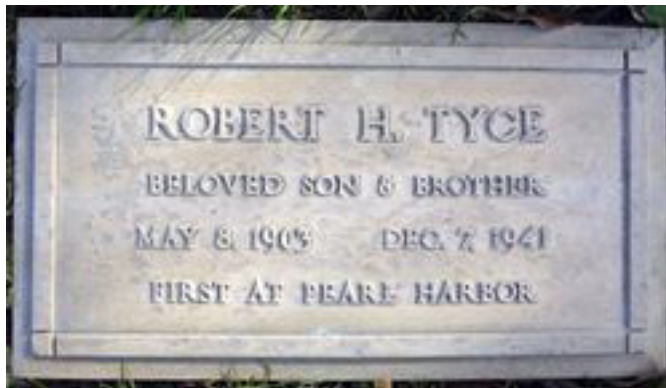


Two Piper Cub trainers took off from the John Rodgers Airport in Honolulu around 7:45 a.m. on the morning of December 7, 1941. The pilots were members of the California National Guard, but this was a personal flight, not a military one. The planes never returned to the airport. The Japanese shot down the recreational aircraft just as they themselves began their aerial attack on Pearl Harbor and other nearby military bases. Robert ("Bob") Horatio Tyce, a partner in the K -T Flying Service based at the airport, was there when the planes left. In fact, he had taught the two national guardsmen how to fly. Bob was getting ready to take up some passengers who had booked a flight with his inter-island aviation company. He stood on the tarmac, spinning the propeller of the plane he planned to fly for the trip. Perhaps his back was to the field; if so, as Bob focused on the propeller, he probably did not see a plane rapidly descending over the privately owned airfield. It fired machine guns as it came down. Bob died when one of the bullets hit him in the head. A friend standing near Bob immediately took him to the hospital, but he was declared dead upon his arrival. If not the first, Bob Tyce was one of the first civilians killed in the attack at Pearl Harbor.<sup>1</sup>



Tyce's marker at the Glen Abbey Memorial Park in Bonita, California. Note the word "First," a reference to his family's belief that Tyce was the first civilian casualty. His grave at Glen Abbey is located in Block 8, Space 19, Lot 4.

That morning, when his immediate family in San Diego County heard about the events at Pearl Harbor, they probably did not think their son or brother could be a casualty. Bob was, after all, a civilian, and the enemy attacked United States military bases.

Bob had moved to Honolulu only after calling several other places home. Born in Poland on May 8, 1903, Bob's parents came to the United States when he was two. They were part of "a tidal wave of immigration" that began around 1890 and continued up to the breakout of World War I in 1914. During that twenty-five-year period, some sixteen and a half million immigrants arrived. They were different in origin and in religion from earlier ones. The "new immigrants," as they came to be called, were from Southeastern Europe; a large number were Catholic and Jewish. They had emigrated from over thirty countries, with slightly more than half of them from Italy, Poland, Germany, and Czechoslovakia. Once in the United States, most worked as laborers in industries such as iron factories and steel mills.<sup>2</sup>

Even though the Tyce family came from Poland, they were not the typical immigrants in this "wave." Bob's parents were cosmopolitan, not the working class one associates with the

new immigrants. Today, Stan Tyce, Bob's great-nephew, recounts how one of Bob's European aunts married a Russian nobleman. Stan also shares the fact that Bob's father, Louis Adam Tyce, spoke nine or eleven languages. Professionally, Stan identifies him as a chemical engineer. This reflects U.S. Federal Census entries for Louis' occupation that consistently name him as a chemist.<sup>3</sup>

Growing up, Bob Tyce was one of four children, three sons and a daughter. Given Louis' level of education, the family would have lived comfortably. They had the means to move, and move they did, ever westward. At one point when Bob was growing up, he and his parents resided in St. Joseph, Indiana before they moved to the city of Colton in Southern California's San Bernadino County. In the 1920s, Bob and his brother Roland settled in Chula Vista, California, a city in San Diego County. Great-nephew Stan Tyce (whose grandfather was Roland) shares a story of how the brothers first became involved in flying. Their father, Louis, had attended an auction where he bought a warehouse filled with machinery. In the building were two large crates, Stan explains. Disassembled planes were inside of them. Louis gave the plane parts to his two sons, Roland and Bob, with the directive, in Stan's words, "Here, you can have these." With what seems to be an inherent mechanical ability in the Tyce family, the brothers not only put the planes together, but they learned how to fly them. Stan Tyce points out that there were no flying schools back then. Still, Roland and Bob each received a pilot's license. Stan has Roland's, signed by Orville Wright in 1926 (he chaired the National Aeronautic Association of the U.S.A.). One presumes Bob's license bore the same signature. Stan also has pictures of the two brothers at the Tyce Airport, later renamed the Chula Vista Airport. The brothers ran an aviation company there, and they also taught others how to fly.<sup>4</sup>



Photograph courtesy of Stan Tyce



Photographs courtesy of Stan Tyce





Bob Tyce, however, did not stay in the San Diego area as his brother did. The adventuresome spirit that seemed to reside in all the Tyces factored into another move west. On July 12, 1935, Bob boarded a ship in Los Angeles bound for Honolulu. It arrived there six days later. Bob went into the aviation business, just as he had in Chula Vista. His partner was Charles Knox; the two named their company "K & T Flying Service." The two pilots flew residents and visitors around the islands. Bob again became a flight instructor, as he had back in San Diego County. He taught students, for example, at the University of Hawaii's pilot training program; it had ties to the United States Army Air Corps.<sup>5</sup>



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*"Your Satisfaction Is Our Reputation"*

An advertisement for Bob's K-T Flying Service from *The Honolulu Advertiser*, January 7, 1940, p. 8.

