

Coast Guard cutter provides aviator Felix Smith, 100, with final sendoff



Felix Smith flew the “Hump” over the Himalayas during World War II, hooked up with the leader of the famed Flying Tigers in postwar China and for many years piloted aircraft for what would become CIA-run Air America in China, Taiwan, Korea, Vietnam and Laos — getting shot at pretty regularly in the process.

He married the great-granddaughter of the last king of Okinawa and later was director of operations for South Pacific Island Airways in Hawaii.

It was perhaps not surprising, then, when Smith’s ashes were scattered from a Coast Guard cutter off Oahu last week, that a former CIA agent, a fellow Air America pilot, a World War II flying legend and some other colorful personalities were aboard.

“No. 1, he was a wonderful person — wonderful to be around. And a great aviator,” said longtime friend and fellow pilot Glen Van Ingen, who knew Smith since the late 1960s and also flew for Air America.

“If you came from a little town in Wisconsin and wanted to see the world, you couldn’t have done a better job of it,” Van Ingen, 86, said of Smith.

Smith died Oct. 3 in Milwaukee at the age of 100. Friend Clark Hatch, who lives in Honolulu, said his last wish was that his ashes be scattered in the Pacific around Hawaii.

His widow, Junko Smith, said her husband had the “best time” living in Hawaii for 21 years, starting in the late 1970s.

He “loved Hawaii,” she said after the memorial service on board the Coast Guard cutter Oliver Berry. “(He always said) his home is Hawaii. We had a very, very good life in Hawaii.”

Lt. Cmdr. Kenneth Franklin, then-commander of the cutter, said, “Felix Smith served the country, and the Coast Guard takes pride in honoring the lives of those that have served the nation.”

Smith chronicled his flying life — the stuff of international intrigue and adventure — in his book, “China Pilot: Flying for Chennault During the Cold War.” He flew first for Civil Air Transport, which became part of the CIA’s Air America.

The intelligence agency decided it needed air transport capability in Asia, and in 1950 secretly purchased the assets of Civil Air Transport.

A “CAT” airline manager declared that pilots were not to mention the CIA by name and instead should refer to agents as “customers.”

During the Korean War, Smith was scheduled to fly to Saipan. When he arrived at Andersen Air Force Base on Guam, an Air Force major skidded his Jeep to a halt and demanded, “What the hell are you doing here?” Smith said in his book.

His “obsolete” C-46 cargo carrier was disguised by aged camouflage.

“Before I could invent a respectable answer, a weapons carrier drove up with about 15 civilians in aloha shirts or plain khakis, 10-gallon hats, sun helmets or no hats, cowboy boots, rubber sandals or tennis shoes,” he wrote.

One led the fuming major away, produced a card, and off the major went without another word.

On the return flight, Smith flew nine blindfolded passengers — all Chinese nationalists trained as spies — and three “customers.” The sudden sound of air rushing through the cabin told him the main door had been opened and shut.

“I said nothing but noticed, after landing, that only eight passengers disembarked. I supposed our customers had discovered a double agent,” Smith wrote.

At the end of World War II, Smith was a pilot with the China National Aviation Corp. working under the aegis of the U.S. Army.

Gen. Claire Chennault, who was behind the Flying Tigers, a group of American volunteer pilots who fought the Japanese in China, started up Civil Air Transport to meet postwar China's needs.

Smith was hired, and in 1946 flew to Hawaii to take delivery of surplus aircraft to start the airline.

"When we got to Wheeler Field, we stared at a graveyard where airplanes had gone to die," he said in his book. "Our 15 Curtis C-46s looked like decaying elephants."

CAT worked in conjunction with the Chinese Nationalist Party headed by Chiang Kai-Shek. In one instance over several missions, Smith piloted air drops of brass ingots for shell casings and rice into Taiyuan in China as the Red Army closed in.

"It took several passes to get all the rice out. Red golf balls — machine gun tracers — curved below us," he wrote.

CAT transported Bank of China's silver bullion to Hong Kong before Chiang made Taiwan the seat of the Kuomintang Party.

Jack DeTour, a Honolulu resident and World War II B-25 pilot, recalled meeting Smith when the former flew to the Philippines to train CAT pilots on the C-119 "Flying Boxcar" to aid the French in Vietnam.

"I rated Felix as one of the best pilots I had ever checked out," recalled DeTour, who was on the Coast Guard cutter for the memorial service.

Smith flew C-47 aircraft in and out of Vientiane in Laos to Hmong villages where weapons included crossbows and flintlock rifles. On one flight he ferried grenades for kingdom forces, and on another, rice for the U.S. Agency for International Development.

In his 1995 book, Smith wrote that "back in the practical West, years away from 'Alice in Wonderland's' topsy-turvy domain, I hold memories fleetingly by their tails, wondering if those strange things really happened. The looking glass reveals only an aging face."