

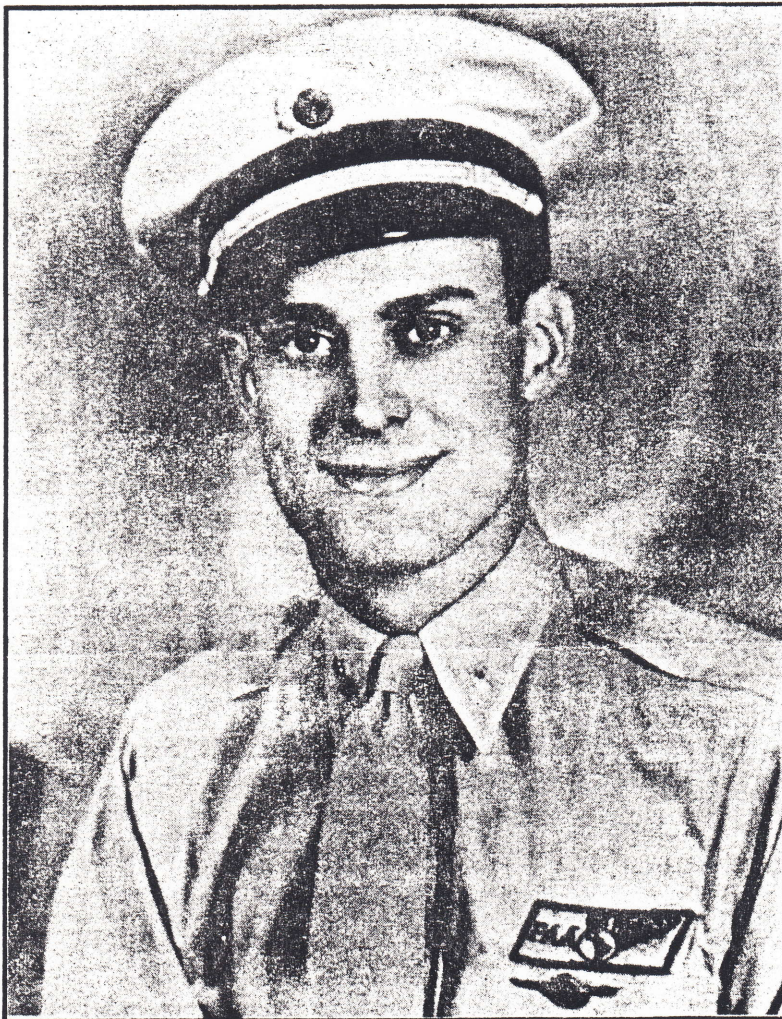
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A niece's quest



**Woman plans trek to wreckage site
in Himalayas**

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Jim Fox was transporting supplies for the Allies when his DC-3 went down in China during World War II. Pamela Jaye Smith has spent 20 years searching for his plane.

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Mission: nearly impossible

Niece plans Himalayan trek in search of uncle she never met

By Steve Lowery
Daily News Staff Writer

It is a measure of Jim Fox and the predicament that befell him that his niece, Pamela Jaye Smith, a solid citizen with small-town Texas roots, would consider riding horseback naked in the Himalayas to find him.

It's the measure of Smith that she has pursued this man for practically half her life despite never having met him, taking guidance from a blind man's map and a dose of encouragement from images sent back from outer space.

This is about adventure, perseverance and the ties that bind, and it all began in 1943, six years before Smith was born, when Jim Fox's plane went down in the Chinese Himalayas near the Burmese border while delivering supplies as part of the Allied war effort.

"To me, my uncle embodies what America was about back then," said Smith, a Hollywood resident, and a film and television writer and producer. "It's a strong sense of honor, a strong sense of doing what is right."

That Fox's plane went down is nothing extraordinary; more than 1,000 Allied planes were lost in that theater during the war. It was the manner in which it went down. Softly.

"They came down slowly," Smith said. "It eventually made a soft cartwheel before coming to rest. It really wasn't a plane crash the way you usually think of one."

The ease with which plane met ground left hope with Fox's comrades that he and his two Chinese crew mates survived. But a six-week blizzard prevented any rescue, and they were never found. They remain the only crew not accounted for in that area of the war.

Now, 20 years after she actively started the search, Smith and Monty McMillan — friend, business partner and co-searcher — are as close as anyone has ever been to finding them or, at least, what happened to them. Images taken from the space shuttle Columbia in 1981 (which Smith saw in 1983) confirmed that Fox's plane, photographed in 1944 in what appeared to be one piece, was still intact in the Himalayas.

"It happened by pure chance," said Charles Elachi, assistant director of space science and instruments at Pasadena's Jet Propulsion Laboratory, who explained that Smith didn't order the images. In fact, Smith didn't find out about the radar imaging capabilities of the shuttle until a few years later when Elachi wrote an article describing how the technology had seen below the sands



Roger W. Vargo/Daily News

Pamela Jaye Smith and partner Monty McMillan use radar images from a shuttle mission to help locate the airplane of her uncle, Jim Fox, who crashed in the Himalayas in 1943.



A photograph of the airplane shows it crash-landed intact, but no trace of the crew has been found.

of Egypt and the vegetation of South America.

"They came to us," Elachi said. "The odds were very low that Columbia had passed over the area they were interested in. They got

lucky."

Thus encouraged, Smith, 43, and McMillan, 42, are attempting to mount their second trip to the area, hopeful this one will provide answers. Their first attempt in

1984 was hampered by a border war between Thailand and Burma. They did manage to make contact with a band of missionaries who knew about Fox's crash and suggested that the only way of solving the mystery was to ride to the site on horseback.

"But they said we'd have to do it naked," said Smith, adding that a certain strain of leeches in the area meant a person could bleed to death without knowing it if clothed.

