

Vultee's Last Flight



Gerard "Jerry" Vultee



Stinson Reliant SR-9C cabin monoplane

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Gerard "Jerry" Freebairn Vultee has been described as a little known man who played a leading role in the drama of early aviation in America. He ascended to international prominence as an aircraft designer and engineer only to die tragically in an aircraft accident in Arizona. Some of the innovations he helped introduce were the engine nacelle or cowling, the fully retractable landing gear, replaceable fuselage panels, the V-type windshield, and Vultee large wing flaps that made it possible to reduce landing speeds. His contributions to aviation are vast and his legacy lives on in the state of Arizona.

Jerry Vultee was a native of California and he was one of the first graduates in aeronautical engineering in 1921 at the California Institute of Technology. Starting as a draftsman at the Loughheed Company, now Lockheed, he worked his way up to become chief engineer. It was under his direction that the first low-wing commercial planes with retractable landing gear were built in America.

Jerry Vultee's connection to Arizona was first recorded on the Davis-Monthan Register when he landed at Tucson Sunday, March 30, 1930. He was a passenger in an almost new Lockheed Vega Model 3, built August 27, 1929, registration number, NC522K. His pilot was none other than Wiley Post. They were eastbound from Burbank, California to El Paso, Texas. No purpose was cited in the register for their trip and they departed the same day. At that time Vultee was Lockheed's chief engineer and was a primary designer of the Vega model at Lockheed. The Vega was one of the most popular planes of its day; Wiley Post, Amelia Earhart and Charles Lindbergh all flew and adored it. Also while at Lockheed, Jerry Vultee was the chief designer in the development of the Lockheed Orion and the speedy, far-ranging Lockheed Sirius (which Lindbergh used to scout routes for airlines) which brought him some notoriety.



Amelia Earhart's Lockheed Vega 1932

The Great Depression was hard on everybody including Mr. Vultee. Jerry Vultee was replaced at Lockheed and he accepted a job for awhile developing and teaching drafting and engineering courses at the Curtiss-Wright Technical Institute. He also took a post as chief engineer for the E.M. Smith Corporation (EMSCO) in Downey California, but the Depression also stifled new aircraft designs at EMSCO. Jerry Vultee then worked with Vance Breese on a six passenger aircraft called the V-1 (V for Vultee), which was just what Entrepreneur E.L. Cord was looking for when he needed a new commercial plane. With Cord's financial support, Vultee and Breese established the Airplane Development Corporation (ADC) in early 1932, a division of the Cord Corporation with Mr. Vultee as vice president. The V-1 was the fastest passenger plane of its kind at the time with a top speed of 235 mph and American Airways ordered ten. When modified by American Airways it was known as the V-1A. Jimmy Doolittle piloted a V-1A on a record breaking cross country flight. Just as aircraft orders came in the Federal Aviation Administration created an unexpected reversal of fortune by ruling that all commercial passenger planes be multi-engine. The V-1A was single engine, and was thus grounded for commercial passenger use. The ADC then went through several reorganizations and mergers. The Aviation Corporation (AVCO) established the Aviation Manufacturing Corporation (AMC) in 1934 through the acquisition of Cord's holdings, including Vultee's ADC until AMC was liquidated on January 1, 1936 and Vultee Aircraft Division was formed as an autonomous subsidiary of AVCO. Mr. Vultee then acquired the assets of the defunct AMC, including Lycoming and Stinson aircraft companies.



Vultee V-1A passenger aircraft

At about that same time Mr. Vultee was aware of the growing threat of war on many fronts, and converted the V-1 plane to a dive-bomber known as the V-11 which later became the Vultee Vengeance Dive Bomber. When orders began to roll in, he needed a larger production site, and he recalled the EMSCO plant in Downey, CA. He relocated there from Glendale CA, and renamed the small Downey airstrip Vultee Field. The plane was sold in what were then considered large numbers to Brazil, China, Turkey and the USSR. The Vultee planes built in Downey flew in the Spanish Civil War, and in defense of the Chinese Nationalist government. In 1937 the Downey plant was renamed the Vultee Aircraft Division of the Aviation Manufacturing Corporation. By 1938, the Vultee Aviation Manufacturing Company had grown to 1,500 employees.

