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Leslie Leroy Irvin was born in Los Angeles on 10th September 1895. Leslie's aviation interest began while working as a stuntman for the film industry in California where he performed acrobatics and descents from hot air balloons. In 1914, he was hired to jump from an aircraft using a standard balloon chute. He did this from a height of 1,000 feet above the shimmering ocean. The film was entitled 'Sky High' and from there Leslie obtained the nickname which stayed with him for the rest of his life - Sky High Irvin!

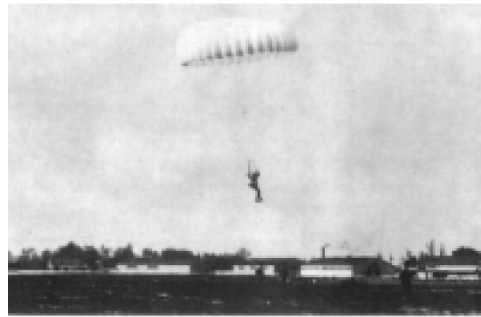


Leslie Leroy Irvin

In early 1918, Leslie realised the need for a reliable parachute for flyers and began to put his own ideas on life-saving parachutes into practise. The exact specifications of the first parachute that Leslie made are not recorded. What is known is that it was a static-line operated backpack; that incorporated a harness of original but somewhat uncomfortable design; that the canopy was made from cotton; and that it worked. We know that it worked because Leslie himself jumped with it several times during the spring and summer of 1918.

One parachute descent performed by Leslie L. Irvin stands out as a major turning point in the history of the parachute - as the beginning of a new era. On McCook Air Field on 28th April 1919, Sky High Irvin established his reputation as the first man to make a premeditated free fall parachute descent. Leslie was undoubtedly affected by the pessimism of those around him when he was quoted as saying 'I would have been all right if everyone around me had not acted as though they were going to be my pall-bearers.' Irvin had helped James Floyd Smith, from the U.S. Air

Service Engineering Division, develop the parachute he wore in 1919.



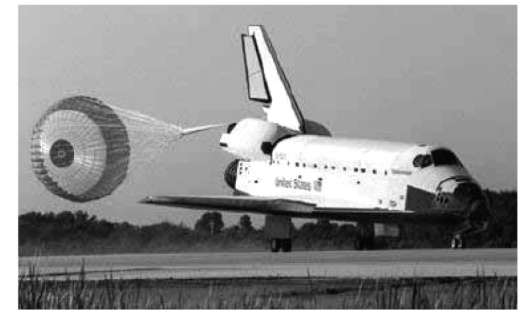
Leslie Irvin's Historic Jump at McCook Air Field

On 18th June 1919, a Certificate of Incorporation was issued and The Irving Air Chute Company was born. A clerical error resulted in the addition of the 'g' to Irvin and this was left in place until 1970, when the company was unified under the title Irvin Industries Incorporated.

Since its incorporation Irving Air Chute has noted remarkable achievements. During the 1920s and 1930s almost every parachute strapped on by a flier bore the Irvin name. Leslie initiated diversification of his company and in 1923 began manufacture of automobile seat belts. Production facilities were realised in Britain, Sweden, Italy and West Germany. In 1973, Irvin acquired a tool and die company to expand its metal processing capability. Within this division the company also became a leading producer of specialised can-making machinery for the beverage and food-canning industries. The Irvin expertise in metal and fabric technology was expanded to produce cargo-handling systems. A Structures Division was incorporated in the Irvin family and technology from this division found a variety of applications in industry and recreation during the 1960s and 70s.

The company again was to change their name in 1996 to Irvin Aerospace to better reflect the Aerospace Industry to which the focus of the company had returned.

In June 2001 Irvin was purchased by Alchemy Partners and joined together with GQ Parachutes Limited and Para-Flite Incorporated, under the umbrella of Airborne Systems. Irvin exists today in the U.S. and Canada and also as Irvin-GQ in the UK. Production still includes personnel parachutes encompassing ejection, troop and bail out parachutes, precision opening release systems, aerial delivery systems, inflatable life support systems, special-purpose parachutes including recovery systems for high performance aircraft and deceleration systems for fighter aircraft, air droppable rescue systems and parachute mechanisms. Also included in these diversified lines are space vehicle recovery, drone recovery, missile recovery and a large variety of other inflatable products.



Shuttle Brake Parachute

On 9th October 1966, Leslie Irvin passed away. During his lifetime the parachute had altered the whole face of military strategy; men, supplies, guns, everything could be dropped from the air anywhere during wartime. Leslie Irvin was one of the most influential figures in the annals of parachuting. His early love for the sky and concern for the safety of those who entered it was the outstanding cornerstone for the company that still bears his name. Every product stamped with the Irvin name is a proud emulation of the adventuresome and insightful spirit of the man himself.



