

INSCOM Journal

Puppy love

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Maj. Tracey Smith, executive officer for the 741st MI Battalion, 704th MI Brigade, was named INSCOM's Volunteer of the Year. (photo by Brian Murphy)

The 600 Soldiers of the 741st Military Intelligence Battalion, 704th MI Brigade primarily train to support the National Security Agency mission, but one among them is simultaneously training to lead the blind.

This dedicated trooper works diligently out of the battalion's command group, although he's never possessed a security clearance nor attended basic training. His name is Cagney, and he's a 17-month-old black Labrador Retriever.

On the other end of Cagney's leash is Maj. Tracey Smith, executive officer for the 741st MI Battalion, who was named the U.S. Army Intelligence and Security Command's Volunteer of the Year.

She was nominated for the award by Col. Karen Gibson, commander, 704th MI Brigade, who believes Smith "models every Army Value, but most especially the ethic of selfless service."

While others are content to stop serving at the end of the duty day, Smith donates hundreds of hours of her free time to puppy raising for the nonprofit organization Guiding Eyes for the Blind.

This process started two years ago while Smith was stationed in Alaska. She sat in her place of worship just like any other Sunday, but under the pew in front of her lay a guide dog in training with a teenage girl wrangling the responsibility.

Intrigued, Smith spoke with the young lady and formed a relationship while learning about the program. After Smith was assigned to Fort George G. Meade, Md., she saw an advertisement in the local newspaper

looking for “puppy raisers,” and she signed up, knowing that she could make a difference in the life of a disabled American, just like the teenage girl in Alaska did. This led Smith to Garland, her first Seeing Eye puppy and immediate predecessor to Cagney.

Cagney, like Garland and all other puppies in the program, was born in Yorktown, N.Y., before spending eight weeks at a loving kennel where he learned fundamentals of his training, such as how to go to the bathroom on command.

After spending up to two years with Smith, Cagney then goes on to “college” where his training reaches its pinnacle and he becomes a full-fledged guide dog serving a disabled person, just as Garland and countless others have done.

Smith was not able to attend Garland’s graduation because of mission requirements, and will also be absent for Cagney’s because of a pending deployment. While it’s tough missing out on such a special moment, Smith understands it’s part of life in the Army.

“Deployments have happened while I’ve been with the program,” she said. “We have Puppy Raisers, like myself, and Puppy Sitters – people who have gone through the program, and wouldn’t like to raise but would want to help out. So, instead of putting them in a kennel and doing nothing, there is still a person who understands the dog and can continue his education until I get back.”

When it’s time to deploy, Smith knows that she will have to say goodbye to Cagney, much like she did with Garland.

“I didn’t really start welling up until I got home and was putting away her toys,” Smith said after Garland’s graduation.

But the personal satisfaction that comes from helping someone less fortunate more than makes up for the difficult farewells, Smith said.

Smith grew up in Beaver, Pa., and interacted often with her older cousin, who was born blind and partially deaf because of complications from German measles. That relationship helps explain why she feels especially attached to this program. So much so that she teaches Cagney simple sign language commands in addition to the verbal commands so he can better serve his impaired owner.

“Some people may have less hearing or some sight, so mostly they need 15 hand signs,” she said.

Perhaps this willingness to go the extra mile teaching Cagney skills for different types of disabilities came from her religious upbringing when she and her family, instead of attending traditional Sunday school, would frequent the local geriatric center to bring the disabled residents down to the chapel for services.

“That good internal feeling – the one you get from helping someone out – it just started out for me at a young age,” Smith said.

With an energetic “Type A” personality that rivals her Seeing Eye puppy’s tail wag, Smith couldn’t imagine doing anything else with her time.

“Even though you’re taking away from your own personal time, what are you doing? You’re sitting around doing nothing,” Smith said. “I would rather, instead of my mind numbing while watching TV and doing absolutely nothing, get something that you feel internally. It makes you feel good.”

Smith’s volunteer work isn’t limited to just guide dogs, though. She’s also involved in the unit’s Better Opportunities for Single Soldiers program. When she first arrived to the unit, the program barely existed,

with only five individuals utilizing the program.

With the help of Smith's hard work and persistence, the BOSS program grew to more than 30 members in less than three years.

"Whether it was a volunteer event for fun or if it was actually going somewhere and volunteering to help out it didn't matter – she has the same motivation," said Spc. Cara Sanders, the 741st MI Battalion's BOSS representative. "She makes you want to come out and do things."

Those who know Smith describe her as a shark, insinuating that if she were to ever stop volunteering, she would cease breathing.

"If Maj. Smith isn't volunteering, there's something wrong with her," said Cpl. Victoria Friend, the 2010 installation BOSS president.

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