

Painting Life Large

Evergreen's Del Smith Charts Life on a Global Flight Path

By Jim Pasero

The five most famous Oregonians? The names on that list would probably be, in no particular order—Phil Knight, Gert Boyle, Joey Harrington, Gus Van Sant, and ...sad but true...Tonya Harding.

Thirty miles west of Portland, in McMinnville, Ore. (pop. 28,000), lives an Oregonian who may not be as famous as the other five, but who arguably has lived the most interesting life of any current resident. His name is Del Smith, and he's the founder and president of Evergreen International Aviation and also founded the Evergreen Aviation Museum and the Captain Michael King Smith Educational Institute, named for his oldest son. Evergreen is the most diversified, and one of the largest, private aviation services companies in the world, and it's located right in the middle of Oregon (pinot noir) wine country, Yamhill County.

To label Del Smith an Oregonian misses the story, because while he is an Oregonian, he is also a westerner, an internationalist, a humanitarian, and most poignantly an American. And he's managed to paint his life large. Very large.

Snapshots in time tell just how large. It's 1990, only three months after the U.S. Army has ousted drug dealer General Manuel Noriega from power in Panama, and Evergreen Airlines has provided the military with air transport support in the war against the Panamanian dictator.

The date is March 2, 1990—the first Gulf War has just ended and Saddam Hussein responds to his defeat by throwing a tantrum and setting fire to 700 oil wells in Kuwait. *Hell on earth...* it would be nine months before the Kuwaitis would see a sunrise. Into that hell flew Del Smith and his friend Red Adair, whose firefighting company would eventually put out 117 Kuwaiti fires. Yes, that's the same Red Adair, who in 1968, because of his exploits as the world's most famous oil well firefighter, inspired the film "Hellfighters," starring John Wayne as Adair.

How did Smith and Adair happen to be on the first flight into Kuwait after the fires started?

Says Smith, "We (Evergreen) had carried a lot of equipment into the war zone and we were in Cairo the night the war ended." (The night the fires were started.) "We were with the Emir of Kuwait and he had arranged terms with Red Adair. Adair is a tough old guy, a fearless Texan, and he was fearless in fighting fires. We flew all his equipment in a 747.

"Red wanted an airplane full of whiskey," says Smith, "I said, gee, Red, it's a Muslim country, I'm not sure that's a good idea. And Red said, 'Do they want their fires out or not?' And I said, 'I'll ask them.' Red's second request was for 4,000 pigs. I said to Red, 'Muslims don't like pigs.' He wanted the pigs to detonate the mines in Kuwait." Adair didn't win that request.

Says Smith about Hussein's flawed war strategy, "Hussein had seen too many John Wayne movies. He thought the coalition would come with a beach landing, not an air assault, so he put the mines on the beach. He spilled oil on the beach, spilled gas. As our troops got off the water, Hussein was ready to torch them alive."

But, of course it didn't work that way. "Instead of using the pigs, we put seismic gear from Europe with mine detection equipment on the helicopters."

But what Smith remembers most about that night in early March of 1990 when he and Adair flew into Kuwait was the 15,000 feet of black smoke. "I never saw anything like it. Below 200 feet we finally broke out of the smoke and blackness to where we could see visually. We flew visual flight rules to the airport."

The only problem was that Kuwait's airport had been bombed by coalition forces.

"We could see the bomb crater at the airport," says Smith, "but we could also see there was enough runway to land the Gulf Star at the airport."

So what was Smith thinking as he and Red Adair flew through the black smoke, through the hell on earth? Was he worried about personal safety?

"I was thinking," says Smith, "what a waste...what a tragedy, what an atrocity war is. Kuwait was losing five million barrels and \$150 million a day, and they said it would take three years to put the fires out." But the world environment couldn't wait three years.

"From March '90 to July 4th, we—Evergreen—lived that project. We used a fleet of 13 helicopters supporting the firefighters. It took nine months, not three years, to put the fires out," says Smith. In all, 14 countries would help Kuwait in the rescue operation, but Smith adds, "There were still seven months of total darkness, seven months without a sunset."

