

Vanley ? Who was Mr. Vanley?

By Craney Gartz

For many years, a few of the Landspeed racers that congregate at the Bonneville Salt Flats each year have visited an old aircraft crash site a few miles east of the town of Wendover, Utah. Wendover is a town of relative obscurity excepting for the fact that the 509th composite group, commanded by Col. Paul Tibbetts, conducted their training there. You may recall their job was to deliver the first Atom bomb in 1945.

At the crash site, out in the middle of desert land adjacent to the famed Salt Flats, is a small cross, sunk to its wings, with the name "Vanley" marked on it, and a small pile of aircraft wreckage. Near the cross, many small pieces of aircraft may still be found scattered on the desert floor.

Racers have visited this site for years, but no one ever knew who Mr. Vanley was or the circumstances of the apparent crash. But now they do.

It was in August 2009 that Southern California Timing Association president Roy Creel and some other racers were visiting the site, musing that it was a shame that someone gave their life in service of their country, yet no one knows who it really was or when. Roy and his friends decided to try to do something about that.



Roy Creel, Greg and Joann Carlson at the site , Aug. 2009

A few days later, fellow racers Ken and Inez Carlson were at the site and made an interesting and critical find. Among the scrub brush near the site, Inez spotted a rather odd shaped piece of metal. It was actually 2 identical pieces of metal, folded over; a pair of military dog tags. The name on the tags read: Vanley T. Johnson. This was a major clue.



The Johnson Dog Tags and Vanley's USAAF photo

There had been a lot of assumptions about the crash for many years. Since it was a small area, folks seemed to think that perhaps it occurred during the early WW2 years, when pilots were training at Wendover airfield in "Brewster Buffalos", a small fighter aircraft.. In later years, Wendover was a Bomber training field. However, the mechanically minded racers also noticed that the wreckage parts included, plastic, something that was not used in aircraft until after WW2.

With the newfound dog tag in hand, the research began in earnest.

Thanks to the sources now available via the internet, the first step was easy: Aircraft reports.com. This site provides actual copies of USAAF/USAF reports for many years, with an index by name. Vanley T. Johnson was listed. Creel ordered the 58 page report and soon was well on track to what had happened.

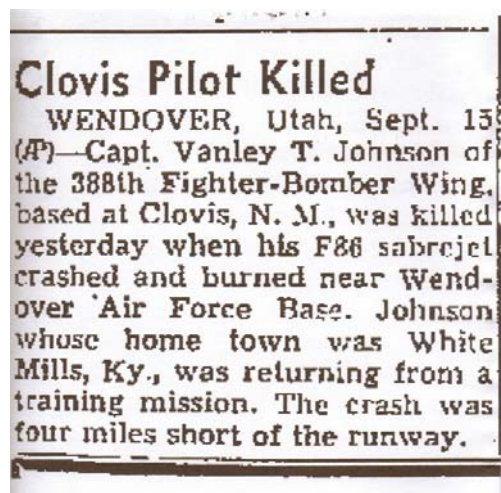
On Sept. 14th, 1954, Captain Vanley T. Johnson was assigned to 388th Fighter Bomber Wing in Clovis New Mexico and was flying a training mission conducted adjacent to Wendover Field; gunnery practice shooting at towed targets. Early on in the mission, Captain Johnson reported some smoke in the cockpit of the F86 Saber Jet he was flying. It seemed to dissipate, so they nearly finished the practice, when it started smoking again. The mission Major in charge instructed him to declare an emergency,

break off and land at Wendover. Captain Johnson reported inbound for Wendover. The tower acknowledged and cleared him to land on runway 21. His wingman, Lt. Elmer "Ted" Hernquist also broke off to follow him in. Vanley never made it. During the approach to the runway, he went into a steep dive and went directly into the ground.

Lt. Heinques, in his written report stated that in Vanley's radio transmissions on the way in seemed incoherent. According to the Air force report, the fatal crash left a crater 12 feet Deep and 30 Ft in diameter.

Plastic covered wiring was fairly new in use in 1954 and there are assumptions that the degree of toxicity of plastic combustion was still to be learned, and Captain Johnson was likely rendered unconscious on final approach.

So now we knew who it was and what happened, but who really was this man and where did the cross come from? And... What to do with the dog tags?



Obituary from Clovis News Journal Sept. 15, 1954

The report gave the hint about Vanley being stationed in Clovis NM, and an obituary was found published the next day in the Clovis NM newspaper files. There was also a similar one in the Salt Lake City Tribune. It listed Vanley as being survived by his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Ray Johnson of White Hills Kentucky. At this point, enters ace genealogist Bobbie Stehling, another racers wife. She promptly found a photo of Vanley in the Hardin KY County museum, burial records for Vanley at the Sonora Cemetery near White MILLS Ky. (they made an error in the obit.) and found current property records showing a William Johnson at an address in White Mills. Paydirt!

Creel found William Johnson's phone number in the local directory. A call to William acknowledged that he was indeed Vanley's Nephew, there were 11 sons and daughters to Ray and Johnson, 7 of which were still living. Creel sent a letter to William explaining the circumstances of the contact and asked him to share it with the family. Soon Mr. Alan Johnson, one of Vanley's brothers contacted the SCTA, along with his sister Vonda.

It was through Alan and Vonda that the rest of the Vanley story unfolded.

Vanley had been a pilot since joining the WW2 effort in the early 1940's. He was absolutely crazy about airplanes since he was a kid. He flew in both WW2 and Korea. He was divorced and living as a bachelor in Clovis NM when assigned to the gunnery training mission. Being one of the oldest of the kids, he was the hero of the family. After the crash, the oldest brother Ralph made the cross and placed it at the crash site.

Arrangements were made for Creel to meet and deliver the dog tags to the Family. On December 5th at 1030 AM, they arrived at Alan Johnson's home in Rienyville Kentucky to find a full house. All of the living siblings except one were on hand to accept the dog tags. "What a warm and gracious family" Creel reports. "they presented me gift s and expressed their sincere appreciation. Each told Vanley stories from their childhood". They are so grateful that someone cares.



Roy Creel handing over the tags to the Johnson Family

It is intended that the dog tags and Vanley's uniform, which Ralph still has, will be displayed at the Hardin Co. Museum.

So that all may know, a simple granite stone will be place at the crash site; **At this site on September 14, 1954, an F86 crashed during a gunnery training mission. USAF Captain Vanley T. Johnson made the ultimate sacrifice in service to his country.**