

Hope Unseen: The Story of the U.S. Army's First Blind Active-Duty Officer

By Cap. Scotty Smiley

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Blindness became Captain Scotty Smiley’s journey of supreme testing. As he lay helpless in the hospital, he resented the theft of his dreams—becoming a CEO, a Delta Force operator, or a four-star general.

With his wife Tiffany’s love and the support of his family and friends, Scotty’s response became God’s transforming moment. The injury only intensified his indomitable spirit. Since the moment he jumped out of a hospital bed and forced his way through nurses and cords to take a simple shower, Captain Scotty Smiley has climbed Mount Rainier, won an ESPY as Best Outdoor Athlete, surfed, skydived, become a father, earned an MBA from Duke, taught leadership at West Point, commanded an army company, and won the MacArthur Leadership Award.

Scotty and Tiffany Smiley have lived out a faith so real that it will inspire you to question your own doubts, push you to serve something bigger than yourself, and encourage you to cling to a Hope Unseen.

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Editorial Review

Review
“Scotty Smiley’s story is one all Americans should hear. It will inspire them in tough times and help them through some of the difficult challenges they face in life.” (Senator Bob Dole)

"I have known Scotty Smiley for nearly ten years—since the beginning of his friendship with my son Edward at West Point. He was a role model for our family before his injury, and his impact on us has only grown since that day in Mosul. Scotty has an incredible story to tell and God is using him in a remarkable way. All of the Grahams look forward to reading and sharing Scotty's story with millions." (Franklin Graham)

“Scotty Smiley is an American Hero! Scotty and Tiffany have been an inspiration to the Duke Community, to Team USA Basketball, and to me personally. He shared his story with our Olympic Gold Medal– winning basketball team, and now he shares it with all of us to show how character ultimately wins.” (Coach Mike Krzyzewski)

“Scotty's story has not only motivated me to trust in the Lord, but also to make the most of all circumstances in life, good and bad. Scotty is the epitome of the old adage, ‘when life hands you a lemon, make lemonade.’ Life handed him a gigantic lemon and he's in turn trusted God and is making lemonade by the barrel. I look forward to helping spread his example to people everywhere.” (Tyler Brayton, Defensive Lineman, Carolina Panthers)

“Beyond the extraordinary courage and hope and faith in God that this book brought to life, it was just impossible to put down. Riveting.” (Patrick Lencioni, president of The Table Group; author of The Five Dysfunctions of a Team)

"It's been said, 'The worth of one's character is measured by the trial of adversity.' *Hope Unseen* is a compelling, inspiring, true story about courage, faith, and character revealed. You'll never want to complain about your circumstances again!" (LTG R. L. VanAntwerp, US Army)

"I love a great story, and the story of Scotty Smiley is not only a great story of a true hero, but this gem is so well written that you will cry, laugh, and cheer as you turn the pages." (Dave Ramsey, New York Times bestselling author)

"Captain Scotty Smiley was put to the ultimate test of faith and passed with flying colors, turning what was intened for evil into good. His determination to overcome and to allow God to be honored in the telling of his story is richly conveyed through this book." (Steven Curtis Chapman, Grammy Award–winning artist, and Mary Beth Chapman)

About the Author
Captain Scotty Smiley is the Army’s only active-duty blind officer. He lost the use of both eyes when a car bomber blew himself up in front of Scotty’s vehicle. A recipient of the bronze star and Purple Heart, he currently teaches the core course in leadership at West Point. Scotty and his wife Tiffany are the proud parents of two young children.

Doug Crandall served in the Army for thirteen years, including the last five at West Point where he was an award-winning leadership teacher and later the Executive Officer to the Dean. Doug now lives in Richland, Washington, with his wife Stephanie and their children.

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HOPE UNSEEN

CHAPTER 1

DEPENDENCE DAY

In any and every circumstance I have learned
the secret of being filled and going hungry,
both of having abundance and suffering need.

The apostle Paul, in his letter to the Philippians (chapter 4, verse 12)

No yellow snow!" was not a suggestion at Mount Rainier's Camp Muir. The climbing guides issued it as an edict. "If you need to go, use the restroom over there—this snow doubles as a source of water at ten thousand feet. None of us wants to go redrinking yesterday's grape Gatorade after it spends the night in your bladder." Easy for them to say. "Over there" was no big deal when you could see. But for a blind guy? I might as well walk to Boise to take a pee; I had zero chance to make it two hundred meters. I had stuck a lot of unwanted things in my mouth during the last eight hundred or so days of darkness, so what was wrong with a tiny taste of lemon snow for a few people who could still see?

