

The Circle of Life and Death

A visit to the crash site of Jerry and Sylvia Vultee by their son Pete Vultee and cousin John Vultee

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Pete Vultee and John Vultee at plane crash site, photo by Brad Gray

On 30 June 2011, a small intrepid group set out from Flagstaff Arizona to complete a journey that had begun over 73 years ago. Pete Vultee along with his first cousin John Vultee, accompanied by Aviation Archaeologists Dave Trojan and Brad Gray set out to locate an aircraft crash site in the mountains south of Flagstaff. The goal that day was to visit the crash site of Jerry and Sylvia Vultee, Pete's parents who were killed in a tragic aircraft accident January 29, 1938. Pete was only six months old at the time when his parents were killed. Pete had often wondered about the parents that he never knew. For a long time he had wanted to visit the crash site to answer lingering questions about what happened and see what was still there. Pete had previously visited Arizona, but he did not know the exact spot of the crash site and he needed a guide to the remote location. Along on the trip was John Vultee, Pete's first cousin and whose father was Jerry Vultee's brother. He had read several accounts of the accident and also wanted to see for himself the crash site.

Another goal of the expedition was to place a site marker near the wreckage to help future visitors identify the site. The site is located in a very remote part of the Coconino Forest atop East Pocket Mesa on the North side of Sterling Canyon, between Sedona and Flagstaff, Arizona. The aircraft crash site may be considered a very historic site in accordance with Federal laws. By placing the site marker, it is hoped that future visitors will respect the crash site where two people tragically died. Pete Vultee also expressed hope that the site will remain as homage to his parents.

The aircraft crash site is the only place that has a direct connection to the deaths of Jerry and Sylvia Vultee. It was a Vultee family tradition to have the remains cremated and the ashes scattered. Pete and John did not have a grave site to visit and they did not know where the ashes were scattered. They wanted to visit the crash site to pay their respects and to honor two great people whose lives were cut short.

Earlier, Pete Vultee had traveled down to California from Washington State to meet his first cousin John. The two then drove to Arizona to begin the expedition. Pete said it was an end to a life time goal, but it was also a new beginning. Pete and John had never really gotten to know each other and this trip provided the opportunity to spend time together, review ancestry and share family stories. It was a new beginning to their relationship.

It was a clear windy day, with the sun high in the sky when the group set out to visit the crash site. Dave Trojan had earlier researched and located the site after much effort. With Brad Gray's help, the group drove down some bumpy dusty forest roads for over an hour to get near the site. One stop was made along the way for a magnificent view of the canyon that the aircraft flew up so long ago. The group finally reached a spot as near as possible to the crash site and then parked the vehicle. The long, but easy part of the journey was at an end.



Pete Vultee and Canyon View, photo by Dave Trojan

The group then began the tough hike across the forest wilderness to the crash site. After hiking over rocks and around numerous fallen trees the group finally reached a small clearing near the edge of the canyon and came upon the aircraft wreckage. It is amazing so much of the plane still remains after 73 plus years slowly returning to the elements. The rust colored and broken scattered fuselage parts rest peacefully on the plateau. The tail is upside down and furthest from the canyon, indicating that the plane had flipped over when it came to rest. Dave Trojan spent some time at the site going over the plausible accident scenarios and identifying major parts of the wreckage to the group. Upon further examination, the group was able to identify many parts, including the boarding stairs and seat frames. Looking closely, they found tiny artifacts that belonged to the Vultees. Some of the small items found included buttons, beads, and safety pins. The artifacts were a reminder of the human tragedy that took place at the site.



Searching the site, photo by Dave Trojan

Both Pete and John had some idea what to expect at the site based on pictures that they had seen, however they were not prepared for the total amount of wreckage still on site. Upon reaching the crash site, Pete surveyed the scene, he was somewhat overcome by what he was seeing. Pete said it was a lot more than he expected. Pete said "I never really knew them". Pete wondered about the life that he would have had if

he was not raised by his grandparents. Pete was told when he was about 7 or 8 about the accident, but never learned all the details. The only things passed down to him from his parents were some furniture and little else. Pete does have a scrap book of telegrams from all over the world on the deaths of Sylvia and Jerry Vultee. The book is one of the few links to his parents. Pete has always had an interest in aviation, but never became a pilot; however he did spend six years in the Navy and was able to fly on Navy aircraft. Both Pete and John have always had an interest in aviation.

After walking through the crash site, the “what if” questions came up and were discussed. Pete wanted to know if they could have survived the crash if the plane had not burned. Most likely because of the winter blizzard conditions and their injuries the outcome would have been the same. It is believed that the couple died quickly because of the force of the crash and did not suffer. John wondered if they could have just cleared the trees would they have made it. Some questions will never be able to be answered, but by visiting the crash site many questions were laid to rest. Pete and John have a much better sense of what may have happened so long ago and they have a much better understanding of what remains.



Pete Vultee at the crash site, photo by Dave Trojan

John pointed out and said “They were close to making it”, and “He did fly it into the ground, but on a flat angle. That changes it all in my mind. That’s different for me” “A hundred feet would have made all the difference.” After hearing the possible accident scenarios John said “It was very interesting, very interesting” John’s grandmother was adamant about John not flying and becoming a pilot, it had cost her too much grief already. John grew up a successful working man. He also recounted how the accident affected the whole family. His father Arthur Vultee, Jerry Vultees’ brother, was a broken man after the accident and it led to the divorce of his parents. John said that his life would have been much different “I know that I would have had a better education because I would have had someone there with a stick to make sure I had one” The plane crash was a tragedy for their entire family. One moment in time led to generations of change. If the Vultees had lived, the world can only wonder what may have been. What aircraft would have been designed and built and how their children would have grown up differently. John and Pete both thought and said several times during their exploration of the site “What might have been?”

One final task was performed at the site to honor the memory of Sylvia and Gerard “Jerry” Vultee. The site marker was placed near the wreckage and dedicated. Pete thanked Dave and Brad for bringing him up to the site. Pete said it had been a dream for most of his life to visit the site. By visiting the site Pete now knows so much more about what happened so long ago. The engraved plaque on the marker reads: “Crash Site of Sylvia and Jerry Vultee Pioneer Aircraft Designer.” It was an end to the journey, but it was also a new beginning for the two cousins. They have a closer relationship because of this journey. The task was finally accomplished and we could all forever rest peacefully. We had completed another step along the circle of life and death.



Site marker near the plane wreckage, photo by Brad Gray



Pete Vultee, Brad Gray, Dave Trojan and John Vultee, photo by Brad Gray



Site marker and plane wreckage, photo by Brad Gray