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Richard Stith: Decorated war veteran, insurance executive, former Clayton mayor

In [Obituaries](#)

By [Gloria S. Ross](#), special to the Beacon

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Richard Stith, whose mother gave away his clothes while he was flying unarmed transport planes during World War II because she never expected to see him alive again, died Sunday (Feb. 10, 2013) of lung cancer. He was 93.



Family photo

Richard Stith was a highly decorated Marine Corps pilot.

After returning from the war a decorated pilot, he became a successful insurance executive, served two terms as mayor of Clayton and helped found the Independence Center, a place where mentally ill adults learn self-sufficiency. The center, like the legion of civic and charitable organizations he led, benefited from his prominence in the community.

“Dick Stith knew almost everybody,” said Bob Harvey, Independence Center’s founding director. “It would take you an hour to walk a block with him.”

Mr. Stith died at the home of a friend, Marie Tramelli Morrison, in the Central West End. Morrison said he had recently been diagnosed with lung cancer.

A memorial service will be Saturday, Feb. 23, at St. Francis Xavier (College) Church.

War hero to executive

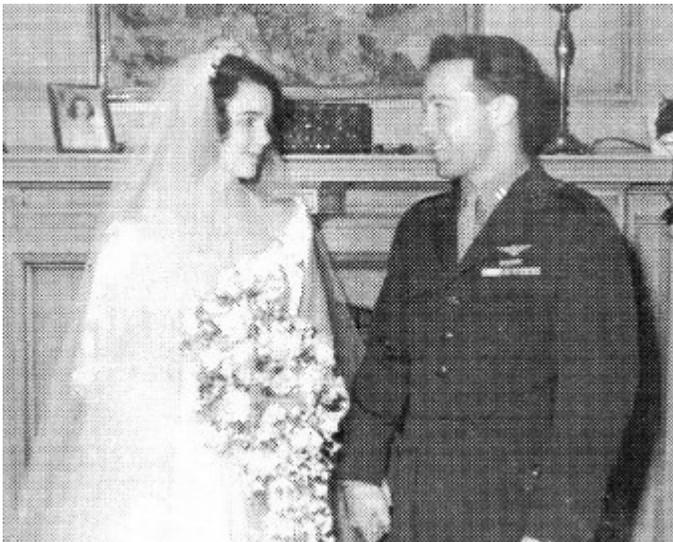
After graduating from Saint Louis University in 1940, Mr. Stith entered law school at Washington University. As the German armies swept across Europe, he correctly anticipated that America would soon enter the war. In 1941, after a year of law school and shortly before Pearl Harbor, Mr. Stith signed up for the Naval Air Corps. He was soon in training in Florida.

Good grades gave him the option to switch to the aviation arm of the Marine Corps. He entered the Pacific Theater commanding unarmed DC-3 transport planes, delivering food, medicine and ammunition round the clock to the front; on the return trip, he carried the wounded.

Mr. Stith was often under heavy fire during trips to and from Guadalcanal and other parts of the Solomon Islands. The dangerous missions earned him three Distinguished Flying Crosses and a dozen air medals. He rose to the rank of major.

Mr. Stith returned to civilian life in 1945, wondering what a 26-year-old ex-pilot with one year of law school could do for a living.

Luckily, during a leave in 1943, he had married Ann Carter See. Her father, who owned a life insurance and financial planning agency, hired him as a general agent.



Family photo

The Stiths were married in 1943.

Because he had no experience, he was given a salary rather than the usual commission, but after a few months, Mr. Stith was actually selling insurance. He was a natural.

Beth Brown, associate director Independence Center, knew the secret of his success.

“A warmth came from Dick, the way he shook your hand, his kind face with those beautiful blue eyes,” Brown said, “he was just a really genuine guy.”

He worked alongside his brother-in-law, F. Russell Fette, the agency’s financial expert. His father-in-law eventually made them both partners and the agency was renamed Fette & Stith Agency of the New England Mutual Life Insurance Co.

Russell Fette retired in 1981; Mr. Stith continued working until recently, limiting his services to longtime clients.

Just as he had in the war, he often worked night and day. As a young husband and father, he felt he couldn’t afford to make less than \$50 a day. He tapped a neglected market – night shift workers – and by 1950, he was earning more than twice his goal.

He bought a home in Clayton, just as he had promised Ann before he returned from the war.

‘Lucking out’

Richard Taylor Stith Jr. was born on Halloween in 1919, the son of Richard Taylor Stith and Agnes Gorman Denvir Stith. The family lived in the Central West End, where he would return to live briefly before making Clayton his home for most of his life. He graduated from Saint Louis University High School and Saint Louis University with a degree in economics before entering Washington University School of Law.

He met his future wife before heading off to war; she was on a tennis date with another man. She said she didn’t immediately notice his good looks, “but I did take note of his welcoming smile,” Ann Carter Stith wrote in her 2003 memoir, *Lucking Out: Memories of a Happy Marriage*.

They were at a bowling alley when she finally agreed to marry him, having appeared to waver in her commitment at times during his visits home. He was so excited, he dropped his bowling ball on his future sister-in-law’s foot and broke her toe.

