

Accidental Hero

How a cigarette break one evening in the summer of 2007 changed baggage handler John Smeaton's life.

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On Sunday 1 July, John Smeaton woke up at his family home in Erskine, on the outskirts of Glasgow, to find he had not yet become a star. But it was only a matter of hours. He was on his way to work at Glasgow airport, where he had been employed as a baggage handler for more than 12 years, when his phone rang. It was ITN, wondering if they could interview him about what had happened the day before.

This was no problem. Before he did the interview that afternoon, a colleague came up to him and said, 'What did you do that for, you maddie?' Smeaton remembers replying, 'You tell me. I just wasn't thinking right.'

About halfway through his shift he was finding it hard to concentrate on his work, which involved overseeing the loading and offloading of thousands of bags a day. His supervisor said, 'Take as much time as you want.'

But there was little respite at home. Everybody was on the phone - ABC, NBC, CNN. Smeaton began to regret giving one reporter his mobile phone number. Some of the requests for interviews carried a financial incentive. 'I didn't want to sell my story at all,' Smeaton remembers. 'I just wanted to keep my head down and wait for it to blow over. But my friends said, "There's no way you're going to sit there and get nothing out of this." I was like, "I don't want to be in the papers."'

One of his friends began calling the newspapers to solicit offers for Smeaton's story, something that annoyed Smeaton at the time. 'But he was only looking after me, saying, "You earn bugger all, so if you get something out of this you've got to take it."'

The News of the World tracked Smeaton down in Cambridge, where he was attending his cousin's wedding. 'So I spoke to them. I thought it would all be over in a week. You know - that's it. I never thought it would get to the point where I would meet the Prime Minister three times and have my photograph taken dressed up as James Bond.'

What does it take to be a hero in today's world? A certain amount of incendiary courage. A willingness to take risks, to do what others might not. A hungry media heading towards a slow summer. And of course it takes a sound bite. For Smeaton this came naturally: 'Glasgow doesnae accept this; if you come tae Glasgow, we'll set about ye.'

He was referring to his part in foiling the attack on Glasgow airport by two men in a Jeep Cherokee in the early evening of Saturday 30 June. Smeaton was having a cigarette break midway through his shift when he heard a commotion and people screaming by the main departures entrance, and he saw a car in flames. His first thought was that it was a terrible accident - that the driver had lost control. As he ran to help, Smeaton saw one of the men in the car get out and hit a policeman, and he came to the policeman's defence by kicking the assailant. He wasn't alone. 'Me and other folk were just trying to get the boot in and some other guy banjoed [punched] him,' he explained. 'We tried to subdue the guy, but he's a big boy, he's no for being subdued. He was speaking Arabic, and he was shouting, "something Allah, something Allah". Every time he threw a punch he was saying Allah.' Another man who had run to the scene, Michael Kerr, also began hitting the man who had stumbled from the car, but he broke his own leg in the process. Smeaton and a female security guard dragged Kerr from the scene as the Jeep, which was laden with gas canisters, continued to throw out its flames like a blowtorch. Then Smeaton saw another man, on fire on the other side of the Jeep. 'A taxi driver hosed him down,' he told CNN. 'And then he got up and tried to attack the policeman. Even though he was covered head to toe in flames, bits breaking off him and everything - very, very determined.'

By the following afternoon, Smeaton was already becoming a celebrity. Television interviewers asked him to repeat his warnings, and he did so with pride: 'You're nae hitting the polis, mate, there's nae chance ... we'll set about ye!' As Time magazine noted, he retold his account with 'dramatic pauses and the inflated diction of a policeman giving evidence: "I saw a man egress the vehicle ..."' The other men who came to the aid of the police that evening were not so easily accessible - Stephen Clarkson was picking up his family, Michael Kerr was collecting his car after a holiday and Alex McIlveen, a cab driver, was dropping off a passenger - and so it was Smeaton who took on the mantle of spokesman for the event. He served two purposes. He explained as best he could what had happened, and he fulfilled a need we evidently have: he was an ordinary John who helped make the world a safer place.