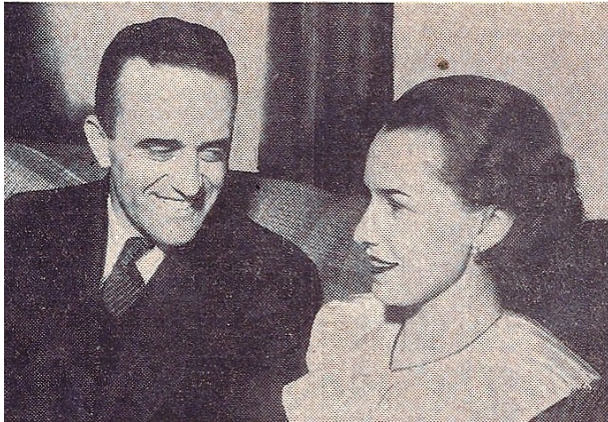


Vultee Aviation Manufacturing Company BT-13



Vultee Company logo

On another front, Jerry Vultee met Sylvia Parker, a Hollywood debutant, while surfing in Southern California. Sylvia Parker was born in Los Angeles on March 27, 1912 and was the daughter of Max E. Parker, art director at the 20th Century Fox studios in Los Angeles. Her father was also originally from Prescott Arizona. They married on January 19, 1935 and on March 6, 1935 they flew from Los Angeles to Mexico City for their honeymoon in a new Vultee V-1A in eight hours and twenty minutes, setting a new record for the 1,670 mile distance flight. During their married life, they often flew together to many distant locations.



Gerard Vultee and Sylvia Parker just before they married

On Saturday, January 29, 1938 Jerry and Sylvia Vultee were flying home from Washington, D.C. in his personal Stinson Reliant SR-9C cabin monoplane, registration number NC17159. It was the last leg of a transcontinental journey the Vultee's made after a month long business trip to the east coast that included presenting a new aircraft design to the Army Air Corps. The venerable 1936 Stinson Reliant was popular at the time and featured leather upholstery, walnut instrument panels, and automobile-style roll-down windows. The Stinson Reliant was a rugged aircraft built of fabric-covered welded steel-tubing structures with a single strut-braced double-tapered wing. Powered by a 260hp Lycoming R-680 radial engine, the Reliant carried a pilot plus three or four passengers at speeds close to 165 miles per hour. Pilots appreciated the Reliant's durability, safety, and stability in flight, while passengers enjoyed a comfortable ride in an opulent cabin.

The couple was anxious to return to their six month old son and home in Glendale California. They departed Saturday, 29th January, 1938 from the TWA Winslow Arizona Airport at 8:35 in the morning and were headed west to Clover Field, Santa Monica California when they were caught in a snow-storm and blizzard. Jerry Vultee had no training in blind or instrument flying and it is believed that he was unable to find his way out of the blinding snow storm. Newspapers reported that the plane was flying without radio apparatus and that he was not aware that he was heading into a snow storm. Friends and associates recalled that "It was not long ago that he learned to fly his own plane, so that might better understand the operator's problems in flight." The aircraft disappeared after taking off in the Oak Creek Canyon region of Arizona which was directly on the course that Mr. Vultee would follow to California.