The decision quickly became a dilemma. I follow rules. But to pee properly I needed help. I had been superexcited when the guide told our group that we would be waking up at eleven in preparation for the climb to the summit. It was just 9 P.M. Fourteen hours of sleep? Simply awesome. It was smart to allow us rest before we ascended the final four-thousand-plus vertical feet to the fifth-highest point in the continental United States. But my joy was soon turned to frustration: the guide explained that we would be arising at 11 P.M. Two hours? I don't mess around with sleep patterns—even if my life now exists in a perpetual nighttime.

By the time I decided that I could no longer hold it, the rest of the climbing team was knocked out. If I woke anyone up, I'd be robbing him of probably half his night's rest. In a departure from my normal worldview, I became a utilitarian. The odds that someone would actually happen upon my urine were extremely low—the Mariners winning the World Series low. Compare those minuscule odds and their minimal impact with the guarantee someone would lose sleep if I shook him awake, and the answer became clear.

At just after 10 P.M., 10,100 feet above Enumclaw and Yakima and Fort Lewis—feet freezing and teeth chattering—I peed in the snow just a few steps behind the tent. Really, the dilemma was less about me stealing anyone's sleep and more about how much I hate—how much I really despise—my childlike dependency on others. With more than two years of blindness under my belt, maybe I should have been used to it, but I wasn't. Being helpless in certain circumstances never gets easy. The pain dulls a bit. But it's a lifelong challenge.

It's difficult to admit, because I like to think of myself as noncompetitive, but the truth is I want to be the best at every endeavor I undertake. Deep down I want to march the fastest, pin the quickest, shoot with the

most deadly accuracy, marry the prettiest girl, and climb the highest mountains. That's what happens when you grow up with three brothers and three sisters. You hone your quickness fighting for extra dessert. You build strength and awareness guarding your space in the car. My life growing up was a constant competition, and losing wasn't any fun. So I grew up trying to be the best.

When Micah Clark, the founder of Camp Patriot, invited me on the Mount Rainier climb, I responded by asking him if he knew just exactly who (or what) he was talking to. "I can't see, Micah."

I can't. I still trembled every time those words rolled off my tongue.

I can't. I won't testify with certainty, but I'm pretty sure I never even used those words before the injury. I had won a state football championship—as part of a team of undersized farm boys and wannabes, none of whom went on to play for a Division I school. I graduated from West Point with a decent grade point. I married my beautiful high school sweetheart. I completed Ranger School, and I set my sights on army Special Operations. I feel like I'm a pretty tough guy. I spent my first twenty-four years tackling life head-on with a pretense of invulnerability, pounding life's obstacles into the turf and standing over them, satisfied, with mouth guard in hand. *I can't. Because I can't see Micah.*

"I know you can't see, Scotty. But you can do it."

Micah Clark dreamed up Camp Patriot while fly-fishing in Montana after a three-month stint as a security contractor in Afghanistan. The luxury of a month in solitude—with just his log cabin, his fly rod, and a stream—convinced him that he should do something more for those who had returned from war a little less whole than when they had departed. He believed that outdoor adventures would be therapeutic for wounded vets, so he took a two-hour trip through *Non Profits for Dummies* and launched a dream that continues to shift the paradigm for many of our nation's most giving servants: *I can still be me.*

With Micah's encouragement, I managed to get over "I can't" and agreed to do the climb. Standard climbs up Rainier involve parking a van at about five thousand feet and then a day's walk to double that elevation. There is no real technical climbing involved in the first portion of the journey—not even any snow until a few thousand feet up from the lot. The climactic moment of the first day came when another wounded vet and I crossed Pebble Creek. The creek crossing was nothing more than an exercise in staying dry for people with both eyes or both legs, but it proved a challenge for me. Michael Perry, a writer who joined us on the climb and later published an article in *Backpacker* magazine, described the dynamics: "When they complete the crossing, there are congratulations and smiles all around, but the cheerleading is contained. Everyone is working out the line between encouragement and patronization. The men simply crossed a small creek."

Compared to all the ruck marches I had done as an infantryman, the climb to base camp had not been all that difficult. Foolishly, I announced that to the group, prompting a quick and unfriendly "Shut up, Scotty" from an exhausted fellow climber. "Why don't you try it on one leg?" was his remark. In no way was I reveling in my partner's struggles. To the contrary, I sheepishly apologized to him for my thoughtless comment. But the ease of the movement to base camp—forty-pound backpack and all—had emboldened me.

