Captain George Van Vleet Jr.
Fallen Cougars Project

Early Life

George Van Vleet Jr. was born on August 16, 1908 in Fresno County, California to George Van Vleet Sr. and Elin Wilhelima Teresia Peterson Van Vleet.[1] His early schooling took place at the Harvard Military School (today Harvard-Westlake) in Southern California. He graduated from Fresno High School and went to Fresno State College for one year before finishing his bachelor's degree at Stanford. He later received a master's degree from Cornell.

Van Vleet was active in Fresno's social scene. A 1931 *Fresno Bee* article lists him as an invited guest to a large New Years "tea and dance" gathering.[2] Some of his real estate holdings included a logging company based in British Columbia. [3] He married Elizabeth Gallagher on October 20, 1934 at the Episcopal church in Yakima, Washington.[4] They then departed for Van Vleet's new position at Washington State College. They had three children together.

Washington State College Experience

Van Vleet arrived in Pullman in 1934 to teach game management, which had recently been added to the college as a program of study.[5] He participated in research studying the impact of early season elk hunting in Yakima County, and the Olympic Peninsula on elk populations. Van Vleet defended the practice in a piece appearing the *Spokesman-Review.*[6] The *Daily Evergreen* reported he gave talks on the conservation of Pacific Northwest game birds to the Natural History

---

[1] "Capt George Van Vleet Jr. (1908-1944) - Find a...," accessed November 9, 2024, https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/56134204/george-van_vleet.
[2] "Osborn Home Is Setting for Tea and Dance," *The Fresno Bee*, January 4, 1931.
[3] "Fernandez Pays $1,500,000 for Canadian Timber Stand," *Longview Daily News*, April 29, 1957.
[4] "Marriage of Gallagher," *The Fresno Bee*, October 21, 1934.
[5] "Powwow, 1934, December - Page 1," accessed October 14, 2024, https://content.libraries.wsu.edu/digital/collection/powwows/id/6300/rec/7.
[6] George Van Vleet Jr., "College Leader Defends Season," *The Spokesman-Review*, August 29, 1937.

club. In 1937 he resigned from his position at WSC, and went into business with his father, George Van Vleet Sr.

Military Service

The military initially denied Van Vleet for military service. The Army, Navy, and Marines rejected his applications, citing his age (33), advanced education, marriage with three children, successful business, bum knee and poor eyesight.[7]

Determined to get in, he made a personal appeal to army personnel. They allowed him to join the air corps and after training he received a commission as a captain. He was stationed on Tarawa as a "desk jockey", doing signals intelligence. Committed to get in the air, he got aboard B-24J “Miss Bee Haven” as an observer on the morning of January 21, 1944.[8] The plane’s mission was to bomb targets on Roi Island, which contained a Japanese airfield.[9] The plane struggled to take off the runaway and crashed. Fully loaded with bombs, the plane detonated on impact. Miraculously the pilot, copilot, and navigator survived, but Van Vleet and the rest of the crew did not. A second B-24 crashed just a few minutes later during takeoff. The accidents were blamed on "bad fuel."

Burial, Recognition, and Legacy

Van Vleet and the others were buried on Tarawa until the end of the war. He was posthumously awarded a purple heart.[10] Eventually, the military exhumed the remains, but Van Vleet's were missing. There Van Vleet would stay, for the next 70 years, until in 2015 a non-profit

---

[7] Marek Warszawski, “Nearly 75 Years after His Death in World War II, Fresno Man Finally Returns Home,” *The Fresno Bee*, August 2018, https://www.fresnobee.com/opinion/opn-columns-blogs/marek-warszawski/article215660770.html.

[8] PacificWrecks.com, “Pacific Wrecks - B-24J-1-CO ‘Miss Bee Haven’ Serial Number 42-72982,” accessed October 12, 2024, https://pacificwrecks.com/aircraft/b-24/42-72982.html.

[9] PacificWrecks.com, “Roi Airfield,” accessed October 12, 2024, https://pacificwrecks.com/airfield/marshalls/roi/index.html. Bombers from Roi Island bombed Wake Island during the Japanese invasion of Wake on December 7, 1941. The United States captured the island in 1944, and the U.S. Army operates the airfield to this day.

[10] Warszawski, “Nearly 75 Years after His Death in World War II, Fresno Man Finally Returns Home.”

called "History Flight" began locating the remains of missing service members on Tarawa. Van Vleet's were discovered in 2017.

