

Bombing practice at Pyramid . . . and a World War II-era family suffers

Raised in Sparks, Nev., Art Smith, Jr., studied at the University of Nevada just prior to the United States' entry into World War II. When Japan attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941, Smith was a teller in the Sparks branch of the First National Bank, hoping to earn money for aeronautical engineering tuition at the Boeing School of Aviation in Oakland, Calif.

He enlisted in the Navy and trained as an aviation cadet in five states before getting orders to begin torpedo bomber training. As a torpedo bomber pilot, Smith was assigned to an air unit that was regrouping in Fallon, Nev., 60 miles east of his Sparks hometown. Although the aviators were still passionate about taking on the Japanese and the Germans, it would wind up being the final year of the war. In this interview, taken by the University of Nevada Oral History Program in 1993 and 1994, Smith, who died at age 76 in 1999, recalls how his military orders had him simulating wartime action in one of the most idyllic locations in Nevada.

When we got to Fallon we really went huckley-buckley; we got with it; we knew we were going overseas from there, and

it wouldn't be long.

I was giving my all, and it paid off. When you regroup, each squadron leader flies with all his young pilots to decide who's going to be his wing man,

and the skipper of my squadron, a guy named Ben Williams, picked me. I felt honored. It was quite a deal.

Much of our time at Fallon was spent practicing bombing and torpedo runs. For torpedo practice we were using Pyramid Lake, which is on a Paiute Indian reservation and is fished by them. Their presence didn't matter. Hell, we were at war! There wasn't any of the commo-



Art Smith, Jr., of Sparks went from a teller at First National Bank to torpedo bomber pilot during World War II. More than 60 years later, his memories of sending torpedoes into the waters of Pyramid Lake still resonate.

tion you'd have today.... I mean, if we wanted to use their lake, go get it. Right? But our torpedo runs were done from the center of the lake north, to stay well clear of the town of Nixon down on the southern shore.

Our practice runs served a dual purpose: When you dropped a torpedo in combat in World War II, it wasn't on its maiden voyage; it had had 10 drops before it ever got there. This was because early in the war the Navy had a lot of trouble with torpedoes. After they were launched they'd go straight to the bottom,

or they'd surface and run erratically; one submarine even sunk itself. To get the bugs out of the things before they were sent to the fleet, the Navy began having each torpedo dropped nine times, with factory overhauls after the third, sixth, and ninth drops. If a torpedo was still running hot, straight, and normal, it was then sent to ordnance, filled full of torpex, and taken out to the fleet.

For practice drops, our torpedoes ran with only half a charge of alcohol fuel in their engines, and in place of the explosive torpex warhead, they carried water with dye marker in their noses. A little pump forced the dye out as the torpedo was running. We would zoom down over the mountains ringing Pyramid Lake, put our Avenger torpedo bombers right on the water, and thunder in toward the target — a 300-foot line between a boat and the buoy it was towing. (Three

hundred feet was equivalent to the length of a destroyer.) We'd make our drops and climb out of there, while observers watched to see where our torpedoes ran — whether they were hits or misses. And we had to practice coming in at different angles.

When a torpedo ran out of alcohol, it would surface, blowing out the remaining water and dye marker. That made it buoyant enough so that its nose, which was painted yellow, bobbed up out of the water. The boat would

The University of Nevada Oral History Program produces and preserves primary-source oral histories that document the history and culture of Nevada and the Intermountain West. Visit <http://unr.edu/oral-history> for more information.

retrieve the spent torpedoes and return them to shore to be sent back to our base for refueling and rearming.

One day after we'd dropped our stuff on the lake, we flew back to Fallon and encountered a snowstorm right over the base. The air officer radioed us, "Go out 10 or 12 miles. There's a big dry lake out there. Land on it. And," he said, "I'm going to repeat this three times: Land with your wheels down; wheels down; wheels down!" We flew out and put down on the playa, and sat in the desert silence for a couple of hours. There was no storm or anything out there, only 10 miles from the base. One guy monitored the radio, and finally he said, "It's cleared; we can go home." We fired up our engines, those big props spinning, and you should have seen the dust stream off that dry lake bed! Then we flew down to Fallon and landed.

We trained out of Fallon for 13 weeks. Soon after that we went aboard the Altamaha, a Jeep carrier, and sailed to Hawaii.