The next day, two hours into the ascent from Camp Muir, my confidence had vanished, and I was vehemently disagreeing with Micah. I was not sure if I could keep going. Micah Clark—as I remembered him from our years growing up in Pasco, Washington—was an attractive guy, a human rock with a stomach that looked like German hedgerows. When I was a summer lifeguard, he would come to the pool to work out; he was training to become a Navy SEAL.

I'd once been in pretty good shape myself, but Ranger School and my levels of peak fitness were distant memories. Being blind made physical training a struggle. I found it tough to run up hills or to ride a bike. I found the monotony of pounding the pavement without the benefit of passing scenery too much to bear. And so my lungs were not the same as they had once been.

In addition to my burning lungs, both of my calves were ablaze. I wanted to quit. I wanted an hour to hydrate. I was breathing like a chain smoker. I was mentally pummeled. I hoisted the cement pillars that were now my legs up the mountain one deliberate motion at a time. Every single step took Jedi-like concentration, tying my neck and shoulders in taut knots. I had no idea what each succeeding takeoff and landing of my foot would bring. Entertaining the notion that I might make it to the top, I considered the number of steps I still had to take. What was left? Thirty-five hundred feet? The equivalent of eight thousand more stairs? Except that climbing was entirely unlike walking up some steps and a lot more like navigating an angry, oscillating escalator—in the wrong direction and with pieces of metal ready to jab my ankles at any moment.

In my head, I scolded myself. *Why did you agree to do this? Why did you say yes?* How was I going to make it to the top—and then back down again? When we paused for a break, I called out for my escort: "Curtis, I'm not sure I can keep going." I no longer believed I had any chance to summit the mountain.

"We'll see how you feel on the next stop, Scotty."

This guy's not listening to me. I made myself a bit clearer: "Curtis, you don't understand. I don't think I can make it. You guys, um, you guys see these amazing views. You have some motivation to overcome the pain. Me, I don't see anything. I can't see anything. I don't know how much longer I can go."

Curtis handed me a Snickers, some M&M's, and a Propel. "Here you go, Scotty. We'll see how you're doing at the next stop."

I wasn't sure how candy and flavored water were going to fix my fatigued body and my dwindling desire. In fact, I wasn't sure what was going to get me back on my feet. I had been in this spot so many times in the last couple of years. When I woke up from the blast in Iraq and couldn't see a thing, every single step became that much harder. It took determination to get out of bed and just take a shower. It took every ounce of me to learn how to send an e-mail. Daily, I had to make choices to continue on or to sit on the couch with my feet up and listen to the television. When I lost my sight, the linebacker who tackled life head-on—that guy was knocked down. If a blind person tackles life head-on, he runs into things: lampposts, doors, other people. There are lots of things I *can't* do. But there were also lots of things I could still accomplish. I had surfed in Hawaii and skied in Vail. I was about to become a graduate student at Duke University. My life was not as easy as before. Many things were hard. I was learning how to dig deep and fight for things in a new way. And yet, as I sat there on Mount Rainier, I just didn't think I could do *this.*

Two years prior to Rainier, and just three months after losing the use of both of my eyes while fighting the war on terror in Mosul, Iraq, I hit bottom with this battle to persevere. I was struggling to believe that God was still God. I know now that the God who loved me before the injury loved me just as much afterward. The God I hoped in but could not see was the same God I now hoped in despite being able to see nothing at all. But crumpled on a cement slab, in the vicinity of the V.A. Blind Rehabilitation Center in Palo Alto, California, I no longer understood what God wanted from me.

What am I supposed to do with this life? Who am I?

Somewhere along the sidewalk that led to the door of the blind center, my stick had missed a mat. I knew the whole route by heart—had committed it to memory in just a week. Coming out of the gym, I felt around for a metal drainage grate. The grate was maybe twenty feet from the door, just an inch or two to the right of the five-foot-wide cement strip that kept me on course. The xylophone tinging of the grate told me to turn right. Another twenty feet took me to the first black mat—three feet long and five feet wide; the rubber marker told me to take another left. About thirty feet after that turn, I would cross a small driveway—a twenty-foot journey without the benefit of paralleling borders that required me to shoot my own straight arrow to the other side. It was my own personal game of Pin the Tail on the Donkey. Once across the driveway, I would use my stick to again find the sidewalk and resume the "easy" part of my travels.