"Red Adair knew there was a pipeline pumping oil to sea to crude tankers," says Smith. "He just reversed the flow and pumped the Adriatic Sea to the fires; he brought an ocean of water to the middle of the desert."

Putting out the fires was not, says Smith, "a high-tech operation." It required putting a long pipe over the fire (capping), which shot the fire up in the air, and then working on the head. "If that pipe leaked while you were working on it, you would go up like a puff of smoke."

"One of our jobs," says Smith, "was to fly the burn victims to Sweden and the amputees to Germany. One guy lost an arm—he came in with it in a bag." Evergreen flew him to Germany and months later the company got a thank you letter from the worker with a videotape of him playing catch with his son. The opposite of waste.

How were Smith and Evergreen able to react so quickly and to dedicate so many company resources so fast to help put out the fires? "Agility is one of our virtues," says Smith, "our flexibility."

If Del Smith hates waste, it has a lot to do with his background.

In 1999, Smith was a recipient of the Wright Brothers Memorial Trophy. Last year, he received the Horatio Alger Award, an award given to Americans whose lives have been a

triumph over unusual and difficult upbringings, an award given to life's heroic long shots. Past award winners include Chuck Yeager, Maya Angelou, and James Earl Jones.

Smith was born in Seattle, Wash., in 1930. At birth he was given up to an orphanage, and two years later he was adopted. Three months later, his adoptive father was killed in an accident. Del Smith and his adoptive mother were poor, very poor. They lived during the depression in a one-room house in Centralia, Wash., with no running water and a wood stove for heat.

“We were really poor,” Smith told the Horatio Alger Association, “but my mother had a positive spirit. She had a capacity for love that I have never seen duplicated. I believe one of the most powerful forces in life is the capacity of genuine love and because of that I had a happy childhood.”

It was also a very industrious childhood. By the age of 11 Smith had saved enough money from lawn mowing and paper routes to put a down payment on a house for his mother. Five years later he would get his pilot's license. In 1953 he graduated from the University of Washington and was commissioned as an officer in the Air Force.

Three years later he began flying helicopters commercially, and patented a system that reseeded harvested timberlands with the use of a helicopter. As Smith told the Alger Society, “I spread for all the major timber companies and the government. It was very successful and I felt I was serving God and mankind because it was a renewable resource. I found it very rewarding.”

In 1957, Smith's business partner, Dean Johnson, the man who taught him to fly helicopters was killed in a crop dusting accident. After the accident, Smith combined the two companies.

Today, four and a half decades later, Evergreen International Aviation boasts 4,000 worldwide employees, seven companies, and has done business in 160 of the 190 nations in the world. The Evergreen family of companies include: Evergreen International Airlines (moving mail, express packages and commercial and military cargo); Evergreen Aviation Ground Logistics Enterprise Inc. (ground handling services for airlines); Evergreen Air Center (maintenance for airplanes and helicopters, including NASA, located in Marana, Ariz); Evergreen Helicopters Inc. (agriculture, construction, firefighting, forestry and humanitarian missions); Evergreen Aircraft Sales & Leasing Co. (buying, selling and leasing of helicopters, commercial aircraft and parts); Evergreen Nursery and Evergreen Orchards (includes over 8,000 acres of agriculture products).

Smith's vision for his helicopter company in the 1950s was twofold: to use helicopters as “industrial workhorses” and as “angels of mercy.” It's a vision that's held steady throughout the aviation company's 47-year history. Evergreen has completed some big construction projects. They put the roof on the Pontiac Silverdome. They built pipelines in China and in the Alaska Wilderness, where Smith admits they “spent more time carrying environmentalists with butterfly nets than they did oil workers.” And they designed an airmail service throughout the U.S. that became the model for UPS, not to mention that the company produces Christmas trees and pinot noirs. It is, after all, located in Yamhill County.

Why the diversity, the flexibility? Again, it's a question of minimizing waste and maximizing opportunity. Smith has always been effective at vertically and horizontally integrating his company, and using the resources around him to grow. That's why the world's largest private aviation company also happens to be one of the biggest agriculture producers in Yamhill County.

