

JACK * CONES

FLYING CONSTABLE OF TWENTYNINE PALMS

BY CHRISTOPHER FREEZE

"FROM OUT OF THE CLEAR BLUE OF THE WESTERN SKY..."

Mention the name *Sky King* to just about all pilots over 50 and chances are a smile will come to their faces as they begin to tell you about how, as a child, they watched the show on weekend television and dreamed of flying someday.

September of 2011 marked the 60th anniversary of the television series first airing. Many a pilot was inspired to fly by the radio and television adventure series Sky King. The story featured Arizona rancher and pilot Schuyler "Sky" King who, on the weekly show, chased black-hatted "bad guys" and helped "good guys" in his Cessna T-50 Bobcat Songbird, registered as N67832, with the periodic assistance of his niece, Penny, or his nephew, Clipper, who were both also pilots.

The series originally ran, off and on, from September 16, 1951, until March 8, 1959, but continued with reruns until the late 1960s.

What is not generally known is that the fictional exploits of Sky King paralleled the real-life deeds and adventures of Orville Jackson "Jack" Cones, known locally as "The Flying Constable of Twentynine Palms" in California from 1940 until his death in 1960.

MIDWESTERN ROOTS

Born and raised in Missouri, Jack received only a grade school education before enlisting in the Texas National Guard in 1917. From the Midwest, he went on to serve in France during World War I where, in the 17 months he served there, he became the personal motorcycle dispatch rider for Gen. John Pershing, the commander of the American Expeditionary Forces, and was also wounded in combat.

After the war, he moved to Southern California, where he met his wife, Clara. The couple decided to become homesteaders in the Mojave Desert in 1929. An experienced tractor operator, he helped build many of the early roads in San Bernardino County.

In March of 1932, he was appointed the second constable of the small township and was reputed to be able to "make a tin can dance in the sand with his gun." Initially, he patrolled the more than 2,800 square miles of his jurisdiction on horseback or automobile. A skilled marksman with his well-worn six-shooter, he preferred to handle crises with words and conversation before resorting to gunplay, earning himself the moniker "The Last of the Peace Officers."

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TAKING TO THE SKIES

Shortly after he completed building his homestead in 1939, Jack purchased a Piper J-3 Cub in order to speed his response time to those in his authority, in keeping with his personal motto of "I can't do everything, but I like to try." Furthermore, the self-taught man established a small airfield (which appeared on sectional maps of the time—aptly named "Cones Field") near his home to operate from, and began to fly sorties—in a "seat of the pants" fashion—in support of the population he served.

A typical encounter with Jack would start with the misfortune of becoming stranded in the vast Mojave. Out of the blue, Jack's stark-white Cub would zoom overhead at about 200 feet and drop, via a small parachute, a note to the



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misadventurer, asking if emergency assistance was required. If so, Jack would then land nearby, normally on a road, and lend help, usually armed with a canteen of water and a first-aid kit. On other occasions, he would drop food and beverage—wrapped in paper—to those lost in the wilderness.

Jack would also check in on the homesteaders living in remote parts of his beat. In a 1950 article discussing the exploits of Jack, one rancher in the Twentynine Palms area said, "We have a feeling of

security to know he can get to us fast in that airplane."

NO TYPICAL DAY

According to Jack's grandson, Bob Gorbould, many of the homesteaders had a prearranged signal to notify Jack if they needed his assistance. "I remember flying out east of town, over Wonder Valley, where he was low flying. So low that we were under the telephone lines." Bob said. "We found the ranch, saw the red signal on the clotheslines, circled the house, and went in for a landing on a dirt road. I'm about 13 years old at the time and seeing greasewood bushes ripping past me in the back seat.

"Anyways, my grandfather introduces me to the family, the dad and the kids, and they discuss whatever business they needed my grandfather for. Fifteen to 20 minutes later, away we'd go! The greasewood bushes flying past—good Lord! We circled around the house again, got waved off, and away we went."

One time, the San Bernardino police called Jack on the phone to notify him of a local



desperado that was fleeing in the direction of Twentynine Palms. Jack took down the description of the getaway vehicle and took off in his Piper Cub to intercept the bandit. In his trademark low-flying style, Jack spotted the automobile and proceeded to fly right over the top of the car, land in front of it, and come to a stop. Surprised, the brigand stopped. Jack then dismounted his plane, walked over to the would-be fugitive, and arrested him on the spot.

AID TO OUR FINEST

Another time, a group of military personnel training out of the Marine Corps base had become lost out in the desert.

Knowing of Jack's skills, the Navy contacted him and asked if he would join the search effort. Obligingly, Jack flew his Cub over the Joshua trees and managed to locate the wayward troops. Then, using his mini-parachute system derived from aerial flares, he dropped several canteens of water to them, along with a note saying that he would return the next day.

He reported the location of the troops to the military authorities, and the next day, he loaded the back seat of his Cub with water, medicine, and other supplies and flew back into the hills to return to the site of the lost party. Then, amongst the creosote bushes, Joshua trees, and desert sands, he landed the Piper and distributed his goods to the grateful soldiers. But, with no clear surface to take off from, the Navy later had to cut roads into the area in order to truck Jack's Cub out.

