

MEMBER LIBRARY

HARRY B. COMBS – Aircraft Pioneer, Adventurer, Conservationist



Theodore J. Holsten
EMERITUS MEMBER
Boone and Crockett Club

In December 2003, a gift from Harry Combs was unveiled at the Wright Brothers National Memorial at Kill Devil Hills, North Carolina. It was an exact model of the historic aircraft first flown by the Wright

Brothers, Wilbur and Orville, on that historic day a hundred years earlier when man first conquered the air. Combs' presentation culminated a long fascination with the Wright brothers who he had carefully researched for his 1979 book *Kill Devil Hill*. In it, he was able to point out that the Wright brothers were far more than a couple of bicycle mechanics who somehow stumbled into the air with a flying machine. These two brothers, with their genius as scientists and engineers, had achieved what the great minds in the world had failed to accomplish in all history.

Born in 1913, Harry Combs's exposure to flying began at an early age. His father Albert was shot down twice during World War I and is said to have warned his son never to set foot in an airplane. Nevertheless, at age 13, young Combs paid \$2.50 for a first ride in a mail plane. Two years later, falsifying his age, he took flying lessons and soloed after only three hours of instruction. This began a long career in aviation.

At age 16 he built and flight-tested a sport biplane named Vamp Bat. In 1938 he and a partner formed Mountain States Aviation that later became Combs Aircraft Company. During World War II, his company trained 9,000 military pilots. After the war, President Kennedy appointed Combs to Project Beacon, the project that helped form the air traffic control system still in use today. He went on to become president of Learjet in 1971 before eventually retiring to his ranch in Colorado.

Harry Combs was an enthusiastic big game hunter and this took him on many trips to Africa, India, and throughout North America. A regular member of the Boone and Crockett Club, he was also an avid conservationist undertaking an extensive game preserve at his ranch just east of Colorado Springs. He was a member of the Colorado Wildlife Commission for seven years, and was its chairman in 1970. During his tenure more progress was made in game management than had been accomplished in many previous years.

An outdoorsman, horseman and adventurer, Harry Combs was a student of the history of the American West. This led to his writing a trilogy of books of historical fiction as seen through the eyes of an old pioneer named "Brules." These books capture a time and place that will never exist again "a vast human drama filled with cowboys and Comanches, desperados and dance hall

BOOKS BY HARRY B. COMBS

Kill Devil Hill (1979)

Brules (1994)

The Scout (1995)

The Legend of the Painted Horse (1996)

At the Battle of the Little Big Horn, Where was Custer? (1998)

girls, dreamers and lost, tough unforgettable men like "Brules."

The life of Harry Combs spanned a dynamic age, from the passing of the Old West to the advent of flying and the space age. He died on December 13, 2003, only a few days after his presentation of the Wright aircraft model at Kill Devil Hills. ■

Theodore J. Holsten Jr.



Harry Combs lived on his working cattle ranch in Colorado.

PHOTO © JIM KATZEL

