

## Gerard “Jerry” Vultee

For a man not yet 40, Gerard “Jerry” Vultee had amassed an impressive résumé. He worked at Douglas Aircraft, and then Lockheed Aircraft, which promoted him to chief engineer at age 28. Vultee designed the Sirius plane for Charles Lindbergh, sporting a top speed of 185 mph, and innovated the fully retractable landing gear. He left Lockheed in 1931 and joined E.L. Cord, whose empire included three automobile companies (Cord, Auburn and Duesenberg), five engine-manufacturing companies and the Airplane Development Corp. of which he named Vultee vice president and chief engineer.

Vultee’s fast planes began setting speed records, including one he set himself in 1934 – while on his honeymoon with his wife, Sylvia, a Hollywood debutante he met while surfing in Southern California.

A year later, Jimmy Doolittle – who would lead the U.S. air attack on Tokyo near the beginning of World War II – flew a Vultee aircraft coast to coast in the record-setting time of 11 hours, 50 minutes. Wiley Post, Amelia Erhart and Charles Lindbergh all adored Vultee’s planes.

American Airlines bought 10 Vultee V-1A eight-passenger commercial air transporters, each with a top speed of 235 mph, but the Depression slowed commercial sales and Vultee changed focus to military planes. He began selling Vultee V-II dive-bombers to China, the Soviet Union and Turkey. With sales going well overseas, he flew to Washington D.C., hoping to interest the U.S. Army Air Corps in a new plane design. He took Sylvia on this trip, and they flew in his small Stinson monoplane.

On the return flight, they landed in Northern Arizona at Winslow Airport, which served as one of TWA’s transcontinental stopovers, and slept in town overnight. After refueling on that fateful morning of January 29, 1938, Jerry and Sylvia lifted off – both anxious to get back to their 6-month-old baby in Downey, California.

But neither his wealth nor accomplishments could help him on that winter morning. About 60 miles southwest of Winslow, a snowstorm overtook them, and suddenly in the blinding, swirling whiteout, the Vultees were engulfed in trouble over the cliffs of the Mogollon Rim.

Earl Van Deren heard the boom from his ranch in Dry Creek Basin, and saw the rising smoke. Ranger F.A. Todd heard the plane go down from Oak Creek Canyon. He joined the sheriff’s search party offering his knowledge of the rough country. The snowcovered, thickly wooded terrain proved difficult, and after hours without success, darkness overtook their effort. Not until noon the following day was the crash site located.

The wrecked plane was found near East Pocket, Barney Pasture, just a few hundred feet from the canyon brink leading into the deep, rocky chasm.

Forest Service Ranger H.C. Fosburg discovered the crash site. Vultee’s charred body still bore his watch, which had stopped at 09:56 A.M.