

Big Pines History... "Legend Down!"



Joan Merriam Smith, Legendary Aviatrix 1936 - 1965

Big Pines, CA – It has been said that the mountains draw to them the things that fly. The mountains and ridges around here are no exception. The things that have taken flight in these parts have included the birds, the old time ski jumpers, an occasional hiker tumbling off a mountain side, as well as gliders and military and private aircraft; all sharpening their skills among the peaks and narrow canyons.

It has also been said that what goes up comes down, and like personal treasures, our local mountains still hold the wreckage of numerous downed aircraft. On Feb 17th, 1965 a gentle ridge below present day Grassy Hollow became the last resting place for a 28 year old aviator legend. Her name was Joan Merriam Smith.

At 15 years of age, long before she could drive a car, Joan Smith learned to fly. She obtained her license at 17 years of age, and her commercial license at 23. It was around age 18 that she applied for a job at a small airport that used to exist in Boston. The airport manager took one look at the small 5 foot tall girl and no doubt wondered how she was even able to reach an airplane's flight controls. "Look, squirt!" He said gruffly. "Go home to mommy!" Undaunted, she marched right home and returned with flight records in hand. As the manager thumbed through her records, a

stunned look crossed his face as he read that Joan had accumulated 10,000 hours of flight time! Humbled, he handed her flight records back and said, "Shucks, little gal! Ya ought to be running this airport!"

Smith was on her way to becoming a legend and fulfilling her life time dream... to not only retrace Amelia Earhart's trip around the world, but finish it.

Her record flight would begin on March 17th, 1964. Joan Merriam Smith flew 27,750 miles in 56 days with 34 landings in her route around the world, but the flight wasn't without incident. She was caught in a Brazilian revolution, had engine problems, nose wheel problems, leaking fuel tanks and hydraulic failures. She over-came all of these difficulties and, running on fumes, arrived back in the U.S., making a safe landing in Oakland, CA on May 12, 1964.

She had done it, and though she did not set an official speed record in that famous flight, she did set some other records:

- First solo flight along the Equator.
- First woman to fly around the world in a twin engine aircraft.
- First woman to fly solo from Africa to Australia.
- First woman to fly from Wake Island to Midway Island.
- It was the longest flight at the time.

Just nine months after her legendary flight around the world, during a simple routine flight over the San Gabriel Mountains with her friend and biographer, Trixie Ann Schubert, they encountered sudden and extreme clear air turbulence that folded the right wing backwards. The small rented Cessna 182C dropped like a stone! The plane tipped to the right and slammed against the rocky brush, Oak and Jeffery Pine covered ridge just below Grassy Hollow and burst into flames! This would be the last stop for the legendary pilot.

Over a dozen aircraft have crashed on these quiet slopes over the years. Thankfully, all of the planes' pilots and passengers have found their way home. And the mountains wait quietly and patiently... for the next flying thing to fall from the sky.

- Contributed by Terry Graham



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History making flight

Duration in Hours: 170, 47 of which were on instruments. She crossed the equator 5 times and collected some 800 signatures on her plane from people she met along the way.



Final resting place

A quiet spot near a shade tree at plot 5027, Forest Lawn Memorial Park in Cypress, CA