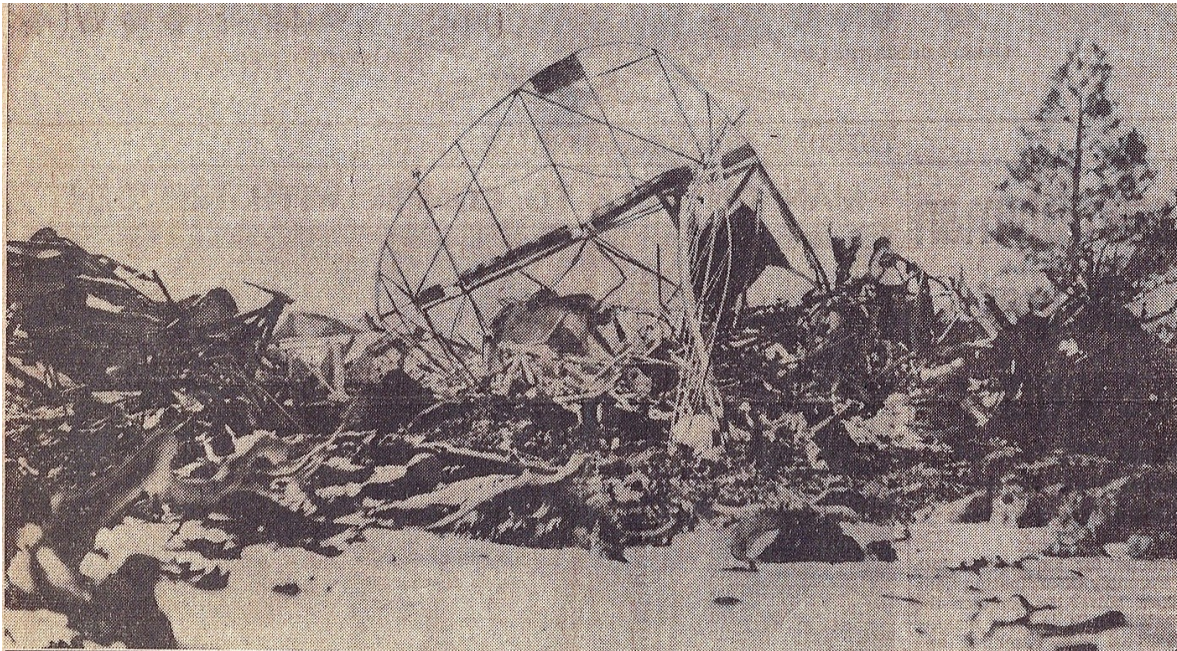
Several people in Oak Creek Canyon reported it was snowing at the time and reported hearing the roar of a plane's engine and seeing the plane flying dangerously low. Oak Creek Canyon rancher, F.A. Todd heard the plane fly over and crash. Carl Mayhew, owner of a Lodge in the mouth of the west fork of Oak Creek Canyon described the sound as "an awful, unusual screech" which was followed he noted by a "deafening silence". Laura Purtymun McBride said the craft "sounded like a truck," and it made two or three dives before she heard a "bang". Earl Garrouette reported that he saw the plane through a pocket in the clouds a few minutes before it disappeared over the crest of a hill. Deputy Sheriff Ernest Yost reported other ranchers in the district heard a plane motor sputter and die near Oak Creek Canyon. Oak Creek Canyon resident, B.V. Davis, heard the plane cross and re-crosses the canyon two or three times. He also reported the motor varied in speed, but did not seem to be missing. Giving belief that Vultee was lost and trying to break through the clouds. It was B.V. Davis's accurate description that gave searchers a good direction in which to investigate, narrowing down the search area.

Another witness gave a contradictory opinion about the plane. Earl Van Deren, rancher in the Dry Creek Area of the Oak Creek Canyon, reported that he and a boy heard the plane and saw a big ball of fire and smoke just before they heard the crash. In a different report he stated "seeing a flaming plane nose to the ground." This would seem to indicate the plane was on fire in the air prior to the crash. Others suggested that apparently Mr. Vultee, discovering that his plane was on fire, began climbing and diving in an effort to blow out the flames when he slammed the Stinson onto the cloud shrouded mesa. A possible reason for Earl Van Deren's report would be that it is natural for one to see the plane or its reflection before hearing the crash because light travels faster than sound. Another possible explanation for Deren's report could have been the planes lights seen through the clouds mistaken as flames.

Forest Rangers, Civilian Conservation Corps (C.C.C.) workers and over a hundred hunters were involved in the search. Thickly wooded terrain covered by at least 1 ½ feet of snow proved difficult for the searchers. The search continued for hours until darkness closed in and the search had to be abandoned. Local Sheriff Arthur Vandevil described the area as forbidding and "the roughest in Arizona".

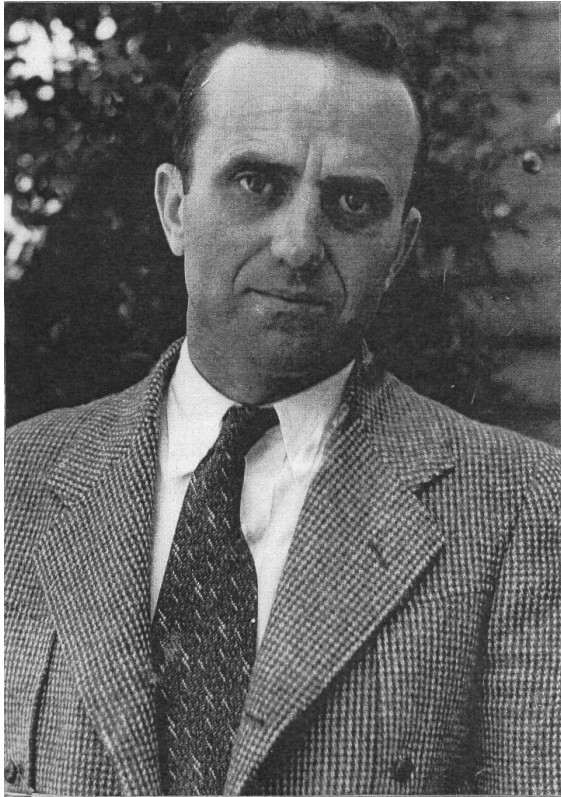
The next day it was announced that a \$500 hundred dollar reward was offered by the Vultee Company for finding the plane and passengers. Additionally, five Army Air Corps planes from March Field California also joined in to help in the search. The wreckage was discovered by a Forest Ranger and a couple of C.C.C. workers about noon Sunday, January 30 after an extensive search. Witnesses said that the plane wreck was a terrible sight; little was left of the plane except a heap of twisted and blackened metal. Edward L. Robinson, CCC youth and one of three persons who fought their way ahead of the posse and located the wreckage described the scene as "just a black spot" on the small, snow blanked plateau. The blackened framework of the Stinson, a women's shoe and a man's hat and watch were the only things found around there that they could recognize. The witnesses also stated that a small branch of a nearby tree had broken

