

Friend warned pilot

Feared airplane was dangerous

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WATSONVILLE — Six weeks ago, John Fellin called longtime friend and fellow pilot Chuck Cooke and tried to dissuade him from flying his experimental aircraft.

"I told Chuck, 'I'm scared to death of this airplane,'" Fellin said



Cooke

Thursday in a telephone interview from his Wisconsin home. "He said, 'You're not alone.'"

But nothing Fellin said could change Cooke's course.

"He'd made up his mind he was going to fly it," Fellin said.

They had one more conversation before Cooke was killed Wednesday when the plane he had painstakingly built over 18 years crashed on its maiden flight.

Fellin and Cooke, both 71, spoke every three weeks or so and had detailed discussions about the craft. "He's one of the few friends I had left," Fellin joked. "Almost everyone else has gone on."

Fellin had read articles about the design Cooke was building, and had seen a report that the plane's designer had died when one of his own planes crashed.

"It didn't sound good," Fellin said. "I didn't like the design; the center of gravity is so sensitive."

Fellin worried about the Volkswagen engine Cooke was using, and says he's sure the fault

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must have been with the engine.

"I really feel he didn't make a mistake — I think the engine itself blew up or something," Fellin said. "Chuck was so beyond most people, it's unbelievable. That's why I can hardly believe this happened."

Friends are unanimous in their use of the word "meticulous" to describe Cooke's craftsmanship and attention to detail. When he wasn't satisfied with the quality of a part, he would make his own in his machine shop. He had just made his own brakes, said Neil Brooks, president of the Experimental Aviators Association, for which Cooke served as treasurer.

"His workmanship was extraordinary," said Brooks. "I was quite impressed with the quality."

Brooks said Cooke showed up every day at the hangar at Watsonville Airport where he kept his plane. "He had almost a complete machine shop there," Brooks said. "You could count on him being down there every day at 11:30 or 12."

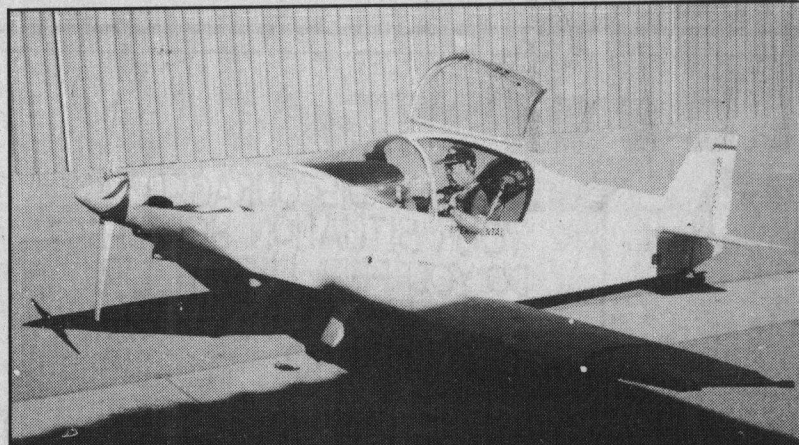
Fellin had shipped him "the best brake linings I could find," but they arrived too late. Fellin called to tell his friend about the shipment just five hours after the crash.

Cooke had a wide range of friends and enjoyed a wide range of activities. He was a dance skater and skated every week. He sang in the St. Andrew Presbyterian Church choir, and fellow singers counted on his rich, steady baritone. He loved to dance. He was quiet, with a quick sense of humor.

And he was an adventurer.

Cooke had a special fondness for sports cars. He designed his own roller skate, which required such skill to navigate that most skaters couldn't really master it, Fellin said.

"Chuck was a wild man," said



Charles Cooke's experimental aircraft.

Don Adkins, director of the St. Andrew choir. "I think he just never showed us that."

Adkins was preparing to leave Thursday evening for his weekly choir practice, and he was dreading Cooke's absence.

"I'm not looking forward to this," he said sadly.

Cooke's wife, Helen, always supported his desire to fly, but she didn't accompany him for the maiden flight of the handmade craft.

"He wouldn't let her go down to the airport," Fellin said. "He didn't want her around if he was going to fly."

Helen Cooke said her husband spent the past 18 years building his own plane because he couldn't afford to rent one. The sad irony, according to Fellin, is that for the money he invested in building the craft, he could have bought one.

Cooke got his pilot's license in 1946, but hadn't had many opportunities to fly of late because of the expense of renting planes. He was anxious to finish the craft so he could resume flying, his wife said.

"He wanted to go to Oshkosh; he figured he could get there in one

day," she said. The couple had lived for a number of years in Wisconsin, and still have friends there. "They were going to have a party for him at Oshkosh."

Jim Wylie, a fellow pilot and choir member, was videotaping the flight when Cooke crashed. He emphasized the care Cooke took with details, and he shared Fellin's conviction that the fault was with the engine.

"It happened in the worst conceivable place it could have happened," Wylie said of the ravine where the plane went down. "If he had been a little higher, he'd have been OK. He had a good parachute on. Had he been a quarter-mile further, he could have landed back at the airport on runway eight.

"It's a shock," Wylie said. "It happened very fast. From his standpoint, the fastness of it was a blessing."

Services for Cooke will be at 1:30 p.m. Monday at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church, 9850 Monroe Ave., Aptos. The service will be followed by a social period. He will be cremated and the ashes will be strewn over the ocean.