

Sacrifice in the Sky:
The Flying Minutemen of San Jose's Civil Air Patrol

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Preface

The writer Paul Bowles had this to say about biography:

“Telling what happened (in a person’s life) does not necessarily make a good story. In my tale, for instance, there are no dramatic victories because there was no struggle. I hung on and waited. It seems to me that this must be what most people do; the occasions when there is the possibility of doing more than that are becoming rare indeed.”

The essay that follows is dedicated to the men and woman of San Jose Senior Squadron 80 of the Civil Air Patrol (CAP) who have not only accepted but thrived on the challenge of “the possibility of doing more” – sometimes with fatal consequences. Over the past 50-plus years these Santa Clara County volunteers have created a legacy of saving lives and helping others.

In particular, this essay focuses on two individuals who exemplified the courage, commitment, and compassion of CAP, and who gave their lives in pursuit of its mission: Lt. Col. Frederick Nettell and Capt. Jess Cenicerros. Both lived in San Jose at the time of their accident.

Please note that by focusing on these two individuals, this author means no slight to the three other Squadron 80 members who lost their lives while flying volunteer CAP missions. Nor is this essay meant to downplay the many, many efforts of the CAP volunteers currently carrying out search and rescue and other worthy missions.

The attempt is to honor the heroic efforts of San Jose Senior Squadron 80 – and in particular two of its members who sacrificed their lives in the skies above California while attempting to help others.

Essay

For more than a week in early November 1997 the rugged Alpine Wilderness lying along the California-Nevada border had stymied all attempts to locate a missing plane. The densely wooded area made seeing the ground – and a downed plane – practically impossible. Early morning fog also played a role, clouding visibility and limiting searches to the late morning and afternoon.

Still, rescuers remained upbeat. The pilot of the missing Cessna 206B aircraft had been flying for more than a decade, including frequent flights from Minden, Nevada, where the plane originated, to Calaveras County, its destination. A break in the weather creating optimal flying conditions also buoyed the searchers. It was possible to survive in the wilderness this long, but with each passing hour the hope of finding one or more survivors lessened dramatically.

When the news of the missing plane with its four passengers reached the members of the Civil Air Patrol (CAP), the volunteers gathered at Minden-Tahoe Airport to coordinate and search for the four missing flyers. For more than a week between 50 and 70 CAP members and 20 planes scoured the Sierras, without luck. The search was particularly difficult because of the deep valleys, which are often inaccessible to airplanes. Lt. Joseph Onesto, a public information officer with CAP, said CAP volunteers would continue indefinitely. “The search will continue until the plane is found,” Onesto said at the time.

And then tragedy struck.

On the morning of November 3rd a search team consisting of two members of the CAP San Jose Senior Squadron 80 and one member of CAP Composite Squadron 10 took off in a single-engine Cessna in another attempt to locate the presumably-downed plane. Squadron 10 Capt. Joseph Lawrence, the observer, accompanied Squadron 80 pilots Lt. Col. Frederick Nettell, 81, and Capt. Jess Ceniceros, 61, both of San Jose, on the mission.

Ceniceros and Nettell exemplified the courage and passion of CAP members. Good friends, between the two they had amassed more than 33 years of volunteer flying. Their missions had ranged from locating downed aircraft to transporting live organs for emergency organ transplant operations.

Something went wrong that day, however. Despite clear flying conditions, and for reasons still to be determined, their Cessna plowed into a tree-studded mountain at 9,000 feet and erupted in flames. Lawrence, although badly burned, survived. Cenicerros and Nettell died instantly.

In an irony that could only be based on actual life, and not fiction, the searchers themselves had succumbed to the dangers of flight while attempting to search for and find a downed plane.

(The original plane that had crashed was found two days after the Cenicerros and Nettell accident and very near their crash site. All four people aboard the Cessna 206B were found dead.)

Ceniceros and Nettell were not Squadron 80's first pilots killed while on a CAP-related mission. On January 14, 1995, Squadron 80 suffered the first loss of life by one of its member while on a mission when a three-person team crashed in the San Gabriel Mountains in Southern California. The three, Capt. Robert Leman, 48, of San Jose, 1st Lt. Brian Perkin, 39, of Santa Clara, and 1st Lt. James Spadafore, 62, of San Jose, lost their lives while searching for a plane and pilot that had been missing for two weeks.

The three had been airborne for less than an hour when other CAP members in the air picked up signals from an emergency locator transmitter from a CAP plane. Satellite reports pinpointed and confirmed the Squadron 80 plane was missing. Rescuers finally located the plane – upside down and split in two. All three Squadron 80 members, who never radioed they were in distress, had been killed at impact.

Rescuers had to wait until the next day to remove the bodies because of inclement weather. Leman, Perkin, and Spadafore's bodies were airlifted from the crash site by helicopter and flown to a nearby airport to be put on a waiting plane and returned to San Jose. Among those at the airport to honor the three flyers were the wife and children of the missing pilot the three had been valiantly searching for. (The missing plane was later found; its pilot died in the crash.)