off showing that the plane had come in from the west. The aircraft had slammed into the snow covered ground atop East Pocket Mesa on the North side of Sterling Canyon, about three miles north of Mount Wilson between Sedona and Flagstaff, Arizona. The impact site was only a hundred feet from the edge of a deep rocky chasm. Witnesses also reported that the propeller had dug into the ground, breaking off and burying one blade. The plane was found inverted facing west and badly burned. The rescuers were forced to travel 33 miles and plod through deep snow to reach the scene. The bodies were then borne out of the rugged region on stretchers to a waiting truck. The remains were then brought to Flagstaff for cremation before the ashes were sent onto Los Angeles.



Vultee Stinson Reliant plane wreckage newspaper photo

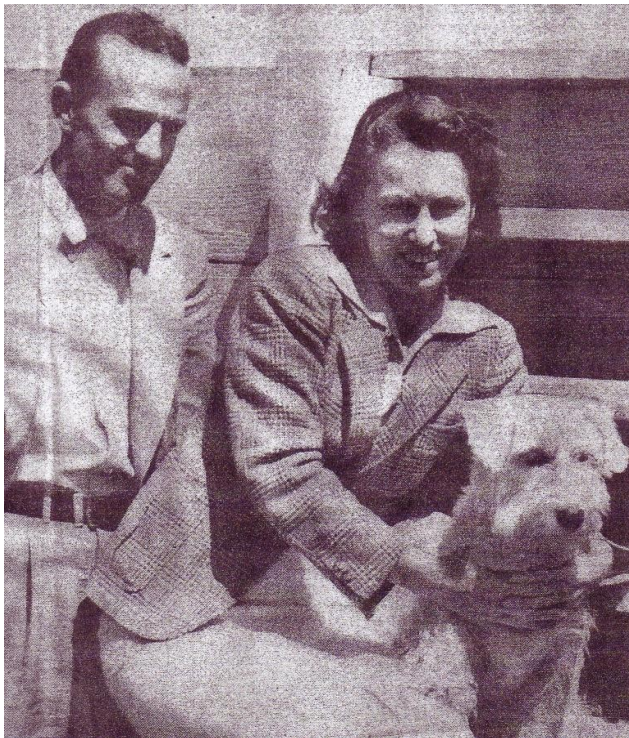
R.E. Drake of the Los Angeles Department of Commerce Investigator and C. Wright, Railway Fireman, traveled to the crash site to find possible causes of the crash. They could not give out the official opinion, however consensus at the time was that the pilot was headed east when the aircraft nosed into the ground and that flames closely followed the crash. It was also believed that Mr. and Mrs. Vultee were fatally injured by the crash and not killed by the flames. Pieces of the motor and unburned debris were found hurled almost to the brink of the canyon leading to the conclusion that there was no pre-crash fire. In an effort to settle the discrepancy in the witness reports, Don P. Smith, Vice President of Vultee Aircraft, Los Angeles, CA wrote in a letter to *Time Magazine* dated February 21, 1938 "(Gerard Vultee was) caught in a local snow-storm and blizzard with no training in blind or instrument flying, he was unable to find his way out. The fire occurred after the crash, not before." Mrs. Vultee was identified by her jewelry and several pieces were recovered and returned to the family. Gerard Vultee's wrist watch had stopped at 9:56 a.m. a little more than an hour after take-off from Winslow AZ. Two young promising lives were cut short, Gerard Vultee was only 38 at the time and his wife Sylvia Parker Vultee was 27.



