

## **FROM DEALING DEATH TO GIVING LIFE**

*A pilgrimage from the army to the classroom*

*By CW4 Max Smith, U.S. Army retired*

*As told to Robert Fitt*

My role as a trouble-shooter for a three star general was the capstone of a long military career. Wherever the general saw a significant problem, he sent me there. My task was to look into every aspect of a troublesome operation and bring back a solution. As my successes grew, so did my reputation.

I had traveled widely through the United States, Europe and Eastern Asia for twenty seven years, and had served my country in many capacities. I began my military career in the infantry, where I served in demolitions and later in logistics and supply. As experience came, so did the opportunity to become a computer analyst and designer.

For most of those years I was an instructor; but as I began to teach computer basics to selected personnel, I was disturbed that so few of our young men could recognize a problem when one existed. Even fewer knew how to solve one when it finally became obvious. This was a serious concern.

While I was struggling with ways to overcome this defect, I retired from the service and began teaching computer systems operations for American Corporations in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iran, Jordan and Africa.

It was there that I discovered that middle-Eastern workers had the same weakness. They couldn't solve problems any better than Americans could.

Oh, there had been warning enough. I had been told that Middle Eastern workers would show little interest or ability when it came to developing and managing high-tech computer systems; and as I began to teach them, I became sure that their detractors were right. Some of the students did nothing for eight hours at a time. Absolutely nothing. A few of them just sat—dejectedly looking blankly off into space.

Frankly, the mission seemed doomed to failure.

In an effort to salvage the project I pondered every facet of my experience. I compared the cultures—their similarities and differences—and searched backward through my own education and experience, seeking for a key that could unlock my dilemma.

I found it in an unlikely place—in an art room.

As I pondered, I remembered the art classes that I had taken while I was off duty, and the hundreds of art museums I had toured. It was then that I began to realize that the study of art had sharpened my senses dramatically. It had taught me to see better, to visualize the relationship between parts, and to bring into view every aspect of a problem simultaneously. I noted that these right-brained visual perceptions had improved my performance in every other area of my life, permitting me to see things as a whole, rather than as ill-fitting bits and pieces. It was through the study of art that I had learned to see problems and their solutions readily and clearly.

The very next day my teaching methods changed dramatically.

Leaving technology behind, for the moment, I first taught my unmotivated charges the principles of visual art, opening their minds to all of their five senses. It was not easy at first, (and it may seem unbelievable to some) but the results were dramatic and long lasting. The same workers that could not, at first, master the complexity of technology, later gained skills that allowed them to successfully operate some very sophisticated computer systems.

Problem solving, then, is a function of visualization. I continue to be amazed that my ever-growing ability to solve problems began in an unpretentious art room.

Who would have guessed. . .

I'm back in the art room now—this time as a teacher. I spent a lifetime discovering that the most important thing I can do in life is to teach art. I feel like the captain on the bridge of a ship, guiding my students into an unknown world of adventure and achievement. It is an exhilarating experience to help my students unlock the wonders of their senses, to capture the fullness of a glorious world, and to cope in unusual and creative ways with common problems.

As students perceive their problems broadly and resolve them creatively, I bask in the realization that the greatest contribution I may ever make in the world —after a life full of adventure and accomplishment—is to help its children sharpen their senses and become more alive to life!

*Max Smith, now deceased, was an art teacher in the Granite School District, South Salt Lake City, Utah.*