Eastern Washington University

EWU Digital Commons

3-19-2011

Smokejumper Obituary: Pitts, Eugene Lee (Missoula 1942)

National Smokejumper Association

Smokejumper Obituary

Pitts, Eugene Lee (Missoula 1942)

Gene, 90, died Feb. 18, 2011, in Ronan, Montana. He was born April 9, 1920, in Spokane, Washington and was a registered member of the Salish Tribe at Flathead Reservation. After an outstanding track and field career at Hot Springs High School, he attended the University of Wisconsin on a track scholarship after sending newspaper clippings from his races to Wisconsin.

Gene joined the U.S. Navy Flight Program in 1942, training at Missoula County Airport while attending the University of Montana. He shipped out for World War II combat in the South Pacific, flying a Gull Wing F-4U Corsair. Gene became a squadron leader in Guadalcanal and was shot down during his second year of combat fighting.

Following the war Gene operated the Pitts Lumber Sawmill in Camas Prairie, Montana, until moving and expanding the operation in Ravalli in 1951. After the mill burned in the early 1960s, he developed a registered Polled Hereford cattle ranch in Dixon, Montana. He became the director of the CSKT Community Action Program several years later, and finally as postmaster in Dixon before retiring in 1990. Gene returned to ranching and joined the Mission Valley Power Board, retiring for good at age 85.

He jumped at Missoula in 1942, training at Nine Mile Base, one of the first jumpers to do so. As a freshman at the University of Wisconsin, Gene was the school's top runner in the 880 and won the famous Turkey Cross Country race, breaking the record by 23 seconds. He also served as the pace runner for teammate Walter Mehl in his 1941 bid to break the world record in the mile. He is buried at Sunset Memorial Gardens in Missoula.

(end of excerpt)