

Finding Smithy



His qualities and character

Kingsford Smith was a national and international hero for his flying achievements. Think of today's most famous celebrities and heroes – and that was Smithy in his own day.

But what sort of a person was he? What were the characteristics and qualities that helped make him an Australian hero?

11 Look at the following information about him and identify the qualities and characteristics you can see in him.

Source 10 Experiences of aerial warfare

'My gun jammed early in the fight and I put my nose towards home to get it fixed, when three spare Huns [Germans] sat on my tail and kept there all the way down to the Hun lines. ... The Huns were firing all the way down. I landed with holes all over the machine and one burst of a dozen alongside my ear. I was rather badly scared.'

'My mind was completely occupied with one unearthly desire. ... too many of them to move quickly. I pressed the trigger. Tracer bullets zipped along the road and I saw men falling, and hundreds of them scrambling to get out of the way. I was filled with an unearthly joy. I kept my finger pressed hard on the trigger. Then I turned and roared back with my machine-gun spitting death. I saw dozens of men bowled over and I remember screaming at the top of my voice. ... I roared up to the other end of the road, turned quickly and back again ... until my gun was empty, then streaked for home. All the way back I had nothing but these thoughts of quite unholy joy. I had killed – undoubtedly killed – lots of men.'

'After the noise of the engine and the gun everything, all of a sudden, was quiet. I could hear birds whistling and men talking and laughing. Contact with these realities suddenly made me realise the horror of the thing I'd done. I leaned against the fuselage and vomited. I was twenty years old, I had just killed many men and I hadn't the faintest idea why. For those few minutes I had gone completely insane. Now I felt utterly miserable and hated my weakness for doing what I did.'

(Extracts from letters in Ian Mackersey, *Smithy, The life of Sir Charles Kingsford Smith*, Warner Books, London, 1999 pages 28, 30)

Source 11 A commanding officer's letter

'As you have probably heard by now, your son was wounded in an aerial combat yesterday. It was rather a nasty wound in the foot and necessitated the removal of two of his toes. But it should not permanently affect him in any way. I went to the hospital to see him and found him

very cheerful. He goes to England tomorrow. We are most awfully sorry to lose him. I am especially sorry as he was one of the very best fighters I have had, full of grit and a splendid war pilot. He hadn't been here with us very long, but had done a lot in that short time and was universally popular. He hopes to be flying again in a few months' time. There is no one I should welcome back more warmly to the squadron. Believe me, there was only one opinion of him out here, and that was 'one of the best.'

(Extracts from letters in Ian Mackersey, *Smithy, The life of Sir Charles Kingsford Smith*, Warner Books, London, 1999 page 34)

Source 12 Smithy on Smithy

'My mind was filled with flying to the exclusion of everything else.'

(Ian Mackersey, *Smithy, The life of Sir Charles Kingsford Smith*, Warner Books, London, 1999 page 47)

Source 13 An evaluation by a biographer

'He also became a legend for constant small acts of kindness: taking poor schoolchildren and unemployed men for free rides, lending people money, giving up his evenings to make the speeches he hated ...

He was a man untouched by fame who ... remained the quintessential Australian good bloke – disarmingly approachable, devoid of a shred of pomp. Old mates, asked to describe him, spoke of his basic decency, his kindness, generosity and tolerance, his reluctance to speak unkindly of anybody. They remembered his ... informality, his preference for the oily, raunchy camaraderie of the hangar over lavish banquets held in his honour. They talked of his infectious enthusiasm, his contempt for officialdom, of the boyish immaturity he never outgrew. Of his endless pranks, inveterate beer-drinking, risqué jokes, larrikin ways and the dashing spirit of adventure he always brought to flying. He was, they said, stimulating company, radiating a spellbinding charm that was almost electric. His deeply appealing mixture of the heroic and the human inspired loyalty and devotion; they would all have followed him to the ends of the earth.'

(Ian Mackersey, *Smithy, The life of Sir Charles Kingsford Smith*, Warner Books, London, 1999 pages 289, 379)

12 What personal characteristics or qualities did Kingsford Smith have?

13 Do you think the popular image or legend of Kingsford Smith is justified?