As best I can remember, I connected all of those dots precisely. Crossing the driveway had the most dramatic impact on my nerves. Parking lots were a blind man's outer space. No up, no down. No left, no right. Just an empty wasteland of concrete that could quickly induce massive disorientation.

Whenever I made it those twenty feet, I breathed a sigh of relief, and on that particular day, I specifically remember exhaling. So it must have been the final waypoint that I missed. My walking stick's next encounter with a black mat meant I would turn right and proceed ten feet until I heard the sound of two automatic doors swinging open. But two minutes after crossing that driveway, I hadn't hit a mat. The stretch to the mat was not really that far—thirty yards and maybe thirty seconds on a normal day. But two minutes? I figure I must have walked a football field. What was the stupid stick for if it couldn't find the mat? I raged against the idea of what I must have looked like with that stick—a spectacle for sure. I was so angry with myself, with the situation, with my pathetic life that I stepped off the sidewalk in defiance. If I had learned one thing in the first week of mobility school, it was "Never leave the sidewalk." *Forget it. I can do this.* I stepped into space and floated toward the moon.

What I didn't know—because Tiffany was carefully picking her battles with me—was that the blue-and-white hockey helmet protecting my brain from a blow to the soft part of my head came with a rainbow-colored chinstrap. I was a triangle-headed man with a stick that shouted, *I can't see,* and I wasn't even aware that it was all made worse by a chinstrap that announced my support for Skittles, trips to Hawaii, or a San Francisco parade. I wouldn't know until weeks later when my friend Adam Rivette visited. Tiffany stood across the room, waving her arms for Adam to be quiet, as Adam asked the obvious question. "Scotty, dude, what's with the rainbow chinstrap?" After Tiffany's sister Michelle hesitantly stuck her toe into the fray and confirmed that Adam wasn't just messing with me, I ripped off the helmet and chucked it across the room.

I had never been to Palo Alto as a sighted person. I had certainly never been to the Blind Center. I had gone toe-to-toe with bullets and bad guys—really bad guys. I had led soldiers in combat. Children at West Point used to look up to me. But sweltering between the mid-July California sun and the radiating pavement—drifting listlessly in that lot—I grew desperate. The blackness, the warmth, and a growing dizziness induced a panic beyond any other that I had ever endured. Before lifting weights at the V.A.'s eighties-era gym, I had neglected to drink any water. I could feel my sweat glands drying up—searching my body in vain for moisture—as I wandered aimlessly, probing for something, anything, that might reestablish my bearings. It was dark. It seemed empty. I felt hopeless.

I fought to stay conscious. Like a bat, I hurled sound waves, shouting "hello" in multiple directions (or what I thought were multiple directions), attuning my ears to any potential echo. But it was well after five. The government workers had all gone home; their punctuality angered me as I clawed at the nothingness for something.

Probably another half an hour went by before I found a curb and its landing. The three-inch increase in elevation was enough to alleviate my fears of being mowed down by a sanitation truck or a spirited teenager fixated on the sounds of hip-hop. I stepped up onto the sidewalk, threw my horrible stick down, and burst into tears. I had lived through a car bomb, narrowly escaped the piercing death of hot bullets, and now I was going to die as a pathetic blind guy in a Silicon Valley parking lot?

As a junior at West Point, I had requested a special inscription on the inside of my class ring. The woman taking my order had looked up and asked me with a surprised smile who "Phil" was. I chuckled inside and then explained that Phil was not a person but a book of the Bible. Tucked up next to the skin on the fourth appendage of my right hand is a small reminder that reads *Phil 4:13*—a reference to the verse from Philippians "I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength." I once believed *I* could do anything—so much so that I went out of my way to carve it into the ring I wear on my finger. But in the emptiness of that parking lot, I quickly understood that I could do almost nothing at all, and I wondered if God even wanted to help me. I goaded God to tell me how I was supposed to take care of my family if I couldn't even walk back from the gym.

God, what do you want from me? Why am I here? How am I supposed to wake up every day and live like this?

"Scotty. Get up. Let's go," ordered Curtis in the most polite way possible. I propped up my body with my axe, tried to shake off the massive fatigue, and trudged on—step by step—up Mount Rainier. I was living out that choice again—the choice to keep going. *I can do all things through Christ.* …I had always wanted to climb this mountain, ever since I'd seen it as a kid while driving west toward Seattle from my home in the eastern part of Washington. The vantage of Rainier from Fort Lewis, where I had been stationed since leaving West Point, charmed me on every single one of the Pacific Northwest's clear days. Whether from the living room of the corps commander's home or from the drive-thru at Burger King, Mount Rainier was Fort Lewis's Mona Lisa. There was no escaping its gaze. I had last looked upon Rainier the day I left for Iraq. I stood on the airfield and saluted the snowy peak before climbing on an airplane.

