

Pioneer Survives First Crash



By Janet Reinka
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STANFORD - The pilot who survived a crash-landing last Thursday at the Palo Alto Airport was not just another 78-year-old tooling around in the wild blue yonder. Frank W. Fuller Jr. of Hillsborough, the paint family scion who always had "a wild urge to fly," is a flyer who won two transcontinental races during the late 1930s and brought back a houseful of trophies. The jolt last week, when his single-engine Centurion apparently conked out near the airport was Fuller's first accident in 50 years of flying. "I'll be 79 in July," the battered and bruised pilot said from his hospital bed Monday afternoon. "I'm sure some

of my friends will say I'm crazy to keep flying. But I always pass my physical." Fuller grinned a wide, warm grin. "I'll just have to give it some thought when I get well." Fuller's hours in the air - a shade under his lifetime goal of 10,000 - no doubt came to his rescue when the engine trouble developed. A "younger" pilot might not have been able to land a plane with no engine as he did, skimming San Franciscquito Creek and thudding over an earthen dike. "I was lucky," he said. "If I had another 100 feet of altitude, I would have been okay."

Even so, Fuller's injuries were much less than they might have been: Two broken ankles, a "hairline" cervical fracture, a shattered knee and cuts and bruises. He said his doctor thinks he may be able to go home within a few days.

Although he dismissed his remarkable flying career as "just ancient history," Fuller was an aviation pioneer who hobnobbed with such flying greats as Jimmy Doolittle.

Fuller's most noteworthy accomplishment was winning the Bendix Transcontinental Race in 1937 and again in 1939, flying from Burbank to Cleveland. The first time he made it in 7 hours, 54 minutes; the second time he shaved 40 minutes from his record-breaking time.

On between his two winning races, he was beaten by a woman - and not just any woman. The 1938 Bendix winner was Jacqueline Cochran, "so I don't feel so bad about it," Fuller added, with a meaningful look.

Fuller was not the only record holder in the family. On a bet that it could not be done in under 21 hours, his brother, Dana, once roller-skated from the St. Francis Hotel in San Francisco to San Jose. His brother accomplished the feat in 12 hours.

The whole family, including Dana and Frank's sister Peggy, as well as some cousins, flew, and the family came to be known as the Flying Fullers, with Frank leading the way. The man would earn the nickname Speed Merchant of San Francisco learned to fly in 1931 at the Boeing School in Oakland, following up on a long-time urge. Subsequently, they met and became fast friends with Doolittle. The Army had just tested and approved the P-35 Seversky, and since it had been beaten out of the competition of its day, Fuller wanted one of his own. Doolittle helped him cajole Seversky into building him one. The \$35,000 plane was the one Fuller flew in the Bendix races.

Another thrill for Fuller was being named ambassador for the San Francisco Exposition in 1939, flying blue and white invitations to each of the 11 Western states' governors. "The idea was to get publicity," Fuller said, his eyes sparking with the remembrance. His contribution to the war effort was as a test pilot for Douglas Aircraft Co., where he flew every plan the company made, including the A-20 light bomber. Fuller set dozens of speed records and landed the first amphibious plane every on Donner Lake. He repeated the same stunt on Crater Lake for a Hollywood movie and had hopes of meeting movie stars, according to a cousin. Instead, he ended up chatting with the mechanics.

In 1938 Fuller set a speed record from Los Angeles to San Francisco - one hour, seven minutes and seven seconds, a time the airlines have trouble beating today. The following year, he cut the time by five minutes. In 1939 he also set a record flying from San Francisco to Seattle in 2 hours, 31 minutes.

Fuller served on the board of directors and as an officer for the family paint company, W.P. Fuller & Co., which was sold in 1960 to Hunt Foods, he said. The company changed hands again when it was sold to Fuller O'Brien Co.

Through the years, Fuller has kept up his flying hobby and still hops in for trips hunting or fishing. He often flew his amphibious Grumman Mallard to Lake Pillsbury for his sporting trips.

Fuller and his wife, Adrienne, belong to a flying club and still enjoy taking trips together. On the day of his accident, he was flying from San Carlos to San Jose on business, when the engine of his two-month-old apparently developed trouble.