Having not traveled halfway around the world to let modestly stop her, Smith agreed until she found out the journey would take two months.

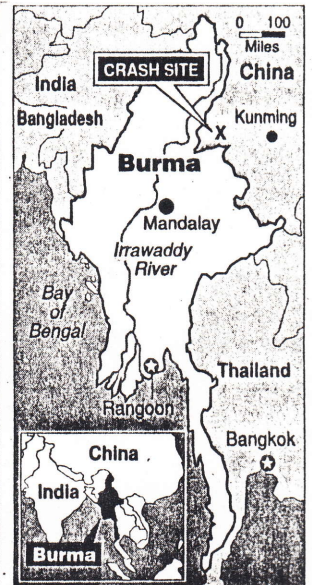
"Two months on a horse is bad enough," she said. "Two months naked on a horse..."

From her Hollywood apartment, Smith continues to gather information about Fox, his flight and the area, as well as make contacts at home and abroad.

If you haven't priced one lately, expeditions into the remote reaches of the Himalayas don't come cheap.

The pair believe their expedition, done from within China and complete with guides, trucks, food, special data-gathering devices and film equipment, could cost anywhere from \$150,000 to \$500,000.

Unlike those who go in search of shipwrecks in hopes of finding treasure, Smith and McMillan know that there is very little of monetary value to be had — when it crashed, Fox's plane was carrying a load of tin, tungsten and bar's hair (the latter used for



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paintbrushes to paint battleships) on a mission from Kunming, China, to Assam, India.

What appeals to both is the adventure: "When you grow up on the flat plains of Texas, I can assure you the idea of going to Asia in order to solve a mystery is very appealing," said McMillan, a native of Liberty, Texas.

For Smith, it runs even deeper. "This is also about tying up loose ends," she said.

Smith had heard the story all the time she was growing up in Dalhart, Texas. It would be hard for anyone in town not to know Jim Fox. His name was on the high school football field near where he and his buddy Red Holmes had learned to fly as teenagers.

Smith's grandmother, Burt Fox, talked about her son Jim often, about how he had gone to China in 1941 to fly for Pan Am and deliver supplies to Nationalist Chinese. She would talk about the crash but she never said her son was dead, each day believing that would be the one Jim Fox would return to Dalhart.

"She held out hope that he'd be coming back until the day she died," Smith said. "This woman practically raised me. Hearing those stories so many times, it was like I knew Jim; I had this link to him through Burt."

Smith left Dalhart in the early 1970s for the University of Texas at Austin where she attended film school, but her uncle never left her mind.

Whatever happened to those three men? Did they die on impact or did they survive the crash

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only to succumb to the cold or starvation? Were they captured by Japanese soldiers or perhaps by the various mountain tribes in the area who owe allegiance to no nation?

It was at Austin that she met McMillan. The two would end up working in television and film together, their sense of adventure hewn while making documentaries in the Arctic and Ecuador. McMillan became, and remains, just as obsessed as Smith about the Fox story.

"There's a definite sense of adventure to it," he said. "But this is also about a hero. This man was fighting the war before America was in it. He was a good man. More important, he was a Texan. He deserves to be brought home."

Fox was 24 when his plane went down. Gaunt and dashing, he had been flying in the area for two years. On March 11, 1943, his DC-3 was one of four traveling in a cargo pack from Kunming. Like the merchant marines, pilots, concerned about Japanese attack planes and the harsh conditions, traveled in groups.

They were passing over a mead-

ow when strong head winds kicked up. The first plane made it over a pass and into the safety of a valley that lay beyond. The second plane was so shaken by the winds that its belly scraped the tops of trees, but it did manage to get through.

Next came Fox. Traveling at 80 knots with a full load, a sudden 60-knot head wind rendered his craft virtually powerless, and his plane almost glided to the ground.

"If they could have made it another 100 yards over the pass, they would have been OK," Smith said, noting that the area has become known as Fox Pass.

As he had been at most stops in his life, Fox was popular with his flying mates and they continued to buzz the area, flashing their spotlights in the cockpit, intrigued every time they saw little or no damage to the plane — "Not even the windows appeared to be broken," Smith said — and no signs of bodies in or around the craft.

In 1944, Red Holmes led a small expedition toward the site, hiking 300 miles in 19 days. As happens so often in those parts, the trek soon turned for the worse.

Weather, dwindling food supplies and disease meant that Holmes soon found himself without guides and with one friend suffering from dysentery. Attempting to keep his friend warm by blowing the heat of their small campfire toward him, Holmes temporarily blinded himself from staring at the flames and the falling snow.

"It's almost incredible that they managed to get back," Smith said. "One man blind, the other very ill, holding onto each other, just inching their way down some of the most treacherous terrain in the world."

Smith became convinced that the only way of getting to the site would have to be with the Chinese government's blessing. She made a valuable contact in Howman Wong, head of the China Exploration Research Society — "Kind of the National Geographic for China," Smith said — in hopes that the Chinese will allow the expedition to take place.

Because of the environment in that part of the world, there are only two windows of opportunity for Smith's expedition: six weeks on the cusp of March and April and the same period between Oc-

tober and November.

There is another obstacle. Money. What Smith calls the "access wall." She tells her story to whom-ever is interested.

On April 14, she will speak in front of the Zonta Club, a service organization of business executives and other professionals. The meeting, at Andre's Restaurant in Beverly Hills, is open to the public. Tickets are \$20. Call (818) 988-5356.

If they do find the remains, Smith intends to bring Jim Fox home to Dalhart and bury him next to Burt. Still, she does hold out hope that this fantastic story could have a like ending. Perhaps 73-year-old Jim Fox meeting her at the site, naked on horseback.

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