

Smith honored as October Veteran of the Month

By Sherri Onorati, Special to The Leader

October's Veteran of the Month is Covington native Peyton Smith, a United States Air Force veteran.

Smith was born on Sept. 22, 1922 in Covington. He spent his early educational years in Brighton, first attending Liberty School and then Brighton. After a two-year break to help on the family farm, he completed his schooling at Byars Hall. Raised with a strong sense of responsibility for his family, a 17-year-old Smith made his way to Pearl Harbor, Hawaii to work at various jobs on the naval base to earn money to help save the family farm. His perseverance soon paid off and he was able to save \$700, an extraordinary amount in 1940. In today's dollars it would equal \$11,700, and he sent it back home to pay the property taxes on the family farm.

Smith, the youngest of 10 children, worked hard for his family because he didn't want his mother to worry. He was named after his father who had died in 1930 of uric poisoning when he was 8 years old.

"I tried not to let her worried because she was old and in bad health," he said. "I was home on leave one time and fixing to go back and she said I hate to see you go back over there, and I said now listen I don't want you to worry about it, its going to be alright and sure enough it turned out alright."

He was 20 years old and still working in Hawaii when he received his draft notice in 1944, and although he could have used his Department of Defense work as exclusion for the draft, like many men from his generation, his sense of duty and responsibility would not allow it, and he headed back to Tipton County to enlist in the Air Force.

Smith was sent to Miami Beach, Fla., for basic training, and then to Ft. Meyers, Fla., for six weeks training in gunnery school. Upon completion of training, he was sent to Tinian Island, an island in the Mariana Island chain in the Pacific Ocean.

As a gunner, Smith's job was to man the right gunner in B-29 bombers, an inherently dangerous position. While flying his 14th combat mission, Sergeant Smith's plane was hit by enemy fire and the B-29 Fortress he was in sustained heavy damage, forcing the crew to bail out over the Pacific Ocean. The crew spent the next 28 hours in the water, combating heavy seas, fighting starvation and hunger before being picked up by a passing U.S. submarine. Once rescued, Smith was hospitalized after he was found to be suffering from dehydration and hallucinations and spent the next three months recuperating.

"When I joined, I thought I was going to be a fighter pilot. They sent me in to get a psych test and the officer asked me if I had a stutter and I said, na na na no sir. I think I flunked out right there," said Smith, laughing. "But I didn't have but two years of high school and at the time they had plenty of pilots they said," he added smiling.

With the end of the war in 1945, Smith found his military duties had also ended and he returned home to Covington and his beloved family farm and found work as a mechanic.

Smith married the love of his life, Mazie Whitson on April 28, 1949. They built a home on the family farm where they raised their sons, Enoch and Jonathan.

Smith said he was surprised and honored of the night's festivities but it was evident he was missing his mother and siblings when asked about his past.

"I'm the last one alive, at least I think I'm alive," he said laughing. "There was 10 of us, three boys and seven girls and the boys were out numbered. I enjoyed my family. We got along real good. We went through some bad times, when there was no money but we had some good times. I was the youngest but they've all been gone for a long time now. Sometime I think about it and I get lonesome. We live on the same farm I was raised on."

Smith's son, Enoch and nephew Kenneth Smith also attended the ceremony and both are very proud of their loved one.

"I am very proud of him," said Smith's son Enoch. "He was in some very dangerous situations."

"This is great," said Kenneth. "I served in the Air Force too from 1956-1960, and he was the main reason I chose the Air Force. I went to uncle Peyton and asked about his Air Force time and I went to another uncle who had served with the Marines who served on Iwo Jima. He wasn't too happy with the Marines after Iwo Jima, so after talking to them I decided to join the Air Force.

Kathy Desjarlais, the 2015 Chairman of the Tipton County Veteran Council, read Smith's certificate of honor, "It is with heart felt appreciation for your tireless efforts in support of our United States military, the Tipton County Museum, Veteran Memorial and Nature Center in partnership with the Tipton County Veterans Council gratefully acknowledge the selfless service of our veteran of the month for October 2015.... Your dedication to our country is commendable and an honorable addition for the fight for freedom throughout the world."

Smith received a certificate of honor in recognition of his service, a United States flag, flown over the state capitol in his honor, a Museum coffee mug and a certificate for a free portrait from Munford Funeral Home.

The monthly event is co-sponsored by the Tipton County Museum, Veteran Memorial and Nature Center and the Tipton County Veterans Council. Sponsors of the recognition ceremony include the Tipton County Veterans Council, Patriot Bank, The Bank of Tipton and Munford Funeral Home. Underwriters include VFW Post 4840, the Disabled American Veterans Auxiliary in Millington and Dunham Lodge 150. The next honoree will be named on Tuesday, Dec. 8 at 6:30 p.m. The public is invited to both make nominations and attend the ceremony.