

Military Hall of Famer hits elite numbers in run-up to bench press challenge

Marine Infantry leader and stroke survivor reportedly one of the top age-specific bench-pressers in South Carolina

COLUMBIA, SC, UNITED STATES, June 22, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- W. Thomas Smith Jr. is on track to earning a berth on the list of "bench-press champions" who will have successfully bench-pressed 250 lbs. as part of the Richland County Sheriff's Department's (RCSD) 250 Bench-Press Challenge, commemorating America's 250th birthday, July 4th (Independence Day).

A formerly deployed U.S. Marine Infantry leader, counterterrorism instructor, and New York Times bestselling editor; Smith has already surpassed 250 lbs. (for multiple reps) on the bench, and the 67-year-old RCSD special deputy has done so after surviving several major simultaneous strokes in May 2024.

Smith, whose current personal record on bench press is 280 lbs. set on the eve of his 67th birthday earlier this year (not counting a 305 lbs. PR he set in his twenties before taking a strength training hiatus for many years) pressed 250 lbs. for eight repetitions followed by two sets of 275 for two reps each, June 19, 2026, nine days before day-one of RCSD's five-day Bench Press Challenge June 28-July 3.

Smith's athletic feat places him well within any advanced-to-elite category based on all metrics for his age, 67, and weight; 198-200 lbs. at 5'11."

Within days of being released from hospital in 2024 and with the blessing of his team of physicians, Smith was back in the gym and training to limits. "It was exhausting, I won't pretend otherwise. Still is," he says. "But strength-training saved my life in 2024 – that according to all the medical experts – and it is absolutely aiding in my continued recovery in 2026."



Col. W. Thomas Smith Jr. hits elite numbers while training for 250 bench press challenge.

Smith recent strength milestones have included not only increasing bench press numbers, but a personal record of 405 lbs. on static (isometric) holds. Static holds involve the lifter unracking a loaded bar on the bench press, but instead of lowering the bar to his chest and then pressing it upward, the lifter simply holds the bar – arms outstretched – above his head for between eight and 10 seconds before racking it back.

“Static holds have been a gamechanger for me on bench,” Smith says. “The reps not only strengthen my wrists, joints, and tendons, but static holds condition my brain to handle extreme weight, build confidence, and prime my central nervous system.”

Additional bench-press gamechangers for Smith have included, among other exercises, incline presses, dumbbell or pec-dec flies, daily dead-hanging from a pull-up bar, regular shoulder and back work, heavy kettle-bell carries for between 100-400 yards several times a week, and record-setting sets of leg presses.

“I can’t do squats and deadlifts – two of powerlifting’s big three – because of knee issues, but I can do leg-presses which I also consider an indirect game-changer for bench,” Smith says.

Smith set then shattered four unofficial (though verified) records on leg-press for all One Life Fitness Centers statewide in his age category. The first record being 683 lbs. for three reps set on Apr. 29, the eve of Smith’s 67th birthday. That record was broken with 703 lbs. for two reps set May 7. The third record was 718 for three reps set June 2. The fourth was 738 for four reps set June 17.

In an article (published May 11 – <https://whosonthemove.com/military-hall-of-famer-achieves-elite-physical-fitness-milestones/>) 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, said Smith’s perseverance is what has defined 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.

In that same article, Vitali’s younger brother, retired USMC Col. Steve Vitali, said: “A Marine 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.”

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RCSO will host the 250 Bench Press Challenge, celebrating America's 250th Birthday, June 28-July 3, 2026.

According to 10th-degree Black Belt and fitness instructor Bruce Brutschy: "Tom is becoming a legend in the gym. Most guys his age, especially after having suffered a stroke, become invisible in the eyes of others. Not so with Tom who is held in some sense of awe by powerlifters and strength athletes much younger than he is."

Kwabena 'Kwa' Brenya, a fitness instructor and trainer for NIKE basketball and NBA camps worldwide, agrees.

"There are powerlifting strongmen, then there are older athletes like Thomas Smith defying the odds," said Brenya, who has worked with Smith on technique and breathing during his heaviest lifts. "What I've seen in this man is consistency. He shows up, pushes like an animal beyond his natural strength limitations, and refuses to quit. Most men don't have that kind of tenacity and resolve. Some do. It's extremely rare."

New goals? Smith, who has set his sights on becoming a member of the three-plate club [315 lbs. bench press] in the near future, "perhaps that or close to 315," he says.

Maybe, he adds, by the 251st-birthday of his Marine Corps which will be Nov. 10, 2026.

"I often peg goals to significant dates in USMC history," says Smith. Last year it was 80-pound kettle bell carries [40 lbs. each hand] for 1,000 yards by the then-83rd anniversary of the USMC raid on Makin in WWII. I exceeded that by well over 100 yards beyond the 1,000 yards. That's the distance of over 11 football fields."

Smith adds: "Challenging but realistic goals make it fun and I think achievable."

Faith has also been a key factor in Smith's athletic pursuits. "I literally pray out-loud between sets, though whispering so as not to disturb or unsettle others around me," he says. "I pray for those spotting me. I pray for my gym-bros around me and gym staff, their families and my own. And I pray for God's strength in each of my bench lifts."

He adds: "But on leg presses, I simply invoke the name of Jesus. Not sure why."

Brenya adds: "Tom moves like there's Someone or Something behind him. And it's because he knows there is."

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