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Dr. Maxwell

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### **“A Life with No Regrets”**

Passion for serving his country is something Dennis Rockwell Smith felt in his heart from a young age. His father, Rockwell Smith, a retired Sergeant First Class, was wounded three times fighting for his country in Normandy, the Battle of the Bulge, and the Ardennes Forest. His father’s dedication and passion for his country was instilled in Mr. Smith from a young age. Born on October 1, 1942, Smith spent his childhood in Plymouth, Michigan, attending school, showcasing his superior talent for athletics, and having a little too much fun with his boyhood friends. After completing his first year of college at The Center for Creative Studies in Detroit, Michigan, Mr. Smith knew in his heart that it was the right time to enlist in the military. It was a no-brainer for Mr. Smith when it came to choosing which branch of the military to attend – the Army, like his father.

On September 2, 1962, at just 19 years old, Mr. Smith began a new chapter in his life when he enlisted for three years in the Army and was sent to Fort Knox, Kentucky, for basic training. He got a rude awakening of what military life entails: “It was physically and mentally intense. They didn’t play around in those days, but it built character and you learned how to sustain.” Mr. Smith also received a valuable piece of advice from a sergeant that he has never forgotten, and it has served him well throughout life: “If you can put one foot to the ground on a twenty-mile march, if you can put just one foot forward, then you can by goodness gracious put another foot forward – so you can keep on going all the time.”

From Fort Knox, Mr. Smith was sent to Fort Dix, New Jersey, to board a troop carrier to take him to Germany – but he never got on that carrier. He recalls that they were all called to attention and instructed to hold their orders in their hands. Before he could blink, orders were snatched out of their hands, and the troops were informed they were now going to Cuba. He was issued a rifle and told he would be part of the second or third wave into Cuba for the Cuban Missile Crisis. He was 19 and about to go into a confrontation often considered the closest the Cold War ever came to becoming a full-scale nuclear war. Was he scared? “Absolutely not. I figured the U.S. Army going into Cuba – we’re going to walk right over them. When you’re 19, nothing scares you.” Mr. Smith was correct. He didn’t need to worry. It wasn’t long before the Russian ships retreated, and he found himself on his way to Kitzingen, Germany, where he would spend the next 33 months.

Mr. Smith was assigned to Headquarters Company A 703<sup>rd</sup> Maintenance Battalion United States Army Europe (USAREUR), 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division, where he was trained in logistics. He was one of two enlisted men along with seven other officers who were sent to Murnau, Germany, to attend logistics school. He was stationed at a former German officer’s base which had been transformed into a very small military base on top of a small mountain overlooking the town of Kitzingen. He had a completely different experience in the military that, unfortunately, many men did not experience. “The base had a nine-hole golf course, swimming pool, tennis courts, and a theater. You could literally walk from one end of the base to the other in less than five minutes.” Mr. Smith admits, “I was lucky. I enlisted during peace time. The word Vietnam hadn’t even been mentioned at that point in time. We had people in Vietnam but only as advisors. However, we all know how that turned into a completely different deal.”



Mr. Smith had been stationed in Germany for 17 months when he was called out of formation and instructed that the Captain wanted to see him. The Captain asked if he wanted to return to the United States and go to Fort Hood in Texas to become a warrant officer and learn how to fly helicopters. He was informed that if he did not pass helicopter training then he would become a fixed-wing pilot. Mr. Smith turned down the offer because he was content with where he was and wanted to see more of Europe. It was a fork in the road and he chose the path that may well have saved his life.

After Mr. Smith fulfilled his contracted three years of service, he was released from active duty but was classified as a 4A. This meant if at any point the military wanted him back, he would get a letter “stating that he must return to service.” Mr. Smith settled back into civilian life, returned to college, got married, and had two children during the time the Vietnam War took off and ended in 1975. Mr. Smith explains: “I did a lot of things during my time out of the service when Vietnam was full-blown, so they were probably never going to call me back based

on my credentials during that time. However, if I had become a helicopter pilot, I never would have gotten out. I would probably be dead. If they had told me to go into a fire fight, that's exactly what I would have done. I don't know what the exact life expectancy of a helicopter pilot was, but I think it was in the vicinity of twenty minutes. It wasn't good. It was just a lucky thing that I joined the military when I did. It had nothing to do with me being smart – it was pure luck.”

Mr. Smith continued to put one foot in front of the other just as his old sergeant had instilled in him, and he found that his military experience helped shape not only who he became but also what he did: It led to an extremely successful career in advertising. The military taught him a lot of life lessons and skills, but most importantly, it taught him how to communicate and build relationships with people from all walks of life. “The military is made up of people of every color, nationality, college people, and people with no education. You need to decide and figure out how to make it and how to get these two people or these two classes to get along with each other,” he told me. It gave me a really great inspiration and great knowledge of how to get along with people, which is what I have done my whole life.” Mr. Smith spent the next 28 years in Michigan working with Studio Associates, Inc., building long-lasting relationships with his employees and customers and leading him to open two art studios and one photography office. He worked on major accounts from Star Wars to Ford Motor Company to Lionel Train and everything in between.

His greatest success came on the evening of a formal sorority party where he met his future wife of 50 years, Jean McCollom. Mr. Smith recalls talking to one of his future fraternity brothers when he spotted the love of his life across the room. “Through this group of people

comes this girl. I asked my fraternity brother if he knew her.” He said, “Yeah, I know that girl.” Mr. Smith replied, “That’s no girl, that’s a woman.” And Jean Smith has been his “woman” ever since. All you need to do is see how he still looks at his bride to know that she’s still the only woman in the room for him. Two sons, four grandchildren, and one soon to be great grandchild later, their love is unconditional and eternal.



Mr. Smith has had numerous accomplishments throughout his life. However, he told me his biggest accomplishments are fostering relationships with “the people that I’ve met along the way. My wife is my number one accomplishment followed by my two sons. Then my grandchildren and the friends I have made along the way. These have been the greatest contributions to my life.” Mr. Smith believes that “a lot of people go through life and don’t understand that there needs to be people in your life because without those people, you’re kind of a nothing.” Mr. Smith has an open and engaging personality that can light up a room, but he is

humble, loving, and thankful. “I got breaks from people that I probably never should have gotten breaks from. I feel very indebted to these people because without them, I could never ever have made it.” When asked if he had any regrets, he responded truthfully; “Now that I’m getting older, you start looking back over what you did and how you did it. I wouldn’t change a single thing that I’ve done.” Mr. Smith has successfully led a life of no regrets, and not too many people can honestly say that.

