

Pilot honored in Searsport almost 70 years after fatal crash

BY ABIGAIL CURTIS
OF THE BDN STAFF

Carolyn Clark was working at the bank in downtown Searsport during the afternoon of Oct. 20, 1947, a day that seemed totally ordinary. Until she heard a noise and glanced out the window of the Merrill Trust Company.

"I saw a plane, lower than the top of the trees, heading toward the Mill Pond," she said. "Then it landed in the Mill Stream."

What she witnessed were some of the last earthly moments of Maj. Kenneth G. Smith, a 33-year-old World War II flying ace from Boise, Idaho. After the war, Smith had come to Maine to be a commander of the 37th Fighter Squadron at Dow Army Airfield in Bangor. On that autumn day 68 years ago, he had taken a group of pilots on an aerobatics training mission. The formation climbed to 18,500 feet and did some climbing turns, but something went wrong for the decorated pilot, who couldn't pull his heavy P-47 Thunderbolt fighter plane out of a flat spin.

It spun to the ground and crashed in Searsport, creating a large fireball near the heart of the town, according to the Maine Aviation Historical Society, and Smith was killed on impact.

Searsport Town Historian Charlene Knox Farris said that in Smith's final actions of maneuvering the airplane away from buildings and people in the center of town and into the bed of the

Mill Stream, he did something heroic.

"Quite simply put, he saved this town from burning and saved the lives of the people in town," she said. "Everyone who was there agrees he deliberately guided the plane down [to the Mill Stream]. I call him 'the man who saved Searsport.'"

However, for many years the dramatic crash and Smith's actions have been all but forgotten by the residents of Searsport. Farris, a longtime fifth grade teacher, said when she was a child, she was told that the pilot's body remained in Mill Pond. She used to tell her students about the plane crash every year around Halloween, and last October, she did a presentation on Searsport ghost stories for the town historical society.

Jack Merrithew, the vice chairman of the Searsport Board of Selectmen, listened to those ghost stories, and instead of being spooked, the story of the plane crash fired him with determination.

"He said it was a shame the town had never done anything for [Smith]," Farris said. "He thought the town should be honoring this man."

Nearly a year later, Searsport is doing just that.

At a Sunday, Oct. 18 ceremony held at Union Hall in Searsport, there was a memorial ceremony to honor the pilot. The town unveiled a plaque and welcomed military dignitaries, the Searsport District High School band and elected officials, as well as peo-

ple who witnessed the crash and its aftermath. Although Farris and others have tried to track down Smith's surviving family members from Idaho, they have so far been unsuccessful.

Smith had a wife but no children, Farris said. He was a fighter pilot in the Royal Air Force Eagle Squadron, made up of American volunteers, and later transferred to the U.S. Army Air Forces. Smith flew 126 combat missions as a pilot in P-47 Thunderbolts and P-51 Mustangs and is credited with having downed six German planes. He was awarded the Purple Heart and a Distinguished Flying Cross with two oak leaf clusters. His peacetime work in Bangor had begun in late 1946 at what was then Dow Army Airfield. The facility became Dow Air Force Base in 1947, which closed in 1968 after it was sold to the City of Bangor.

"He was a wonderful man, by all accounts, and came back here ... to finish his hitch," Farris said.

The pilot, a hero during the war, was a hero on the last day of his life, too, she said, when he spared Searsport.

"He was a different kind of hero," Farris said.

The plane crash frightened people in Searsport.

"One woman who lived close to the plane crash scene said she was so afraid she hid in the kitchen closet," Farris said. "The war hadn't been over that long, and she didn't know what was going on."



BDN PHOTO BY ABIGAIL CURTIS
Searsport Town Historian Charlene Knox Farris stands by the spot in the Mill Stream where Major Kenneth G. Smith, a decorated World War II flying ace, lost his life in a plane crash in 1947.

At the time of the crash, locals reported that people ran towards the burning wreckage to help the pilot. But Smith had been thrown by the impact and was lying face down in the brook behind the tail of the burning plane, according to the Maine Aviation Historical Society.

Clark said her husband, Charles Clark, had flown B-17s in World War II and at the time of the crash he was working at one of Searsport's three fertilizer plants. He heard the commotion and borrowed a car to drive to the crash. There, he

found Smith's parachute and covered his body with the fabric so others wouldn't see.