Irvin Aerospace, Santa Ana, California, USA

THE CATERPILLAR CLUB STORY

Thousands of airmen, and a few airwomen, number among the most highly treasured souvenirs of their service a tiny Caterpillar Badge. It is their passport to one of the most famous flying clubs in the world - The International Caterpillar Club, all of whose members have saved their lives by parachute.



Dramatic Bail Out from a Lightning Jet

One evening in the early 1920s, Mr. Leslie Irvin, inventor of the modern parachute, sat talking over a drink at McCook Field, (near the site of Wright-Patterson AFB) with two American pilots - the first two airmen ever to save their lives with parachutes of his design. "You know, Leslie", remarked one of the pilots, "we ought to start a club for guys like us. As time goes by more and more fliers all over the world will owe their lives to your 'chutes, it should be quite a thing in years to come....".

Today the Club boasts of tens of thousands of Caterpillar Club members of all nations who have escaped death by jumping with an IRVIN parachute. Files of the American and Canadian members are kept at the Irvin Aerospace plant in Belleville, Ontario, Canada, and a count taken in 1977 showed a membership of 11,332 men and 12 women. Each one has been given a gold Caterpillar Badge and Membership to the International Caterpillar Club, honouring the pledge, which Leslie Irvin gave to those first two fliers who saved their lives with his parachutes many years ago. (The Caterpillar is symbolic of the silk worm, which lets it descend gently to earth from heights by spinning a silk thread upon which to hang. Parachutes in the early days were made from pure silk.)

By 1939, Caterpillar Club Membership had risen to 4,000 and included fliers from China to Peru and nearly 50 countries in between. Among the famous personalities wearing the treasured badge were America's General Doolittle - who bailed out three times and once telegraphed Leslie Irvin: "Airlane failed. Chute worked." - Germany's ace flier Ernst Udet, Britain's Lord Douglas Hamilton, and a score of test pilots including Alec Henshaw, Geoffrey de Havilland and John Cunningham.



Sergeant Henn Bailing out from his Hurricane, 1940

At the outbreak of the Second World War a shortage of gold - and reasons of economy - made it necessary to substitute the gold Caterpillar Badge for a gilt one, but no person who applied, and could substantiate his claim to own one, was disappointed. Into the trays of the filing cabinets went the names of some of the greatest air aces of the war - "Cobber" Kain, Sir Douglas Bader, "Bluey" Truscott, "Pathfinder" Don Bennett and hundreds of others. With them, too, each in its own individual and carefully indexed folder, went stories of escape, some so amazing that to read them makes the adventures of James Bond seem like child's play. Some of the fliers were blown bodily out of their aircraft during combat; some floated safely to earth with their parachute canopy ripped by enemy bullets; some jumped at 30,000 feet; others at 200 feet - or less.

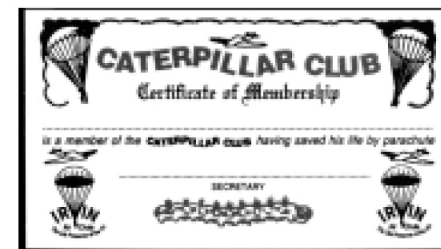
More than 13,000 R.A.F. officers and airmen wrote from prisoner-of-war camps to apply for their badges after parachuting from crippled bombers and fighters over enemy territory. Two brothers in Bomber Command bailed out over Germany within twelve months of each other to qualify for membership and one sergeant-pilot wrote on a P.O.W. postcard to thank Leslie Irvin for an easy let down "on behalf of my future - as yet unknown - wife and children." Among these thousands of R.A.F. men only one airwoman received the coveted Caterpillar badge during the war - Corporal F.H. Poser, who jumped from 600 feet while serving with a meteorological unit in the Middle East. Since then several other women have become fully qualified members of the Club.



A Bail Out from a Stricken Lancaster

The official membership of the Caterpillar Club is only a fraction of the total number who are eligible. It does not include, for example, the thousands of Americans who parachuted safely in the Pacific War, nor, of course, the Luftwaffe airmen, most of who carried an Irvin - designed parachute, made at a factory bought out by the NAZIS in 1936. Altogether it is estimated that at least 100,000 persons - as many as would fill Wembley Stadium or the Rose Bowl - have saved their lives by IRVIN parachutes.

Up to the time of his death on 9th October 1966, Leslie Irvin was Honorary Secretary of the Caterpillar Club ever since its inception, but despite the fact that he made more than 300 parachute jumps he did not become eligible for membership - he never had to jump to save his life.



Membership Card