

Fly-In roars back to finish strong on Saturday, Sunday

Fly-In *RP-52608*
Favorable winds turn back Summit Fire, ease qualms

By DAVID CARKHUFF
OF THE REGISTER-PAJARONIAN

Attendance at the Watsonville Fly-In and Air Show soared on Saturday and Sunday after a slow start Friday, likely due to concerns about the Summit Fire, the air show's executive director, Theo Wierdsma, reported Sunday evening.

The Summit Fire, a 3,920-acre blaze in the Santa Cruz Mountains, likely hampered

turnout on opening day, he said. In the bigger picture, a slow start to the air show was the least of Wierdsma's concerns.

"We evacuated the house on Thursday afternoon; my wife was adamant that we pack things up and move out," said Wierdsma, who lives off of Amesti Road in Corralitos, a community that was threatened by the fire.

On Friday, he and his wife

moved back into their home after the threat of the fire appeared to be lessened by cooler temperatures and favorable winds, he said.

In his first year overseeing the three-day air show, Wierdsma faced not only uncertainty over attendance at the Fly-In but also had to wonder what would happen if the Summit

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Stunt pilot Tim Decker soars above Watsonville in his Pitts S-2B.

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Fire charged out of the mountains, as it threatened to do on Thursday.

"When I woke up Thursday morning, a couple of my neighbors could see the fire from their back yard," he recalled.

A turn in the weather gave firefighters a leg up when winds shifted, blowing the flames back on themselves and away from Corralitos. Jitters over whether the air show could go on were abated, Wierdsma said.

"We knew we could do it operationally, the nice thing for us was the wind shifted Thursday night so it wasn't coming toward the airport. That benefited both Corralitos because it wasn't coming as close to the town, and it benefited the air show because we didn't have smoke hanging over the airport," Wierdsma said.

Attendance on Saturday and Sunday looked very strong, he said, although final numbers haven't been announced.

Throughout the air show, participants were mindful of the tragedy playing out in the mountains nearby for homeowners who lost everything to the fire.

The Lions Club made \$2,000 from an air show pancake breakfast, and the club plans to donate proceeds to victims of the Sum-

mit Fire, Wierdsma said.

Saturday brought moments of inspiration. When F-18s flew over, the reverberation caused many of the car alarms in the parking lot to start going off, Wierdsma said. A C-17, the largest aircraft ever to land at the airport, lumbered into the Watsonville Municipal Airport, creating a spectacle for those attending the Fly-In and for motorists driving nearby.

A 1943 Meyers OTW biplane owned by Joey, Laurie and Britany Sahakian from Fresno won Grand Champion at the air show. That plane will be on the poster art for next year and also will be the plane that adorns all of the logo wear for next year, Wierdsma said.

The winning biplane was flown in from Fresno, and the pilot had to scramble to beat bad weather elsewhere in California, Wierdsma said. In some places in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, it was snowing, which created challenges for some visiting pilots as they planned their departures, Wierdsma said.

Still, visitors to the air show enjoyed moderate temperatures and excellent air quality, Wierdsma said.

"I've talked to people that live in Gilroy and Santa Cruz that tell me the air quality was a lot worse in Gilroy and Santa Cruz" than at the Watsonville airport, he said.



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Members of the public bought a ride aboard a biplane from Nostalgic Rides during the Watsonville Fly-In and Air Show.



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Pilots Bill Stein (from top), Tim Decker and Greg Poe line up to leave a dazzling smoke trail Friday over Santa Cruz.



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A Chinook helicopter settles in for a landing at Watsonville Municipal Airport Friday above a Pave Hawk helicopter.