

Mostly about People

By Wally Traling



Fighting Fire From The Air

Hollister — Flying an aerial tanker onto and sometimes into flames of a forest fire is not a glamorous or dare-devil occupation.

This isn't what we sensation-seeking columnists like to write, according to the Republicans.

Who says its unglamorous? Alfred Adolph, 38, a tall, virile, mustachioed, 49er-end built, good-looking pilot who makes his living flying this type of mission says it isn't glamorous or daredevil.

Adolph is a member of the Air Tanker Initial Attack team, based at the Hollister airport—an arm of the state division of forestry forest fire defense.

It "bombs" the fire from the air, often in places inaccessible to ground fire fighters, and retards and contains it until ground fighters arrive and give it a coup de grace.

Outside, not 60 feet from the ready-room where we talked, rested two World War II single engine Grumman torpedo bombers.

Huge planes they are, one of the largest single engine jobs built; the cockpit is almost a story off the ground; and there's a little gas engine near the tail which helps start the big engine up front.

Each morning the engines are warmed so if a forest fire should bust loose here, the pilots can be off the ground in three minutes and over the fire in 15.

The bellies, where torpedoes once rode now slosh with a liquid fire retardant composed of diamonium sulfate and appulagate clay (oil well drilling mud) called Fire-Trol.

And each plane carries 600 gallons which they can drop in 300 gallon globs.

The team is composed of two Grummans (one is flown by ex-marine pilot Richard Douglas, 35, of Hollister) and a light observation plane jockeyed by Sam Reid, 29, (not the surfin' Sam). It is contracted to the division of forestry.

The unit touches on about seven counties and they've made 45 fire runs since July, seven in our county.

They're expensive. The Grummans contract out at about \$14,000 per plane for the four months and besides the minimum pay (which is hot) the pilots get \$213 an hour while in the air.

But also hear this. Les Gum, chief fire ranger, who has been in the business almost as long as the Smith Brothers made cough

drops, said Friday: "On three of the fires here this year (Love Creek, Pine Mt., and Rodeo Gulch) there's not a bit of doubt in my mind that they would have developed into major campaign fires if it hadn't been for those planes. As it turned out we lost only three acres.

"The Pine mountain fire of 1948, and it started in the same area this one did last month, burned 16,800 acres and cost \$400,000 to stop.

"The Loma Prieta fire in 1961 which burned 9000 acres cost \$600,000 to fight."

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Adolph, a wartime naval flyer who now rents a beach front house at Rio del Mar, and who risks his neck at crop dusting when the fire season ends, does not like the public to hold a daredevil image of the fire flyers.

Sure there's been more than 65 of his colleagues have been killed in the U.S. over the last seven years; true not many pilots can or care to fly this type of mission; true he crashed once on such a mission.

Still, it's a job, when carried off right, it is somewhat riskless.

The observation plane makes daily flights over the area spotting fires—sort of a mobile lookout. When it is called to a fire, it becomes the drop-coordinator plane—in constant contact with the fire boss on the ground. Gil Werder, 26, a Division of Forestry man, acts as observer and drop boss. He tells the Grumman pilots where to put their load.

Adolph said: "We make our approach as we would in making a landing. We will come down, lower our flaps to reduce speed to about 120 mph and drop at about 75 feet."

In canyons, steep hill sides, smoke, high flames—well, to me, heck yes, it's glamorous.

Adolph's proudest drop? "Over in Stanislaus county, I was coming down for a drop at the head of the fire when I spotted a house ready to burst into flames below a fire lookout. I could see people trying to reach the house as if to rescue someone. So I diverted my drop and swung over the house and blanketed it with my load.

It was a beautiful hit and put the fire out, allowing, as I found out later, the wife of the fire lookout to be rescued.

"The lookout was watching the whole thing. He thanked me and said if we ever met he'd buy me a beer. Made me feel pretty good."

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The pilots have to take care not to drop their load on people, for even though it's liquid, 200 gallons coming down represents 3000 pounds of force.

Six hundred gallons will spread out over 1500 by 50 yards, dampening the flames and sometimes extinguishing the blaze all together.

But Adolph feels that it will also take the ground heroes to win over a forest fire.

"We are only part of the team. The only difference is that we fly to the fire."

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