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## WWII veteran turning 100 honored in Barren County

By PAULA L. RATLIFF Special to the Daily News  
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World War II veteran Edwin Smith (right) with fellow WWII veteran and centenarian Lee Robertson.

PAULA RATLIFF

GLASGOW – “Turning 100 years young is a reason to celebrate” and Barren County Fiscal Court recently celebrated the life and upcoming 100th birthday of U.S. Army Air Force 2nd Lt. Edwin F. Smith.

“It was an absolute honor to have Mr. Smith with us today and to allow us an opportunity to celebrate his life and legacy,” said Barren County Judge-Executive Jamie Byrd

as she issued a proclamation declaring April 12 as Edwin F. Smith Day in Barren County.

Smith was also honored by Glasgow High School, Western Kentucky University and Sen. Rand Paul's office.

J. Lee Robertson represented WKU and presented Smith with a distinguished alumni award. Robertson also served in WWII and is 100 years old. After the court session, the two centenarians shared stories and congratulated each other.

"I can't wait for tomorrow, but as of today, it is the best day I have ever had," said Robertson to which Smith replied, "Amen."

Smith survived the war, only to escape death just three days later in what is described as one of the deadliest crashes in military history as two B-29 Superfortress Bombers collided, killing 18 service men in an inferno that stretched for miles over Weatherford, Texas. The two aircraft were on separate training missions to simulate bomb runs. Smith is one of two survivors.

He was the co-pilot, leading 10 other men with various responsibilities. They completed the first run, then started toward the second when it was frantically announced that the nose of the plane was dropping, then there was an explosion and fire as two B-29 planes collided in mid-air.

Smith was “thrown all over the cockpit” as the plane veered toward the ground. “I knew nobody was going to survive.”

He tried to climb out of the co-pilot window, but could not fit and was stuck halfway out of the window, unable to free his lower body. The slipstream was so fierce he couldn’t straighten up. He decided to pull back inside of the plane and ride it down.

“At that point, I started to pray, asking God to forgive my sins and prepare me to die.” As he pulled back inside, the ripcord on his parachute deployed with such force, it ripped his body out of the window and propelled him into the night air.

He went unconscious at that point, later awakening as he floated down to earth, hitting the ground at least three times. He believed he was dead and mistook the silence and darkness for eternity.

In the early morning hours, he was awakened in a field surrounded by burning debris from the aircrafts.

The medic asked for a parachute kit and said to give him two shots of morphine. “It might kill him, but he’s near death anyway,” Smith recalls hearing him say.

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Smith suffered extreme injuries and required several surgeries. He was eventually reunited with the other survivor, Earl E. Wishmeier of West Burlington, Iowa. The two became close friends and remained in contact until Wishmeier's passing in 1993.

Smith grieved for the loss of the crew and has always felt responsible even though history later confirmed many mechanical issues with the B-29s. In a letter to U.S. Navy Veteran Bob Hopkins in October 2002, Smith stated, "I will die with grief in my heart. My soul is full of sadness for the families of these 18 young, patriotic Americans who made the ultimate sacrifice for their country; they gave their lives, but not in vain."

## Left with nothing

When Smith was dismissed from Camp Wolters Army Hospital, he did not have any clothes or shoes. He credits the American Red Cross with helping him obtain a khaki uniform with no insignia, a hat and a pair of shoes to travel back to Clovis, New Mexico.

“When I arrived, the barracks were quiet and empty as if nobody had ever been there. The beds still had blankets on them and the windows were open just like we left them. There was mud on the blankets from the rain. But, all of our personal belongings were gone.”

“I sat on my bunk and prayed for the souls of the crew and I cried. I needed counseling; I was 22 years old and in the last 36 days had endured just about all I thought I could stand.”

## His early years

Smith’s father served in World War I, and his grandfather served in the Confederate Army during the Civil War. He was raised in a one-room log cabin in Monroe County, where he recalls storing milk in a creek to keep it cold. He also attended a one-room school before moving to Glasgow in 1935.

He escaped death as a child when he caught Typhoid Fever.

“At that time, the standard of treatment was to starve the fever. Thankfully a traveling doctor came to the house and told my parents to feed me,” he said with a smile.

He played football for four years at Glasgow High School and his team was undefeated. He was offered a scholarship to attend the University of Louisville; however, fate would change those plans with the attack at Pearl Harbor.

After completing his service time, he graduated from Western Kentucky University and went to work for the IRS for a few years. He spent the majority of his career in real estate and auctioneering.

Smith enjoys watching a good game of football and spending time with family. “I’m thankful that God heard my prayer. I have no doubt he pulled my ripcord.”

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