Gerard "Jerry" Vultee



Sylvia Vultee



Newspaper photos of the couple together before the accident



Hiking in the Coconino Forest

A search was conducted in the summer of 2010 for the Vultee crash site. Using several clues, the location was narrowed down to a section of the Coconino Forest. Even with good information to its whereabouts it was still difficult to find the exact site of the crash. A couple of trips to the area were required and hours of hiking through the scenic forest. Several deer were spotted along the way. The crash site was finally located not far from the edge of the canyon rim. The broken scattered fuselage and rusted color parts rest peacefully near an old Juniper tree nearly matching their surroundings. All that remains is a maze of rusted and twisted steel tubing sprawled out across the plateau among pine needles and twigs. The wing and tail are still identifiable as a tubing truss. The tubing is thick and grey paint can still be seen in spots. The position of the wreck is as it was reported over 70 years ago. The tail was upside down and furthest from the canyon, indicating that the plane had flipped over when it came to rest. It was truly amazing to find such an old aircraft wreck little disturbed. All parts of the engine were missing, probably salvaged shortly after the accident. Only one full part number was found on a piece of a wheel assembly; however, several other numbers were found on various pieces. Upon further examination, I was able to identify other parts, including the boarding ladder and seat frames. Looking closely, one can find tiny parts from the construction of the aircraft including screws, nails, segments of cable, and fragments of broken glass that sparkled in the sunshine. All wood and fabric parts were destroyed in the fire. A small safety pin was found that may have belonged to Sylvia Parker Vultee. The safety pin was a reminder of the human tragedy that took place at the site. I was able to find and confirm unburned debris along the path of the accident almost to the brink of the canyon. A through survey of the wreckage using a compass revealed that the plane was headed almost exactly due north at the time of the crash, contradicting the earlier witness reports. The plane must have come in from the south and was headed north. This makes me wonder if Mr. Vultee was trying to return to Winslow or Flagstaff at the time of the crash. We will never know for sure why the plane crashed, but examining the remains did answer some questions. It is amazing so much of the plane still remains after 70 plus years slowly returning to the elements.



Vultee Stinson Reliant crash site



Surveying the wreckage



Tail Section



Scattered tube frame parts



Tail section and tail wheel



Main wheel assembly with part number





Exhaust manifolds



Landing gear leg with wing strut mount



Small parts, knob, snap and jar top



Mrs. Vultee's safety pin?

Jerry and Sylvia Vultee became a footnote in history; however, the Vultee name would not. The company Vultee founded continued on without him in his tradition of innovation and discovery to be a leading producer of WWII aircraft. Its accomplishments would have made Jerry Vultee very proud. In 1939 Vultee Aircraft Division of AVCO reorganized as an independent company known as Vultee Aircraft, Inc. Soon after Vultee's death, the American Army Air Corps placed its first order for the V-II-GB. In 1941 Vultee Aircraft purchased controlling interest in the Consolidated Aircraft Corporation in San Diego. The company became Consolidated Vultee Aircraft Corporation, or "Convair," and produced more than 13,500 aircraft during World War II.

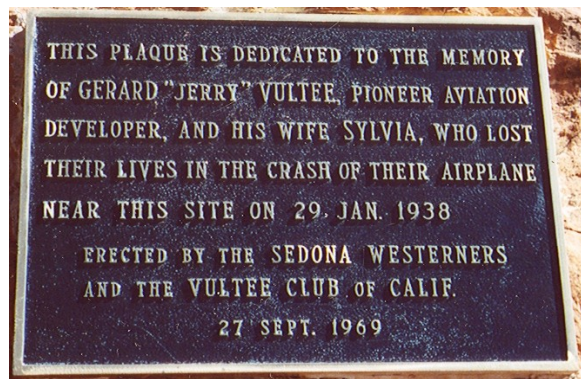


Vultee Vengeance assembly line during WWII

Although the Vultee's crash is now largely forgotten, the spirit of Gerard Freebairn Vultee lives on. In the canyon 1500 feet below and less than a mile away from the plane crash site is a gravity-defying natural sandstone arch, forever carrying his name. A large bronze plaque in remembrance to both Gerard and Sylvia Vultee is dedicated in their memory and is located at the end of the Coconino Forestry trail named in honor of the Vultee Arch. The beauty of this natural formation is a fitting tribute to an individual who made a significant contribution to the progress of American aviation.



Vultee Arch near Sedona



Plaque on the Vultee Arch Trail