He was a Republican Catholic; she was a Democratic Methodist. “But we found as we talked, that we agreed on most everything,” Ann wrote. He would later become a Democrat and she would convert to Catholicism.



Family photo.
The Stith family, 1962.

Their happy marriage was not without challenges. They lost an infant son to pneumonia, and later, their 32-year-old daughter to Hodgkin’s disease. They helped ensure that another son thrived despite polio. Somewhere along the way, Ann suffered what she described as a “nervous breakdown.”

“Dick was wonderful,” Ann wrote in her memoir. “He gave up all his evening meetings and activities to be home with me.” Mr. Stith took care of the family while Ann recovered. She came home to a more attentive husband.

Ann Stith died in 2005.

Rebel with a cause

By the time his wife talked him into running for public office, Mr. Stith already knew how to mount a campaign. She called him “the real rebel in the family” because he fought the hierarchy of the Catholic Church.

He was recruited to lead the Christian Presence, a group formed to implement Pope John XXIII’s Vatican II reforms. The group later wrote a letter criticizing Cardinal Joseph Ritter for urging Catholics to obey Pope Paul VI’s encyclical on birth control; their nickname became “The Dirty Thirty.” Cardinal John Carberry labeled Mr. Stith a heretic for his beliefs about confession. Outside the Church, he and his wife were marching for civil rights and against the Vietnam War.

With battle scars from the ‘60s, he ran for alderman in Clayton in 1972. He won that race and the next five. Then he ran for mayor and won that, too – twice – serving from 1983-87.

Ben Uchitelle, an alderman during one of Mr. Stith’s mayoral terms, worked with him on a number of issues. They were not always in perfect agreement.;

“We intellectually locked horns,” said Uchitelle, who later became mayor of Clayton. “When the issue of nonsmoking came up, he didn’t think that was the thing to do; I did. He later changed his mind.

“Dick was a good man; a man who thought clearly and fully and was willing to see the other side,” Uchitelle added. “He was a person who cared deeply about Clayton and the entire St. Louis area.”

Mr. Stith declined to seek a third term despite some urging, but would later strenuously oppose efforts to implement term limits.

“He was a popular mayor,” his wife wrote, “but he decided to quit while he was ahead.”

Civic-minded

Mr. Stith immediately went on the Clayton Planning Commission and Architectural Review Board, just two of the many civic organizations he was destined to lead or support.

Shortly after returning from war, he helped found and was the first president of the St. Louis Chapter of the Marine Corps League. He was soon made chairman of Saint Louis University’s first alumni fund drive.

He was active in insurance industry trade associations, taught estate planning for the American College for 18 years and served on the board of Arundale, a plastics company.

Mr. Stith was president of the board of the United Nations Association of Greater St. Louis. Robert A. Cohn, editor-in-chief emeritus of the St. Louis Jewish Light, served with him.

“Richard was very civic-minded and very active in a variety of organizations,” Cohn said. “He brought his organizational expertise to the U.N.”

He served on the Board of Trustees at the Clayton Library and was chairman of Confluence St. Louis (now FOCUS St Louis). He was president of Hillcrest, his neighborhood association, the Public Questions Club and the Psychoanalytic Foundation. He was treasurer of the Institute for Theological Encounter with Science and Technology and was a member of the Bequest and Gift Councils of both Maryville College and Barnes Hospital.

He was a master fundraiser for many organizations.

“Dick was uniquely responsible for helping the Independence Center develop its first planned giving program,” Harvey said. Mr. Stith had helped found the center in 1981.

‘We are old’

The Stiths were in their 80s and nearing their 60th anniversary when Ann penned the book about their life.

As his golf games and tennis became less frequent and the worldwide float trips less strenuous, she wrote: “I find that in my old age I do a lot of remembering of times past. I think about our marriage most

of all and what good fortune I have had in marrying Dick.”

In addition to his wife of 62 years and his parents, Mr. Stith was preceded in death by a daughter, Carter Stith Spano (John Spano); an infant son, Frank “Frankie” See Stith; his sister, Miriam Frances Stith, and brothers Lt. Col., USMC (Ret.) John Denvir Stith and Francis Gorman Stith.

His survivors include four children, Richard T. Stith III (Rosemarie) of Valparaiso, Ind., Kate Stith-Cabranes (José Cabranes) of New Haven, Conn., Laura Denvir Stith (Don Scott) of Kansas City, Mo., and Rebecca S. Stith (Gen Obata) of Tacoma, Wash.; two “adopted” sons, Yabo Lin (Hong Mei) and Mohan Phansalker (Prachee), and 10 grandchildren and one great granddaughter.

He is also survived by his companion, Marie Tramelli Morrison.

A memorial service will begin at 2:30 p.m. on Saturday, Feb. 23, at St. Francis Xavier (College) Church, Grand and Lindell, on the Saint Louis University campus. A reception will follow the service. Complimentary parking will be provided in the Laclede Avenue Garage. Burial will be private.

Memorials would be appreciated to Independence Center, 4245 Forest Park Ave., St. Louis, 63108, or to the Presidential Scholar Fund at Saint Louis University, 221 North Grand Boulevard, St. Louis, Mo. 63103.