



**Robert Mark Freeman, M.D.**

Robert Mark Freeman, M.D., 86, a lifetime resident of Tacoma, physician, and manufacturer of Wood Freeman Autopilots, died Monday, November 5, 2001 at the home of his daughter, Karen Freeman Worstell.

The son of the inventor of the magnetic compass marine autopilot, Dr. Bob was an inventor of mechanical, electronic and navigation devices in marine navigation, aviation and military fields, and was the holder of 10 patents, 6 of which are military, assigned to the US Government, and 4 concerning automatic pilots

and accessories. He was a long time member of the National Marine Electronics Association (NMEA), receiving the Fessenden Award from NMEA for outstanding contributions to the marine electronic field. The Wood Freeman Autopilot was recognized for over ten years by NMEA as the best autopilot in the industry.

His M.D. degree, with honors, was received at the University of Washington in 1952. He was a general practitioner in University Place, Washington from 1953 until 1966, when he assumed full responsibility for the manufacturing at Wood Freeman Autopilots in Fircrest following his father's passing. He was a Naval Aviator, Captain USNR (Ret). His military flight experience included development and operation of radar equipped "night fighters" for night carrier operations. For piloting such aircraft from carriers under night combat operations in World War II, he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. His development of flame arresters for exhaust pipes of Navy aircraft was used throughout the war.

Dr. Bob's story is one of an outstanding Northwest native. Born to Wood and Etta Freeman in Oakland, California in 1914, he moved with his family at a very young age to one of the first homes in Fircrest, Washington, at 342 Golden Gate Avenue. He attended Whittier Elementary School in Fircrest. At age nine he commenced spending summer school vacations with his father, Wood Freeman, on a 50 ft. deep sea commercial trolling boat. He continued these activities for the next ten years, learning boat handling, piloting, celestial navigation and maintenance of marine engines. He continued his schooling at

Jason Lee Junior High and graduated from Stadium High School. In the latter part of this period, he assisted his father in the development of Wood Freeman "Metal Mike" or "Iron Mike" (as the autopilot was later nicknamed by commercial fisherman who used it in later years). By the age of 21, he was licensed as a chief engineer for motor vessels up to 300 tons.

In 1932 he entered the University of Washington, studying chemical engineering, microbiology, and participating in the Navy ROTC. During his years in college, he operated his father's fishing boat, the "Sea App", to earn funds for school following the failure of the banks during the Depression, and was also the Chief Engineer for the UW Oceanographic Department's research vessel, the "Catalyst". For one year he piloted the Catalyst every weekend and throughout the summer for the University. He left the UW in the second quarter of his senior year to accept an appointment as a Naval Aviation Cadet. He graduated second in a class of 72 from Navy flight training in Pensacola, Florida in 1937, and was assigned to the USS Ranger as a fighter pilot. During this time he became an expert in solving the problems of aerial gunning and dive bombing, and was temporarily loaned to the Army Air Corps at Langley Field to instruct personnel on aerial gunnery. He spent the next four years as an aviation instructor for the Navy.

In 1939 he met Ethel Viola Cox in Coronado, San Diego County, California at a Bible study. They were married shortly thereafter in a chapel in Coronado during his three day leave over the July 4th weekend. In 1941 he was a member of the first group of aviation cadets, USNR, accepted as USN in the regular Navy. He developed several of his patents over the next two years while serving as a project engineer for the Bureau of Aeronautics, Navy Department in Washington, DC. Following the work at the Bureau, he was transferred to Rhode Island, NAS Quonset Pt, engaged in developing radar equipped night fighter aircraft (Night Hellcats), tactics for use of these aircraft, and training crews to operate them under combat conditions. His radar work was done in conjunction with the MIT radiation lab. For his work he received a Navy Commendation. When the third Navy Night Fighter Squadron VF(N)77 was commissioned in January 1944, he was commissioned as the Commanding Officer, and in June of the same year he embarked with his squadron for the Marianas, Palau and Philippines campaign of WWII. It was action of the June 19, 1944 Marianas Turkey Shoot for which he received the Distinguished Flying Cross. For a little over a year, until December 1945, he was the Assistant Operations Officer, Commander, Air Pacific in Pearl Harbor, HI.

Following WWII, Dr. Bob was stationed at the Naval Ordnance Test Station at China Lake, California, where he was Experimental Officer and Officer in Charge (OinC), Naval Air Facility. It was during his tenure in China Lake that Dr. Bob was inspired by Dr. Drummond, a physician who shared his love of aviation. In June 1947 he resigned from Regular Navy with the rank of Commander and joined his father back in Tacoma, to assist with the design and manufacture of Wood Freeman Autopilots and to attend Medical School at the University of Washington.

With his wife Ethel, sons Bob Junior and Michael, and mother Etta, Dr. Bob lived in the Montlake area of Seattle. attended to his medical school courses at UW. assisted his

father at Wood Freeman Autopilots and continued his “weekend warrior” activities as Group Commander and Commander Air Wing in the Ready US Naval Reserve at Sand Point NAS, Seattle. He graduated with honors from the UW Medical School, having also served as the class President all four years.

In 1953 the Freemans moved to University Place to the family home they still occupy. Daughters Karen and Janet were born shortly following the move to UP. Dr. Bob’s medical practice flourished as he pioneered the use of oral polio vaccine for school children and worked with other leading physicians in the Pierce County area in treating tuberculosis patients. He was licensed for general practice and surgery and continued to serve the Tacoma community and Pierce County until he retired from medical practice in 1966. He continued to take refresher courses in medicine following his retirement from active practice for many years.

He retired from the Navy Reserve in 1974 with the rank of Captain, and led the design and production of Wood Freeman Autopilots until his retirement from the family business in 1998 at the age of 83. He is recognized for inventing the first successful marine autopilot using Hall Effect Sensors, the Wood Freeman 500 Series. He was also the co-inventor of “Geofix” Loran C to Autopilot interface using micro-processor technology to allow a Loran C Navcomputer to guide a 500 Series autopilot along a chosen geographic track. In 1983 the NMEA committee, chaired by Dr. Bob, published the “NMEA 0183” Standard for interfacing marine electronic navigational devices.

Throughout his life he kept current on developments in technology from transistors through personal computers, continued to pilot his private airplane for business trips and pleasure, and escaped to sailing one of his sailboats on Puget Sound and in the San Juan Islands whenever the opportunity arose. He was active in the community, leading the building committee for Mount Cross Lutheran Church’s first sanctuary near Curtis Junior High School and supporting the science department at Curtis High School. Over the years he and his wife sponsored several nursing students from Malaysia to complete their medical studies here in Tacoma.

Dr. Bob is survived by his wife of 62 years, Ethel, his sister Eleanor Jessel Conti, sons Robert Freeman Jr. and Michael Freeman, daughters Karen Worstell and Janet Freeman-Daily, all of the south Puget Sound area, ten grandchildren and several great-grandchildren. A memorial service will be held in Gig Harbor, Washington on Saturday, November 24th, 11 a.m. at Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church. The family suggests that, in lieu of flowers, remembrances may be made to the UW Tacoma Technology Institute or the UW Alzheimer’s Disease Research Center.

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