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Oklahoma City man set world record and won gold in 1963 Pan American Games



by **ED GODFREY**

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Fifty years ago, Thomas D. Smith III of Oklahoma City made history with a pistol.

At the 1963 Pan American Games in Brazil, then-Air Force Capt. Smith set a world shooting record that still stands.

Competing for the United States in the two-day pistol match, Smith was shooting on a course at targets the size of silver dollars and the second day at moving targets from a distance of 25 meters.

He won the gold medal with a score a 597 out of a possible 600, besting the world record of 591 held at the time by a Russian.

It was the first world shooting record set by a member of the United States Air Force and the first centerfire pistol world record set by an American.

The Soviet press did their best at the time to try and discredit the record.

“For three days, I had Soviet correspondents following me around all day long trying to make me admit I was a professional shooter,” Smith said.

Smith wasn't supposed to win. The four members of the United States Pan American pistol team in 1963 included 1960 Olympic shooting gold medalist William McMillan, a United States Marine.

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“Nobody knew who the hell I was,” Smith said.

Smith, a native of Texas, was good with a gun even before he joined the Air Force.

“I came from a family of shooters,” Smith said. “I was raised in that ranch country of West Texas. Sunday we would go to church and come home and the women would be frying chicken and we would be out behind the barn shooting.”

Smith became a competitive pistol shooter only because the Air Force wanted it. One day Smith's commander decided that all crew members were going to have to qualify with a handgun.

He set the range and division record, and the Pentagon noticed the scores. The Air Force brass was so impressed that Smith was ordered to start shooting in pistol matches.

Smith shot in his first match in 1961 and later became captain of the Air Force Pistol Team.

Over the next four-and-a-half years, Smith won 36 individual state, regional, national and international pistol championships, breaking 79 National Rifle Association and world shooting records.

He was a member of eight United States shooting teams in international competitions, including the 1963 Pan American Games where he won an individual and team gold medal and the 1964 Olympic Games, where he finished eighth in free pistol. He won five individual national shooting championships.

The Colt 1911 semi-automatic pistol that Smith used in the Pan American Games to set the world record is now on display at the NRA's National Firearms Museum in Fairfax, Virginia.

In 1988, the size of the shooting targets were changed and Smith's world record set in the 1963 Pan American Games is now considered retired, never to be broken.

After leaving the Air Force in 1975, Smith began training Olympic shooters in 1986 and moved to Oklahoma City to be under the care of the late Dr. William Grana, an orthopedic surgeon.

Smith, 81, survived a 1966 plane explosion over Greece but received multiple injuries that have required more than 90 operations in his lifetime.

Grana, a pioneer in sports medicine, worked with the United States Olympic Committee and as a physician for the United States 1988 Summer Olympic squad.

Smith has lived in Oklahoma City since then and served as past president of the Oklahoma Station Chapter Safari Club along with being a volunteer ROTC instructor at the University of Oklahoma.

Heroic survival efforts earned Oklahoma City man the Airman's Medal

Thomas D. Smith III was awarded the Airman's Medal for extraordinary heroism after a 1966 airplane explosion.

Smith was one of 10 people on a C47 transport plane returning from assignment in Turkey when the plane broke apart flying over Greece.

“I was sitting in the midsection of the plane and the next thing I knew I was looking at a mountain through my feet,” Smith said.

Then Capt. Smith was blown from the plane still attached to his seat. He kicked free of the seat and began tumbling.

He survived the 5,000 feet free fall by landing in a deep snow bank. Unconscious for two hours, when Smith awoke, he could see the plane wreckage a quarter of a mile away.

With a broken back, Smith crawled back to the plane and pulled survivors into the tail section for shelter. Smith found a bundle of parachutes on the plane and used them as blankets to try and keep the survivors warm.

“It took about four parachutes to fluff them up for each one,” Smith said. “I spent basically the next three days fluffing parachutes.”

Dense fog kept rescue planes from finding the wreckage. It became obvious to Smith that they were not going to be seen from the air at their present location with the plane covered in snow.

Smith then crawled down the side of the mountain to get out of the clouds and to a ridge where he tied a parachute to his waist to use as a signal flag.

Smith waited and nearly froze on the mountain side before a C130 aircraft flying by spotted the orange parachute against the white snow.

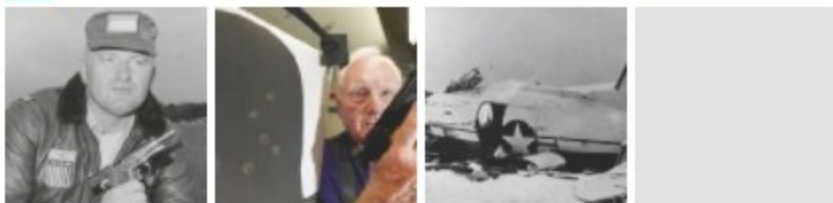
Smith and three other survivors were rescued the next day. His actions were credited with saving the lives of the men.

Lt. Col. Smith was medically retired from the Air Force in 1975, but not before serving in the Vietnam War where he flew 128 combat missions as a fighter pilot.

He is a member of the Red River Valley Fighter Pilots Association, nicknamed the River Rats, one of the most famous combat fighter pilot groups.



Retired Air Force Col. Thomas D. Smith III poses for a photo at HSH Shooting Sports Complex in Oklahoma City, Friday June 28, 2013. Col. Smith set a pistol shooting record in the Pan American Games in 1963 that still stands today. In all, he set 79 shooting records in his career and this summer...



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Ed Godfrey was born in Muskogee and raised in Stigler. He has worked at The Oklahoman for 25 years. During that time, he has worked a myriad of beats for The Oklahoman including both the federal an...
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