

## Giant Card Carries Christmas Message To Soldier Overseas

BY TERRY POPE  
A special Christmas card is in the mail, on its way to the Saudi Arabian desert where American troops are stationed for Operation Desert Shield in the Persian Gulf.

Brunswick County government employees are hoping the card will brighten the holidays for a Shallotte man who will spend this Christmas with his fellow soldiers instead of at home with his family.

It's addressed to county native Sgt. Chris Smith, 327th Infantry Regiment of the 101st Airborne Division. Smith, 21, is a 1987 graduate of West Brunswick High School in Shallotte. He enlisted in the Army three years ago. His regiment was sent to Saudi Arabia Sept. 16.

There are messages from the county employees inside the card, but there is one very special message written in green ink for the holiday season. It reads:

"Merry Christmas, Chris, from your Mom. I love you and miss you!"

For Roger and Delilah Smith of Shallotte, it will be a different sort of Christmas, a holiday season spent hoping that their son will remain safe on foreign soil, a long way from home but very much on their minds.

Delilah would like to see Chris' face when he opens the card.

"He'll probably do what I did," she said. "I cried when I saw it. It meant more to me than words could ever express."

The county employees who made the card are hoping Chris will share it with his regiment and that he and his fellow soldiers will write replies. The employees' message inside reads:

"To Our Fellow Americans:

During this season of hope, joy and love, we are sure you would rather be home to celebrate with your loved ones. We want you to know how grateful we are to you for the sacrifice you are making. These pictures of our children and loved ones are reminders of why you are away from your loved ones. You are assuring them of a safe and free future. As you look at them, please see the hope and promise shining in their eyes and feel the love in their hearts. They join us in wishing you all a safe and happy holiday!"

The card was the idea of Steven Randone of the Brunswick County Planning Department. He painted the Santa on front and ar-

ranged to have employees attach pictures of their children, symbolic reminders for the servicemen of why they have been stationed overseas.

"That's what the soldiers are there for, really," Randone said. "The future."

Randone's idea grew. A rush to beat the mailing deadline sent county employees scrambling to find pictures of their children.

"I heard on the radio that we needed to get the cards and letters in the mail early," he said. "I had thought about making a generic one, and having it sent from everyone here."

Ms. Smith says her wish list this Christmas is short.

"If I could have one thing for Christmas,

In letters, those are the items Chris told his family he misses the most.

Chris also described how ice is so scarce in the desert that when a truck arrives carrying a load all the soldiers run like children to grab some.

"He told me that he never dreamed that he would be running just to get a piece of ice," Ms. Smith said.

The family has also received a handwritten letter on regular notepaper from Chris' commanding officer.

In the letter, Lt. Jay Peterson explains why Army troops were sent to Saudi Arabia to serve as a protector of "an oath of alliance" to that country. Peterson promises that he will "do everything within my power to make your son's welfare the highest it can be and the safest possible. I am committed to my soldiers and their safety is my highest priority," he adds. "Their lives are as important to me as they are to you and their trust in me with your trust in me shall be the guide to a safe and successful deployment to the Middle East."

"I thought that was really nice," Ms. Smith said. "It helped me understand the situation better than I did in the beginning."

Chris had planned to enroll in the University of Tennessee, but changed his mind and enlisted in the Army instead. His father, Roger, a mechanic for the Brunswick County Schools, was in the Army and served a year in Vietnam. Roger never received special packages or cards in Vietnam like Chris has in Saudi Arabia, Ms. Smith said.

In his letters to the family, Chris talks about night training in the desert with strong winds that blow sand in the soldiers' faces. Among the items he happened to carry with him to the desert, a pair of electric hair clippers. When the soldiers have access to a portable generator, Chris plugs it in and cuts all of the soldiers' hair. He has joked with his family about returning to Shallotte to become a barber.

"If he had known this was going to happen," Ms. Smith adds, "he would have gone to college. He did real well in school. He was well known in school, well liked."

