

THE LIGHTER SIDE OF ARMY LIFE: A COLLECTION OF STORIES AROUND THE SERVICE OF JAMES L. SMITH

The Tiniest Hero

It was the middle of monsoon season in the spring of 2012 and everything was flooding. James Lorenzo Smith was a Specialist in his third deployment with United States Army. This time it was to Afghanistan. His platoon had a drainage ditch beneath a walkway dubbed “the bridge” outside their living area on top of a hill (uphill from everyone else). The ditch was about 3-4’ in diameter—just large enough to fit an average-sized human. But there was a problem. Leadership noticed that one side of the walkway was getting flooded over and there was “something” underneath the bridge blocking the path of the waterflow. His Platoon Sargent called for brave volunteers to venture into the dark hollow of the drainage ditch to locate the problem. Could it have been an improvised explosive device (IED)? Or was it just natural debris? Someone would have to wriggle in and find out. His fellow infantrymen suddenly became squeamish about dirtying their fatigues. Smith took the opportunity to seize the glory by the ass and volunteered to go into the “depths of the unknown,” as he puts it, and “locate, analyze, and correct” the issue.

He crawled over the wet, slippery concrete, as his brothers in arms abandoned the cause. His Team Leader, Squad Leader, and Platoon Sargent stayed by the entrance as Smith wriggled deeper into the concrete tunnel, knife in mouth, and a single headlight upon his head. He inched through the tunnel amazingly slowly, barely able to move in the tight space as he tried to avoid the nails entering the tunnel from the walkway above. After a time, the only way to prevent the nails from stabbing him was to propel himself forward inch by inch pushing his toes off of his Team Leader to allow him to cover the whopping FOUR FEET of tunnel to the site of the issue. Finally, the object blocking the path of the flowing water was within reach. A rectangular, orange, plastic container was perfectly wedged into the tunnel without room for a single fingerhold. He would have to make his own. Taking the 7” blade from between his teeth, he studied his target and

stabbed the center mass. He recalls laughing, “It wasn’t the best idea I’d ever had.” He stabbed, said a quick prayer to his deities, held his breath, and pulled his blade free. The ensuing tidal wave drowned out the cheering from above as the flow was restored. The water on the blocked side began to recede as his legs, still hanging out of the ditch were engulfed in a sudden onrush of water. After the initial flood, he stabbed again and cut along the bottom of the container, now releasing the built-up sediment in it and allowing it too to flood over him. He grabbed the now ripped container, holding it tight, and let loose the warrior cry, “PULL!” He felt hands grasp his ankles and the ground moving beneath him as he held tight to the orange menace before him, dragging it out with him. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, he could see the light of day once more.

More cheering and applause greeted him as he held the carcass of the orange menace above him, losing the remnants of its holding onto him as the water once again flowed free. He cast the carcass away and turned to the onlookers, a fire in his eyes, and a pounding in his chest, and spoke, “I need two things. A smoke and a shower.” He was awarded the highest honor an Infantryman could be given: a “Get Out of Shit Detail” certificate, written in Old English lettering by one of the Squad Leaders as a reward for his valorous deeds.

The Fart Smelled Round the Company

The year was 2011. It was a particularly windy day in Fort Carson, Colorado. Specialist Smith’s company was preparing to go on a routine field training exercise, and they had all just eaten ready to eat meals, or MREs, for dinner. These substance packets are not known for their delicacy. 24 different flavors based off of real dishes only without the delightful taste you get from actual food. Being a Specialist and not in a position of pull, Smith scraped the bottom of the box for his meal. He was poor sap that pulled the dreadful VEGGIE BURGER from the box. It is ranked 23rd on the MRE list of taste. The soldiers quickly scarfed down their dinner, kitted up (donned their gear in civilian terms), and headed outside for what they call rock trails—where each soldier has a rock placed on the ground representing themselves while going over battle plans to ensure everyone knows where they are supposed to be and what their tasks are. Each squad broke off from the full company to review the battle drills together. Smith felt a rumble

in his stomach, something fierce and unnatural. Smith was downwind from the majority of his squad, his Squad Leader in the middle of the semicircle moving rocks into a new configuration. Then...he felt it. Like a ghost leaving his body to go toward the light. It was the longest silent fart that had ever escaped his body, even to this day.

It.

Felt.

Amazing.

He thought the blowing wind would keep everyone safe.

He thought no one would even know.

He.

Was.

Wrong.

The soldiers to the left and right of him began dry heaving.

Their Team Leader approached to reprimand them for trying to cause a distraction.

But he, too, began heaving at the stench.

Before long, the heaving soldiers gained the attention of the entire squad.

Then...the smell wafted over them.

UTTER PANDIMONIUM

The entire squad was dry heaving and retching. Survivors recount it as the single worst thing they'd ever had the misfortune to be near.

Battle-hardened soldiers fled the gas cloud they could not see

Within minutes, Smith's platoon leadership came over to investigate the commotion.

It was a decision he'd regret instantly.

He fell victim to the cloud.

He walked away laughing but called one of the other Squad Leaders over to share in the torment.

The Squad Leader retched and called to his squad so they might experience this

Smell

To

End

All

Smells.

Legends say the gas cloud still roams over Fort Carson, drifting in the breeze. If you are unlucky enough to find yourself in its grasp, pray you have the constitution to survive it.

Specialist Smith was "kind" enough to demonstrate his unique abilities during this interview. Pray you never hear the story first-hand.

Night Vision Fail

2007. Iraq. Smith's very first deployment. Private Smith was just a cherry soldier, still naïve to what his limitations were. There he was, in the middle of the night, freezing in the middle of the Iraqi desert. He was atop a three-story high, round, concrete tower pulling overwatch and perimeter guard. As the end of his shift approached, he could hear his relief climbing the rickety rebar ladder to the top. He gave the arriving soldier his brief (what happened during his shift), sectors of fire including key landmarks, weapon orientation and orientation of extra ammo, and bid him farewell. Private Smith prepared to make his descent. As it was night, every soldier was wearing night-vision goggles. Being the lowest ranking soldier, Smith was issued the worst type: PVS-7s. They turn your three-dimensional vision and turn it into two-dimensional vision. While being able to see at night is a good thing, depth perception is also crucial. He sat down on the ledge of the hole to the ladder leading down. In his excitement to get to his bed, he reached out and pushed off simultaneously, trying to be the "cool" new kid on his block. Unfortunately, his hand

missed
the
ladder
and
Smith
fell
three
stories,
twisting
in
midair
to
ensure
his
weapon
would
not
be
destroyed
upon
impact.

He collided with the ground in a daze of concussion and dust. The Roving Patrol Leader opened the door to the ground level to see why there was such a girlish scream emitted and found Smith on the ground with a broken metal folding chair. He looked at Smith and asked if he was okay, telling him to get up before he could answer. The Roving Patrol Leader left him and what felt like two minutes later to our injured hero, he finally rose. His shoulder was in a great deal of pain, but his weapon was intact.

Years later, the VA says his shoulder injury is non-service related.