

# VERN "ACK" ACKERMAN

by: Donald R. McDowell

It will be only proper and fitting that the Watsonville Airport one day be called Ackerman Field, named for the man who was its first and longest serving airport manager. He has been the only airport manager to date except for a one year period, 1963-64, when the position was held by Mr. C.O. Brandt.

A local born boy, Ackerman has had a flying career every bit as colorful as the airport itself. He started his long flying career while attending Cal Poly and soloed in 1938, the year prior to the decision to build the Watsonville Airport, in a two-cylinder, 39-horsepower Aeronca K. He then returned home and was accepted into the government-funded CPT program for flight training at Salinas J. C. (Hartnell). The government was starting to anticipate the spreading of the winds of war throughout the world and selected twenty applicants from this area for the new program. After they obtained their private pilot licenses, two members were selected from each school for advance training in Los Angeles. The summer of 1940 found young Ackerman in the cockpit of a Ryan STA flying in the then uncrowded sunny and smogless clear skies of southern California. He was learning the advanced flying skills of aerobatics and instrument flying that would lead to a limited commercial pilot's rating. One student out of every ten in this advanced program would be selected for Naval Flight School.

In December, 1940, Ackerman entered Pensicola, and in July, 1941, he earned the gold wings of a Naval aviator and the Naval Officer's rank of Ensign. He stayed on at Pensicola for a short time after graduation to instruct others in the primary training course flying Stearmans. In October of that same year, he was transferred to Corpus Christi to further instruct in N3N's, a similar aircraft to the steerman. The war starting reassigned him at Corpus Christi from instructor status to a student again, this time flying PBY's, a twin engined flying patrol boat. After learning the more advanced over-water navigation and patrol bombing, he returned to instructor status and remained at Corpus Christi in PBY's until December of 1943.

He went to Texas alone, but he did not leave Texas alone. Ackerman returned to California bringing with him one of Texas' fairest flowers, Miss Myradell

Hicks, by then known as Mrs. Ackerman and their three-month-old baby daughter, Jean. His next duty assignment was as Operations Officer at Naval Air Station Alameda flying Martin PBM Mariners. Four months at NAS Alameda and then it was off to war in the South Pacific.

It was while flying Martin PBM's in the South Pacific on long-range patrols from Iwo Jima that Ackerman flew his most rewarding, but hazardous flight. It seemed like the entire Pacific that day was solid overcast at a thousand feet with a light rain dampening the already wet world below as Lt. Ackerman eased his twin-engined patrol bomber into the sky and disappeared into the grey mist. They patrolled northward toward the mainland of Japan to screen for the Navy's Fast Carrier Task Forces. The blue luster of the Pacific was dimmed to a dull grey by the low overcast and light rain as navigation, off the wave caps, became increasingly more difficult. Suddenly, while only 45 miles off Tokyo Bay, a Japanese destroyer escort appeared immediately in front of them. Too late to set up an adequate bomb run, they opened fire with as many of their 50-caliber machine guns as they could bring to bare upon the Japanese ship. Sinking a vessel of that kind with only machine gun fire was rare, but the accuracy of their fire was so devastating that the Japanese ship quickly slipped beneath the waves.

Being so close to Tokyo Bay, it wasn't long before three Japanese Zeros appeared on the scene to help the sinking ship. Ackerman knew that the PBM was no match for the Japanese fighters, so he climbed quickly for the grey clouds above and headed for home, eluding the fighters. They flew southerly for about two hours with no means to navigate but by flying a heading for a certain time and hope. They slid beneath the clouds only to find nothing but the grey-blue sea below. A zigzag course was flown in the hopes of seeing land when they were jumped by a flight of F6F Hellcats. "Hey -- we're the good guys too!" they tried to convey to the approaching fighters. They must have received the message, as they veered off suddenly leaving Ackerman again alone in search of his home island. Finally, in the grey merk ahead, they saw their home base, none too soon, as they landed with low fuel lights glowing on all seven of their fuel tanks.

Lt. Commander Ackerman returned home assigned as Operation Officer to NAS Watsonville until he was released from active duty in 1946; the same time that NAS Watsonville was also returned to civilian life. In fact, Lt. Commander Ackerman flew the last active Naval flight off NAS Watsonville, and Mr. Ackerman landed the first civil airplane onto the Watsonville Airport. He was quickly appointed airport manager, and he started the Watsonville Flying Service — running the fuel service, teaching flight training, flying charter flights, and becoming a Cessna aircraft salesman. In October of 1947, he received approval from the government to train under the GI bill, and approximately 350 students earned their civilian wings under this program.

Mr. Ackerman started his Corporate Pilot career while operating the Watsonville Flying Service when he became the personal pilot for Nick Copriviza of Fresh Frozen Foods flying a Navion. He then flew a Twin Beech for J "Bud" Vuckasovich, and in 1954, he flew the first airplane, a Cessna 180 four-seat taildragger, for Granite Construction Company. From that beginning, Granite, with Ackerman as pilot, slowly moved up to twin-engined aircraft flying higher and faster in more comfort until, in February 1976, with Dan Chauvet as copilot, Ackerman landed Granite Construction's and Watsonville's first jet, a Cessna Citation, onto the asphalt runway of Watsonville Airport.

Life has become a little easier now for Mr. Ackerman. Retired from the Navy Reserves as a full Commander in 1953, if he can't be found in the airport manager's office, he may be at 40,000 feet in the Citation, or else try the local tennis courts where he still gives younger players a lesson now and then.

