

FROM HERO TO ZERO – ARMY SERGEANT AWARDED MEDAL OF HONOR AND THEN DEMOTED

A SOMEWHAT SAD STORY OF A MEDAL OF HONOR RECIPIENT

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SEPT 3, 2018

When you think about the military, the first thing that comes to mind are stories of honor, prestige, and service. Being in the military entails sacrifice for the good of your country. Anyone who joins the army would have to go through grueling drills and training and shape up to subdue resistance.

However, not all stories in the military are what they seem to be. Some accounts have tagged specific reports to be unbelievable, if not comical.

One such story familiar among the veterans of the United States Air Force is the case of Maynard Smith better known as "Airman Snuffy." He was recalled as the insubordinate and most disliked member of the military with no one wanting to work alongside him. Despite that, it was the result of his first mission that oddly earned him a medal of honor, much to his peers' astonishment.



Sergeant Maynard H. Smith, a B-17 Flying Fortress gunner, received the first Medal of Honor to be awarded to an enlisted man from US Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson.

Maynard Smith was born in Caro, Michigan in 1911 and had no plans of being in the military. He came from a wealthy household at the time. He had a reputation for being a spoiled child with a troublesome attitude, often easily bothering a lot of people.

When he left school, he decided to mooch on his family's inheritance until he inexplicably had to get a job in the tax office.

It was one unfortunate incident that led Smith to decide to join the army, and that was when he fathered a child. Although he and the mother's child parted ways, he was brought before the judge. *His refusal to financially contribute to the child support gave him only two choices: he either went to jail or signed up for the military. Smith chose the latter.*

As soon as he was in the Army, he became considerably difficult and did not like taking orders, especially from men who were younger than he was. As a result, he chose the shortest way to rank, and that was to volunteer for Aerial Gunnery School. It was a peculiar choice for a person who was innately selfish considering bombers he had to crew had very little chance of survival.

Because of his obnoxious attitude and inability to make friends in the military, he gained the nickname "Snuffy" preceding his reputation of being obtuse.

THE INFAMOUS FIRST MISSION

It was on May 1, 1943, that newly appointed Staff Sergeant Smith flew out to France inside of a B-17 that events took a different turn. The mission was to target a series of U-boat pens around Saint Nazaire despite the location's reputation of being heavily defended.



Fortunately, the first batch of bombers reached their target without violent resistance from the German forces. As soon as the mission was complete after dropping the bombs, the crew of the B-17 headed for home. *Unfortunately, when the lead bomber made an error in navigating towards England, they had flown over Brest, France.*



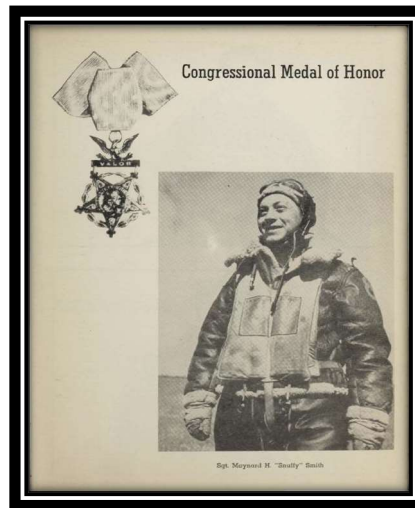
The location was also heavily defended, they soon realized they were being attacked by German fighters as their plane began to descend. As the enemy fire tore through the plane's fuel tanks, a huge fire erupted in the center of the fuselage. With communications down, oxygen systems malfunctioned, and Smith's gun power knocked out, three of the crew members decided to bail out. They jumped out with parachutes over the channel and were never heard from again.

Smith, however, leaped to action and tended to the wounded crew members.

He inadvertently navigated the craft home even while German fighters riddled it with bullets and threatened a major explosion. Not only that, the plane's temperature was rising dangerously and the fire extinguishers starting to empty.

Smith began to throw out anything explosive and not bolted to the aircraft. He also put on protective clothing to put out the fire, and it was said he successfully did so by urinating on it by the time they reached England.

As the plane landed in the first available airfield, it broke in half, but the crew members including Smith surprisingly survived. Smith was then dubbed as an unlikely hero afterward.



However, the act of heroism did not lessen his personality problems and he was still causing trouble among his peers and not changing their continued resentment toward him.

On the day was to be awarded the MOH he couldn't be found. He was eventually located in the mess kitchen, where he was peeling potatoes. He had been given KP duty for coming in late from the pass and had forgotten to show up to get his medal.



THE CITATION FOR HIS MEDAL OF HONOR

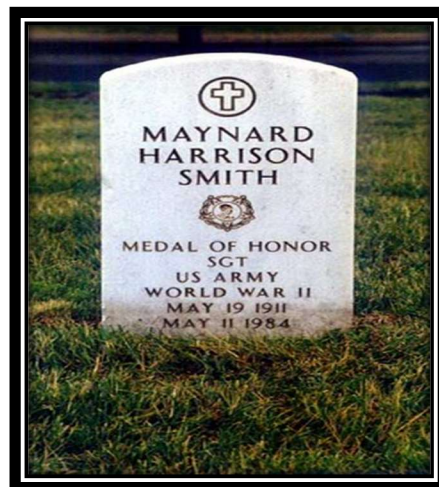
For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action above and beyond the call of duty. The aircraft of which Sgt. Smith was a gunner was subjected to intense enemy antiaircraft fire and determined fighter aircraft attacks while returning from a mission over enemy-occupied continental Europe on 1 May 1943. The aircraft was hit several times by antiaircraft fire and cannon shells of the fighter aircraft, 2 of the crew were seriously wounded, the aircraft's oxygen system was shot out, and several vital control cables were severed when intense fires were ignited simultaneously in the radio compartment and waist sections. The situation became so acute that 3 of the crew bailed out into the comparative safety of the sea. Sgt. Smith, then on his first combat mission, elected to fight the fire by himself, administered first aid to the wounded tail gunner, manned the waist guns and fought the intense flames alternately. The escaping oxygen fanned the fire to such intense heat that the ammunition in the radio compartment began to explode, the radio, gun mount, and camera were melted, and the compartment was completely gutted.

Sgt. Smith threw the exploding ammunition overboard, fought the fire until all the firefighting aids were exhausted, manned the workable guns until the enemy fighters were driven away, further administered first aid to his wounded comrade, and then wrapped himself in protecting cloth, completely extinguished the fire by hand. This soldier's gallantry in action, undaunted bravery, and loyalty to his aircraft and fellow crewmembers, without regard for his safety, is an inspiration to the U.S. Armed Forces.

He continued to fly for four missions before being diagnosed with 'operational exhaustion.' His rank was lowered and his assignment changed to clerical services.



Smith died in 1984 and was buried at Arlington National Cemetery. Although he was considered a war hero, he was one nobody wanted to fly with. *Until this day, his actions in May 1943 remain an exhibition of courage, with or without his insufferable personality during his service in the military.*



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