It may have been that one of the suspects would have escaped without his intervention (the burned man died a few weeks after the attack, but the second man is awaiting trial, and Smeaton will be required to repeat his story as a key witness), although it may also be that the two men would have been restrained even if he hadn't been there, if his cigarettes had called him out five minutes later. But this has never been the point. What we admire is that Smeaton got involved, and spoke his mind. Within a few hours there was a website in his name, where pints could be bought for him via PayPal. Within days he had his own column in the Scottish edition of the Sun. And now on eBay there are T-shirts promoting 'The Smeatonator', and others emblazoned, 'We'll Set About Yi,' 'Glesgaes Gonna Get You' and 'What Would John Smeaton Do?'. The vendor of the latter item introduces it to potential purchasers with the line, 'Next time you're faced with a difficult, life-changing decision to make, just ask yourself one simple question ...' He also sells a shirt with the slogan, 'Proudly Banjoing Terrorists Since 2007'.

John Smeaton, who is 31, is a reluctant hero, but his reluctance is tempered with inquisitiveness, like a young person on a blind date. He is telling his story during dinner at the Erskine Bridge Hotel, a five-minute drive from his home, and with each insistence that he is just an average bloke who did what any decent person would have done, comes a certain relish in the absurdity of his new status. The more he objects, the more he is celebrated. He is wearing a crisp blue untucked shirt and jeans, and his light brown hair is cut into a neat short fringe. There is a sparkle in his voice, and his accent is heavy to foreign ears, requiring the insertion of subtitles when his thoughts were broadcast in Australia.

He orders tomato and mozzarella salad, and then steak, and when the main course appears there are, by oversight, three different servings of potatoes - chunks, chips and new - and Smeaton's reaction is, 'Brilliant!'

The waitress recognises him and smiles. 'It's unbelievable,' he says. 'When people pass me in the airport they do a double-take and say, "That's John Smeaton!" I'm peeing myself, because I've walked through there every day for 12 years.'

Smeaton hasn't always been a baggage handler, although he says it sometimes feels like it. He grew up in Bishopton, a suburb of Glasgow, his mother a pharmacist, his father a financial manager at the Argyle and Clyde Health Board. They lived near a farm, and he describes a carefree childhood with his two older sisters. 'In the summer it was two-man tag in the woods and in the winter it was snowball fights between the neighbouring roads. You didn't play on computer games, you played outside. Now I think most kids are just into X Factor and "let's be famous", but I've had a wee touch of what it's like to be famous, and it's not particularly great.'

At school, Smeaton was good at history and modern studies, but he was a dreamer and failed to apply himself. He says that if he was able to, he'd go back now and hit himself, so full was his head of Star Wars. He left school at 16, and saw things changing around him: the Royal Ordnance factory closed, Compaq came in. He wanted to be a joiner, and began on tiny wages with the Construction Industry Training Board, building the chalets at the 5-star Cameron House Hotel at Loch Lomond. He left at 19 with a belief that he was being exploited, and applied for a job at the airport. In a nervous act that may now be seen as apposite, he crashed his car near the entrance. The role of baggage handler didn't require an arduous interview - 'Do you have a criminal record, do you live near, can you drive?' - but the job was gruelling. 'I was "hold fodder", working inside the aircraft, chucking the bags out, and then waiting for the next load to put in. In some of the holds you can't stand fully, and I'm 5ft 10in, and you have to watch it because you'll always be hitting your back or head.'

When the dessert menu arrives, Smeaton is faced with a tough call. 'Cheesecake or chocolate mousse?' he asks. 'Cheesecake, mousse, cheesecake, mousse.' After a pause, he concludes he has 'always been a cheesecake man'.

Before it arrives, there is a rant against budget airlines. 'Aircraft on the ground lose money, aircraft in the air make money. Your bag gets treated like absolute

crap. The way people's bags are handled, it's not right. It's not like you've got an hour, you've got 20 minutes. We don't treat ...#8594; ...#8592; the bags with contempt or try to break them, but you do have to chuck them in and they do get slung about. It really annoys me when people fly so cheaply, but you get what you pay for.'

