

MEET A SUPERHERO

By John Mohr

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Retired Corporal William Richard “Rick” Smith has no special powers, no secret identity, and no cape, but he is my definition of a Superhero

I got to know Rick earlier this year at the Lowcountry Foundation for Wounded Military Heroes golf outing. Rick cannot golf, but he came to Hampton Hall last May to share his experiences with us and the other 30 wounded heroes. I recently sat down with Rick at his home, where he shared his story. It’s a story of an ordinary man with an extraordinary heart and commitment to his country. I hope it touches you as it has touched me.

Rick was born in 1967 in Mobile, Alabama, and today, like many former military personnel, he lives in Florida. Rick first enlisted in the US Army in 1989 shortly after graduating high school in Satsuma, Alabama. He comes from a family with a long military tradition. His father served in the Marine Corps and his uncles served in the Army and Navy. While Rick joined the Army to “better himself,” he adds that even at a young age, “I have always held dear to my heart the idea of patriotism and self-sacrifice.” Little did he know at the time of enlisting where the road he chose would lead him.

At the age of 20, he completed basic training at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, but as he readily admits it was a shocking, life changing experience. Rick wanted to go to Ranger School, but the Army had other ideas. They deployed him to South Korea – a real culture shock for a boy raised in Alabama. “It was the first foreign country I ever saw”, says Rick but “despite our many cultural differences, Korea was a unique and pleasurable experience for me that I will never forget.” In Korea he was given the task of a forward observer -- officially called a Fire Support Specialist. These specialists do not put out fires -- they rain fire down with big artillery guns. In Korea, his job was to sit on the hillside and call in artillery fire to blow things to pieces. Rick adds, “I blew up a few off-target shacks in my time there, luckily no

one got hurt.”

After four years, when Rick was asked to reenlist, he declined. Rick had girls on his mind. He decided to forgo the Army’s offer for Ranger School and instead attend college. He attended Southwest State Technical College specializing in instrumentation technology. From there, he became an employee with Alabama Power Company and life was good. He married his sweetheart and they had their first child. While attending a company meeting on September 11, 2001, he watched the attacks on our nation with disbelief. At that moment, Rick got the call. He knew he had to reenlist and serve his country once again. “I just didn’t know how to break it to my wife” he explained. However, they soon agreed that he had to go help and he joined the Alabama National Guard in hopes of keeping his career while fulfilling his desire to serve.

Soon after, he fully reenlisted in the Army. Rick is good with a rifle and he quickly qualified to be a sniper. He trained with a tight knit squad of four soldiers initially based in Camp Shelby near Hattiesburg, Mississippi. “Hattiesburg was a unique place where we experienced mobilization training and made great friendships”, says Rick. “We had our fun but soon we were headed to Ali Al Salem Air Base, a military airbase situated in Kuwait, approximately 20 miles from the Iraqi border.” Rick and his squad performed routine convoy and personnel escorts in Operation Iraqi Freedom. Riding in a handful of Humvee gun trucks and other vehicles, his squad provided the escort security vehicles to keep things moving throughout Iraq’s southern province. Rick explains, “I was the gun truck commander with stressful missions every night and life or death close calls with the enemy. We were ever vigilant to roadside bombs and approaching vehicles. The reality of war quickly set in when on one of my first missions I had to give the

order to take-out an approaching truck that threatened my convoy.” Incidents like this would happen again on Rick’s deployment and these incidents would later come back to haunt him. Suffice it to say -- war is hell.

Near the end of his 15-month deployment, Rick suffered an unfortunate injury. While mounting a gun on the turret of a Humvee, a heavy armored steel hatch fell on his head resulting in Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI). “The hatch fell, busted my head open and knocked me unconscious,” Rick recalls. He was quickly medevaced to a hospital at Camp Arifjan in Kuwait. Rick was badly injured and spent the next several weeks in recovery in and out of consciousness. While he later returned to his unit he was not able to resume missions. Soon after, he was sent home to his wife, daughter and 2-year-old son, who was just a newborn infant when Rick left for Kuwait. While still in the Alabama National Guard, Rick went back to work for the Power Company but something was terribly wrong. The brain injury had affected his ability to function at work. Rick admitted, “I became bored and anxious and for many selfish reasons I needed to go back to the fight in Iraq.”

