

Story and Photography by Ramona d'Viola

ON A WING



AT HOME WITH CRAIG MUELLER

Craig Mueller earned his berth aboard the America's Cup *Stars & Stripes* the same way one gets to Carnegie Hall — practice, practice, practice. “I was the guy working winches, hoisting sails, or hanging off the rail,” says Mueller. “I was a grinder.” From 1987 through 1990, Mueller worked sailing charters on San Diego Bay aboard several of the retired boats, including *America II* and *Heart of America*.



ABOVE: Craig Mueller on *brushfire*; A CREW member sails *Brushfire* on San Diego Bay



TOP: Mediterranean fan palms (*Chamaerops humilis*) are the centerpiece of Casa del Viento's front yard. In the background are stunning views of San Diego Bay and the Pacific Ocean. **RIGHT:** Craig Mueller at home. **ABOVE:** The property, once owned by several of San Diego's founding fathers, has a storied lineage.

SANDIEGO PEOPLE

When Mueller wasn't tuning sails on a 12-meter boat, he was piloting commercial transport planes for Emery Worldwide. It made sense — his professions, or rather, passions — flying and sailing. A wing and a sail are synergistic complements, each utilizing the same principles of aerodynamics; each subject to the same whims of nature.

On a socked-in January evening in 1998, Mueller had just completed a routine flight to Ohio, touching down in his DC8 just after midnight. While awaiting a shuttle at a bus stop on the tarmac, the inconceivable occurred.

"I was run over by a forklift and dragged for some distance before the driver realized I was underneath him," recalls Mueller. "I lost my left leg, most of my right leg, all my blood, and for a period of time, my life."

Mueller speaks reverently of his experience of "crossing over," but concedes it wasn't his time. "I got turned back." For two months he lay unconscious, doing his best to elude death, while his doctors performed numerous complicated surgeries. In pilot's parlance — it was touch and go.

The once-powerful yachtsman had lost nearly a third of his body mass. "I was still just a hunk of flesh when I left the hospital," says Mueller. "I spent six months as an in-patient at a Sharp rehab clinic, strengthening what was left of my body. After another year, I learned to walk with a prosthetic leg and walker."

For a man accustomed to going where the wind blew him, Mueller was intent on regaining his independence. With the proceeds of his settlement, he went in search of a few necessities. One was a new home to accommodate his handicap. The other was a sailboat — to give him back his freedom.

It's hard to miss *Brushfire*. The 51-foot Sparkman & Stephens racing yacht floats regally between an armada of bobbing starter boats, and a fleet of swanky sportfishers — by far, the classiest vessel at the marina. "She's yachting

royalty," proclaims Mueller. "Elegant, fast, and comfortable, *Brushfire's* one of the most beautiful wooden boats on the water today."

It's true, the 39-year-old mahogany sloop is well loved and is in Bristol, or mint, condition, an homage to the days of superb craftsmanship and artistry in shipbuilding — a gem buffed to a high sheen.

An unmistakable classic, *Brushfire* was designed by Olin Stephens II and built at Driscoll's Custom Boats on Shelter Island. When *Brushfire's* original owner, Gene Trepte, commissioned her, he had a couple of requirements. At 6 foot 4 inches, the big man needed a roomy boat to accommodate his sizable frame. Easy enough — but, she also had to be fast.

The younger Stephens based *Brushfire's* design on the shape of a two-time America's Cup winner named *Intrepid*. In 1971, *Brushfire* proved unbeatable in the Lipton Cup, and is, by all accounts, one fast boat.

The sum of tragedy and desire is often irony. The yacht-less skipper was searching the globe for a boat, when he happened upon *Brushfire* in his own backyard. Or shipyard, as it were. Mueller first saw *Brushfire* at Fraser's docks on Shelter Island, and his sailor's instincts immediately recognized her thoroughbred proportions. The forsaken sailboat was in need of a serious patron to care for her in a manner befitting her pedigree. Mueller was her man. It was love at first sight.

