

# MONTANA MUSINGS

• MIKE "DUKE" VENTURINO • PHOTOS: YVONNE VENTURINO

## THE GENERAL OFFICER'S COLT MODEL 1903 This one was issued to an exceptional man.

**O**ne of my long unfulfilled firearms desires was to try out one of the little Colt Model 1903 Pocket Pistols. Recently my desire was satisfied, but never in my wildest dreams had I thought my first shots through one would be with the General Officer's version.

Here's the scoop... it was long practice of the US Army and US Air Force (and may still be for all I know) that when an officer was promoted to general, he was issued a Colt Model 1903 as a badge of rank. He could pick of these little semiautos of .32 ACP or .380 ACP (Model 1908 then) as caliber. They came with 3.75" barrels and weighed 24 ounces. Over the decades those issued to generals could have had blue or Parkerized finishes, checkered walnut grips and may or may not have been marked "United States Property."

Now, here's how I came to have

such a pistol briefly in my possession. At Montana gun shows I first met and then became friends with a gent named Bill Smart. During one conversation he mentioned as a young fellow he had lived in Japan. Curious, I asked how that came about. He told me his father had been a general in the Air Force and stationed there. He said he had his father's Colt 1903, and I was welcome to have Yvonne photograph it and even shoot it if I desired. Brother did I!

But there was more. Knowing how happy I had been a few years ago to have flown in a restored World War II B-17,



*Gen. Smart achieved 4-star rank in 1963.*



*Gen. Jacob E. Smart's General Officer's Colt Model 1903 .32 ACP pistol (above), and the shoulder holster in which he wore it. Some, but not all General Officers' Colt Model 1903 pistols were marked this way (below) and some, but not all had the Parkerized finish.*



Bill told me his father had been a B-17 pilot, had been shot down over Europe and spent time as a POW in Germany. Bill also said he had a private manuscript his father had written for his children and grandchildren about his experience. Also, Bill said he had other papers, some of them originally classified about his father's career. Would I like to read them? Brother would I!

Gen. Jacob E. Smart lived an amazing life. Starting out in a family of modest means in South Carolina, he earned an appointment to West Point in 1927. Fascinated at an early age with aviation, after graduation he joined what was then called the US Army Air Corps. In WWII Smart served on the staff of Gen. H.H. "Hap" Arnold, the head of the then designated US Army Air Force. One of the letters in Gen. Smart's papers was by Gen. Arnold, mentioning how he reluctantly allowed then Col. Smart to transfer to combat duty. He was sent to Italy to take command of the 97th Bomb Group, which was heavily engaged in attacking Germany's armament factories throughout southern and central Europe.

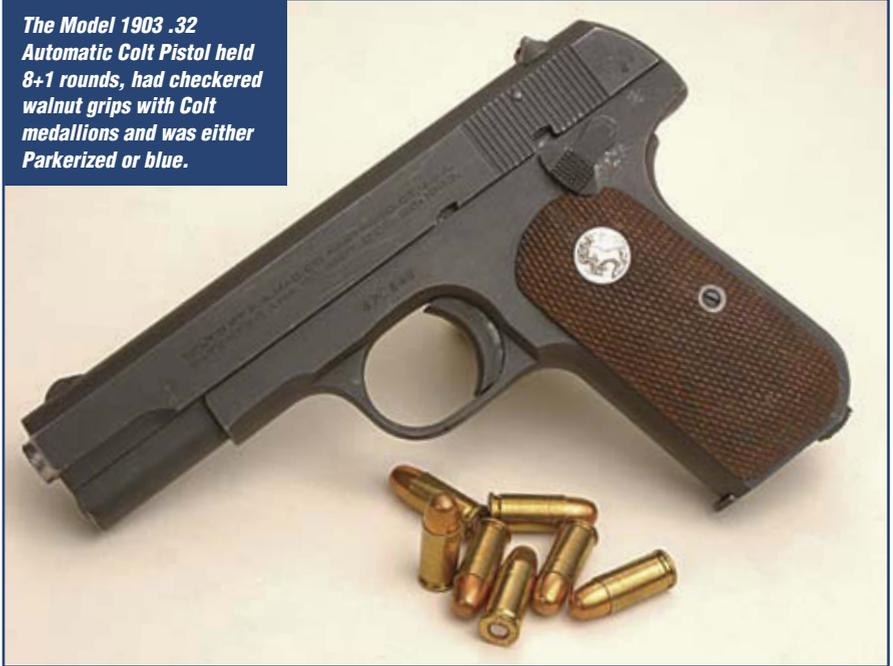
Col. Smart liked to lead from the front. On May 10th 1944 he was flying as his group's lead pilot on what was

