

Los Angeles Times CALENDAR weekend

October 20, 2005

WITH THE KIDS

Highlights are her career

Julie Clark, joining the show at Edwards Air Force Base, has been pulling stunts for years.

By Brenda Rees
Special to The Times

October 20, 2005

AVIATRIX Julie Clark really doesn't like it when people refer to her as the "modern-day Amelia Earhart."

"She crashed planes, ran low on fuel and got lost. Why would I want to be like her?" Clark says with a laugh.

No, the 58-year-old Californian would rather folks compare her to the strong women aviators of World War II, especially pioneer pilot Jacqueline Cochran, who was the first woman to pilot a bomber across the North Atlantic, in 1941, and who started a training program for women to fly military aircraft.

"Those were amazing gals who flew those war birds," says Clark. "If I was born 40 years earlier, that's right where I'd be."

These days, even though Clark is not soaring with the B-52s and F-17s, she still ascends to the clouds regularly for aviation highs, lows, whirly-whirls and loop-the-loops.

As one of the headlining acts both days at this weekend's Edwards Air Force Base Open House in the Mojave Desert, Clark will be bringing her trusty Mopar T-34 for a display of aerobatics, complete with a patriotic tribute that features wing-tip smoke of red, white and blue along with a fireworks finale.

The event at Edwards is one of two high-flying spectacles this weekend. The 41st Point Mugu Air Show in Ventura County — featuring the Blue Angels in FA-18A Hornets as well as the Navy Leap Frogs parachute team — goes off Saturday and Sunday at the Ventura County Naval Base.

Postponed for the last two years for security reasons, the Edwards open house offers more than 30 air demonstrations, 90 displays on the ground and a host of high-flying performances — including a sonic boom from the F/A-22 Raptor and F-16 Fighting Falcon, as well as aviation legend Chuck Yeager flying a vintage P-51 Mustang.

Kid-friendly activities include rock climbing, aviation experiments and a perch in a giant gyroscope — and, for tots, pedal cars fashioned to look like F-15s, F-16s and P-9s.

With more than 1,000 air performances under her belt, Clark has one of the longest-running shows in aerial history, having appeared across the U.S. and Canada.

An airline pilot from 1977 to 2003, Clark found her way into aerial performing on an inspired whim when she won the right to buy a Beechcraft T-34 plane "sight unseen" from a government surplus auction with a starter bid of \$1,000.

"I had no idea I was going to win that bid," she confesses. "After that, there was the problem of coming up with the other \$17,000 to [actually] buy the thing and then get up to Alaska to pick it up."

Clark personally restored the former military plane from the inside out, especially working on creating a fuel system that would allow for sustained inverted maneuvers.

"I gutted the whole thing," she says, adding that even today she still "tinkers with it."

Participating in small air shows in the '70s with a team, Clark decided to go solo in 1980. She hooked up with singer Lee Greenwood to choreograph an aerial homage to his tune "God Bless the U.S.A." that she still performs today.

Clark says she always knew she'd spend most of her time up in the air.

"It was my biggest aspiration as a kid — I was obsessed," says Clark, describing her childhood bedroom as full of airplane posters and model planes. She was a self-professed "tomboy in the '50s" — a time when women rarely ventured out of homemaker, teacher or nurse career paths.

CLARK'S father was her biggest inspiration. Ernie Clark was an airline pilot who would routinely take her along for day trips up and down the coast from their home in San Carlos in Northern California.

"He would load me in the baggage claim and then sneak me up to the cockpit later," she recalls. "He would let me read and help out with the checklist, which was exciting for this little girl who had to always wear dresses."

But tragedy struck for Clark in waves: First her mother died when Clark was 14; a year later, her father was murdered during a flight by a deranged passenger who shot him and the co-pilots, downing the plane and killing all aboard.

That tragedy made Clark even more determined to fulfill her pilot dream. She attended UC Santa Barbara, spending her college book money on flying lessons. Clark eventually became a contract flight instructor for the U.S. Navy at Lemoore Naval Air Station in California.

Then, in 1977, Clark was hired as the first woman pilot for Hughes Air West Airlines, launching a career spent with several companies.

Today, Clark relishes her performance schedule, which brings her to about 25 air shows a year. "I love meeting the crowds and talking to people after the show," she says.

"I know it's an overused saying, but honestly — and I tell this to the kids — you can do whatever you really want to do. I tell parents to really help their kids and do what it takes for them to reach their dreams. Don't let anything stand in your way. You'll never be sorry you did."

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Brenda Rees can be reached at weekend@latimes.com.

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In the skies

Edwards Air Force Base Open House

Where: 15 E. Mojave Blvd., Edwards

When: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday and Sunday

Price: Free

Information: (661) 277-3510

Point Mugu Air Show

Where: Ventura County Naval Base, Las Posas Road exit of Highway 101, west to Point Mugu

When: 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday

Price: Free; reserved seating, \$15, (800) 367-5833

Information: (805) 989-8095 or www.nbvc.navy.mil<252>