

100 private pilots assist relief effort

By Frank Sweeney
Mercury News Staff Writer

With the cloudy vanguard of a major Pacific storm sweeping through the Bay Area, Friday was not the best of days to fly. But Walter Windus had precious cargo aboard his light airplane that couldn't wait.

Jammed into the back seat and luggage compartment of the single-engine Mooney Mark 20 were nearly 300 pounds of food and blankets for Watsonville-area victims of Tuesday's earthquake.

Windus was one of about 100 Bay Area private pilots who donated their aircraft, fuel and

time Friday to airlift desperately needed supplies to Watsonville.

So, on a day when few light planes would normally be in the air, Windus peered through the plane's windscreen, searching the cloudy skies over Santa Cruz Mountain ridges for the path around a 1,500-foot television antenna and the way to Watsonville Municipal Airport.

The television tower was obscured by clouds, a trap for the unwary pilot. The airport, fortunately, was in the clear, and Windus landed in a strong crosswind to deliver his payload.

See AIRLIFT, Page 10B

Private pilots assist relief effort by airlifting 20 tons of supplies

AIRLIFT, from Page 1B

By the end of the day, pilots flying above roads closed by slides and broken bridges airlifted more than 40,000 pounds of relief supplies from Buchanan Field in Concord to Watsonville airport.

At the hard-hit city in southern Santa Cruz County, volunteers distributed food and other supplies to more than 1,000 families.

"There are times when heavy aircraft are just not suitable for a mission, for one reason or another," said Windus, a 50-year-old Saratoga resident who has been flying for 20 years.

The airlift was conceived only the day before, when the Food Bank of Contra Costa County asked Navajo Aviation at Buchanan

Field if 20 tons of food could be flown to Watsonville.

Linda Milosch, Navajo's marketing director, figured that she could round up six or eight volunteers. "We put the word out, and the phone never stopped ringing," Milosch said.

News of the airlift spread quickly, and on Friday light planes swarmed into Buchanan Field from throughout the Bay Area.

There, carefully weighed bags and cartons of supplies were loaded aboard the light planes, which took off in a constant stream for Watsonville, more than 75 miles southwest.

By dusk, the entire 40,000 pounds had been moved.

"We don't have anywhere near

enough food to meet any of the needs," said Carlotta Woolcock, a volunteer from the Western Service Workers Association who was coordinating the food distribution from a small house a couple of blocks from the Watsonville airport.

"People are just coming and coming and coming needing food, and they're scared," Woolcock said. By early Friday afternoon, more than 1,000 families had received food. Three truckloads of food had run out before the first of the airlift supplies arrived.

"People need the food, and they need the clothes, and they need tents, and we need volunteers desperately," said Djean Becker, another volunteer.