

Military Hall of famer achieves elite physical fitness milestones

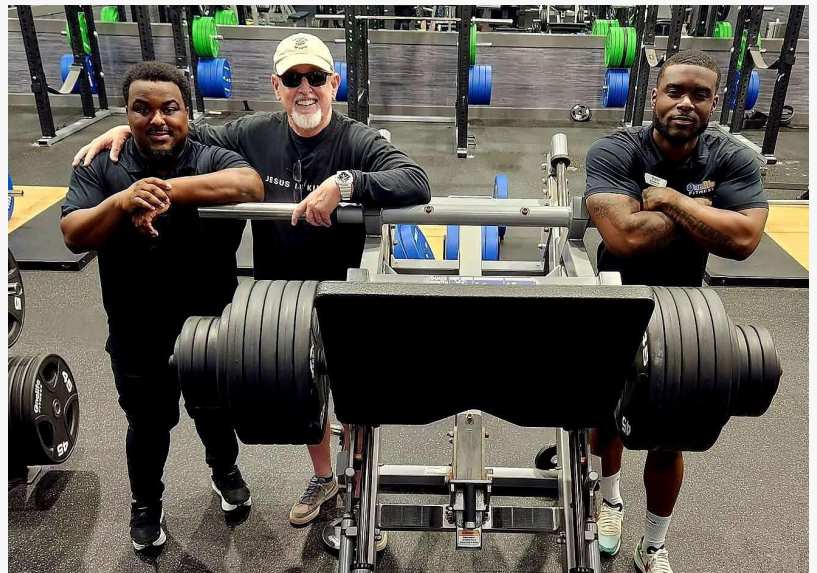
Former Marine infantryman and New York Times bestselling editor sets unofficial strength records in age-category: Marks two-year stroke anniversary

COLUMBIA, SC, UNITED STATES, May 11, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- W. Thomas Smith Jr., a former U.S. Marine Infantry leader, counterterrorism expert, and 2025 inductee in the S.C. Military Veterans Hall of Fame pushed past advanced-to-elite level powerlifting numbers on bench press and, days later, shattered known non-traditional leg-press numbers (for his age group) during recent training sessions at a One Life Fitness (1LF) facility location in Columbia, South Carolina.

The two strength-training milestones were both achieved within days of Smith's 67th birthday, April 30, and nearly two years to the day after he suffered several serious simultaneous strokes which hospitalized him in mid-May 2024. "The doctors say I'm a walking miracle," says Smith who attributes decades of on-again, off-again strength training to his surviving the stroke. "Years of working-out as well as faith in God – I'm convinced – have given me the mental, physical, emotional, even spiritual strength and ability to work



W. Thomas Smith Jr. is a former U.S. Marine Infantry leader, counterterrorism expert, and 2025 inductee in the S.C. Military Veterans Hall of Fame.



Pictured [L-R] U.S. Navy veteran and strength-and-conditioning coach Aaron Glenn, USMC Infantry veteran W. Thomas Smith Jr., and U.S. Army veteran and One Life Fitness GM Brandon Mohtassem, Apr. 29, 2026.

through stroke deficits to achieve these penultimate goals.”

Smith adds: “I say ‘penultimate’ because I’m continuously pushing beyond personal records (PRs) toward something not yet realized.”

Smith, whose highest bench-press PR was 305 lbs. in his mid-to-late twenties (in the 1980s) took a near 20-year powerlifting hiatus, lifting only intermittently and instead focusing on running (an avid runner from youth through about age 35), backcountry hiking and hitting the speedbag. Following an unfortunate parachute landing in which he broke a rib at age 50, Smith returned to the gym, regularly, but not fully committed to bench press until nearly age 60. “It’s since been quite a grind,” he says. “Recovery after age 60 takes a lot longer than it does in your teens, 20s, ... even 40s. I know this sounds crazy, but today I only bench – flat and incline – once a week. It literally takes me six days to recover whereas as a kid and a young man I only needed 24-36 hours to recover. I took that for granted.”

