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At age 99, veteran Vic Smith looks back at a life well lived

By Sora O'Doherty



Vic Smith with his wife, Fran Photos Sora O'Doherty

Vic Smith found God at 300 miles per hour, flying just 20 feet from the ground. He kept God, added a wife, children, and is up to nine great-grandchildren, with a 10th on the way.

Now a resident of Moraga, Smith was born on May 24, 1922 in Leroy, Kansas - a little farming town, population about 1,000 where Smith's grandfathers were farmers. His dad was an auto mechanic, and later a policeman. Smith moved to California with his family when he was 3 years old, but returned to Kansas from time to time in his life.

In 1936, the family bounced back from a short stint in Kansas to California, landing in Los Angeles, where Smith's father became chief of police for the city of Palos Verdes Estates. Smith finished high school in 1940 and went on to junior college.

"I lied about my age when we lived in LA and joined the National Guard when I was 16," Smith confesses. "There was a battalion of four companies in LA that met at the Coliseum." Smith made Sergeant, then Platoon Sergeant. In 1940 they were mobilized to the 160 Infantry in Washington state. But Smith only lasted there one month. It was found that he had a perforated eardrum, so he was rejected, receiving a discharge from the army on physical grounds.

However, the Draft Board wasn't paying any attention to his discharge. In 1942 he was drafted. The examining physician declared that his eardrums had grown back. Smith went into the Air Force, and, following in his mechanic father's footsteps, he worked on the line servicing aircraft at Williams Field Arizona. He then applied for cadet training, in California, where he qualified for both pilot and navigator training.

When Smith finished navigator training, he went to bombardiers' school, joined a six-man B-25 crew and after finishing their training, went to Savannah, Georgia to pick up a brand new B-25. They flew it to California, where it was altered to add an additional gas tank necessary to make it to Hawaii, then Townsville, Australia. The small plane required about six legs of 1,000 miles each to complete the journey.

But as these things go, all did not go smoothly. In August 1944, the little plane and its crew got to New Caledonia, a group of French Territorial islands in the South Pacific. "The weather was terrible," Smith recalled. "We couldn't fly on to Australia." But their hosts grew impatient, telling them "Australia is only 700 miles away and it's so big you can't miss it."

"Those were the worst conditions I had ever flown in," Smith remembers. "Seven years after Amelia Earhart and her navigator were lost, flying blind, rain and clouds the whole trip. I was looking forward to seeing the Great Barrier Reef, but couldn't." As it turned out, they were 100 miles wide off course, but, with the radio working, they honed in on Townsville, Australia, where they delivered the plane.

Smith and his crew then hopped on a British flying boat to a replacement training center in Port Moresby, the capital of New Guinea. The base was moving to the interior of the island, to Nadzab, about 40 miles in from Lae on the coast. At that time, Japanese soldiers were threatening Australia, and would have gained a huge advantage if they could have gotten over the Owen Stanley range of mountains in New Guinea.

Smith was assigned to the 38th Bomb Group in early August 1944. The group was assigned to 822 squadron 5th Air Force on Halmahera in the Maluku Islands, known as the Spice Islands, west and a little north of New Guinea. For two months, their crew led missions from there before moving up to the Lingayen Gulf in the Philippines.

The B-25 was a medium altitude bomber. For those missions, the airplane had a glassed-in nose and the bombardier sat there with a Norden bombsight. "Most of our airplanes had 12 50-caliber machine guns, we struck our targets at 20 feet at 300 miles an hour. The pilot fired all 12 at the same time with a single button on the steering wheel. I had an Astro compass mounted on the instrument panel, I could sight the sun shadow and get a compass correction because every compass is a little off." An astrocompass is a navigational tool for determining the direction of true north through the positions of various astronomical bodies.

All of Smith's crew survived the war and they've held several reunions in the intervening years. Smith was awarded the air medal with the oak leaf cluster for his service.

After the war, Smith took advantage of the GI Bill to return to school and chose the Colorado School of Mines. As a senior, he needed a date to the homecoming dance and got fixed up on a blind date with Fran. Five years younger than Smith, she and her twin are soon to celebrate their 95th birthday. They married, and Smith got a job at U.S. Steel in Torrance, California. In 1949 they had their first child before he was recalled to the military for the Korean War.

Fortunately, this time he wasn't called upon to fight, but to do research at Wright Field in Ohio. He was a scientist at the flight research lab for a two-year period, working on high strength steel. When he finished his stint, the civilian head of the program offered him a job. "I said no," Smith remembers with a chuckle, "because I wanted to come back to U.S. Steel." It did occur to him later that the job he turned down paid twice what he was getting in his old job.

After the Korean War, Smith did come back to work for U.S. Steel, this time in Pittsburg, California. Smith spent 20 of his 29 years with U.S. Steel in customer technical service. The family lived in San Francisco, then Concord and Orinda before settling in Moraga.

Smith and his wife have three children, and when their youngest was in the third grade, Fran went back to work, starting a preschool at their church, before becoming the director of the preschool at St. Mark's, where she worked for 40 years. She retired in her 70s, but hated to quit.

In addition to backpacking, the couple has volunteered a lot, traveling with their church to build houses in the central valley of California and also in Mexico where they also donated \$2,000 to build a kindergarten playground. The couple was recently honored for their work for the Contra Costa Food Bank.

The Smiths live their lives according to Fran's mother's adage, "Busy people are happy people," and in their 70-plus years of marriage, they have proved it true.

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