

Dearly beloved, we are gathered here this evening to witness the very recent retirement of Sergeant Smith, A. from Her Majesty's Royal Air Force; and what could be more fitting on such a momentous occasion, than for us to join with him in a relatively brief, but heartfelt moment of ritual humiliation.

Known variously as, Smithy, Smythe, Smudger, Biff, and somewhat surprisingly perhaps as Alex, our hero was born at a very early age, and in the presence of his mother, who at the time was using the name 'Mrs. Smith'. His father reportedly took one look at the newly arrived infant and said, "That's my boy!" before taking to the bottle. As he grew, attempts were made to educate the boy, all seemingly ending in failure. He took the easy way out and left school at the earliest opportunity (which in reality was when his parents allowed him to). Not for him the hallowed halls of a university education - life was calling, and the young Alex had every intention of answering it.

First called to the colours in 1976, Alex joined the Air Training Corps, rising rapidly to the rank of cadet. It was here that his real education began, along with friendships which would endure through to today (although, after tonight, some of those may yet come to a tragic end). There was the occasion when, on an adventure training exercise, the inquisitive Cadet Smith asked an older, and somewhat wiser colleague just what he was brewing up for lunch in his mess tin. "Pea and ham soup," came the eager reply; "Wanna try some..?" It was only after the proffered spoonful of green gunk had been consumed, that young Smithy realised with some agony that what he had in fact been fed had been a mixture of dregs and washing up liquid being used to clean the aforementioned tins.

It was around this time, that Alex' adventurous spirit caused him to accept a ride in an old pram, found abandoned in the locality by a couple of chancers, identified only by their names - Hope and Burgess. Kneeling up so as to be afforded the best possible view, le Smith was perambulated in some style around the streets - you had to make your own entertainment in those days.

On entering the top of a particularly long and steep bank known locally as Butcher's Bridge, Smithy began to notice a marked increase in velocity. Calling back to the two rascals providing the forward motion, with an enquiring, "You won't let go, will you?", he was answered with a breathless, "Of course not!", their running feet a blur as they built up the necessary momentum. Did they let go? Of course they let go, watching as the speeding pram, its young test pilot hanging on for grim death, hurtled away from them. Down, down it went, faster and faster, getting smaller and smaller. Presently, the carriage mounted a garden wall, travelling along it at an angle of 90 degrees to the horizontal for some distance, before crashing with some force into the road way. At the top of the hill, the other two protagonists were concerned. Through tears of laughter, the one identified as Burgess was heard to say, "We've killed him!" They hadn't of course, but it had been an admirable attempt.

But the innocent pastimes of youth give way in turn to the diversions of an adult world. There was a particular Saturday evening when Alex, in company with one Neil Yarwood and myself were seeking some suitable distraction. A trip to the cinema was eventually agreed upon, but what to see? The young and hormonal Alex' preference was for *'Flesh Gordon'*, a two-bit X-rated piece of nonsense which was on release at the time. Although I begged him to change his mind, he was set, and being at heart a kindly soul I couldn't see a young man of such tender years go disappointed, and so reluctantly agreed.

It was an unmitigated disaster! Glaring at him in a darkened cinema, I overrode his protestation of "Alright - alright!" with the words, "Don't you ever do this to me again!" It is the single worst film I have seen in my whole life - cheers, mate (!)

But such times were coming to a close, as Alex was about to follow his dream and enlist in the Royal Air Force - it was inevitable, he had become attached to the uniform. I well remember the night that we celebrated his departure. 'T'was a night of alcoholic over indulgence, and when the night was through, he and the aforementioned Yarwood who shall remain nameless, accompanied me to the bus stop. Taking a seat on a low wall, the better to cope with a swaying world, Smithy was holding forth on some topic of great importance, up to and including the time that he disappeared backwards into the night, his little legs wagging skyward. And so he was gone . . .

In the service of Her Britannic Majesty, Aircraftsman Smith learned all there is to know about computer hacking, and internet fraud. Always in awe of those in authority, he learned to overcome his hesitancy, pointing out to sometimes very senior officers, his humble opinion of the inadequacies of their performance, whilst holding a beer in one hand and extending the middle finger of the other in their general direction. His career has taken him very much into harm's way in the service of his country, and of his own performance, Alex told me recently that one of his greatest achievements was the successful return of his team from a particular war zone with the same number of holes in their bodies as when they went in. A laudable achievement indeed.

However, things did not always go his way; such as the time he was cashiered for misappropriating government funds, to wit: rigging up a service telephone to make private calls home via satellite whilst on detachment to the Falkland Islands.

As they took him down to the cells, Alex was heard to shout, ". . . *And I'd do it all again!*" This wasn't an isolated case. Stationed in Germany, he installed a phone in his room, and charged colleagues a small fortune in favours for its use. Rumour has it that this is how he managed to feed the many guests at his wedding barbeque. The entrepreneurial spirit is not lost!

Speaking of weddings, Alex Smith does reportedly have something of a reputation as a bit of a 'ladies man'. Precisely which bit I'm not entirely sure, and am somewhat reluctant to find out. Married many times, and the subject of numerous acrimonious paternity suit's, he has always been a party-animal, organising shindigs and acting as D.J. at functions from the U.K. to Germany, Kosovo to Saudi Arabia and all points west - some of the proceeds even finding their way to charitable causes - amazing! Never happier than when in fancy dress, Alex was once heard to call a Group Captain a 'Girl!' whilst dressed as a bearded lady. The Group Captain was clearly dressed as Aladdin at the time; what was he thinking?

The butt of practical jokes in his formative years, Alex turned the tables in adulthood, placing rotten fish, etc. onto car engines (gad - the smell), and filling a mates car through the sun roof with billions of polystyrene balls, for a laugh.

However, his riotous days as a latter-day Lethario were finally curtailed when Lucy - the present Mrs. Smith - terminated his wandering eye, hands and other extremities, dragging him to the alter one final time, and making an honest man of him; and doesn't he look well on it? The result - young Greg; and he didn't have to argue the case in Court!

Lucy speaks fondly of her husband, the man she loves and cares for. Of particularly note are his driving skills. There was the brand new Shogun, pranged whilst in reverse (admittedly she herself had already crashed the thing barely two weeks previously); and the two week old Mitsubishi Gallant, reversed into a 7 foot blast wall he hadn't seen. A bit of a pattern developing here, perhaps? Beware the Smith parked in front of you!

But enough of all this. The Smith has returned, along with his dear wife Lucy, and their son Greg, and that is what we celebrate tonight. Those of us present, who were also there at his departure all those years ago, have our own tales of adventure to tell of life's highway. The important thing is that we are here together tonight, united in grief . . . sorry, gratitude for old friends and new.

A toast: to the Smiths - and not a single mention of Mr. Morrissey!

. . . And now, if anyone has anything more sensible to say, I would like to offer you the floor; it is however, an integral part of the house, and the occupants need somewhere to hang their carpets. Thank you.

Ian D. Nesbitt

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