With close to 13 feet of beam, *Brushfire's* "Intrepid design" is spacious down below and roomy topside — unlike most bare-bones racing yachts. "It's one of the reasons I bought her," says the handicapped sailor, "and she's nearly unbeatable in winds over 10 to 12 knots."

Highly competitive and respected on the water, Mueller is recognized as one of San Diego's most adroit yachtsmen — renowned for a savant-like ability for finding, and working the wind. "We

don't want to look foolish out there," says the captain. "We're serious about winning — even a Wednesday-afternoon 'Gentleman's' race."

With assistance from the "No-name Crew," the grounded pilot regularly skips *Brushfire* to a win, place or show in local regattas against younger, lighter, and far-pricier boats. Her improbable team of shipmates ranges from old salts to sunburned novices, and other handicapped sailors. They perform with precision and efficiency, their enthusiasm fueled by a keen sense of camaraderie, and a ferocious competitive spirit.

With restoration work on *Brushfire* well underway, Mueller turned his attentions to finding the next necessity on his list — a new home. Weary of looking at what he thought would be another dead-end house, Mueller agreed to meet his real estate agent at a Point Loma address. Arriving early, he pulled up to an undeveloped lot full of brambles and dead brush and thought, "She must be out of her mind!" When his agent rolled up moments later and motioned for him to continue, Mueller followed her up the horseshoe-shaped driveway of his soon-to-be home. He'd stopped one address too soon.

The serendipitously named *Casa del Viento*, or *House of the Wind*, commands one of San Diego's most magnificent views. The sprawling hacienda-style home faces southeast, overlooking the channel into San Diego Bay, and the shimmering arc of beaches from Coronado to Baja.

Well, you know what they say about location — Mueller was sold.

The nearly turnkey *Casa del Viento* was livable, but required some modifications to better accommodate a wheelchair. "Most of the work was done in the master bathroom," says general contractor David Cohen of Aaron Industries, "We removed doors and widened the entries to the dressing and bathrooms. We also customized the existing spa-style tub, and refitted

the toilet for ease of use.”

To assist Mueller in exiting the house in the event of an emergency, Cohen also installed railings on several sets of stairs leading out to one of the home's several patios. Also installed at Mueller's request, was a banister leading down two steps into a sunken, formal living room. “As long as I can walk, I want to be able to enter this room like a whole person,” Mueller says gesturing at the sophisticated, sun-washed space. “I don't want any ramps in my home.”

The home's main arteries, as well as the kitchen, are tiled with handmade Mexican floor pavers, imparting a soothing blush to the interiors. The history of Casa del Viento can be read in their coppery patina — and they accommodate Mueller's chair easily. Just another reason the house was a good fit.

Like *Brushfire*, *Casa del Viento* has a storied lineage of its own. The site where the house now stands once was

a 9-hole golf course belonging to Reuben H. Fleet. The civic-minded R.E. “Pappy” Hazard, one of early San Diego's best-capitalized entrepreneurs (or eccentrics), owned the property at one time as well.

Pappy was known to throw a pretty good party and Mueller has begun to make parties a *Casa del Viento* tradition. For the past several years, he's hosted the Cabrillo Festival Dignitaries party, and regularly donates the verdant, manicured grounds for charitable causes he believes in. The often decked-out affairs help raise money and awareness — and everybody gets a good party. Mueller's gratitude and generosity are ubiquitous.

No stranger to survival, when a close friend was stricken with breast cancer, Mueller shaved his head in solidarity, after chemo treatments left her bald. Determined to take up the plight of those suffering from the disease, Muel-

ler published a 2006 calendar shot by famed yacht photographer Bob Grieser. The proceeds of “Girls on Fire,” go to the fight against breast cancer.

Mueller's compassion is also the stuff of legend. “I have friends at the top of their game, and others on their way back after bouts with the bottom,” says the ardent “people collector.”

“It's about respect, and allowing people to be their best,” he says. “I encourage that.”

For a man who lost his life eight years ago, Mueller knows the value of a second chance, firsthand. Not only is he surviving, the salty sea captain is thriving — and inspiring countless others do the same. ■