CAP is the volunteer civilian auxiliary of the U.S. Air Force. Created on 1 December 1941, its early charter was to patrol the East and West coasts for German submarines, rescue downed pilots, and transport cargo and other supplies during the war. These "Flying Minutemen," as early pilots were called, amassed a stunning record: flying more than half-a-million hours, sinking two enemy submarines, and saving hundreds of crash victims.

The CAP volunteers proved so helpful during the war effort that on 26 May 1948 Congress passed Public Law 557, which permanently established CAP as the Auxiliary of the new U.S. Air Force. Today CAP operates as a nonprofit agency with the advice and assistance of the Civil Air Patrol-U.S. Air Force Headquarters at Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama. There are 1,700 units nationwide consisting of approximately 53,000 members, 5,000 of which are based in the state of California. CAP members wear uniforms similar to those of the U.S. Air Force, but with distinctive CAP insignia and badges. The CAP has about 530 corporate-owned and 5,300 member-owned aircraft. In addition, CAP operates a radio network of about 18,000 fixed, mobile, and airborne stations – the second largest radio communication network in the United States.

CAP's three main functions are:

1. Emergency Services. Search and rescue missions for missing pilots or persons, transportation of live organs for transplant, and assistance during natural disasters, among others.

2. Aerospace Education. Sponsoring aerospace education courses in high school, and conducting workshops for training teachers in aviation-related topics. Each year, CAP sponsors approximately 200 workshops in colleges and universities across the nation which reach more than 5,000 educators. In addition, CAP hosts the premier aerospace education conference each year: the National Congress on Aviation and Space Education.
3. Cadet Program. Provides training and scholarships and other support to persons ages 12-18 to help grow future leaders in American aviation and other walks of life. More than 18,000 boys and girls from all over the U.S. currently participate in the Cadet Program, and ten percent of the students enrolled in the Air Force Academy are former CAP cadets.

Of the three, CAP is best known for its search and rescue (SAR) efforts. CAP now flies more than 85 percent of all inland SAR missions directed by the Air Force Rescue Coordination Center at Langley AFTB, Virginia. Overseas, CAP supports the Joint Rescue Coordination Centers in Hawaii and Puerto Rico. According to CAP, CAP members save more than 100 people every year.

CAP members are often the first on the scene when disaster strikes. Disaster relief efforts include air and ground transportation, establishing a communications network, flying disaster relief officials to remote locations, and supporting federal, state and local disaster relief organizations with manpower and leadership. CAP has formal agreements with a number of humanitarian relief agencies, including the American Red Cross, Federal Emergency Management Agency, Federal Aviation Administration, and U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary.

CAP also performs a variety of missions in direct support of the U.S. Air Force, including missions for damage assessment, radiological monitoring, light transport, and low altitude route surveys.

In addition, CAP has made major contributions to the fighting the war on drugs by providing aerial reconnaissance, airborne communication support, and the airlifting of law enforcement personnel.

San Jose Squadron 80 has been operating continuously since the early days of CAP's formation. The group consists of between 35 and 75 men and women at any given time, as members move into or out of the San Jose area. While all members are volunteers, not all are pilots. Most members either have full-time jobs, such as police officers or engineers, or are partly or fully retired.

Emergency calls arrive at Squadron 80 three to four times a week. Calls range from false alarms to requests for assistance in locating downed planes. Most aircraft are equipped with an electronic transmitter that is activated by a crash. CAP pilots search for the electronic signals when searching for missing planes. Minutes count when attempting to locate a crash site, as often pilots and passengers are seriously injured. Because of the time sensitivity of searching for survivors of a plane crash or transporting organs for transplant operations, CAP members are often raised out of bed in the middle of the night or pulled away from family events.

CAP pilot deaths are rare. The five men lost from Squadron 80 are the only casualties during its history. According to figures provided by the CAP Public Affairs Office at Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama, less than 50 CAP members have been killed during CAP missions.

Of the five Squadron 80 members who have been killed during CAP missions over the last several years, Cenicerros personifies the pioneer spirit which California and Santa Clara County are known for.

Ceniceros was "as good they come" in terms of dedication to search and rescue missions, according to Squadron 80 Commander Capt. David Coppom.

"Jess was deeply, deeply involved in search and rescue," Coppom said. "He and Lt. Col. Nettell were always among the first to volunteer when a plane was down."

Most CAP members like Cenicerros volunteer for a simple reason: the flights allow them to combine a love of flying with a way to help others. "You can put your hobby or your passion to a useful purpose," Coppom said.

Coppom refused to speculate on the cause of the crash that killed Cenicerros and Nettell, the condition of the plane they were flying, or which of the two was piloting the plane when it went down, citing the National Transportation Safety Board's (NTSB) ongoing investigation of the accident. Capt. Lawrence, who spent considerable time in the hospital recovering from his burns from the crash, also could not be interviewed because of the pending NTSB investigation. The final NTSB report should be released in the summer or fall of 1997.

Ceniceros was born 21 May 1936 in Indio, California. Jo Ann Cenicerros, Jess's wife of 36 years, said her husband had a difficult, strict upbringing. Even during his early childhood years, however, Cenicerros knew he wanted to be a pilot.