So, in May of 2008, Rick volunteered for his second active deployment in Operation Iraqi Freedom. He transferred to the Pennsylvania National Guard to join the 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team (SBCT). The 56th SBCT is composed of some of the oldest units in the United States Army. Units of the 111th Infantry trace their lineage back to 1747, when Benjamin Franklin first established the “Associators.” Since that time, battalions

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RICK SMITH ON DUTY IN KUWAIT

of the 56th SBCT participated in nearly every conflict throughout American history.

The 56th SBCT was based at Camp Taji, Iraq from January to September 2009. It conducted operations in northern Baghdad, as part of Multi-National Division – Baghdad. The best way to describe a Stryker Brigade Combat Team is ‘hell-on-wheels’. These teams are organized and equipped into a combined arms formation with enough firepower and mobility to defeat any modern enemy threat. The Stryker is a full-time eight-wheel drive, armored vehicle weighing approximately 20 tons. It carries an infantry squad with all their equipment. On paved roads the vehicle can attain speeds over 60 mph.

During this 9-month deployment, Rick experienced another unfortunate injury. While setting an explosive to enter a building, Rick was hit (‘peppered’) multiple times. He was knocked-out and left with a second brain concussion. This injury resulted in frequent blackouts, vertigo and not being able to fully function. Rick was diagnosed again with another TBI on top of hearing loss, depression and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The PTSD was likely triggered

by the horrific incidents Rick experienced on his deployments in Iraq. It comes with a debilitating set of physical and psychological symptoms. Shortly after, Rick was released from active duty, treated for his brain injury at Fort Dix and returned home. After 11 years of service, including 3 deployments and 6-years of active duty, Rick’s career as a soldier was now finally over.

Like many of our soldiers, Rick returned a different person only to face more struggles. He had the challenge of recovering from his brain injuries, the challenge of dealing with

invisible wounds – the depression and demons; and the challenge of stepping back into relationships with his wife, family and friends. After going through war, sustaining injuries, a divorce and a job loss, life took its toll on this Superhero. To deal with his demons, Rick started drinking heavily on top of the many medications he was taking for depression and PTSD. It was a deadly cocktail. Rick indicated “I became angry and sketched-out and at one-point I tried to take my own life. Fortunately, I found many good reasons to continue and now, with the help of my family and friends I am doing much better. Recently, the doctors found the cause of my debilitating blackouts. It was an issue with my heart. It would just stop beating momentarily, long enough that I would blackout and fall. The VA Medical Center never diagnosed it. I am better now thanks to the team at the Mayo Clinic. They installed a pacemaker for my heart and now I no longer experience blackouts. To control my depression and anxiety, I have been blessed with a good buddy ‘Berkeley.’”

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Berkeley is a K9 for Warriors trained service dog. The concept was started by Shari Duval, married to PGA golf professional Bob Duval. Shari started to train dogs to help her son recover from PTSD – and it worked. Shari is now the largest service dog provider for wounded vets in the country. Many of her dogs are rescued from local pounds. “Berkeley is my medication on four legs”, says Rick. “He senses my anxiety. He knows when my demons are coming on and when it happens he jumps on me, licks my face, and reminds me I am not alone. It’s a priceless bond we now share.”

So, why do I call Rick a Superhero? The word superhero brings to mind images of strength, bravery, and determination. I’ve learned that most heroes are just ordinary people — it is their acts that are extraordinary. To find real superheroes, we need to look no further than our servicemen and women. Our veterans make great personal sacrifices. When duty calls they step-up for their country to keep us safe. They put their careers on hold, leave their families behind, go into battles, risk getting injured, or worse, killed. Their lives are not easy being superheroes and they share many of our human flaws. In Alabama there is a saying, “Good people are like candles; they burn themselves up to give others light.”



Corporal Rick Smith personifies this. He has made a great personal sacrifice and serves as a role model for all of us. For that he is a Superhero.

Today, Rick is trying to lead a normal life. His disabilities are getting better. He is supported by his parents, daughter, son, grandchildren and two dogs. One of his best friends is a retiree from Berkeley Hall – Ed Giannelli. Ed helped sponsor Rick’s dog Berkeley. He keeps a close eye on both of them. Rick is now busy as a volunteer for several wounded veteran organizations. He greatly enjoys fishing with his son and looking after the grandchildren. Rick is an inspiration to all of us -- it’s what superheroes do in their retirement.

Thank you, Rick, for sharing your story. I enjoyed spending time with you and Berkeley. ♦



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