The local firefighters couldn't extinguish the aviation gasoline fire with water and had to wait for a crew to come from Dow Air Force Base in Bangor with a crash fire truck, an ambulance and the military police, according to the Maine Aviation Historical Society. Those responders put the fire out with carbon dioxide.

"It occurred to me that the plane could have wiped out the building where I was working,"

Carolyn Clark said. "My life was probably saved -- and to me, that's important. My opinion would be that he did his best to do the least amount of harm he could."

Orono Bog Boardwalk to close six weeks early

The Orono Bog Boardwalk will close at the end of the day on Friday, Oct. 16, according to a recent press release. This is six weeks sooner than normal, but it is necessary for the completion of the second phase of the boardwalk reconstruction process.

The mile-long boardwalk can be accessed from trails of the Rolland F. Perry City Forest in Bangor. The closest trailhead is at the end of Tripp Drive, which is located off Stillwater Avenue, 1.6 miles north of the junction of Stillwater Avenue and Hogan Road. Access to the boardwalk is free. During October, it is open from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Dogs are not permitted.

Directly after the boardwalk is closed this season, volunteers will start carefully removing 48 deteriorating wooden sections of the boardwalk, plus three wheelchair turnouts. They will then replace them with new sections made of durable composite material.

Over the last two years, volunteers have worked long hours to replace the first 204 sections of the boardwalk, which has been rapidly deteriorating in recent years. The new composite decking with cladded aluminum

siding and stainless steel footings is expected to last many years -- much longer than the original wooden decking.

A volunteer staff maintains the boardwalk and provides information and education for visitors, including school and community groups. The facility is jointly managed by the Orono Land Trust, the City of Bangor and the University of Maine. Its operation and maintenance are funded entirely through donations and sales of boardwalk merchandise.

For more information about the boardwalk, to volunteer for the upcoming reconstruction or to make a contribution to the reconstruction, visit umaine.edu/oronobogwalk/, email jim.bird@umit.maine.edu, or call 866-2578.

Wildlands Trail Race set for Great Pond Mountain Wildlands in Orland Oct. 25

Great Pond Mountain Conservation Trust's 6.3-mile Wildlands Trail Run is set for Sunday, Oct. 25. The race is the first in the third annual Downeast Double Trouble Trail Race Challenge series, followed by Frenchman Bay Conservancy's Autumn Trail Race on Sunday, Novem-

ber 1. Participants who run both races are eligible for a special prize.

The Wildlands Trail Race in Orland's scenic Great Pond Mountain Wildlands is a 6.3-mile course on dirt roads and single track, over roots, rocks and mud, up and down hills, over small streams, past lovely views and munching moose. Total climb is approximately 1,200 gut-or-calf-busting feet. Registration starts at 10 a.m. and the race starts at 11 a.m. sharp. Enter through the South Gate on Rte. 1, near the Rte. 176 intersection. Lunch will be available. Please, no dogs, for the safety of all runners.

Cost for the race is \$20 pre-registered (plus a \$2 online registration fee) or \$25 race day. Pre-register for BOTH races for only \$37! With two family members registered, additional kids under 15 run free. Visit greatpondtrust.org or frenchmanbay.org for more info and a link to register online for one or both races, or call 469-6929 or e-mail info@greatpondtrust.org. Those who sign up for and complete both races (pre-register for both by Oct. 11) receive a Downeast Double Trouble Trail Race Challenge prize. Swag is also available for pre-registrants at both races and prizes for top finishers. Walkers welcome.

Krav Maga Maine to offer women's self-defense training

Krav Maga Maine will offer a three-hour training course for women in Krav Maga, an Israeli fighting system based on street-level fight styles. The training is set for noon to 3 p.m. on Sunday, Oct. 25 at 127 Hammond St., in the former Bangor YMCA building. During the training instructors will cover both basic and advanced self-defenses specific to combating sexual assault, as well as training on prevention, awareness, and learning how to recognize pre-fight indicators. This seminar is open to women only, ages 14 and up. Participants under the age of 18 must be accompanied by a female parent or guardian training with them in the seminar. Please wear gym attire, as this training is very physical. Be sure to bring some form of hydration. Space is limited; to register, call lead instructor Keith Emery at 299-0823. Registration fee is \$30. For more information, visit kravmaga-maine.com.

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