From there the DPAA took over. Their research concluded that Van Vleet's remains had been separated at some point during the 1940s recovery process. Most of Van Vleet's remains ended up in an anonymous grave at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific in Honolulu. But part of Van Vleet's skeleton, and most importantly--this dog tags--remained buried on Tarawa until 2015. The DPAA was able to match the Honolulu remains to the Tarawa remains, and together the remains were sent home to Fresno in 2018. After a ceremony at a local funeral home, Van Vleet's remains were cremated, and the ashes spread on family property.

Van Vleet's daughter, Elizabeth, was less than a year old when he died. In 2018, at the age of 77, she told the Fresno Bee: "It was hard for me to miss him when I've never known him. But now that I've read his letters I'm thinking 'I missed a really great guy, a really fascinating person,' and how different my life would've been if he had not made that choice (to enlist). But I have to honor his decision and thank God that people like him went over there."

Van Vleet Jr. is memorialized in the Court of the Missing at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific in Honolulu, Hawaii.[11] After his identification in 2018, a rosette was placed next to his name, indicating he had been recovered.[12] The George Van Vleet Jr Memorial Scholarship is established at Washington State University. It is available to undergraduate juniors and seniors majoring in life sciences.[13] A scholarship bearing his name is also available in his hometown of

---

[11] Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, "Capt GEORGE VAN VLEET - Service Member Profile," Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, accessed October 12, 2024, https://dpaa-mil.sites.crmforce.mil/dpaaProfile?id=a0Jt000000cLitYEAS.

[12] "George Van Vleet Jr. | American Battle Monuments Commission," accessed November 11, 2024, https://www.abmc.gov/decedent-search/van-vleet%3Dgeorge.

[13] "George Jr. Van Vleet Memorial Scholarship | Student Financial Services | Washington State University," accessed October 12, 2024, https://financialaid.wsu.edu/scholarship/george-jr-van-vleet-memorial-scholarship/.

Fresno, California to biology students at Fresno State University.[14] The Fresno American Legion Post No. 594 is named in his honor.[15]

[14] "College of Science and Mathematics Scholarships," accessed November 11, 2024, csm.fresnostate.edu.
[15] "Mrs. Van Vleet, Fresno Realtor's Widow, Dies," *The Fresno Bee*, August 25, 1960.

Bibliography

Agency, Defense POW/MIA Accounting. "Capt GEORGE VAN VLEET - Service Member Profile." Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency. Accessed October 12, 2024. https://dpaa-mil.sites.crmforce.mil/dpaaProfile?id=a0Jt000000cLitYEAS.

"Capt George Van Vleet Jr. (1908-1944) - Find a Grave" Accessed November 9, 2024. https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/56134204/george-van_vleet.

"George Jr. Van Vleet Memorial Scholarship | Student Financial Services | Washington State University." Accessed October 12, 2024. https://financialaid.wsu.edu/scholarship/george-jr-van-vleet-memorial-scholarship/.

"George Van Vleet Jr. | American Battle Monuments Commission." Accessed November 11, 2024. https://www.abmc.gov/decedent-search/van-vleet%3Dgeorge.

"George Van Vleet Jr. Memorial Scholarship - Fresno State Scholarships." Accessed October 12, 2024. https://fresnostate.academicworks.com/opportunities/28635.

"Instructors Talk at Natural History Club." *The Daily Evergreen*. February 27, 1935. Accessed November 9, 2024. https://content.libraries.wsu.edu/digital/collection/evergreens/id/12329/rec/7.

Longview Daily News. "Fernandez Pays $1,500,000 for Canadian Timber Stand." April 29, 1957.

PacificWrecks.com. "Pacific Wrecks - B-24J-1-CO 'Miss Bee Haven' Serial Number 42-72982." Accessed October 12, 2024. https://pacificwrecks.com/aircraft/b-24/42-72982.html.

PacificWrecks.com. "Roi Airfield." Accessed October 12, 2024. https://pacificwrecks.com/airfield/marshalls/roi/index.html

"Powwow, 1934, December - Page 1." Accessed October 14, 2024. https://content.libraries.wsu.edu/digital/collection/powwows/id/6300/rec/7.

The Fresno Bee. "Marriage of Gallagher." October 21, 1934.
The Fresno Bee. "Mrs. Van Vleet, Fresno Realtor's Widow, Dies." August 25, 1960.

The Fresno Bee. "Osborn Home Is Setting for Tea and Dance." January 4, 1931.

Van Vleet Jr., George. "College Leader Defends Season." *The Spokesman-Review*, August 29, 1937.

Warszawski, Marek. "Nearly 75 Years after His Death in World War II, Fresno Man Finally Returns