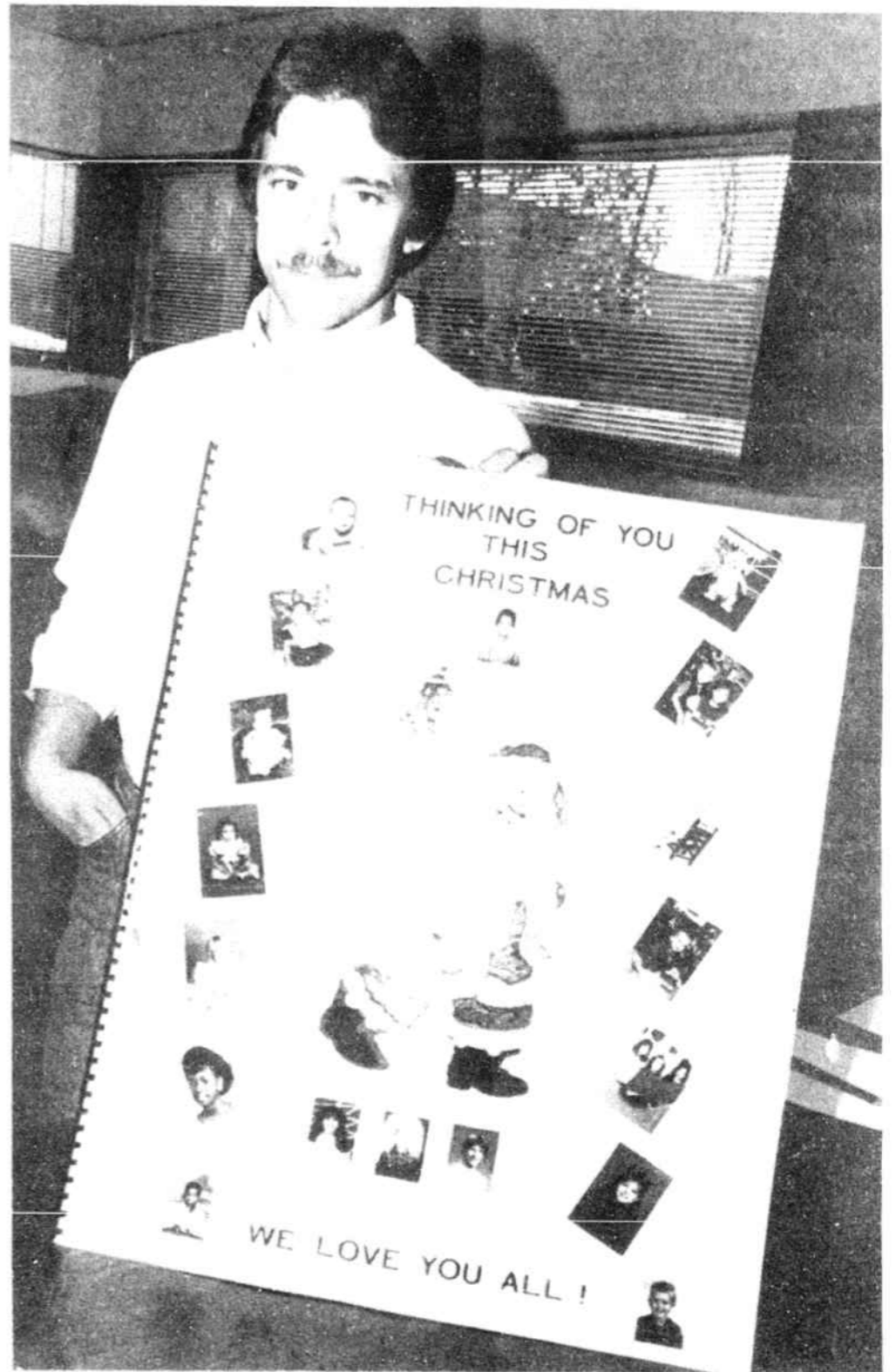
He played on the football team and was named most valuable player on the Trojan track team at West Brunswick. He also played baseball when younger and learned to roller skate when he was nine months old.

"We've always been a real close family,"



SGT. CHRIS SMITH of Shallotte. This picture was taken while Smith was training in Korea last year.

PHOTO CONTRIBUTED



STEVEN RANDONE first had the idea to send a Christmas card to a local soldier stationed overseas. Pictures of Brunswick County employees' children were attached to the card.

STAFF PHOTO BY TERRY POPE

Ms. Smith said. "We all love sports."

Chris has plans to coach sports at the high school level. He just began serving the last year of his commitment to the Army.

"They're saying now that they won't let them out in a year, so I don't know what will happen," said Ms. Smith, who works for child support services with the Brunswick County Department of Social Services.

In a recent letter to his parents, Chris talks about the package he had just received and requests more Gatorade, the kind in the

blue pack. He talks about letters he has received from his grandmother and Mark and Amy, his brother and sister, and asks about his dog, Petie.

"It has cooled down a lot since I've been here," Chris writes. "Now that we're up north, it's not near as humid as it is down south."

"Tell Dad I love and miss him very much, too. Take care of the family and tell Petie I said hello. I love you very much, Mom."

"Love always, Chris."

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