



Harold Smith, aka. Smitty the Jumper, was a well-known figure at the U.S. Nationals. At right, Smitty makes one of his many tandem jumps with the U.S. Team during the '80s.

Remembering Smitty

BY CHUCK POWELL

Earlier this summer, the sport lost one of its true pioneers. Smitty the Jumper—best known for his appearances at the U.S. Nationals during the '80s and, more notably, his 1980 appearance on *The Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson—died peacefully in his sleep on June 7, taking with him skydiving memories dating back to before the Great Depression.

Smitty spent his last few years in a nursing home. About ten years earlier, he had shown this author a will which read, "When I pass on, I don't want much...but I would like channels 3, 10, 12 and KFDI radio there, and I would like as many planes as possible to fly over during the service. I would also like jumpers to land beside my grave. I understand if all of this is not possible."

Well, he had his wish. During the service, you could hear the 182s passing overhead, loaded with jumpers. As the procession filed out, eight jumpers descended onto the grave site, one carrying the American flag. You can bet Smitty was eating it up.

He was laid to rest in his red, white and blue jumpsuit—his trademark attire. He had a pull-up cord tied to his zipper and one of his jump cards in his hands.

The Good Old Days

Born Harold Truesdell Smith on October 17, 1898, in Salisbury, North Carolina, Smitty vowed to jump someday from a plane. And on a Friday afternoon in 1928, at the age of 30, he did just that. Andy Burke, chief pilot of an airfield in Wichita Falls, Texas, took Smitty on an airplane ride that would lead to a lifelong love of parachuting.

The gear wasn't state of the art, and the spot was anything but precise. On his first jump, Smitty used a cotton canopy packed in a bag that was about 15 inches in diameter

and stood about 30 inches tall. A rope on the bottom of the bag was tied off to the airplane, and that was his first static-line rig. Nothing special, nothing complicated, and by far, nothing like the gear today. But Smitty jumped it, and he walked away from the biggest shake up of his life—and loved it.

His next jump was scheduled for the following Sunday, but the local paper billed it as two jumps, adding in that "he was a sign painter who had never jumped off anything higher than a step-ladder." Spectators gathered to watch, and on his first jump, Smitty landed farther away than he wanted. But on his second, he had the best landing of his life. At first it looked like he was going to land on the hangar, but he went over it from back to front, almost got the flag pole, and came down in an open area right in front of the crowd. He made a stand-up landing, collapsed the canopy, pulled off his white cloth helmet and waved it at the fans. "There I stood," said Smitty, "and damn it, not a camera in the field." His disappointment turned to excitement the next day when he went to collect the \$40 promised for both jumps. They gave him an extra ten bucks for the stand-up landing.

Smitty bummed gear until about 1934 when someone gave him an old pongee canopy with shroud lines made of hemp. He made the harness himself by tying the lines to an old Model A steering wheel and used a horse harness to make risers. With heavy snaps at one end, he made himself a wide leather belt with two buckles and leg straps. He put two large rings on each side. Next, he had a tent maker design a bag to hold the parachute. The mouth of the bag was tied off with white string (like break cord) and the steering wheel fit at the bottom of the bag.

Smitty re-lived those days time and time again. "I would just put the canopy in the bag with newspapers between each fold, then the lines, then the wheel and tie it off with break cord," he said. "The top of the bag had a rope on it where I would tie it off to a tube or strut, hold the bag over my head and jump."

It would all string out in a staged deployment. He made about 30 jumps on that set up and often looked back in wonder at how he survived those days and what modern-day jumpers would think of his "rig."

Smitty spent the next ten years barnstorming out of cattle pastures and air fields, wing-walking and making multiple parachute jumps. He earned the nickname "tree top Smitty." He explained, "The lower I opened, the more money I collected when I passed the hat at the end of the day."

As the years went on, Smitty met many important people. He rubbed shoulders with the likes of Walter Beech, Clyde Cessna and many other well-known pilots and jumpers. In 1937, he took a break because his wife urged him to come back down to earth, paint signs and make real money. At that point he had made 204 jumps—170 of them were with two or more parachutes, usually anything he could get his hands on!

Smitty started going to airshows again in the late '50s, and in 1960 at the National Airshow in Wichita, Kansas, Rip Gooch, a pilot with just about every ticket in the book, flew him for his jumps. He borrowed gear and dropped down to about 1,500 feet just so he would land by the crowd. (He even wore a back-up parachute to stay partly legal.) Smitty ended up blacking out on exit, fumbled for the ripcord, and got it open just at tree top level. Most people

Smitty the Jumper

Continued

thought it was intentional, but it was another close call for Smitty, and he left it at that.

In 1972, he made a jump at Wichita's Maize airport and tried landing in front of some girls in the packing area. He ended up breaking his leg after landing downwind. He ate it up as the girls carried him in. Smitty hung around the drop zone with ice packs on and partied into the night, waiting until the next morning to finally head to the hospital.

In August of 1974, Smitty made his last solo jump in Lincoln, Nebraska, at a drop zone owned by "Shorty" Janousek. He jumped a Cessna 185 using a T-10 canopy. During the jump, he had trouble reaching his toggles, and when he finally got to them, he realized he couldn't see. "Everything got dark, but I was still conscious," recalled Smitty.

He finally got his sight back, but then he realized he was getting low. Once he pulled and looked down, what he saw was a nightmare—the Lincoln city dump. He hooked it in to miss some nasty, black water and slammed into a five-foot embankment. He was broken up and spent weeks in a double cast for both broken legs. When it was over, he hung that cast at the end of his trailer on his "Wall of Fame" with a sign which read: "Warning to all jumpers who quit before the age of 76."

Smitty didn't jump again until 1985 when he made a tandem with Mark McCafferty. Later that year, he made a jump in Perris Valley with his son, Jerry Smith. Jerry was making his first jump at the age of 56; Smitty was 87. Smitty made tandems into many of his own birthday parties, and on July 5, 1990, he made his last jump in Albert Lea, Minnesota. Smitty joked, "I better quit while I'm still in one piece." He had made 15 tandems from 1985 to 1990, and even got in his first 8-way with the Coors team.

Smitty had once commented that Tiny Broadwick had a big influence on his career. "Before I began jumping," he said, "I tried to meet Broadwick by going to her home in Henderson, North Carolina. But unfortunately she was in California at the time. I did get to meet her family, and they let me stay in Tiny's bed, which I felt was an honor." Smitty finally did get to meet Tiny before she died.

When asked by this author what he loved most about skydiving, Smitty's reply was, "If I had to live my whole life over again, I wouldn't change a thing...except maybe for landing in a dump in Lincoln." ❖

About the Author

Chuck Powell, D-10795, first met Smitty at the age of ten when he saw a parachute descending onto the local airport. Powell followed it down and found Smitty selling books to spectators. Powell took one, which Smitty said was free, but the autograph cost him five bucks.