Family Obituary: William Gray Helling

William (Bill) Gray Helling passed away on Thanksgiving Thursday, Nov 28, at age 91 at Broadmoor Court in Colorado Springs. He was the son of June Rounsaville Helling and William Fredrick Nicolas Helling of Anaheim, California and brother of Frank Chilson and Robert Helling all predeceased.

Bill was born April 29, 1922 in Anaheim, California when the tree lined neighborhoods gave way to acres of orange groves. His childhood was marked by a geological event when he survived the 1933 earthquake that leveled various areas of Anaheim. He talked about being with his dad and how the two grabbed one another as the earth shook and started running toward home, they were close to being swallowed by the shaking ground beneath their feet when they rounded the corner to see that their house was still standing and his mother out in the yard as shaken as the earth beneath her feet. His school had been flattened and for two years he attended middle school in canvas tents that had no walls.

He entered Anaheim Union High School in 1936 and was in the first classroom as a freshman in the newly built school. Bill graduated in 1940. He went on to attend Santa Ana Junior College, and, as an extra-curricular activity, he enrolled in a flight class taught by the US Army Air Corp. Within a year, Bill had received his pilot’s license and was also certified to become a flight instructor. He knew his future had changed when on Dec. 7, 1941 Pearl Harbor was attacked. Bill was soon recruited by the Army Air Corp and pulled from school. He taught glider pilots for three years at 29 Palms, California, where he became a Captain and was the youngest flight instructor on base. Twenty-nine Palms was the first glider school in the US and he helped train the glider pilots who later participated in the invasions of Burma, North Africa and Normandy.

In 1944 the Army Air Corp released their glider pilot instructors from active duty with the stipulation that the instructors continue flying with any commercial airline. (Pilots were in short supply in those days.) He was only 22 and as he said, “I was single, and a free spirit and I wanted to do more for the country than fly domestic airlines.” When he discovered that Pan American Airlines was contracting with China to help fly supplies over the Himalayas he was intrigued.

Bill traveled to New York City, took an elevator up to the top floor of the Chrysler building and signed his name on the dotted line. Within a week he was on his way to Calcutta, India to join the CNAC (Chinese National Aviation Corp). He flew a C-47 through the mountains of India and China as the planes in those days could not reach high enough altitudes to fly over the top. The “Hump Routes,” as they were called, were dangerous and the CNAC pilots often flew without radar. He lost many friends and colleagues to those daring flights between Calcutta, India and Dinjan, Kumming and Chunking China. He became a Captain soon after joining CNAC and was one of its youngest pilots. The supplies he was transporting ranged from drums of high octane gasoline, to gold bricks. No Kidding.

When the war ended in 1946 he left the CNAC and traveled back to the US by ship. He and his four friends could not believe their luck when they easily found passage on a ship out of Calcutta to New York. Once on board they found the reason it was so easy to book tickets on this particular transport vessel, two days into the trip the ship’s captain announced that the entire hull of the ship was full of ammunition. There were sailors at all times on the look-out for mines and when the ship came to the Suez Canal, which was usually a three week wait for ships to pass through, all the other vessels got out of way. It took a month to get back to New York and another few weeks to travel across the country but soon he was home. Bill received the Distinguished Flying Cross, for his outstanding service and extraordinary achievement in the US Air Corp during WWII. Many war scholars think that CNAC played a major role in preventing the Japanese from capturing Burma and India during WWII.

Bill enrolled at University California Los Angeles where he graduated with a degree in Political Science in 1950. During his time at UCLA, he was set up by a friend to go on a blind date. That’s how he met his future wife. They both told the story from different angles, Bill said he was not eager to take out a girl whom he had never seen but thought, what the heck, if she was a toothless, old lady he would politely bow-out. Peg said she came downstairs to meet him with her slippers on because her last blind date was with a man who was 3 inches shorter than she and she wanted to wear heels but did not want to tower over her next blind date.

In 1948 Bill married Margaret (Peggy) Lynn of Santa Monica, California and together they had three children. Soon after graduating from UCLA, Bill joined North American Aviation and worked his way up to being the assistant to the Presidents, Lee Atwood and Dutch Kindelburger.

In 1960 he and his family moved to Colorado Springs where he was hired by Al Hill to assist in the development of Kissing Camels Golf Club. At the same time he ran the Chilson-Baldwin Construction Company which built the first seven houses and 18 cottages at the Kissing Camels Golf Club and the 40 room addition at the Garden of the Gods Club. He went on to manage the Hill Development Company which included Seven Falls. While acting as general manager of the Garden of the Gods Club, Bill met many famous people including Walt Disney. Disney had traveled to Colorado Springs and was staying at the Club. It seems that Disney had fallen in love with the Springs and was looking for a home for a new idea he was calling Disney World. He asked Bill to take him around the city for a couple of days just to get the scope of things. Disney thought Colorado Springs might just be the perfect setting. Bill asked if he knew how the winters were in Colorado. Disney said he had no idea. After learning about the wild weather patterns at the base of the Rocky Mountains, Disney decided to look elsewhere.

Bill was also partners in the Trans Western Properties Commercial /Industrial Real Estate which founded Paint Brush sub-division in Colorado Springs. He was a member of the Relator’s Commercial Industrial Society and served one-term as President and continued to serve on the board of directors.

In his youth Bill was an avid tennis player, winning championships in southern California while in high school. He played weekly well into his 50’s. His love of flying continued throughout his life. He was an enthusiastic storyteller and his flying adventures during the war made for some lively narratives. He wrote about his experience for the CNAC website. (Google CNAC and see him listed under Pilots) He was predeceased by his wife of 63 years, Peg Helling.

He leaves three children William G. Helling Jr. of Germany, Jan Helling Croteau of New Hampshire and David L. Helling of Santa Fe, NM; daughter-in-law Jutta Helling, daughter-in-law Aysha Griffin, and son-in-law Richard Croteau, seven grandchildren, Soren, Nils and Jens Helling of Germany, Richard and Ben Helling of Tennessee, and Maggie Murray and Hannah Croteau of New Hampshire, and three great grandchildren, Johnny Murray, and Linus Helling and Cacilia Helling.

One day dad asked me, “Do you *know* how much fun you are having? I ask because I didn’t realize how much fun it all was while I was having it.” Thanks for the reminder, Dad.

Written by Jan Helling Croteau for the Helling Family, Nov. 30, 2013