



France Bestows Its Highest Honor on Former Ames Test Pilot George Cooper

By April Gage
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In a small ceremony held in the French Consulate in San Francisco on May 8, 2012, Consul General Romain Serman presented France's highest honor to former head of Ames flight operations and chief test and research pilot George E. Cooper. As reported in the San Jose Mercury news, the French Consul General commended Cooper along with two other World War II veterans for their "courage, selflessness and dedication" in helping to "defend and preserve the independence of France and our common values" as he pinned the prestigious Legion of Honor medal to Cooper's chest.

Cooper received the commendation for his performance as a US Army Air Force fighter pilot during World War II, when he flew a P-47 Thunderbolt on 81 missions with the 412th Fighter Squadron. Deployed first to England, then on to positions in France and Belgium, Cooper supported the advance of Allied forces in 1944 and 1945 by conducting attacks on the German ground transportation system. Cooper's strafing sorties required him to fly the P-47 low to the ground while firing a machine gun at targets such as roads, railways, aircraft, land, and water vehicles, as well as fuel stockpiles. Routinely deployed to conduct these highly dangerous ground attack missions and not "top cover" where fighter pilots were likely to engage in air-to-air combat, Cooper encountered German enemy aircraft just three times but managed to shoot down four of them, coming one plane shy of becoming an ace. Though several of his colleagues were downed, George--and his aircraft--made it through the war without a scratch.

Prior to his involvement in active military service, George Cooper studied engineering at UC Berkeley, focusing on mining engineering and working in California gold mines during summer breaks between terms. While at Cal, he met and married classmate Louise Garrod, and joined the U.S. Army's Reserve Officers' Training Corps to earn extra money, not anticipating the war and his subsequent call to active duty. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, Cooper completed flight school and earned a pilot degree, then served as a flight instructor in the Southeast Training Command before being posted with the Ninth US Army Air Force. By March 1945, he was eligible to leave the front and returned home to the Saratoga foothills and his wife Louise.

In 1945 he was hired as a test pilot at Ames (then known as the Ames Aeronautical Laboratory of the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics), where he further distinguished himself as an exceptional aviator and research engineer. At Ames from 1945 until his retirement in 1973, Cooper tested over 135 aircraft (including 41 kinds of aircraft carrier planes), routinely pushing

them straight down into hazardous high-speed maximum dives during test trials. Flight testing can be fatal but, just as he did in wartime, Cooper made his way through his flights without a scratch (though he did have to crash-land a malfunctioning Douglas SB2D into a local prune orchard, to the decided detriment of several trees and the aircraft). The intrepid pilot's death-defying field testing of aircraft designs was only part of his contribution to flight research. He helped develop ways for pilots to contribute to the flight research and design process with greater safety and reliability by using, for example, simulators and other mechanisms for translating human experience and expertise into useful data. One of the best-known examples of his many efforts in this area is Cooper's Pilot Opinion Rating Scale, a standardized methodology he developed for test pilots to effectively formulate observations about aircraft handling characteristics. The system, later adjusted in collaboration with Robert Harper and renamed the Cooper-Harper Handling Qualities Rating Scale, remains in use as an international standard.

After retiring from Ames in 1973, Cooper went traveling for a few months but apparently wasn't quite ready to call it quits. He came back to Ames, first helping with the reorganization of flight operations and developing the center's human factors aviation safety research program, then extending his career as an industry consultant for another dozen years while simultaneously satisfying his thirst for world travel. During this time, he also launched a commercial salmon fishing venture, embarked upon a home-building project in Lake Tahoe, and decided to try his hand at grape growing and winemaking. This last effort culminated in the esteemed Cooper-Garrod Vineyards, a successful family-run estate winery.

Though George Cooper has always been a quiet and modest man, he has been singled out by his colleagues for many prestigious honors such as the Octave Chanute and Arthur S. Flemming awards, selection as the first recipient of the Admiral Luis de Florez Flight Safety Award, induction into the National Academy of Engineering and NASA Ames Hall of Fame, and election as Fellow of the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics and Founding Fellow of the Society of Experimental Test Pilots. Recognition for his professional achievements has now come full circle with the Legion of Honor award for his military service at the start of his long career.

George Cooper, now ninety-six years old, is still living the good life in the Saratoga foothills.

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