

BOOK ONE

THE SHUTTLE SAGA



THE CHALLENGER:
TRIUMPH, TRAGEDY
AND TRANSITION



'He was a cut above average'

Mike Smith's brother and close friend, Pat, knew Mike would learn to fly someday because Mike had said he would. And Mike always did what he said he'd do. 'He set goals and he really worked hard for them.'



CHAPTER 3

Challenger

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By Joan Heller

The Smith boys had work to do. There were cabbages to pick and chickens to tend.

Yet Mike Smith kept looking up. Off in the distance, the buzz of plane engines shattered the rural North Carolina calm.

He was going to learn to fly, he told his two younger brothers as he looked past the family's 13 acres to Beaufort Airport.

Pat Smith, born 14 months after Mike, knew his brother always did what he said he'd do.

Close friends as far back as anybody can remember, the brothers stuck together. What Mike did, Pat did. Where Pat went, Mike went.

Together, they built model airplanes, spent summer afternoons on nearby Atlantic Beach and signed on to the Beaufort Elks Little League team. When Beaufort High School's football team lined up on the field in the fall of 1962, Mike was at one end of the forward line, Pat at the other.

One of Mike's dreams came true at Beaufort Airport on his 16th birthday as he soloed in a single-engine plane.

"He was a cut above average," Pat said. "He set goals and he really worked hard for them. That's what got him where he was."

Later that year, the inseparable brothers went to summer football camp at Ocean Isle Beach, S.C. Mike met 16-year-old Jane Jarrell on the beach. When camp ended, they wrote for a while. But one or the other stopped writing.

Back in Beaufort, another of Mike's dreams came true when word came that he'd won an appointment to the U.S. Naval Academy.

When Mike had decided to attend academy, Pat joined a neighborhood conspiracy to keep him on the straight and narrow.

"We wouldn't let him do anything wrong. No beer, no nothing," Pat remembers. "He stood there and watched us have a good time."

Taking a break from his studies of naval science, Cadet Smith opened a Christmas card forwarded to Annapolis from Beaufort. It was from Jane Jarrell. The teen-ager he'd met on the beach four summers before was 20, an airline stewardess in nearby Washington, D.C.

Less than an hour away from Washington, Mike courted Jane, then married her.

Newly married and fresh from the academy, Dick became one of the few graduates sent directly to the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School.

The year 1969 was a big one. Navy Lt. Mike Smith received a master's degree in aeronautical engineering, moved on the the Advanced Jet Training Command as an instructor — and became a father.

Two years later, Mike said goodbye to his wife; 2-year-old son, Scott; and infant daughter, Allison, and headed into the thick of the Vietnam War.

Catapulted off the deck of the aircraft carrier USS Kitty Hawk, Mike flew his A-6 jet fighter into battle and became a decorated war hero. He would go home with 20 commendations — the Navy's Distinguished Flying Cross, three Air Medals, 13 Strike Flight Air Medals, the Navy Commendation Medal, the Navy Unit Citation and the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry.

Back home from the war, Mike headed into still more hazardous duty, Navy Test Pilot School at Patuxent River, Md.

When he finished, his address remained the same, but his duties got tamer. With his feet planted firmly on terra firma, Mike was assigned to work on cruise missile guidance systems at the Navy's Strike Aircraft Test Directorate in Patuxent River. There, the Smith family grew to five with the birth of daughter Erin.

After four stable years, it was time to move on — first to the Test Pilot School as an instructor, then to the Mediterranean as maintenance and operations officer aboard the aircraft carrier USS Saratoga.

By 1980, Lt. Cmdr. Mike Smith had spent 4,300 hours flying 28 different planes, and NASA wanted to make him an astronaut.

"He didn't make up his mind right away," Pat said. "He wanted to think about it. He called me to ask me what I thought. I said, 'You'd be a fool not to.'"

Accepting the offer, he moved his family to a lakeside home in Houston and went into training at Johnson Space Center.

At home, Mike relaxed with the family and all the tools of a home handyman. He finished the bedroom and family room furniture he was making, then tackled another big project — converting the attic space to a bedroom for 8-year-old Erin and transforming her old room into a home office.

When Mike's turn at the Space Shuttle came on Jan. 28, Erin's room was still under construction.

Grieving friends, neighbors and fellow astronauts came to finish the job.

At the same time, Mike's North Carolina family was learning more about the one-time farm boy who loved baseball, football and airplanes. They were finding out for the first time that he was a war hero.

"We never knew about all the medals," Pat said. "He never said anything about them."

MAKING PLANS:

Astronauts Mike Smith, right, and Dick Scobee, discuss the Shuttle schedule during a training session Sept. 12, 1985, at Johnson Space Center.

NASA



The Associated Press

AT THE CONTROLS: Shuttle pilot Smith is right at home in a cockpit in November 1985 at Johnson Space Center.