

Screaming Sersant Smit.

Sergeant Smit was an instructor at No.1 Parachute Battalion at Tempe in Bloemfontein back in the winter of 1966 when I was doing my 9 months military training.

“**Sergeant Smit**” doesn’t send the same shiver down my backbone as “**Sersant Smit**”. Sersant Smit’s handlebar moustache was almost as wide as he was tall. Even though this was a magnificent moustache Sersant Smit was not a tall man. He was actually a very short man. But he was a frightening and angry short man feared by the men in his platoon. He had a voice that would send the devil running with his tail between his legs.

This voice could be heard all over Bloemfontein let alone Tempe. This voice would shatter the cold, still Free State mornings at 05:50 as Sersant Smit left the Permanent Force barracks to kick start his ‘troepies’. This voice melted the ice in the fire-buckets.

He would tip over the first bed as he entered the barrack room and an angry hurricane of cursing blasted through the barracks and out the door at the other end. He was driven to distraction by the thought of ‘troepies’ being comfortable.

One thing about Sersant Smit was you knew where you stood with him — in fear.

There was one memorable occasion where we were able to vent our feelings towards Sersant Smit.

We had done a parachute jump on one of those beautiful winter days. Clear skies bluer than the deepest ocean. A day with warm updrafts, one of which took Sersant Smit for ride. We had all landed and were watching his screaming parachute rise up. Then drop a little. Rise up. And drop again.

This was the one and only time we had to look up at Sersant Smit. We cheered his parachute on to greater heights while he screamed down at his out of hand ‘troepies’. But all good things come to an end, and we spent the rest of the day paying for our impromptu entertainment.

At the end of our nine months the PF’s gave us troepies a braai. ‘Stywe pap en wors’ eaten out of our ‘staal daks’. We even got some beers. It was here we learnt the cause of Sersant Smit’s anger at life. It was us.

He was, he said, a man who loved nature and all its beauty. He would wake up thinking how nice it would be to give us a day off in the vast natural beauty of the Free State so we could learn about the nature so loved by him.

Then he remembered another truth of nature — trophies go soft without discipline. He realized he couldn't give us the day off. We had come between him and his love of nature. He would start talking out loud. Then shouting. And finally rabid screaming. He hated us for destroying his love of nature.

He just wanted us to know this, and also — being the big hearted man that he was — he forgave us for what we had done to him. But heaven help the next intake.

Les Hellmann