

The Right Stuff: Saratoga's George Cooper has got it

By Sara Hazlewood

Memorabilia from the different facets of George Cooper's life are interspersed with family archives and farming paraphernalia in the historic tasting room of the Cooper-Garrod Estate Vineyards. There are ribbons from wine contests alongside photos from his test-pilot days at NASA, an outgrowth of being a fighter pilot during World War II.

While becoming a wine master may not seem a natural transition for a pilot, it made perfect sense for George Cooper, given the events of his life and his boundless energy.

Cooper is married to Louise Garrod, whose family settled in the Saratoga hills in 1893. The Garrods emigrated from England and over the years accumulated 250 acres. Originally the family grew apricots and prunes, but eventually stopped when it became unprofitable. In 1979 half the land was gifted to the Mid-Peninsula Regional Open Space District, but plenty of acreage remained for the vineyards and horse stables.

Cooper had met Louise when both were students at UC-Berkeley. He was pursuing a mining engineering degree and she was a political science major. They married in 1941.

After graduation he shifted gears in response to changing times: "I did mining in the 1930s but saw there was no future in this industry, so I went into aeronautics," he says.

World War II

Cooper went to work for Lockheed in Burbank as a design engineer, but World War II interrupted every-



George Cooper went from serving as a fighter pilot to developing the well-known cabernet franc for Cooper-Garrod Estate Vineyards.

Photograph by George Sakkestad

thing. What initially began as a one-year tour of duty in the Reserves turned into 4 1/2 years when he transferred to the Air Force to begin pilot training.

He was based in England and he flew 81 missions in a P47 Thunderbolt. His initial mission was escorting bombers over Germany to isolated battlefields. They attacked railroads, truck movements and fuel dumps throughout France in order to keep the Germans from easily supplying their forces. But his or-

ders changed in six weeks. It was D-day.

“Missions were decided day by day. We knew D-day would happen, but the date was well protected, and they did a good job of camouflaging it,” he says. He flew two missions on D-day, his main job being protection and coverage of ground troops.

At Normandy a pilot friend was shot down, but members of the French Resistance movement protected him. “They saved a lot of pilots,” he remembers. He stayed in England and flew into France until Normandy was secure—or as secure as circumstances allowed—and an airstrip was built. The area was heavily forested, so trees had to be quickly removed.

Afterwards he was assigned to support the 3rd Army under General George Patton as the field advanced toward Paris. “Our airfield moved as we advanced toward Paris, keeping closer and closer to the front lines to reduce the amount of time we flew.”

Since his primary mission was ground support, he didn’t have much opportunity for run-ins with German aircraft. Still, on the three occasions he did meet German aircraft, he shot down two of them on each of two engagements for a total of four shot down.

In Rheims, the pilots took over a French chateau one block from Piper-Heidsieck—one of the oldest champagne houses in the world. Champagne was \$1 a bottle. The chateau was the former home of Nazi collaborators, and as troops advanced, the collaborators fled. The pilots, who had been sleeping in tents, were pleased to find their finest accommodations of the war.

“The chateau had several cases of champagne in the basement, which we liberated.”

He recalls the time he received orders from headquarters to take a senior editor of *Time* magazine on a mission. “We didn’t want to do it, naturally, but we did it. And as operations officer, I decided to take him on my aircraft.” So they modified the plane to include a backseat for him.

“Where’s all the flack you talk about?” the editor asked over the intercom. So Cooper moved his head

to the side so he could see out the window and pointed to the puffs of smoke coming up from anti-aircraft fire from the ground.

Planes were shot at all the time, but it was difficult hitting a moving target traveling 350 mph. They did lose about 20 percent of the pilots, though. Some were shot down, others were taken prisoner and still others were wounded and sent home.



Test pilot at NASA

Upon his return home, Cooper began the next phase of his career at NACA (later NASA) as a test pilot. In addition, he did graduate work in aeronautical engineering at Stanford over the course of two years. “I didn’t get a degree, I just wanted the courses.”

He tested 145 different aircraft, much of the testing done as research for the Air Force and Navy requirements. He flew some of the first new models to be tested and evaluated.

His favorite was the F86, used to explore the supersonic envelope before the advent of the wind tunnel. It was a subsonic airplane used at full power and

driven straight down from a maximum altitude of 46,000 feet to get it supersonic. This supersonic time lasted about 15 to 20 seconds.

“In the early ’50s, regardless of what Chuck Yeager was doing, I had more supersonic time than anyone I know of,” he says.

This type of flying, although physically rigorous, is done gradually so the body adjusts, but it still took its toll. “It bothered my hearing more than anything,” he says.