**FLY** AT LOW COST  
**OVER THE**  
**VOLCANO**



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**\$25**

**See This Thrilling Sight From The Air!**

Complete round trip to Hilo and back, flying over Mauna Loa enroute, gives you the best possible view of the volcano. The big yellow K-T Flying Service ships leave Honolulu and return the same day, except that the weekend trip leaves Saturday morning and returns Sunday afternoon. \$25 fare applies only to parties of six, but Mr. Tyce will arrange a party for you. **SEE THIS SPECTACLE WHILE YOU CAN!**



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*"Your Satisfaction is Our Reputation"*

*The Honolulu Advertiser, April 18, 1940, p. 2*

Without the deadly consequences of that December morning, one imagines Bob Tyce staying in Hawaii for years to come. Stan Tyce believes his great-uncle intended to live there indefinitely. Bob might have visited family in San Diego, but his home would be Hawaii. Because of the circumstances of his death on December 7, 1941, Bob Tyce became a part of history. If not for that moment at the John Rodgers Airport, he would have continued a life marked by professional success in his aviation business. In October 1938, Bob had married a woman named "Edna" who seemed to have a business sense. Together, with their guidance, the K-T Flying Service would probably have grown. Or put more simply, Bob would have continued his adventuresome life in a place many called "paradise." Yet he did return home to San Diego to stay, although not until after the war was over. Bob Tyce is buried in Glen Abbey Memorial Park, outside of Chula Vista.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “4 Missing In 2 Planes After Raid on Oahu,” *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, December 17, 1941, p. 1; “Precautions Taken Along Waterfront,” *The Honolulu Advertiser*, December 9, 1941, p. 2; “Aided Victims Of Air Raid,” *The Honolulu Advertiser*, December 30, 1941, p. 7; “Tyce Estate Valued,” *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, April 24, 1941, p. 1; “Killed While Trying To Start Plane Motor Unaware of Hostilities,” *The Chula Vista Star*, December 12, 1941, p. 1. See also Stephen Harding, “First Planes Down at Pearl,” [historynet.com/first-planes-down-at-pearl](http://historynet.com/first-planes-down-at-pearl) (accessed December 2, 2021). Harding gives a somewhat different account of the last moments of Tyce’s life; he does not, for example, mention the propeller referred to in newspaper accounts after the attack. This author used the newspaper accounts and the family story of the propeller.

<sup>2</sup> For Robert Tyce’s birth date and birthplace, see the following record on [ancestry.com](http://ancestry.com), accessed November 11, 2021: U.S., Find A Grave for Robert Horatio Tyce. United States immigration statistics are taken from Leonard Dinnerstein, *Anti-Semitism in America* (New York, 1994), p. 58.

<sup>3</sup> Conversation between author and Stan Tyce, November 29, 2021. On [ancestry.com](http://ancestry.com) (accessed November 11, 2021), see U.S. 1910, 1920, 1930, 1940 Federal Census for Ludwig A. Tyce (1910), and Louis A. Tyce for 1920, 1930, 1940.

<sup>4</sup> In 1930, Tyce’s parents and his youngest brother, Theodore, lived in Fresno, California. By 1935, the three had moved to Chula Vista, California, part of San Diego County. Tyce himself seems to have preceded the family to San Diego County. A newspaper account soon after his death stated that he moved to San Diego in 1925.

Naturalization papers he filed a San Diego’s Superior Court in September 1930 also place him in the county before his parents may have lived there. See the following records on [ancestry.com](http://ancestry.com), accessed November 11, 2021: U.S., Find A Grave for Robert Horatio Tyce; U.S. 1910, 1920, 1930, 1940 Federal Census for Ludwig A. Tyce (1910), and Louis A. Tyce for 1920, 1930, 1940; U.S. Naturalization Record Indexes, 1791-1992 for Robert Horatio Tyce. “Killed While Trying To Start Plane Motor Unaware of Hostilities,” *The Chula Vista Star*, December 12, 1941, p. 1.

Conversation between author and Stan Tyce, November 29, 2021. Stan Tyce pointed out that he is “a 4<sup>th</sup> generation engineer.” His great-grandfather, Louis Adam Tyce, was a chemical engineer; Stan’s grandfather, Roland Tyce, was a mechanical engineer; his father, Lawrence Tyce, was an industrial engineer. This observation by Stan is the basis for the statement that a natural mechanical ability seems to reside within the Tyce family.

<sup>5</sup> The following records are on [ancestry.com](http://ancestry.com) (accessed November 11, 2021): Honolulu, Hawaii, U.S., Arriving and Departing Passengers and Crew List, 1900-1959; 1940 U.S. Federal Census for Robert L. Tyce. “Air Instructors Examined By CAA Official,” *The Honolulu Advertiser*, January 5, 1940, p. 3. Stan Tyce agrees with the characterization of his great-uncle as “adventuresome.” In fact, Stan believes the word applies to Bob’s entire family at that time (conversation between author and Stan Tyce, November 29, 2021).

<sup>6</sup> Marriage Announcements in *Hawaii-Tribune Herald* (Hilo, Hawaii), November 13, 1938, p. 10; after her husband’s death, Edna became the manager of his business (she is so identified in “4 Missing In 2 Planes After Raid on Oahu,” *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, December 17, 1941, p. 1); conversation between author and Stan Tyce, November 29, 2021.