level was at more than three times the legal limit.

District Attorney Kirke Adams read a letter from the victim who is now living back home in Germany after spending approximately one year in the hospital. The letter described how Hinrichs was dealing with his paralysis and how his life had completely changed since the accident. Hinrichs used the letter to describe how the simplest things everyone takes for granted would never be possible for him to do again. His letter described how he is in constant pain and requires 24-hour care.

Prior to the accident, Smith had been arrested five different times for DUI, beginning in 1991. Smith was sentenced to 12 months in prison for the DUI charge, and denied probation on the first-degree assault charge.

"This was a horrible event and a tragedy," said Adams after the hearing. "No matter how many years Mr. Smith serves in prison, it will not make up for what he did to Florian Hinrichs. There was nothing that Mr. Vincent could have done to avoid the collision. However, there will continue to be people who drink and drive and law abiding citizens should always be aware of their surroundings and always expect the unexpected."