On May 4, 2026, Smith flat-benched 280 lbs., a one-rep-max accomplished after the previous week’s 275 lbs. for two repetitions and 225 lbs. for 10 reps among other heavy bench sets.

According to the popular weightlifting calculator, <http://strengthlevel.com>, a 67-year-old male capable of bench-pressing 280 lbs. is stronger than 98-percent of all male lifters, worldwide, and a single repetition of 280 lbs. on the bench is categorized as an “elite” level lift.

Nevertheless, Smith contends he’s not a competitive powerlifter: He instead lifts for health, wellness, longevity, and recreation. “I compete only with myself, my previous workouts, a few close friends, and for the fun of the numbers,” he says.

Forgoing traditional squats and deadlifts (two of powerlifting’s big three) due to decades-old knee injuries, Smith has recently committed to heavy leg-presses in which he recently set two records for his age at all 1LF centers in South Carolina. The first was 683 lbs. for three reps on the leg-press, Aug. 29, the eve of his birthday, a new PR for Smith and a verified (though unofficial) 1LF record, statewide. The second was 703 lbs. (well over a third of a ton) for two reps, May 7, breaking his previous Aug. 29 record, again “unofficial,” because like the Aug. 29 lift, the May 7 lift was not part of an officially sanctioned event.

Karate Grandmaster Bruce Brutschy, a 10th-degree black belt, fitness instructor and pull-up champion, who at age 74 bested a national bench-press record earlier this year, says: “Tom is absolutely killing it and showing us all what’s possible for seniors... even younger guys.”

Jay Alverson, an offensive line coach at South Mecklenburg High School (Charlotte, N.C.) and a former walk-on quarterback for the University of South Carolina football team, agrees.

“Beyond the numbers, Tom is setting the example for young athletes about the importance of lifelong fitness,” said Alverson, also a Marine and a S.C. Military Veterans Hall of Fame inductee.

"Tom's recent bench PR and the weight he's pushing on leg-press are impressive PRs particularly when you consider the severity of the stroke he experienced two years ago."

World-champion martial artist Keith Vitali, a Hollywood martial-arts movie star (who fought Jackie Chan) and who was the #1-ranked U.S. karate champion for three consecutive years, says Smith's perseverance is what defines him in the gym. "Tom is an excellent example of someone who – despite major health challenges at a later age – has not been deterred from achieving even greater strength training achievements," Vitali said.

Vitali's younger brother, Col. Steve Vitali, U.S. Marine Corps (Ret.), says it's all about Smith being a Marine. "A Marine rifle-squad leader like Tom is the kind of man who will fight his way through hellfire and brick walls to achieve what lesser men only dream of," said Col. Vitali, a veteran combat-commander of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. "This is a fact, and Tom is proving it through his stroke-recovery efforts, overcoming unrelated shoulder, back, and elbow injuries, and his overall strength-training achievements."

Smith is also able to perform 50-54 push-ups in less than 60 seconds: equally remarkable considering his age, stroke deficits, and a rotator-cuff injury in Aug. 2025.

Smith's strength and conditioning secrets? "No secrets," he says. "It's simply daily stretching, eating well, trying to rest, combating daily neuro (stroke) fatigue, very heavy static holds, hardcore kettle-bell work, training all other quadrants of my body, constantly praying to God, finding peace, and striving to encourage others even if I'm discouraged: Not easy, but necessary."

Athletics Coach and trainer Trajon Pate, a former guard on the Claflin University Basketball team, said: "Tom is consistent. He shows up when injured. He knows that no matter what, he's still got to get the job done."

May is National Stroke Awareness Month. May 12 marks the two-year anniversary of Smith being hospitalized for stroke. But according to Smith: May 12 is also the 247th anniversary of his five-times great-grandfather being killed in a cavalry engagement during the American Revolution. "So I feel like I'm way ahead of the game," he says.

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