

By Jack Williams

UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

July 25, 2006

Young Navy aviators couldn't help but be impressed by Armistead B. "Chick" Smith's combat credentials when they joined his Quonset Point, R.I., squadron in 1948.

They also discovered that Capt. Smith, a decorated World War II flying ace, was an unpretentious leader with an affable, sometimes playful, demeanor.

"Most skippers get to be hard-nosed," said former astronaut Wally Schirra, who began duty as a Navy aviator under Capt. Smith's command. "Chick wasn't that at all. He was very warm and kind-hearted, and very much a hero to us."

Capt. Smith, a veteran of three wars who went on to pursue a civilian career in banking and serve as foreman of the county grand jury, died July 20 at his home in La Jolla. He was 85.

The cause of death was complications from Parkinson's disease, said daughter Sandra Wallace.

During World War II, Capt. Smith shot down 11 enemy aircraft during 87 combat missions. The first seven of the downed planes were during a 15-month period flying off the aircraft carrier Essex.

Attached to Flying Squadron 9 in the Pacific Theater, Capt. Smith flew the F6F Hellcat, which was nicknamed "the ace maker" for its record in countering the Japanese Zero.

In the battle for Truk Lagoon in Micronesia, Capt. Smith's aircraft was shot down. After landing in the water, he was rescued by a destroyer.

Capt. Smith shot down four enemy aircraft in strikes from the carrier Randolph, taking part in the invasions of Iwo Jima and Okinawa.

His decorations included four Distinguished Flying Crosses, a Silver Star, eight Air Medals, two Legions of Merit and a Navy Commendation Medal.

"He was one of my two heroes," Schirra said. "The other was Joe Foss, a Marine aviator. Some of the tactics Chick taught are still in effect, even with jets."

During astronaut training, Schirra used Smith as an example to counter the doubts of physicians who were uncertain whether fluids could be consumed in a weightless state. He told them Smith had successfully consumed fluids at one-G, a more demanding task than drinking at zero-G, or zero gravity.

"Chick was successful in everything he did," said retired Vice Adm. Howard E. Greer, who met Capt. Smith in 1946. "He was always a true gentleman."

After Capt. Smith retired in 1972 as commander of Pacific Fleet fighter squadrons, he began a career in banking that spanned more than 20 years. He rose in 1982 to senior vice president and head of trusts and investments for what is now Union Bank of California.

He later joined Scripps Bank as senior vice president, organizing a trust and financial services division.

He served for 12 years as chairman of the board of the San Diego Aerospace Museum, playing a key role in rebuilding the Balboa Park institution after it was destroyed by an arson fire in 1978.

In 1988, he became foreman of a county grand jury that issued 15 reports and made 89 recommendations to public agencies, focusing on deficiencies in jail operations and the juvenile-dependency system.

Armistead Burwell Smith Jr. was born March 15, 1921, in Gastonia, N.C.

He left the University of North Carolina after two years to join the Navy and was commissioned as an ensign in February 1942.

His introduction to combat was the following November in North Africa. He flew an F4F Wildcat off the carrier Ranger.

In January 1944, Capt. Smith married Margaret Pagliotti of Santa Barbara. She had moved with her family to Hawaii prior to the war.

After World War II, Capt. Smith commanded two fighter squadrons, a carrier air wing and the seaplane tender Pine Island. From 1967 to 1969, he commanded what was then the Miramar Naval Air Station.

His post-career community service included positions on the YMCA Board of Management, the Balboa Park Advisory Committee, University of California San Diego Chancellor's Associates, the Reuben H. Fleet Space Museum board and the Burnham Institute board.

An accomplished golfer, Capt. Smith played frequently at Lomas Santa Fe Golf Club and once had a seven handicap.

He was a member of the American Fighter Aces Association and the Early and Pioneer Naval Aviators Association, known as Golden Eagles.

Survivors include his wife, Margaret; daughter, Sandra Wallace of North Myrtle Beach, S.C.; sons, Armistead B. Smith III of San Diego and Michael S. Smith of Kauai, Hawaii; six grandchildren; and four great-grandchildren. Services are scheduled for 10 a.m. Aug. 1 at Fort Rosecrans National Cemetery.

Donations are suggested to the San Diego Aerospace Museum.

■ Jack Williams: (619) 542-4587; jack.williams@uniontrib.com

Additional Info added by USS Essex Association member

During WWII, Capt. Smith shot down 11 enemy aircraft during 87 combat missions. The first seven of the downed planes were during a 15 month period flying off the aircraft carrier USS Essex. Attached to Flying Squadron 9 in the Pacific Theater, Capt. Smith flew the F6F Hellcat, which was named "The Ace Maker" for its record in countering the Japanese Zero. In the battle for Truk Lagoon in Micronesia, Capt. Smith's aircraft was shot down. After landing in the water he was rescued by a destroyer.