Smeaton is now a supervisor, working four days on and two off, two of his shifts lasting until 11pm or later if planes are delayed. He will go back in the hold if one of his charges calls in sick. 'I've actually seen kitchen sinks go as luggage on aircraft. I've seen people take lengths of wood with them. You know, do they not have the equivalent of B&Q in Spain? And don't even get me started about golfers - I'm sure they're very nice guys, but do you really think I'm going to lift your golfclubs? I really hate it. Skis are a lot easier - you can manipulate them and pivot them. But golf clubs - there are 40 or 50 sets to deal with on some flights. And the hold of the aircraft isn't big enough to take them, and you're thinking, "Right, whose clubs are going to miss [the flight]? I'm sorry, but someone's going to get over to Malaga without their clubs.'"

I ask him about missing bags. 'Things fall off trailers,' he says. 'And the tag comes off.' He advises his friends to label their cases in two or three places with their name, flight number and destination. 'Don't put your return address on, because you don't know who is looking at your case. There's probably someone who's going, "Oh, they're around the corner from me, they're away on holiday, well, I might have a wee chat with... or go around looking at their house.'"

Smeaton was working at the airport on 9/11, and he heard the news of the first plane on the radio. 'I was with my big mate Rab. I said, "Rab, you hear that, a plane has crashed into the World Trade Center." He goes, "Oh aye, must have been a wee Cessna." And then 20 minutes later, when the second one crashes, within a minute there's a phonecall: "Every single bit of hand luggage has to be checked in." And we're going, "Oh great, instead of one trailer's worth of bags there are now two trailers' worth of bags. When things like that happen, you have to work harder. People are having to work 18-hour shifts, and they don't get any thanks for it.'

Was he nervous about handling people's bags after the attack? 'Not at all. It never entered my wildest dreams that anyone would want to attack Glasgow airport. It was the other side of the world - it would never happen here.'

The following morning I visit Smeaton at his house (he used to live with a girlfriend, but the relationship broke up a few weeks before he became famous). We are going to the airport together, but he isn't going to work. Instead, he is travelling to the Pride of Britain Awards in London with his fellow heroes. He greets me in good spirits, but as he drinks tea on the sofa his mood changes, and he puts his head in his hands. 'I really don't want to go,' he says. 'If I could do it up here it would be fine, or travel down and back in a day, but another two nights in a hotel is going to do my head in. I've run about the last six or seven weeks and I'm exhausted - you know, give me back my quiet, mundane, ordinary life. Now it's "go here, do this". I have said no to a lot of things. All I really want to do is sleep in my own bed.'

I suggest there must be some financial benefit from all this attention. 'Oh, it's a laugh when people say, "Oh, you're making a fortune!" I do get a wee bit of money, but if I was making a fortune, do you think I'd still be lifting people's bags? I'd be paying people to lift my bags for me.'

His parents, who are retired (his mother works occasionally as a locum) express pride in their son, but they can see he is feeling the strain. 'He's coped very well,' says his mother, Catherine, 'although there has been the occasional wobble.' His father, Iain, says, 'What I'd really like John to get out of this is a new job.'

His father drives us to the airport, and on the way Smeaton talks about past trips to London and beyond, necessitated by his new fame. Before July he had only visited London once. In the past few weeks he has travelled down for interviews with Richard and Judy and Lorraine Kelly, and to meet Gordon Brown.

'It was beyond a joke,' he says of his visit to Number 10. 'You go in, it's like a Tardis in there, I'm asked into another room, and I'm standing there thinking, "Oh my God," and ...#8594; ...#8592; the next minute the Prime Minister comes through and he's, "Hi, how are you doing? Come with me." So we go into another room, and it's just me and him, no advisors or anybody, and we're just sitting there and we have a great chat. He wanted to know about me, what my mother and father did, how I got to be doing what I was doing, and what happened that day. He was really taking it in, and I'm not a fan of politicians, but I was really impressed by him. Maybe he's not got the charisma of Alex Salmond, but they're two very good leaders.'

