

Spencer Williams, Kennedy Evans

Period 2

Gerald Smith

Navy

1964 - 1993

2018

### Gerald Smith

Each year hundreds of thousands of men and women are enlisted in the United States military. All of which enlist in many different branches and serve in different parts of the world. Gerald Smith served as a Navy Special Operations Airborne division Lieutenant Commander. Before he enlisted in the Navy he had a troubled childhood and a problematic family. While he served he was awarded nearly 30 medals and served in over 7 countries. After retiring from the military Smith went back to school to get his teaching degree and became a substitute teacher.

Growing up Smith did not experience the greatest childhood with issues resulting in him wanting to join the military in the first place. His father would drown himself in alcohol ultimately creating a rough relationship between the two. A majority of the time Smith's father would give him a hard time taking a toll on not only him but his brother and mother too. In a few incidences it resulted in his father not only being verbally abusive but physically too. This gave Smith a sense of resentment towards his father. He then went on to graduating high school and after going to Cal State University studying physical geography and San Bernardino Valley College studying general science and graduated honors from both. Smith saw the military as a better opportunity to grow as a man and just really wanted to see what war was like. In 1964 he had come to the decision to volunteer and enlist in the military. He now had nothing holding him back and with that he went on to training and preparing to fight for the citizens of this country.

Enlisting in the military was the easy part but now came the hard part the training. Smith was apart of the Seabees unit first which are part of the Navy but mainly focused on the completion of construction projects which serve combat and non-combat missions. Being in this unit he was trained by the Marines though they are in a completely different branch. In preparation for war this unit trained intensely in different parts of the country such as Great Lakes Illinois, Coronado California, Camp Lagoon North Carolina, and a couple others that would prepare them for combat. Not only was he training for the Seabees unit but also as a Naval Special Operative and a Combat Veteran. During boot camp with the Marines Smith explains how absolutely terrified he was going in and how much abuse he had faced from the Marines due to the fact that they needed to change him and get him to do exactly what he was told. A couple of things that helped Smith get through the brutal training was to just tough it out and create a strong mindset. The Marines were tough on him but their training shaped him into the warrior he would become out in the field. The Marines would tell him that he wasn't leaving until he was a good shot and with that Smith was able to shoot 500 meters without a scope. Through all the painfully intense training Smith had gone through he was now put into the field where the real combat would come out to play and wasn't very welcoming.

One of the very first missions as a Seabee Smith was apart of was the Battle of Khe Sanh in Vietnam. This mission was filled with an immense amount of combat which had him fighting to stay alive each and every day and would leave him wondering if today would be his last. During this war on December 3, 1967 the Dong Ha Combat Base was under attack by the North Vietnamese artillery which ignited in a huge explosion having the most casualties of Marines ever, later being called the "Dead Man Zone". Smith and his men were only a few miles away

from this explosion and knew it wasn't good. A couple ways he would get through that war was repeatedly having the idea that he was going to let the other guy die for his country and to never lose because losing was never an option for him. It was also a series of mind games played from both sides such as Smith and his men placing an ace of spades card on the deceased of Vietnamese soldiers because they believed the card was bad luck. One thing Smith would do as a good luck token was carrying tons of ammo because there are no timeouts when it comes to war. As prepared as Smith may have been for war nothing could have prepared him for an artillery bursting from Russia. The round had hit him and later exploded near his liver which has since then given him many issues involving his chest to this day. Smith had developed an incredible amount of mental toughness during the war and later stated, "You have to know when to turn on and off the light to get through the day." Through all the rough times however there were very fun and memorable moments he was apart of. One for instance involved a coward amongst his unit and so he and his members had some fun with him. It concluded in Smith and his unit first taking the lightbulb out of the bunker that the person was showering in and then throwing pebbles at the roof and yelling "Incoming!" Which then led to the person running out undressed and petrified. Although there were good times Smith didn't have any close relationships within the unit because he wouldn't be able to predict if they were going to die the next day. The war most definitely took a toll on Smith but he always said that no matter how adverse it got that you can't give up because then that would just make you a loser.

Joining the military for Smith had its positives and negatives, but the greatest thing he got from it was his transition from a boy to a man. He would take the things he learned and keep it with him for the rest of his life. Soon after he had returned home he went back to school and

accomplished his teaching credential at Cal State San Bernardino. Academics played a huge role for Smith in conquering PTSD and was the most important factor for him in overcoming adversity. Gerald Smith is currently living his best life and continues to go to the annual Seabees reunion each year. What Smith went through in all those years of service and even his life early on are things people couldn't even fathom being apart of and it's truly remarkable and it should inspire everyone to be the best they can be and never settle for less just like Gerald Smith.