Smith's Air Group 13 unit, based in Hawaii, never saw action. Shortly after the end of the war in August 1945, he was discharged and resumed his banking career, first in Las Vegas, and then in Reno. Smith advanced from teller to become the chairman and chief executive officer of First Interstate Bank of Nevada.

FIGHTING FOR THE SAME SIDE

Roy Nishiguchi, a Fort Ord, Calif.-based U.S. Army medic, saw his Japanese-American family become outcasts during the war. His father, Masaichi Nishiguchi, had been a section foreman for the Western Pacific Railroad in Gerlach, Nev., 70 miles north of Reno, since 1933. But after Pearl Harbor the railroad forced him to leave his job and his property in 1942. Roy Nishiguchi, who attended the University for two years just after war's end, picks up the story in his own oral history, dictated in 1992. He is a soldier in conflict, devoted to both family and country. His excerpt about wartime in this country tells the other side of the Art Smith story, although both Smith and Nishiguchi, ironically, were fighting for the same side.

Many years before the war my dad was carving a toy boat for me, whittling away and talking about war. He said, "Roy, if Japan and



Roy Nishiguchi

America fight who you going to fight for?"

I said, "Japan."

He said, "Baka (fool)! You were born in this country; you are an American. You fight for your country."

I was about 12 or 13. "You told me how

Japanese would fight to the death for their country," I said. "I'm Japanese, so I'll fight for them."

He said, "You are American. This is your country — you fight for this country."

Dad wanted to be an American so bad that he even adopted *Sam* for his first name; but because of his race, he was out — immigration law prevented those born in Japan from being naturalized. Even though he was bitter about this, he studied American history and read American literature. "I'm going to keep on reading," he told me. "Everything I read is for me. Whether anybody else wants it or not doesn't matter."

My dad loved his job and thought that being a section foreman for the railroad was all a man could want. He had tried to persuade me to follow in his footsteps: "You have your house furnished; you have your coal, and your kerosene for lighting," he had said. "What more could you ask? You can't get that anywhere else." The railroad was his life.

In January following Pearl Harbor, the Western Pacific kicked my father out — took his job away, claiming he was a security risk... He and Mom were ordered to leave their house and get off railroad property, and since the railroad practically owned Gerlach, they didn't know what to do. Their other son, Art, had been inducted into the Army the week before, but one of my friends who hadn't yet been drafted helped them. He got a bunch of fellows together and rented a little trailer for Mom and Dad. It was just big enough to hold a double bed, and they moved it to a site that

was off railroad property, which meant it was out in the desert, out in the sagebrush. Stuck out there in the boon docks that's what my mother and dad lived in through the winter. No toilet facilities, no nothing.

My sister Mary and her husband, Chad Chadwell, journeyed from Tennessee to care for my preteen sisters, who had been separated from Mom and Dad. When Mary wrote to me and told me about the situation, I borrowed money from Army buddies and made my way back to Gerlach. I walked out to the trailer and knocked on the door. At first there was no response: Mom and Dad were scared! They were afraid that someone had come out there to blast them. I called out, "It's Roy," and my dad finally opened the door.

Well, there wasn't a thing I could do for them. I only had a seven-day furlough, and no money. What could I do? I didn't know anything. My friend Paul Wayne told me, "Go back to Fort Ord. We'll look out for your mom and dad." So I went back to Fort Ord, and eventually Mary was able to rent a house in Reno and move our family into it.

The Army pulled all the Nisei off the West Coast and transferred us to inland units. Although we didn't know where we were going, I, for one, thought that I would soon be in combat. Boy, was I wrong! We Nisei were Americans, soldiers in the United States Army; but for a year following Pearl Harbor, my group was given only the kinds of jobs that had been performed by work details from the stockade. I ended up assigned to the 1851st Service Unit at Camp Wolters, Texas, a trained medic serving the Army by emptying garbage cans.

After the war, Nishiguchi enrolled as a 30-year-old at Nevada on the GI Bill, but did not finish his schooling. He became material facilities officer at Stead Air Force Base, located just north of Reno, and then was warehouse supervisor for K-Mart in Reno. He retired from K-Mart in 1986 and died in 2002. **N**

In 1995, the program published excerpts from Art Smith's and Roy Nishiguchi's oral histories in War Stories: Veterans Remember WW II.