Guardian in the sky

Donald Smith

DAV life member, veteran of Korean and Vietnam wars nominated for Medal of Honor

Donald Smith was just 11 when Pearl Harbor was suddenly attacked. He watched as the young men in his hometown—a farming community in rural Mississippi—went off to war. He felt dejected that he was too young to answer the call to serve.

But fate had something else in store for Smith. He went on to give 20 years to the U.S. Army, including wartime service in Korea and Vietnam, and a chance to fulfill the patriotic duty he had felt drawn to as a boy.

On June 19, 1966, while supporting a daring rescue mission for an entire infantry company that had been pinned down for 48 hours, Smith repeatedly engaged enemy forces as a door gunner of a UH-1B “Huey” helicopter, allowing 42 American soldiers to escape to safety.

His bravery in Vietnam did not go unnoticed, and he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for his actions. And in 2013, Smith received news that he was under consideration for the nation’s highest military honor, the Medal of Honor.
The DAV life member’s Army career began in 1950 as a combat engineer. His first duty station was in occupied Japan following the ending of World War II. As the Korean War broke out, he found himself helping build infrastructure for the American forces on the peninsula.

“What we did in Korea was build bridges and roads to make things travelable,” recalled Smith. “Bunkers, trenches, we built a little bit of everything.”

Smith would often handle demolitions for construction. On one occasion, he found himself behind enemy lines in the sweltering Korean summer. He had been separated from his unit for 10 days. The only food he had to eat was a chicken, which he stole, along with some raw rice.

“It’s a wonder that didn’t kill him,” said Jean Smith, Donald’s wife. “To this day, he doesn’t eat chicken.”

After the war, he was briefly assigned to Camp McCoy, Wis., before volunteering to switch jobs and becoming a helicopter crew chief.

“I wanted to fly, so I thought I’d try for aviation,” said Smith. “And wouldn’t you know, I managed to pass the test.”

He was sent to Vietnam around Christmas 1965. On the morning of the rescue mission, Smith was told that dozens of Americans were in harm’s way near the coastal city of Tuy Hòa, and he would help cover the medical evacuation helicopters from his gunship.

“All I could think of was [to] do everything I could to bring them out of there,” explained Smith. “It never crossed my mind, the danger, or anything like that.”

Although multiple enemy rounds hit his aircraft, Smith didn’t hesitate and kept engaging the enemy with overwhelming force.

“Completely disregarding his own safety,” the citation for his
Distinguished Flying Cross reads, “while receiving intense hostile fire, [Smith] pinpointed the most active enemy emplacements and sprayed them with devastating fire.”

Smith hit the enemy “with such a disruptive effect that the infantry company was able to move from its position for the first time in two days,” the citation continues.

After the dust settled and the choppers made it safely back to base, 42 American soldiers were saved from nearly certain death.

Smith met Jean in 1969. They got married the following year and are now retired in Maine.

The bid to receive the Medal of Honor began in 2013, decades after Smith left military service.

Smith has been a DAV life member for the past 22 years and is currently part of Chapter 1 in Augusta, Maine.

At 88 years old, Smith said he would use the opportunity to travel and talk to people about the war.

“I’d see what I can do to help them,” he added.

But Smith stops short of calling himself a hero. To him, it was just another mission, albeit one where he had the
opportunity to make a decisive impact.

“I’m just one of the boys, and that’s what they thought of me,” he said. “I tried to take care of the people in my group.”

Smith was already a hero, his wife said.

“I’m very proud of him,” Jean added. “Whether he gets the Medal of Honor or not, it doesn’t make any difference to me. He’s a hero in my books and a great husband, too.”