

Homemade plane crashes, kills pilot

Bio-C
Aptos man, 71, dies on aircraft's maiden flight

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WATSONVILLE — Charles Cooke took to the skies Tuesday on the maiden voyage of his painstakingly hand-built airplane. It was also his last.

Shortly after 3 p.m., Cook's yellow single-engine KR-2 experimental craft lifted from the runway of Watsonville Airport, sailed over a ravine and apparently lost power. It flipped upside down and crashed into the back of Inez Tucker's barn on Manfre Road. The 71-year-old Aptos pilot was killed in the crash.

The crash is the first fatality near the Watsonville Airport in about 12 years, said airport manager Don French.

Cook had been working on the plane at home for 18 years. Tuesday afternoon he took it out to the airport and taxied down the runway four times at high speed before taking off on the fifth try. As he approached the ravine behind the airport, the Volkswagen engine lost power at 150 feet, so he put it in landing mode and apparently tried to turn around, French said.



Tucker has lived in her Manfre Road house for 50 years and has never seen a crash. She had just awakened from a nap and decided to sit down and play a hand of solitaire.

"Then there was this big explosion," she said. "Even after I saw the fire I didn't know what it was. I just grabbed the hose and started spraying."

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ENGINE TROUBLE: The Volkswagen engine that powered Charles Cooke's airplane sits in the ashes of the crash.

The 12-foot-long plane — made of fiberglass, Styrofoam and wood — was so damaged she didn't even realize what it was until the emergency vehicles arrived and told her about the crash.

"It just looked like a bunch of cardboard to me," she said. "I wondered how all that junk got out there, and how it could have caught on fire."

Tucker's neighbor, Mary Robbins, had just stepped out to check the mail when she heard something in the sky that sounded like a plane having engine problems.

"It was like he couldn't get control of it," she said. "It started wiggling back and forth and then it jerked and flipped upside down."

Tucker stood off to the side and watched firefighters dismantle the barn her husband built 40 years ago. She

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Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel photos

Firefighters gather near the 40-year-old barn off Manfre Road where Charles Cooke crashed.

Plane crash

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shook her head, still shaking from the trauma.

"I've seen all those fires and accidents on TV, and I wondered how it would feel to see something like that," said Tucker.

"Then to have a man die out there. ... It's terrible," she said, and burst into tears.

Federal Aviation Administration inspectors arrived in Watsonville at 5:30 p.m. Tuesday, and will be investigating the accident. Anthony Costanza, an FAA investigator at the crash site, said the FAA will determine pilot competency, training, aircraft design and whether there were any navigational errors.

He declined to speculate on the cause of the crash, other than to say that Cooke apparently tried to turn around, but that he "apparently didn't have enough altitude to get back to the airport."

"It's not fair to the pilot or to the family to speculate" as to whether the crash was a result of mechanical failure or pilot error, he said.

Cooke had just begun his retirement two years ago at age 69. He had worked his way up from a tool-and-die worker to an engineer after 25 years with a San Jose company.

Helen Cooke of Aptos described her husband as a "very meticulous" and detail-oriented man.

"That's why I'm surprised he crashed," Cooke said.

Finishing his airplane project was a hobby for her husband, who planned to fly his aircraft in July to the Experimental Aircraft Association Exhibition in Wisconsin.

"He started it because he couldn't afford to rent a plane, so he decided he'd build one," Cooke said. But that project lasted almost two decades because he liked to do things well, Cooke said.

'If it weren't for experimental airplanes, a lot of innovations in aviation today wouldn't be here.'

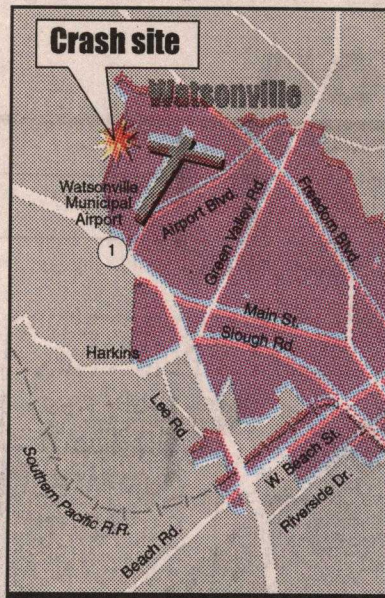
— *Don French,*
airport manager

Watsonville Pilots' Association member Stan Quarter said many other pilots were aware of Cooke's longtime project. Quarter, who knew Cooke as a fellow pilot and member of St. Andrews Presbyterian Church in Aptos, described him as a "very intelligent, dedicated person. He would have run all the checks that were necessary" before taking off Tuesday.

French said people like Cooke are the ones who have helped advance the progress of aviation in this country.

"If it weren't for experimental airplanes, a lot of innovations in aviation today wouldn't be here," French said. "And the people who get killed in them are the ones that build them."

Despite the term "experimental," French said these kinds of aircraft usually have excellent track records. Kit planes, which come in pieces from the manufacturer and must be assembled, are viewed as safe and are certified by the Federal Aviation Administration, French said. Cooke's plane was built from a blueprint using his own materials, however, rather than from a kit.



Chris Carothers/Sentinel

Watsonville's small craft airport is the busiest in the Santa Cruz-San Benito-Monterey county area, French said, with some 120,000 takeoffs and landings recorded last year by the Caltrans Division of Aeronautics. Watsonville houses 312 small planes, while Salinas airport holds 272, he said. Despite its large number of flights, major damage crashes happen only once every five years or so, French said. Minor accidents like leaving the landing gear up happen a few times a year.

French said the timing of the crash is "dismal," falling days before this weekend's Watsonville airport anniversary celebration.

The last fatal or injury crash in Watsonville was about 12 years ago, French said, when a couple was killed after they slammed into the side of Mount Madonna in a weather-related accident. In 1976, a Santa Cruz County man and teen-ager were killed when their single-engine airplane stalled shortly after takeoff and dropped nose-first onto the tarmac.