After 15 minutes, Brown offered to give Smeaton a tour. They visited the cabinet room, and met David Miliband, the Foreign Secretary. Smeaton remembers saying to his mother on the way back to the airport, 'Just unbelievable! These are the guys I've seen on telly.'

But there was more to come. Smeaton met the Prime Minister again towards the end of September at the Labour Party conference in Bournemouth, where he thought he had just been invited as a guest. Early in his speech, Brown said: 'When the terrorists tried to attack Scotland's biggest airport, they were answered by the courage of the police and the firefighters - and a baggage handler named John Smeaton. He came to the aid of a policeman under assault from one of the terrorists. That man, that hero, John Smeaton is here with us today - and on behalf of our country I want to thank you.' Smeaton waved from his seat in the hall, and only later concluded: 'It was the most important speech of the Prime Minister's life. You go down in history.' Smeaton received a standing ovation, but it wasn't as loud as the one he got at Ibrox some weeks before, 50,000 football fans chanting his name before a friendly between Rangers, the team he has followed all his life, and Chelsea.

And then it was New York. He met the president of the Scottish-American Society, ate a huge, huge steak, shook the hands of fire chiefs and visited Ground Zero. In SoHo, he went to a restaurant called Balthazar, where he was introduced to the Hiltons, the hotel heirs and real estate mavens, Paris's mum

and dad. 'Totally, totally crazy!' Smeaton remembers. 'But people in the restaurant are pointing at me, the same way they're pointing at them.' We arrive at the airport, and Smeaton shows me where he was standing when the attack took place. He is reluctant to relive the situation in detail. In the departure lounge, he describes the names and trailer routes taken by those who would normally be in his charge. He meets up with Michael Kerr, Alex McIlveen and Stephen Clarkson. The night before, Smeaton had twice asked me not to forget about the other guys. 'It was just that it was me who was caught on telly saying those words, which has kind of immortalised me in a lot of people's minds. Yes, "We'll set about ye."' "

I asked him if he regretted it.

'In a way I regret it, because the other three boys did as much as me.'

But they don't resent you?

'No, I don't think so. It's just that I was on the television, and people took to it.'

As they chat at the airport, there is no resentment at all; they look like young soldiers joking about anything other than the event that brought them together. And Smeaton has a particularly good story to tell - he is scared of flying.

The takeoff and landing?

'The whole thing. It seems so unnatural.'

On board, there is a familiar announcement. Two passengers have checked in bags but have failed to make it to the plane. 'It happens day in, day out,' Smeaton sighs. 'A passenger can fly without the bag, but the bag cannot fly without the passenger. So someone has to go in the hold, and they'll have a baggage number and a scanning code, and they'll see if the supervisor has done his job right. As you load the hold you have what we call bingo cards, which tell you which trailer you've put where, so you have some idea of where it might be. But there may be 140 bags to get through before you get to it, and because the passenger's not there, they can't give you a description, so you don't know if it's a holdall, or a huge case, or a set of skis, or a set of lovely golf clubs.'

That evening at his hotel he attended a rehearsal dinner for all the recipients of Pride of Britain awards, hosted by Carol Vorderman, and his cynical air evaporated. 'It was awesome,' he told me the next day. 'All these incredible stories, like the couple who have run a foster home for 40 years, and a girl who had cancer who had written a book for other children with cancer.'

He heard that he and his friends would be given their awards by the Prime Minister and his wife, Sarah, and that there would be another trip to Downing Street the following morning. 'I'll be able to show the others around,' he says. 'With my pal Gordo.'

The last time I spoke to him on the phone, Smeaton's diary was still full. There was a charity song to record with Miss Scotland. There was another flight to the United States for a CNN tribute, and the possibility of a trip to Iraq to meet the troops. He was running out of holidays from work, and he was still struggling with his conscience and his roots. 'I'm just a baggage handler,' he reasoned again. He had promised himself that he would continue his heroic

parade until Christmas, and after that he would go back to his normal and anonymous life. 'That's the idea,' he said, 'although I've never been a great one for long-term plans.'