



# A treasured elder...

## Margaret Josephine Smith

*Pearl Harbor survivor leads a rich, full life*

**A**fter brief introductions cheerfully facilitated by Haven of Our Lady of Peace Activities Director Janet Suggs, Margaret Josephine “Josie” Smith quickly turned the tables on the FHCA *Pulse* “Treasure Our Elders” interviewer.

“Why are you interviewing me? I’m just an old country girl from Pensacola,” Smith mentioned quietly, almost incredulous at her sudden celebrity.

Such modesty is typical of 93-year-old Josie Smith, who was born where the sprawling U.S. Naval Air Station Pensacola sits today. She was the second of five children born to a family whose father was a painter under contract to what was then one of the nation’s first aviation training stations. Her grandmother owned a dairy farm not far away, and dozens of aunts, uncles and cousins living in the immediate area made for a close (literally), large, loving and very happy family.

Josie and her family attended church at nearby St. John’s Catholic Church and she was an eager student and graduate of its parish school. Although St. John’s was established in 1851 as the second Catholic parish in Pensacola, “it was still just three wooden buildings and a schoolhouse,” she recalled.

### Love, marriage, children

By age 16, Josie was singing in the church choir regularly and getting to know better one of her choir mates, a handsome red-headed sailor, Joseph R. “Red” Smith of Oswego, New York, a machinist’s mate who was four years her senior. The two courted for four years until their marriage on November 8, 1932.

“It was the same day Franklyn D. Roosevelt was elected,” Smith readily pointed out, leaning forward in her chair. “You know he was our best President.”

The couple honeymooned in Red’s hometown on the shores of Lake Ontario in upstate New York, about 200 miles from Niagara Falls. It was the first time Josie had ever been outside Pensacola.

Within a year, Josie and Red were on their way to the other side of the world, Honolulu, Hawaii, for a brief stint at the Pearl Harbor naval base. She gave birth there to their first child, Alice, but soon

the family was back in Pensacola. Four years later, another girl, Frances, was born and three years later, Jack, their first boy. In late 1941, Red received orders to report back to Pearl Harbor, so soon the entire family began the three-month journey to Hawaii via Newport News, Virginia, arriving in Pearl City on December 5, 1941.

### Day of Infamy

Smith’s eyes grew wide and her voice intensified as she keenly recounted the events of December 7, 1941, as if it were yesterday.

“It was Sunday, and I always went to church on Sunday. I had Alice with me and toward the end of Mass, a sailor came running in and said, ‘Lady, there’s been a lot of trouble. You’d better go home.’ We all got into an old Ford truck and started driving past Hickam Field. I could see fires burning off in the distance, but I thought it was just the sugar cane fields burning, which was what they did that time of year.”

“We were listening on the car radio to find out what was going on. We pulled up to the house. Red was out front polishing the car and I yelled, ‘The Japanese have bombed Pearl Harbor!’ but before he could say anything, a stray bullet hit the house. I looked up and saw the Japanese airplanes overhead, so we all ran into the house and took cover in the closet. Red headed toward the base.”

Josie leaned back, sighing. “I’ll never forget being in that closet because we had hidden the children’s Christmas presents in there and they saw them all.”

### Back home

Military families were quickly evacuated from Pearl Harbor, so within two months Josie and the children were in San Francisco and headed back to Pensacola by train. It would be another four years before she would see Red again. Daily letters, news accounts and nightly prayers were all the family had to keep in touch. Two months after V-J Day in August 1945, Josie received a telephone call from Washington state. Red was back on the mainland and headed home.

“It’s another thing I’ll never forget,” Josie laughed. “I was at home and a car pulled up. I said to Momma, ‘I believe that’s Red getting out of the car.’ I ran out of the house, he ran toward me — and I fainted flat on the ground.”

### A long, happy life

Red and his newly-reunited family never left Pensacola again. He finished up a 30-year career in the Navy in 1956, retiring as a Lt. Commander. After discharge, he served in the civil service and even managed the Pensacola naval base’s golf course for ten years, a period Josie described as the happiest time of his life.

Six years ago and after 67 years of marriage, Red died at age 91. Soon thereafter Smith moved into a tidy private room at Haven of Our Lady of Peace, where she attends daily Mass and administrator Martha Perez and staff make sure she’s safe and comfortable.

Surrounded by family photos and mementos from a full life, Josie accepts no pity.

“Nobody put me in here — I put myself in here,” she insisted. Smith remembers when the original Haven of Our Lady of Peace was first constructed out on the Lillian Highway (Florida Hwy. 298), but then there’s not much of Pensacola she doesn’t remember before it was what it is today.

Smith’s two daughters remain in the area and visit often. Her only remaining sibling, Clara — age 86 — lives in south Florida and the two talk by phone almost daily. — “I love it here, and I’m going to stay here until I die. I’m not even going to go to the hospital.”

FHCA honors Margaret Josephine Smith and treasures her many contributions to our nation.

*(FHCA Pulse will be profiling one of our state’s treasures each month in subsequent issues of FHCA Pulse. To suggest a patient you think worthy, contact Ed Towey & Associates, Inc., at (850) 224-6242, or via e-mail, etowey@fhca.org.)*

