

## A Mile Long: The Consolidated Vultee Factory in Fort Worth

by Scott Sosebee

*The East Texas Historical Association provides this column as a public service.*

*Scott Sosebee is Executive Director of the Association and can be contacted at [sosebeem@sfasu.edu](mailto:sosebeem@sfasu.edu).*

*Learn more about ETHA by visiting the website at [www.easttexashistorical.org](http://www.easttexashistorical.org).*

(Jan 8, 2023) Very few times in history can one “draw a line” and remark that “everything after this” will be different: World War II was one of those instances. The war’s brutality and loss certainly changed families’ lives forever, and tens of millions of Americans who served will never forget the experience. The conflict also began a process that would transform Texas’ society and—probably most notable—its economy. While the discovery of oil and the subsequent industries it spawned began to nudge Texas from its dependence on agriculture and a rural, very southern financial system, it would be World War II, and the ensuing industrial conversion, that would truly begin to establish Texas as a center for manufacturing and more complex industry. Petrochemical plants, armament factories, and garment distributors began to locate and proliferate in the state, adding a base that would benefit Texas for years to come. One of the most important, and enriching, production facilities to come to Texas during those years was the aircraft business, and of all the ones that called Texas home, none was larger or had a more shadowing presence than the massive Consolidated Vultee Aircraft Corporation bomber plant in Fort Worth.

When the U.S. finally entered World War II after the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor in December 1941, the nation mobilized as it never had—or never would again—for war. Texans, as they usually have been, volunteered for the armed forces in numbers far greater than its percentage of the population, and its citizens willingly and generally cheerfully sacrificed everyday goods and lifestyle. Meat, sugar, coffee, rubber, gasoline, and other products were subject to rationing, and the “ration book” became as much a shopping necessity as cash. Residents volunteered to conserve food, to forego buying clothing, and also bought war bonds, all as gestures to support “our boys” who were fighting in Europe and the Pacific.

Rationing and volunteering for the service were not the only transformative experiences happening in Texas during World War II. Modern wars require a modern industrial infrastructure; armies need material, weapons, fuel, and a myriad array of other manufactured products in order to fight and be effective. Wars are more often won not by the nation with the fiercest warriors, but by the ones with the most industrial might. Thus, the war infused a number of regions with factories and manufacturing concerns that had previously had very few. Texas was one of those beneficiaries. Because of its vast reserves of oil, Texas became a natural setting for the burgeoning petrochemical industry, and the arc of the Gulf Coast from Beaumont-Port Arthur all the way to Corpus Christi became the center of this new business. The state also built granaries to process and store food, expanded or founded steel mills in East Texas and Houston, erected shipyards along the coast, synthetic rubber plants grew throughout the state, and the wood-pulp industry in East Texas boomed. Those industries proved vital to Texas' fortunes and provided a great economic benefit, but perhaps no industry brought such benefits to Texas like the enormous aircraft factories that located in the state—and Consolidated Vultee was the biggest of those massive endeavors.

The company did not originate in Texas, but was the result of a merger between the Consolidated Aircraft Company of Buffalo, New York and California airplane manufacturer Vultee Aircraft. World War II meant that Consolidated Vultee's production would skyrocket to the point that its San Diego facility could not handle the workload, so they looked throughout the country for places to build new plants. One of their most profitable lines was larger bomber aircraft, and the facility that would build those massive aircraft needed to have lots of space, good flying weather, and a sizable labor source. A number of Texas municipalities fit such characteristics, but Fort Worth had an advantage—a large plot of land directly across from an Army Air Corps training base (which would eventually become Carswell Air Force Base)—a decisive benefit that gave Fort Worth the factory.

The company would build an assembly line that was more than a mile-long, and at its production height would employ almost 40,000 workers—one-third of them women. Within the massive structure in just a little over three years those workers built over three thousand B-24 bombers, and an almost equal number of C-87 cargo planes. The plant pumped more than \$150 million into the Texas economy, and, along with other industries helped to make Texas a manufacturing power house. After the war, Consolidated Vultee became a part of the larger General Dynamics Corporation, and the plant in Fort Worth became the center of that company's Convair division. It would maintain a presence in Fort Worth for decades, becoming one of the most important corporations in that city.

Consolidated Vultee, along with other aircraft manufacturing facilities in among other places Dallas and Houston, helped to make Texas a center for the aerospace industry after the war. When NASA came to Texas in the early 1960s, the state's importance in such industries grew even larger. The building of aircraft is a highly technical operation, work that must embrace new and advanced technology. Thus, Texas' leadership in the industry meant that they attracted a number of high-tech firms, as well as the talented people who work in such industries. In turn, in our present day, these developments have helped to make Texas one of the technological leaders of the world.

# # #