Bob Dunn flew with Jack in the back seat of the Cub on several occasions. "It was a big deal to ride with him to places like nearby Kelso or San Bernardino," Bob said. Bob, a lifelong pilot who now is an airport manager and owns a Cessna 185, got his first airplane ride from Jack, which inspired his interest in aviation.

ON UPWIND AND BEYOND

On the morning of Sunday, February 7, 1960, Bob Gorbould happened to run into his grandfather at the local drug store in Twentynine Palms. The two

chatted for a short bit and then parted ways, as Jack was to take Orville L. Jones, a 26-year-old civilian in the safety department at the nearby Marine Corps base, on a local area flight, with a stop at the Yucca Valley Airport (L22). But, shortly after noon, Jack was taking off in his white Piper Cub from Yucca Valley, with Orville riding in the back seat, when the Piper climbed up to 50 feet, banked sharply to the left, and entered an accelerated stall. The plane nosed into the ground, severely injuring Orville and Jack, who was found slumped over on the Cub's control stick. En route to the hospital, Jack passed away. An autopsy found that Jack had suffered a heart attack during the flight.

Jack was buried a couple days later at the Rose Hills Memorial Park in Whittier, California, in the cemetery's Sharon Lawn. The day of the funeral, flags were at half-mast throughout the town, and many businesses were closed from 10 to 11 a.m. out of respect for and in remembrance of Jack and his service.





THE SECOND CESSNA 310B off the assembly line, and registered as N5348A, this *Songbird* was flown during the remaining episodes of the series, until 1959.

No discussion of N5348A is complete without mention of the rumors that several -48As existed to complicate the historical record. The story goes that the original N5348A crashed in 1957, killing the pilot, six weeks after filming the stock shots and opening sequence with the new *Songbird*. Apparently, one of the other Cessnas used in the series had its number changed to 5348A so the stock footage would match the other sequences.

The sole mishap of the series that occurred during the filming occurred with this plane when Kirby Grant stopped it a few feet past the camera, burying the nose gear in a soft spot.

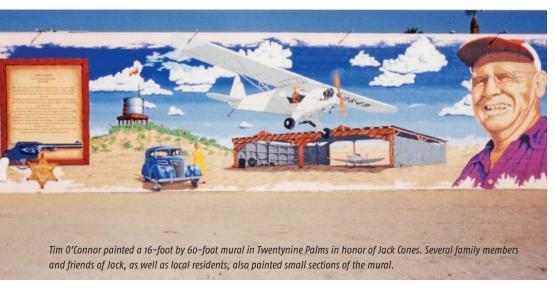
This *Songbird* was provided by Cessna at no cost to the producers and was piloted by Cessna's national sales manager for the 310, Bill Fergusson, who got the job after the motion picture pilot already selected was deemed unqualified to land the airplane at some of the off-airport sites required.

After a library of stock footage had been compiled, additional sequences were filmed using a different airplane painted as N5348A. It passed through seven owners, winding up with Cunningham Construction Company of Torrance California

Shortly before midnight on August 4, 1962, 33-year-old Basil Cunningham of Rolling Hills, California, pancaked the plane into the swampy ground southwest of Delano Airport, California. Basil, who was scheduled to pick up his three children that he had left at a motel there, was killed in the mishan.

The registration number 5348A now belongs to a 1964 Cessna 320C.

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A year after his death, the town of Twentynine Palms dedicated a bronze plaque, purchased with the contributions of individuals and businesses throughout the community, to Jack and his service to the desert oasis and its people. His wife, Clara, who passed away in April of 1977, is buried alongside him.

REMEMBRANCES OF THE LEGEND

Cones Field (2CA2) is still an active, albeit private, airport—its three dirt runways a silent witness to history and home to several airplanes. Bob Gorbould stills lives in the Cones homestead adjoining the field and maintains the runways as a sort of monument to its role in local history.

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BOB GORBOULD * * * * * * * *

Today, in downtown Twentynine Palms, a 16-foot by 60-foot mural of the pilot and lawman adorns the town. The artist, Tim O'Connor, of Twentynine Palms, came to admire the constable whom he never met—after hearing stories of Jack's exploits while taking flying lessons at nearby Cones Field in the early 1970s.

On the source of his inspiration, Tim stated, "Mainly because I learned out of that field in 1972, and his story was inspiration to me and got me excited in flying and old vintage aircraft. I heard stories from my old boss, Marvin Cobb, and Cones' wife, Clara."

The mural, dedicated in January of 1996, is located at 6308 Adobe Road in Twentynine Palms. Making the project a community effort, several family members and friends of Jack, as well as local residents, were allowed to paint small sections of the mural under Tim's supervision, serving as a lasting reminder of

the Flying Constable of Twentynine Palms.

Any direct association between *Sky King* and Jack? None that any of the locals are aware of. "I loved to watch *Sky King*, but I am unaware of any connection between the two," Bob Gorbould said.

Virtually everyone associated with the production of *Sky King* is dead today. While Jack's exploits were well-documented in the press of the day and for 15 years before the first airing of the *Sky King* radio show in 1946, no direct connection can be made today.



According to Bob Dunn, "Aside from flying an airplane, and both being cowboys of sorts, I don't see how the two are connected. But it wouldn't surprise me." EAA

Christopher Freeze is a commercial pilot and flight instructor in the San Francisco Bay area. A native of Alaska, he researches and writes about historic aviation personalities and accidents. To learn about such mishaps, visit www.check-Six.com.