Although it was dangerous work, “we carefully thought out the risks,” he says. Before a test pilot sets foot in the plane, much work is done on the ground.

“Every flight is thought out, all the end data is reviewed and the flight test plan formulated,” says Ron Gerdes, retired from NASA and also a test pilot hired by Cooper.

Which isn’t to say there weren’t near mishaps. In one particular test flight, the engine started failing over Sunnyvale and Cooper was forced to land, taking out 84 prune trees in the process.

Another close call occurred when he was performing reversible pitch propeller tests in a P47 and doing vertical dives. He was using the propeller as a dive breaker, but the P47 wouldn’t come out of reverse pitch, causing a braking effect rather than pulling. After trying many times, he thought he’d have to land in an open field, which he preferred to bailing out since there were no ejection seats. He was below the treetops when he was finally able to correct the problem. The engine was still working even though he’d jettisoned the canopy, and he managed to get back to Moffett Field.

These tests were done over the Central Valley, beyond the Mt. Hamilton range, because it had no population and was a designated test flight area so commercial aircraft stayed out, says Cooper ... or at least

they were supposed to, he corrects himself.

During this time, President John F. Kennedy asked Vice President Lyndon Johnson to visit the various NASA centers, since they’d only been established for a couple of years. So Johnson got in one of the simulators to experience this new technology.

“We were told he was a pilot, but he crashed every time; I tried to prevent it but I couldn’t,” he says.

Cooper also met with plane designer Bill Lear and



was instrumental in getting NASA to buy the first Learjet. It was supposed to be used for transportation, not research, but actually ended up being used by airborne scientists, particularly in the development of the infrared telescope by Frank Low of the University of Arizona. It reported data from space on stars and galaxies and was so successful it was expanded until it was eventually installed on a 747.

While at NASA, Cooper devised a rating system for pilots to evaluate planes using a scientific 10-point scale rather than the intuitive method used at the time.

“The Cooper-Harper handling qualities rating scale is still widely used as a means for test pilots to measure the amount of work they need to do to get the

airplane to do what they want,” says Glenn Bugos of the NASA Ames history office.

Cooper is one of 12 inductees into the Ames Hall of Fame and even has a street named after him. Fittingly called Cooper Loop, it’s located near the tarmac at the NASA Ames Research Center.

He’s also remembered as an excellent boss. “He didn’t order us into a project but allowed us to express an interest and encouraged us to pursue it,” says Gerdes.

The winery

Cooper attributes his interest in wine to his father-in-law, R.V. Garrod, who took him up to Stevens Creek for a drink now and then. “An old Frenchman named Bordi had a small winery, and for 50 cents he’d fill a jug with red wine.” These few opportunities over a glass of red wine sparked an interest.

He started to make wine in 1975 on a small, two-acre parcel, having retired from NASA in 1973. While the wine was drinkable, he knew he had a ways to go and set out to learn more. He took extension courses through UC Davis, and the wine started to improve.

Originally he gave the wine to donors for organizations like the Saratoga Historical Society and West Valley Scholarship Fund. But in 1990 he decided to make it a commercial winery and began selling directly to restaurants, markets and wine shops. “In retrospect it might have been better having a broker handle this.” But it afforded his daughter a way to earn more money, since the salary they were able to pay wasn’t enough.

This is indeed a family business. His nephew Jan Garrod takes care of the vineyards, manages the stables and is operations officer.

His son, Bill, is retired from the State Department’s Foreign Service and is assistant winemaker. However, Dad hopes to become “winemaker emeritus” in the near future and hand over his duties so he can spend more time with his wife.

These are difficult times in the wine business.

“There’s a terrible glut—just walk into Safeway and look at all the yellow tags,” he says.

They’d managed to keep ahead of the game up until this year, when they suffered serious decreases in business because of the number of restaurants going out of business. So in response, they’ve expanded distribution to include Sacramento, Southern California, New York and New Jersey.

They only make wine from their own grapes—hence the term “estate wine”—and grow six varieties. They are best known for their cabernet franc. “We were one of the first wineries to begin marketing 100 percent cabernet franc, and we’re told that ours is one of the best.”

There’s a common thread running through George Cooper’s life. “He’s tenacious,” says Jack Boyd, a research engineer and then Ames deputy director. “Like now, in growing all those vineyards, once he puts his mind to it, he’ll get it down.”

Even still, at 88 years old, striving for quality is of utmost importance.

Former World War II fighter pilot and NASA test pilot George Cooper looks out from the porch of the Cooper-Garrod Winery.

All suited up, George Cooper is ready for flight during his test-pilot days.

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