supposed to be his last combat mission. He was slated to move on to higher command responsibilities. In the last seconds of his group's bomb-run over a factory producing ME109 fighter planes in Weiner Neustadt, Austria, Col. Smart's B-17 took a direct hit from a heavy caliber anti-aircraft gun. As with most B-17 pilots and crewmen Col. Smart, as a rule, did not wear his parachute continuously. However, in his reminisces he writes the first volley from those anti-aircraft guns had burst so close he thought it wise to take his 'chute from under his seat and clip it onto his harness.

Bare moments later his B-17 received that direct hit. Witnesses in other B-17s in the formation said in their after-action reports Col. Smart's plane was blown into pieces and it was very doubtful if anyone could have survived. Three men did. Col. Smart and his co-pilot Maj. Homer Hill were blown clear of the airplane by the explosion. Col. Smart regained his senses as he was free falling from more than 20,000'. He was wounded and dazed but finally managed to get his parachute deployed. Likewise with Maj. Hill. Also, miraculously the tail gunner, Sgt. Alvey J. Carter rode the falling tail section of the B-17 down for several thousand feet before he too took to his parachute. All three men ended in German captivity. The other seven B-17 crewmen perished in the explosion.

Col. Smart spent about two months

**The Model 1903 .32 Automatic Colt Pistol held 8+1 rounds, had checkered walnut grips with Colt medallions and was either Parkerized or blue.**



in Austrian and German hospitals being treated for his many wounds. He was interrogated by both German military officers and Gestapo agents, but never tortured or given drugs. For that he was grateful because as a former member of Gen. Arnold's staff, he knew the exact date and location of the D-Day landings scheduled for less than a month after he was shot down. After recovering from his wounds, Col. Smart was incarcerated

in a German POW camp until freed by American forces on April 29, 1945.

Because all the survivors of Col. Smart's B-17 were not able to deploy their parachutes until having fallen to lower altitudes, witnesses in other planes felt no one survived the explosion. Therefore, his family and the USAAF's hierarchy had no knowledge he was alive until notified by the International Red Cross a few months later.

The following is an excerpt from a letter by Gen. Arnold dated May 17, 1944 to Gen. Jacob L. Devers, Deputy Commander in Chief of the Mediterranean Theater of Operations. "It was a terrible tragedy when Colonel Smart was lost. He was an outstanding man. I had brought him to Washington a couple of years ago, put him on my personal staff, and I agreed very reluctantly to his going for duty with a combat unit. I never saw anyone so pleased as he was when that decision was made. His loss is one of the tragedies that we must face in war. Unfortunately the Air Forces has so many such men—one after another. Fortunately some of them have later turned up in German prison camps. I have such hopes for Jake Smart, but I must admit they are rather faint hopes."

Jacob E. Smart stayed in the military after WWII, was promoted to Brigadier General (one star) in 1950 and gained his fourth general's star on Aug. 1, 1963. He served in high US Air Force command positions around the world, retiring in 1966. He passed away in 2006 at age 97.

I feel honored and privileged to have read these many documents by him and about him, and even to have fired Gen. Smart's personal Colt pistol.

**GUNS**



**Gen. Smart wearing his Colt Model 1903 .32 in a shoulder holster during the war in Korea (1950-1953).**