

In Memoriam

Ray Oliver

1935-2025



Memorial Service was at the Aerospace
of California Museum June 13, 2025.

Ray was a long time dedicated volunteer
at the Aerospace Museum in addition to
his work at the Citrus Heights Historical
Society. He was very active in the SacArea
History Network.

Ray was born to Caryl and Bonnie Smeltzer in 1935. He was the second of three children – his older sister, Pat, who would go on to have a rather colorful life, and his younger sister, Janet, who took a more traditional path. He also had an older half-brother, William, who became a doctor in Southern California, and an adopted brother, Tapuni “Cap” Ioelu from Samoa, but that’s another story.

Growing up spending summers at Lake Bowstring in Minnesota, and childhood trips driving through Yellowstone, influenced Ray’s deep love of the outdoors. He worked summer jobs for many years at various national parks, including Yellowstone and of course his beloved Yosemite, and visited them as often as possible. Yosemite is where his ashes will be scattered.

Somewhere along the line – whether it was during his time in the Army, earning his bachelors’ degree at Humboldt State University, or getting his Masters at UC Berkeley – Ray got tired of being called “Old Smeller” by his various classmates, so he proceeded to have his middle and last names switched...taking Oliver as his last name. Cousin Kevin Smeltzer, the family genealogist, was quite sympathetic when he learned that.

Ray was working in civil service when he met a lovely Scottish nurse named Olga, and with very little ado, he called his mother in Eureka and informed her that he was coming home in three weeks to get married. A few miracles were called in and a couple of smallish mountains were moved, and by the time the couple arrived, an entire wedding had been arranged for them, complete with attendants and a flower girl – Ray’s niece, Helena.

Ray worked at McClellan for years, during which time he helped with the creation of the aviation museum. He and Olga bought a home in North Highlands where they entertained often and provided a comfortable lifestyle for a whole host of stray cats. It wasn't beyond him to phone up one of his sisters – Pat in Stockton at the time, or Janet in Eureka – and inform them that he had the perfect cat for them, and to come and pick it up. As if Sacramento were right down the street from Eureka.

What do we really know about Ray? Well, he grumbled a lot, but he also did a lot. He was a journalist, a historian, a photographer, a collector. He would dive down the deepest rabbit holes to ferret out a fact, just for the reward of proving a fellow newspaperman wrong – and remember, this is all before Google, so he did all of this the old-fashioned way, with books and periodicals.

He bought a lot of books. He was always pawning off duplicates, or books he no longer had room for – every time he visited with his niece Kat, he handed off two or three boxes of books – and he still had shelves full of books in every room when he passed. Most of those, by the way, went to the Friends of the Library, as he requested, so next time you go to one of their sales and you're looking at the history or the military or the joke books, check inside for his personal stamp of the fellow in glasses with a pointed head. A college classmate sketched that little drawing of him one day, by the way, and rather than being offended, he took it and made it his personal coat of arms.

There's so much left to tell that hasn't been touched on here – like the years he spent living in Germany, or the time he took a cooking class from Jeff Smith (the Frugal Gourmet) in Seattle, or the history of the old pale-blue Volkswagen bug that was missing its front passenger seat – but like so many things, space is limited, and so we stop here. There's a lot about Ray's life that we'll never know. That even his family never knew. And that's exactly the way he would have wanted it.

Ray wrote an extensive
monograph for McClellan

RANCHO DEL PASO

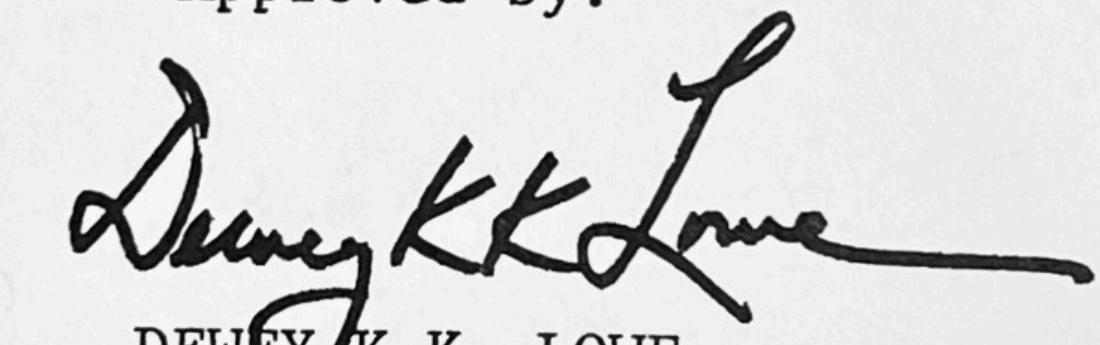
A history of the land surrounding
McClellan Air Force Base

by

Raymond Oliver

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