

PML Action Hero: Ken Cole

Commander of the Commander

By Janet Gregory

Published April 2014 in the PML News

Action. That kind of quiet, intense, “get it done” action is what Ken Cole’s life is all about.

At 16-years old Ken marched into the military recruiting office. Raised in Ohio, half-way between Cleveland and Columbus, he was inspired by hard-working Midwest values and heroes of the American Legion and VFW (Veterans of Foreign Wars). The recruiter shuffled the papers on his desk mumbling “scrawny piece of crap” which motivated Ken into action all the more.

Ken was shipped off to Farragut, ID to be inspected, injected, drilled and trained. Lined up, counting off by twos; “ones” became seamen and “twos” were firemen. Thus was the unpretentious beginning of a 30-year career in the Navy.

Firemen learn everything about firearms and machinery. At Camp Pendleton Ken mastered rifles; how to carry, run, roll, clean and fire. They learned to move as a force, working synchronously. Next training stop was Brown Field for LTVs (Landing Track Vehicles) and tanks.

Liberty before deployment was at Treasure Island. San Francisco was the biggest city Ken had ever seen and he wanted to experience the wild Barbary Coast for himself. “Get outta here, kid” was all he heard from the bouncers. Disappointed, Ken shuffled into a cable car barn where an engineer took a-liking to him, giving him a full tour and let him work the clutch, “it was amazing.”

Ken did five assault landings at Yap, Palu, Tinian, Saipan and Okinawa before his ship joined an armada. “It was 360-degrees, a fantastic armada of ships - cargo, carriers and tankers of every size”. He had no doubt that we would win the war. After the Japanese surrender, Ken participated in disarming Japan, as people turned in guns and ammunition to be destroyed.

Life in the military suited Ken. When he reenlisted they gave 60-days leave but after only 20-days he was bored and returned for duty to the destroyer USS Leonard F. Mason. Ken hadn’t finished high school when he first enlisted thus reading and writing skills were weak. The Chief ranted, “you are the stupidest piece of &#*%; I should take you out and drown you.” This tirade whirled Ken into action and in 6-months he completed high school and continued taking courses to earn multiple engineering certifications and a full commission.

Commander Ken’s distinguished 30-year Navy career spanned World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War. He honed leadership skills in the Navy. Be respectful. Don’t set any requirements that you wouldn’t do yourself. Follow four-steps for success: organize, deputize, supervise and criticize. Those four steps will keep you alive in wartime, make business thrive and any project successful.

After the Navy, Ken settled in California applying his engineering expertise to Boiler Machinery Insurance. His work spanned many industries from food processing to lumber to nuclear power, driving safety and minimizing business interruption.

The seeds of aviation were sown as a child watching airplanes and barnstormers at the grass field outside of town. Right after WWII, Ken got his pilot's license, requalifying after retiring from the Navy. Ken has built an impressive collection of aviation memorabilia through the years including over 3000 aviation history books. He has owned several airplanes and the Rockwell Commander is his favorite. Ken is the Commander of the Commander as he and his wife, Dianne, commute between the Bay Area and Pine Mountain Lake.

Ken bought his PML lot in the early 1970's. He preferred oak trees to pine and airport to lake so unit 12 was the place to be. He built a few years later. Ken still loves the quiet, great view, watching satellites overhead at night and those spectacular cantaloupe sunsets. Ken is an artist in paint, metal and multiple materials. He painted PML's cantaloupe sky in his recreation of the famous Curtis Wright Learn-to-Fly poster featured in his home.



Ken has been a quiet force in the development of Pine Mountain Lake Airport. Ralph Butler and Ken took action to raise money, grade and pave the north taxiway. It was a bit of a fiasco but the job got done opening up airport access for more of the community. Next time you walk by the airport office look for the plaque that Ken put up honoring Ralph's contribution to PML Airport.

After an aircraft accident in the area, Ralph and Ken roared into action again, raising money for airport safety. Ken tapped into his business network for a company that manufactured VASI lights. VASI (visual approach slope indicator) is a light system on the side of our airport runway providing descent guidance to approaching aircraft. These FAA-approved lights are visible up to 5-miles during the day and 20-miles at night. Thanks to Ken, the VASI has provided 25-years of guidance for many safe landings. Ken Cole is a man of action and a true PML Action Hero.