

The art of war

R.G. Smith turned a job at Douglas Aircraft into a career as a famed aviation artist *By Pat McGinnis*

His paintings and drawings depicting naval aviation and combat have been displayed from the Pentagon to the wardrooms of warships, in private collections and the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum. They have even been used on U.S. Navy recruiting posters.

But had it not been for a speeding ticket, who knows what career road R.G. Smith, considered the dean of naval aviation artists, might have taken.

The traffic citation had been issued to Roy Brown, chief draftsman for Northrop, by a Los Angeles police officer who was acquainted with the Smith family and knew that R.G. was interested in a career in aviation. Brown agreed to meet with Smith—and the ticket was torn up.

It was 1936. Smith was hired at \$18 per week as a blueprint trimmer at the Northrop operation in El Segundo, Calif., which later became the Douglas El Segundo Division.

For Smith, working at airplane-maker Douglas was a childhood dream come true.

Born in Los Angeles but growing up in Oakland, Robert Grant Smith's love of aviation began at age 13 when he was inspired by Charles Lindbergh's solo flight across the Atlantic.

That daring and pioneering flight by Lindbergh in the *Spirit of St. Louis* in 1927 "ignited in me an immediate ... and unending interest in aviation, I just had to get into the flying world," Smith would later write in his autobiography, *The Man and His Art: R.G. Smith*.

But unlike many other boys of the day who were interested in flying and wanted to be pilots, Smith wanted to design and build airplanes.

Following high school, he studied mechanical engineering and took aeronautical engineering classes, graduating in two years from the Polytechnic College of Engineering in Oakland, Calif.

At age 20, he set out to find a job in the aircraft business. No jobs existed

in that field in the San Francisco area, so he accepted a job with the Works Progress Administration. He left after three days for a job in the mining industry making \$1 a day.

It was a couple of years later, after he went to work at Douglas, that his artistic talents took root. Smith quickly progressed from blueprint trimmer to producing detailed component drawings. Later, he was a configuration engineer. He was part of the conceptual phases of every military aircraft built by Douglas at the El Segundo Division, including Smith's favorite, the A-4D Skyhawk.

Although much of his artwork depicts aircraft in combat, Smith never served in the military. When World War II began, he was told he was too vital to the war effort and could not enlist.

Years later in his autobiography, Smith would write: "If given the opportunity to rewrite the course of my life, I would change but one pathway. I would have liked to serve my country on the front lines. I believe this is one of the reasons serving the Navy as a combat artist means so very much to me."

Throughout his career, Smith had opportunities to witness Navy operations firsthand. Among the highlights were two trips, when he was in his 50s, to Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War.

Famous for his images of Navy fighters, signature clouds and sky, Smith's body of work spanned more than five decades and comprised some 2,000 pieces. In addition to naval aviation, he produced many paintings and drawings of Native Americans.

He died in Rancho Mirage, Calif., in 2001, at age 87.

"As I enter the final chapters of my life," Smith wrote in his autobiography, "I feel a twinge of guilt for having had so much fun." ■

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— R.G. Smith



PHOTOS: (Clockwise from top left) R.G. Smith; Douglas SBDs attack Japanese carrier *Akagi* during the Battle of Midway; a C-17 taking off; paratroopers jump out of Douglas C-47s over Europe during World War II; an F-4 Phantom is shown ready to launch from a carrier as A-4 Skyhawks return from a mission during the Vietnam War; Douglas AD Skyraiders from the USS *Princeton* attack the Hwachon Reservoir Dam during the Korean War; the U.S. Navy's Blue Angels; and C-54s at Tempelhof Airport, Berlin. BOEING ARCHIVES