

Daniel Smith (Letter to the Editor from his sister, 1976)

Dear Editor:

Since there was nothing published in your paper about the plane crash and death of my brother, Daniel Robert Smith, 28, born and raised in Fairbanks, I feel obligated to inform his Fairbanks area friends through this letter.

On Saturday, Dec. 18, Dan crash landed his new Cessna 185 on Six Mile Lake in front of Nondalton village. He was critically injured and later died en route to the Anchorage hospital.

Sophie Balluta, Dan's mother-in-law, was killed instantly. Sarah Balluta, 18, was seriously injured but removed from intensive care at NHS on Christmas Eve. Thanks to God she'll make it. Little Nick, 5, Dan's adopted son, miraculously escaped with cuts, bruises and a few broken bones in his feet. He is home and doing fine.

Dan is survived by his wife of one year, June Balluta Smith. They just celebrated their first wedding anniversary on Dec. 7. Dan and June were such a devoted couple, with many plans for their business.

Dan started out as assistant guide at 17 for Ray Losche in the Brooks Range. He worked with Barbara DeSpain in camp. For a couple years he packed out game but then he started flying. Then he guided for Thompson & Simms out of their Newhalen Lodge and earned his Class A license. He founded his own Nondalton Guides with the help of private pilot June Balluta, his favored assistant. Between seasons Dan flew air taxi for Hedlund Air Service.

December 1976 was a happy, busy one until this tragedy. Besides their anniversary, there was June's birthday, the purchasing of the 185, and the awarding of Dan's registered guide license.

He had just fulfilled all the goals he set for himself. He wanted a log home in the bush, a family, a fancy airplane, a guiding business (Nondalton Guides) and his guiding license. Most of all he had to fly every day and he did, weather permitting for the five years he lived in Nondalton. Dan logged over 3,000 hours and was a highly respected pilot.

Dan joins many pilot friends who have also lost their lives flying. Gary Montgomery, Bob Hanson, Stewart and Diane Olson, were a few of his dear flying friends. They all had such zest for living and will always be remembered

Dan's and Sophie's body were returned to Nondalton on Dec. 22. Russian Orthodox services were officiated by Father Michael of Dillingham. Also observed was the traditional Athabascan farewell party attended by several hundred villagers. Friends and relatives came from surrounding villages, Newwhalen, Pedro Bay, Illiamna, and Lime Village. Dan would have been proud. So many people mourned with us. Dan's loss is felt by all who new him. He lived with such enthusiasm and dedication. And his rescues will never be forgotten, not by the hunters lost on the glacier in Clark Pass, not by the young mother who delivered a two-pound preemie in a desolate cabin.

I would like to thank Sumner Putman, Gerry Chambers, Sonny Hedlund and Tinny Hedlund, who worked together to keep Dan going for three hours until a doctor arrived. Their assistance and support are greatly appreciated by my family.

I would also like to thank all the good people of Nondalton who bought Wien tickets for my mother, sister Louise, brother Pat and myself, and to Tinny and Sonny Hedlund of Hedlund Air Service, for taxi flights to and from the village.

Dan is survived by his father, Joel C. Smith of Washington, mother Harriette Smith of Fairbanks, three sisters, Louise Huelle and Marjorie Martinez, of Fairbanks, and Kathy Hartung of Payette, Idaho; and three brothers Michael, Patrick and James Smith of Fairbanks.

Sincerely, Marjorie Smith Martinez

Danny Smith (from a blog by Pat Fitzgerald)

I grew up on the south side of Fairbanks for my first 12 years. My parents owned an acre of land at 26th Street that fronted on Cushman and stretched to the next street back. Once when I was 9 or 10 I wandered toward the back of the property and saw a kid a little older than me shooting at sparrows in a willow bush with a BB gun. He paused and asked me, "You're not going to tell are you?" I shook my head and wandered away. I immediately told my Dad who went back and gave the kid hell.



Age 15 I meet the same kid but thankfully he didn't remember me. This was Danny Smith. We somehow were called together to jam and eventually spent long hours in his basement, me, Rif Rafson, Danny & other musicians, improvising by the light of the Fender amp power lamps. As I got to know Danny I couldn't help noticing his hands. The back of his hands looked like marshmallows over-cooked on a campfire. They reminded me of The Thing from the Fantastic Four. After a while I ask him what happened. He laid out the story that a few years before he'd gotten a job doing automobile oil changes at a place called Triangle Service that was located in a little triangle formed by Illinois Street meeting College Road. It was a small station with an "grease pit"--a hole dug in the ground that a car or truck would drive over and a poor sap below could change the oil and lube the vehicle. They were also illegal by that time since they tended to get very oily and very dangerous. Something ignited the grease pit Danny was working in and he was badly burned. Thus began a long journey to a hospital outside, through numerous operations and morphine addiction. They did a wonderful job on his face and chest and only his hands were left with severe burn marks. I have no doubt his survival gave him a zest for life that was infectious.

With his settlement money he bought a brand new Fender Stratocaster, a new Fender Super Reverb amp, a Gibson Dove acoustic guitar and an old Dodge Powerwagon. He fitted the Powerwagon with large airplane tires. This meant, for instance, that as we drove south on the Richardson Highway between Fairbanks and North Pole with a couple bottles of Boone's Farm Loganberry wine (we were kids, OK?) and he got himself a notion, a gleam in his eyes and a little smirk on his face, and with a crank of the wheel and yell of, "Let's go overland!"-- we did. And could. We drove off the highway, across the muskeg until we came to a grove of trees where we couldn't be seen, turned off the engine, drank the wine and talked about music. We almost could have floated with those tires and the only time we got into trouble was in the winter heading up Ester Dome. We cruised up easily but somewhere on the steepest part Danny down shifted and the tires broke friction with the snow and just spun. The one thing he hadn't figured was that the airplane tires had no tread. Airplanes didn't need tread and with none we were going no further. After a pause to think, Danny let the off the brake. The truck drifted backward, he cranked the wheel quickly and instantly we spun around and headed down hill again.

One summer day I was at 26th Street in the back very near where I first met Danny shooting at sparrows. A bunch of us had taken an old military building that my Dad had moved onto the property and made it into a practice house. I was outside the house when Danny pulled up in his Powerwagon and leaned on the horn. Then suddenly he stood up and his head and shoulders went through the roof of the cab and he yelled, "Hey Fitz, whatya think? Like my new sunroof?" He had taken a torch the roof and cut it out for a little sun and air for summertime cruisin'.

Danny and I hung out together a lot for a few years and played a lot of music. He always insisted on playing only rhythm guitar, no solos, with that clean Fender sound you get on classic Surf music. We played together at what was possibly Fairbanks first music festival up hill from the Fox watering hole, probably in 1969. I've got a picture somewhere and Danny's shirt is off, he's playing his Stat and he's enjoying life.

Later on we both drifted to other things. I joined a band called the Glass Bead Game. Danny became the youngest registered guide in Alaska at that time. I think he was 19. And that's when he learned to fly. Sometime later when he was in his late twenties or early thirties, he flew into a mountain with his young daughter in the airplane and they both perished. I'd guess the weather was bad.