When I finally agreed to do the climb, I thought that maybe if I made it to the crest of that enormous snowcapped rock, I could be the best again—that someone ordering a Whopper Jr. and fries would look up and see me through their binoculars. I would wave back. "I'm blind, but I'm on top of Mount Rainier." Those were nice thoughts—they kept my heart warm and my pride intact before the onset of my cramping legs and the melting of my mental fortitude. Now, though, hope was becoming a memory. Much of the climb was in the mind, and as I mentioned before, my brain had all but given up on the prospect of actually scaling the summit—probably about a Space Needle ago.

Nonetheless, I had eaten the Snickers, downed the M&M's, and sucked in some Propel. Whether it was the peanuts and caramel or the prayer, somehow my strength returned. The cement around my legs cracked and crumbled to the ground. Unbelievably, my newfound energy carried me up the mountain for the next several hours. I listened to Curtis, followed his steps, and trusted he would not lead me astray. The trust reduced the tension that had hindered me to that point. While the climb remained tedious and painful, I began to believe again.

The point of no return came during the crossing of a narrow ice bridge. It was a truly perilous portion of the climb for a blind person. The fragile nature of the bridge restricted its use to only one passenger at a time. My inability to see actually helped me overcome my fear of heights. The sight of the two-thousand-foot

crevasse waiting below surely would have paralyzed me on the near side of the frozen balance beam. But unable to process my fear visually, I looped myself onto the safety line and picked up the sound of Curtis's confident voice. "Put one foot in front of the other, Scotty. One foot in front … careful … easy … one foot in front of the other. Step in your steps." Climbers do not die on Rainier at the rate that Everest claims lives, but many of those who have perished scaling Washington State's largest mountain reportedly surrendered to the claws of just such a crevasse.

I could tell by Curtis's careful tone that we were in a dangerous spot. Earlier, Micah Clark had dropped his axe while moving along the ice bridge. It spiraled across the slick surface and clinked and clanked a few times before falling into the bowels of the mountain. The climbers in his group had steadied their ears to ascertain the sound of the axe hitting bottom. They never heard a thing.

"One foot in front of the other. That's good, Scotty."

Twelve hours after we had begun our final stretch of the journey, I placed my size eleven boots on the 14,410th foot of Mount Rainier. I turned and told a video camera: "I love you, Tiffany." After the shout-out to my wife, I stood up straight and painted a mental picture of my surroundings. My heart swelled with confidence. I knew exactly where I stood. I'd looked up at the top of the mountain so many times before. At that moment, I was the biggest thing up there. I made it. I really did. I couldn't see a thing. But Micah was right. I made it.

I was not the first blind person to climb Rainier—five people without sight did it together in 1981. There had probably been others in the twenty-six years since. Nor is Washington State's highest peak the crowning achievement of sightless climbers. A blind Erik Weihenmayer summited Everest in 2001. Rainier is not even that big a mountain, but it felt like an unreachable peak at many moments during the climb. Somehow I had made the choice to keep going, and others had come alongside to make persevering possible. We are dependent on God and dependent on one another. I just couldn't see it until I was blind. Sight notwithstanding, in some way, every day is dependence day.

I had other things to do that day. A month earlier, I had oddly been named the 2007 *Army Times* Soldier of the Year. Before I climbed Rainier—which I'd done now; I'd climbed all the way up it—my story had been one example of an entirely new way of imagining our wounded warriors. All kinds of soldiers just like me had shifted themselves from people to be pitied and thanked to servants who had more to give. So to represent others like me, I should have been en route to Washington, D.C., for the Soldier of the Year festivities. Tiffany, not all that happy about my sudden jones for sightless mountain climbing, nonetheless volunteered to stand in for me on the first day of events in D.C. I would arrive just in time for the actual ceremony.

Hearing a plane soar just above my head, I allowed myself to believe that maybe Tiffany, on her way to the nation's capital holding baby Grady, looked down on me with pride from a window of that jet. I waved—just in case—and thanked her for everything she had done to get me to this point.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Christopher Patton:

This book untitled Hope Unseen: The Story of the U.S. Army's First Blind Active-Duty Officer to be one of

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