



Frank Hayes Prentice Jr.

June 26, 1927 - July 16, 2020

Known for his limitless capacity for love and learning, Frank Hayes Prentice passed peacefully at his ranch home on Thursday, July 16th at the age of 93. Frank, who went by “Ace” or “Papa Acen” to those closest to him, possessed a rare openness that made perfect strangers feel immediately welcome and a playful wit that put them at ease. His sly humor was often apparent whenever someone paid him a compliment, to which he’d grin and reply, “Aw, you’re just saying that because it’s true.” He was a devoted husband, father, grandfather, great grandfather, farmer, pilot and friend to many. Frank exuded a genuine warmth and humility that was forged by his unwavering Christian faith, which anchored him throughout his life and shaped his other life passions—family and flying. To know him, however slightly, was to love him. As such, there were many who regarded him as family even outside of his official one.

Frank was born in Willows on June 26th, 1927 to Frank Hayes Prentice Sr. and Hazel Fern Lavender Prentice. His love of flying was fostered early on as the Prentice's lived near a small airfield—the Willows-Glenn County Airport—where the younger Frank would sit for hours watching planes take off and land. As he watched, he imagined what it might feel like to fly one of the planes himself. In time, he would find out. The fascination with flight continued into his early adulthood, and upon graduating from Willows High in 1945, Frank enlisted in the Navy with the hopes of parlaying the experience into becoming a pilot. That was just 10 months before the end of World War II. He was stationed primarily in San Diego during his enlistment and saved the money he earned working at a commissary to pay for ground school. Shortly thereafter, he actualized his lifelong dream by earning his pilot’s license.

Although Frank never had the opportunity to serve his country as a fighter pilot, he went on to serve it in a fight of another kind, becoming one of the founding members of the first Air Tanker Firefighting Squadron. The group included seven elite pilots based out of Willows who pioneered aerial firefighting and executed the first-ever air drop in the 1955 Mendenhall Fire in Mendocino National Forest. In a Boeing Stearman 75, a plane sometimes used for crop dusting that was later converted to an air tanker with a 170

gallon drum, Frank buzzed forests engulfed in flames and doused the blazing treetops from above. With billowing towers of smoke and ash obscuring their view, he and his team carried out airstrikes with pinpoint precision until the fire they had been tasked with fighting was extinguished. This practice remains an invaluable technique in wildland firefighting today, and would not have been as widely used or evolved had it not been for the first Air Tanker Firefighting Squadron. Frank was the last surviving member of that historic crew. The Stearman he flew had been originally designed to train fighter pilots for the war, however, with it repurposed, Frank combated some of the deadliest forest fires in California history.

It's impossible to think of Frank apart from his wife of 70 years, Lila, who he met at the Willows skating rink in 1948. Being reserved by nature, Frank was reluctant to approach the more outgoing Lila, who skated circles around him in an attempt to catch his eye. After a full month of employing this technique to no avail, Lila decided to be more direct. She summoned her courage and skated toward Frank at full speed, knocking him into the rink wall and making certain to gain his undivided attention. The effort proved effective, and at their 70th anniversary, Frank recalled, "When I regained consciousness I was married." That initial encounter had him first seeing stars, then hearts. Lila said that checking Frank into the wall was "the best move she ever made." The collision prompted a three-month courtship that resulted in an engagement in June of 1949. They kept their engagement secret at first, since Frank lacked the money to buy a ring at the time of his proposal. Nonetheless, Lila accepted the offer and Frank worked for three weeks loading rice trucks in the sweltering summer heat of Woodland until he scraped up funds to take his soon-to-be bride ring shopping. On November 26th at Willows Christian Church—the same year as their engagement—the two were married. From that point on, the pair was virtually inseparable. And though Frank would later fight fires by trade, the flame of his love for Lila never flickered nor failed, but burned eternally.

Frank worked in aviation through the 1950's and 60's, converting a Naval Aircraft Factory N3N to an air tanker in 1958, and three years later, opened Ace Aerial Service in Ukiah. However, he and Lila made Chico their permanent home in 1971 when Frank took over his in-laws' almond and walnut farm, leaving professional aviation behind. At their Chico ranch, Frank raised a family with Lila and worked the land throughout his life. He was survived by his beloved children Elizabeth Ann Danley (Wade), Marilee Susan Doolittle (David), F. Steven Prentice (Yolanda). Frank relished the company of his grandchildren, Timothy Danley (Ashley), John Danley, Julia Danley, Steve Doolittle, Ben Doolittle (Tiffany), Rebekah Newman (Dan), Malia Redkey (Chase), Christopher Prentice (Aysha), Meghan Rollins (Keith), Jeff Prentice (Katya), Annie Prentice and Janae Swartz (Corey). He was also blessed with great grandchildren Everett Danley, Delaney Doolittle,

Eli Doolittle, Emery Doolittle, Frank Newman, Millie Newman, Acen Redkey, Parker Rollins, Asher Rollins, Roni Rollins, Zane Rollins and Wyatt Prentice. Lastly, Frank cherished the friendship of Aysha's sister Amanda Raley and his niece Vikki DeGaa.

A memorial service is currently pending due to the Coronavirus pandemic. In the meantime, Frank will continue to be remembered by his children as the best father ever. To his grandchildren, the best grandfather ever. To his friends, the best friend ever. But of course, as Frank would say, they're "only saying it because it's true." In every sense of the word, the man born Frank was truly an Ace.

Comments



“ My condolences to the family of this extremely interesting man! Many things I have read make me think I had the honor of meeting him, at Essex Ranch. The Frank I met visited my family regularly, often with a case of asparagus in hand. With my parents, both 1926 babies are deceased so I cannot get this answer directly. I have a great memory of “my FP”, so this question is quite important to me. Nonetheless, my sincere condolences on your loss.
George Palmer, Chico

George Palmer - October 26 at 08:59 PM



“ My thoughts and prayers are with you, Yolanda and Meghan and family. When I saw the name Prentice in the obituary, I was sad to see it was a beloved relative of yours. But what an interesting man he was. My children Meghann and Kaitlyn Shorrock went to school with Meghan, my Meghann being in the same class as Meghan. Many condolences, Kris Shorrock

Kristin Shorrock - August 24 at 07:13 PM