"Flying is something Jess always wanted to do," Jo Ann said. "We kept in touch with one of his grade school teacher's over the years, Ms. Willa Hall, and she said it was something special to see a kid's dream come true."

After high school, Cenicerros joined the Air Force hoping to become a pilot. Constant military red tape prevented him from achieving pilot status, and he did not re-enlist when his tour of duty ended. He then earned an electrical engineering degree at Heald College in San Francisco and planned to become an engineer. During a noontime walk in San Francisco, however, he saw an armed services recruiting poster seeking flyers and decided to try again. After failing the Navy's eye examination, Cenicerros passed the Marine Corp.'s eye exam and eventually became a Marine officer, flying fighter jets. He later captained jetliners for United Airlines for nearly 30

years, flying Boeing 727s, 737s, 757s, 767s and DC-8s. After his retirement from United in 1996, he devoted the majority of his free time to CAP missions.

In addition to Jo Ann, Cenicerros is survived by daughters Karen Harper of Fresno and Julie Cenicerros of San Jose, and two granddaughters.

While strict about many aspects of his life, Cenicerros had his own idea of what to wear on CAP flights, according to those interviewed. He is most known for wearing a railroad engineer's hat in the cockpit (both with CAP and with United), and flew almost every CAP mission wearing his Marine-issued leather bomber jacket. He was wearing the jacket the day he died, Jo Ann said.

At one point Cenicerros served as Commander of Squadron 80. During his command, Cenicerros initiated and later expanded a new Squadron 80 service: the transfer of live organs to needy patients. This program, called CAP-LOT for Civil Air Patrol – Live Organ Transport, has saved the lives of 300 people and aided 4,600 others during the 16 years of mission, according to CAP Lt. Col. Sydney Wolfe.

"In 1982 during his command, Jess read an article on a group transporting blood and asked, 'What else can we do?'" Wolfe explained. Under Cenicerros' direction, Wolfe and two others studied how to most effectively initiate a live organ transport program and sustain the resulting expenses (mainly for fuel) involved. Within a year the first transport was completed.

According to CAP records supplied by Wolfe, Cenicerros is credited with flying 28 CAP-LOT missions that resulted in saving 16 lives and assisting 399 other people. As a group, Squadron 80 has completed more than 400 CAP-LOT flights.

Cenicerros' love of flying and piloting skills make his death hard to accept, Wolfe said. "It always seems to be the most dedicated people that something (bad) happens to," Wolfe said, referring to both Cenicerros and Nettell.

Coppom echoed that sentiment. "We're not supposed to put ourselves in danger, but whether out of goodness or not, things happen."

Jo Ann said her husband never dwelled on the potential dangers of flying. "Jess used to tell me, 'You can't worry. I'm not going to do anything to kill myself,' she said. "I always felt that he thought that the danger and the occasional death was part of the whole package, like it or not."

Jo Ann said her strongest memory is her husband's commitment to a dream of flying. "He came from nothing, he had all these obstacles placed in front of him, but he still succeeded," she said.

While flying was Cenicerros' main passion in life, his good friend Nettell had many interests – and, in fact, had taken up flying only after retiring from his full-time job.

Lt. Col. Nettell was born 8 October 1916 in Grass Valley. He later earned his electrical engineering degree from the University of California-Berkeley, during which time he was in the Reserve Officer Training Corps. During World War II, he served as an instructor and also was called up during the Korean War. He had achieved the rank of Colonel upon his retirement from the Army. Before and after his war service, Nettell was an engineer for Pacific Gas & Electric Co., retiring in 1965.

Nettell was a man of many interests, according to his brother Gale, and took up flying only after he retired from PG&E.

"Anything he went into, he went into all the way," Gale said. Nettell's interests included playing the coronet, skiing, hunting, and fishing. He shot rifles competitively and competed on a national level.

The oldest of four brothers, Nettell's death shocked his family. In addition to his wife Dorothy, he is survived by sons William of Ellsworth, Maine, and Thomas of Fresno; and daughter Mandy Phillips of Scotts Valley.

Brother Frank said Nettell's curiosity always kept him trying – and mastering – new hobbies. "He spoke often about CAP," Frank said. "It was the curiosity of flying and the self-satisfaction of helping others that he thrived on."

According to CAP records, in addition to many SAR missions Nettell is credited with flying 35 CAP-LOT missions that resulting in saving 12 lives and helping more than 700 others.

Cadets and senior CAP members provide a wealth of talent to assist citizens with projects and events. These include assisting with air shows, staging an emergency response enactment with wounded or casualties, honor guard teams for drill and ceremony, and education programs. Members do not have to be a pilot or own an airplane to join CAP.

For more information about CAP's activities, or to inquire about joining, please call either National Headquarters Civil Air Patrol at 1-800-FLY-2338, or San Jose Senior Squadron 80 at 408-258-2720.

Donations in either Cenicerros or Nettell's names may be made to CAP Senior Squadron 80, 2490 Cunningham Avenue, San Jose, California, 95148.

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