But in addition to Evergreen's commercial success, it's been the company's role in providing military logistical support for the U.S. government and its humanitarian work that has etched Del Smith and Evergreen as central players in world affairs.

Evergreen has provided military logistics in several wars. "We flew over 700 flights to Afghanistan and 3,700 to Iraq," for the wars on terrorism, says Smith. Evergreen also flew for the British government during the first Gulf War.

Out of those nearly 4,500 trips to provide U.S. military hardware to the Middle East, only eight times have Evergreen planes come home without a return commercial load. Smith notes, "Of 190 nations, only 25 percent have liquidity. You have to know how to barter. We zigzag to China for high-tech, to Tel Aviv for vegetables, and to Kenya to bring flowers to Australia. (Evergreen has offices in Beijing and Hong Kong).

At the end of the Vietnam War, Evergreen was responsible for getting the last hundreds of Americans out of the country. But probably Smith is most proud that Evergreen has flown the missions that have helped destroy the drug fields in Columbia. "If the drug lords of Colombia have a deck of cards for their most wanted, then I've got an Ace with my name on it," says Smith.

Evergreen has also set a world corporate standard in humanitarian work, both paid and donated. For 29 years, under the auspices of the World Health Organization, Evergreen has worked in West Africa to eradicate the black fly, which caused blindness in millions of young Africans. Before the spraying, Smith talks about the dilemma young western Africans faced. "They could move inland and starve, or they could stay by the river and go blind."

Smith remembers the sad sight of watching one young African child leading seven or eight blind ones. In 1962 Evergreen sprayed sugar cane in the Caribbean to save the crop. And in Pakistan, when floods brought famine, Evergreen sprayed 400,000 acres of rice fields to increase food production. In 1980, the company worked with California Gov. Jerry Brown to eliminate the Mediterranean fruit fly. And on February 12, 2002 Evergreen Humanitarian and Relief Services landed the first 747 in Afghanistan since 1974, distributing more than \$2 million in critical post-war aid. This November of 2003 Evergreen landed in Iraq with a load of backpacks, packed by U.S. volunteers with school supplies for Iraqi children.

In the '90s, Evergreen flew a Mother's Day mercy relief plane to aid 450,000 refugees of Kosovo. Smith says that trip to Albania was particularly heartfelt because you saw "people who had nothing." He remembers a conversation with an Albanian mayor that illuminates the complexities of world affairs and the difficulties in transplanting western values. "The Albanian mayor said to me that 'when my people do shopping they don't

buy, they go to Paris and Rome and steal.’ He told me ‘we need to control their activity, so I need our police force to go to Germany and steal 40 or 50 police cars.’”

Despite such a remarkable past, Del Smith is forever forward thinking. These days Evergreen is concentrating on converting 747s to fight forest fires. Smith says the planes, with ten times the spraying capacity of helicopters, will revolutionize forest firefighting. And due to the reconfigured 747s’ increased capacity, improved accuracy, and pressurized delivery, they could prove to be invaluable tools for biological decontamination and for oil spill containment and cleanup. Evergreen is also in the process of establishing an air cargo system in China modeled after the UPS system they helped build here. Closer to home, in fact right next door to the Evergreen Aviation Museum, plans are underway to construct a giant screen 3-D theatre, the only one of its kind between Seattle and San Francisco.

And there’s something else that drives Del Smith’s imagination these days: unmanned aircraft. “If I was 25 again, that to me would be my future. With solar energy they will eventually never have to land.” Smith believes that you think from the “tactical to the practical,” and he believes the practical uses of unmanned flights are limitless. For instance, he says, “You could put them on gas and oil pipelines. The Yemen pipeline to the Red Sea is so exposed. Terrorists can take pipelines out so easily.”

Del Smith may not be number one on the list of famous Oregonians, but he’s the *only* one who has ever flown the Shah of Iran to seek medical attention, who has transported Imelda Marcos *and her shoes* (Evergreen staff called it the “Slipper Clipper”), and who has held long conversations with Mikhail Gorbachev about *perestroika*.

As for his favorite world leaders: Gorbachev, Pope John Paul II, and Margaret Thatcher. All people, like Smith, who have painted it large, very large.