Local soldier returns as hero after nearly losing his life



U.S. Marine Corps Sniper Specialist and Easley High School graduate, Andrew Smith, lies wounded after a mortar round exploded 10 yards in front of him while he was serving in Afghanistan.

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BY JESSICA SIBLEY
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SALEM — His attitude is upbeat and his outlook on life, well, let's just say he has a new appreciation for it.

This week he is among the Marines enjoying the hospitality and opportunities for rehab on Lake Keowee.

Andrew Smith — sniper specialist in the U.S. Marine Corps and graduate of Easley High School — took a direct hit from the relentless Taliban during his spring tour in Afghanistan just six weeks ago.

He enlisted in 2008 and between providing aid during the earthquake in Haiti and defending certain sections of protected water on military ships, his last bit of training would lead him to the depths of Middle Eastern battle.

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"I trained as a sniper and that's what I did when I deployed in March," Smith said. "We went into combat right away."

Smith and his sniper cohorts set up shop to fight the Taliban during the middle of March.

He was familiar with the types of weapons that the Taliban was known for using, but the homemade mortar round was the one he was injured by.

"It's a tube launched bomb, that is shot high at an angle and comes down, destroying everything in its path once it hits," he said. "Before I knew it, one landed 10 yards in front of me."

Smith said that the shrapnel of the blast will leave scars on him from head to toe, while arteries in his legs were sliced to the point that he was in danger of bleeding out on scene.

And yet, his first thought was to remain calm.

"I knew it was important to keep myself cool and collected," he said. "I was so surprised it was me that got hit, simply because you never think it'll be you, until it is. I was conscious for the nearly two hours it took to get me into a helicopter."

His fellow soldiers dragged him out of the initial danger zone and put tourniquets on his legs to help slow the massive bleeding.

All the while, rapid Taliban machine gunfire littered the air all around them and more mortar shells were dropping at a constant pace.

"They loaded me into a helicopter under heavy fire," he added. "The medic gave me a drug to help with the pain and my nerves, but by then I couldn't feel myself bleeding and I couldn't hear anything. I was pretty sure those were going to be my last moments. I was scared."

After a short ride to a field hospital to assess his wounds, that's when Smith realized how bad it was.

"I had severed arteries and veins," he said. "I thought they were just going to be superficial wounds. Little did I know."

Following a six-hour surgery and a vein graft to save his life, he woke up with both of his legs wrapped in bandages.

"I was happy to see that I had both my legs, but it took another week or so before I was out of the woods and didn't have to worry about amputation. I came really close," he said.

His mother, Dee Moore, couldn't be prouder of her son, as his heroic fight yielded one of the highest honors in the military.

"Andrew received a Purple Heart while recovering, presented by the Commandant of the Marine Corps and the highest enlisted member of the Marine Corps as well," Moore, who works in Clemson, said.

Smith and his mother can't thank his battle buddies enough for helping save him despite the danger they faced.

"Two of his friends were also hurt in the attack and are doing well. We are so thankful for that. One of his good friends, Mark Bradley, a fellow sniper gave the ultimate sacrifice on June 16 in Afghanistan."

For Smith though, the recovery is going well, although he will live the remainder of his life with the scars to remind him.

"Now, I'm walking without a cane and it hasn't even been six weeks," he said. "I'm lucky and I know it. But to see the community support us, well, that's the best. Let's face it. Afghanistan is only in the news now when it comes to policy changes. Sometimes, we feel like we aren't supported, but this event makes it easier to believe that we truly are."

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