



## ONE MAN'S DREAM: AIR RESCUE

**By Tom Kollenborn (c) 1986 Rev. 1994**

The history of aviation has an interesting role in the legacy of the Superstition Wilderness Area. Men and their flying machines usually avoided the air space over the rugged topography of this vast wilderness during the 1920's. Aviation was in its infancy during this decade. Most airplanes were underpowered and very dangerous to fly at low altitudes. Flying low over rugged terrain such as the Superstition Mountains was out of the question for most early aviators of the Salt River Valley.

The 1920's marked an unusual interest in airplanes and flying by the public. Men like Commander Francesco de Pinedo and Colonel Charles Lindbergh at the world in awe with their aviation accomplishments. At the same time another man in Arizona was fascinated by the flying machine. Paul Ruble's fascination for flying could not be controlled. In 1928, he designed and built his own airplane in the desert of Arizona. Not only did he design it and build it, he test flew it. His first airplane was somewhat underpowered, but was capable of extremely tight maneuvers. Ruble spent hours flying his creation over the mountains of Central Arizona. Paul didn't like to fly high in the air; he liked being close to the ground. Paul Ruble flew through canyons and mountains nobody else dared to. Paul was also a visionary who believed someday flying machines would be used to spot lost or injured people in the deserts and mountains of Arizona. His antagonist of the period claimed planes flew too high and too fast to be used successfully in air searches. This did not discourage Paul Ruble, he continued flying low and slow over the deserts and mountains of Arizona developing his skills as a pilot and attempting to prove his point.

Paul Ruble made several flights over the now famous Superstition Mountain range. He reported to friends the violent updrafts and down drafts that plagued the area during the summer months. Ruble was convinced these hazards could be avoided if flying was done in the early morning and late evening. Most aviators of the period felt low-level flying was far too dangerous, therefore airplanes would never be used for searching the rugged mountains of Arizona. Some aviators also believed even if airplanes were safe enough for air rescue work, the cost of operating them would be prohibitive.

It was three years later in July 1931 the first attempt was made to use an airplane on a search and rescue mission. This aerial search occurred over the rugged Superstition Mountains east of Phoenix, Arizona. Adolph Ruth, a Washington D.C. prospector, had been reported missing in the Superstitions on June 18, 1931. Men and dogs had been searching the canyons and towering peaks of the Superstition range for three weeks and had found no trace of Adolph Ruth. On July 1, 1931, Erwin C. Ruth, the missing man's son, hired a pilot and airplane to search the rugged mountain range. Ruth later claimed all pilots of the period held a great fear of these mountains and would never descend below 7,000 feet while flying over them. It was suicidal to fly into the canyons of this mountain range, most pilots believed.

Ruth was finally able to secure the services of Mr. Charles Goldtrap, a pioneer aviator in Phoenix to fly a couple of search missions. Goldtrap had recently opened an airport in Phoenix and needed the money to operate it. Ruth offered Goldtrap \$200.00 if he would search the Superstition range for his father in an airplane.

Mr. Goldtrap, accompanied by Edward D. Newcomer, made the first aerial search of the Superstition Mountains with an airplane. Newcomer was a photographer for the Phoenix Gazette. On that hot July day in 1931, Goldtrap and Newcomer changed aviation history in Arizona and fulfilled Paul Rubles' vision that someday airplanes would be used for searches over rugged mountain terrain for missing people.

This was the beginning of air search and rescue work in Arizona and it was another important application of the airplane. It was a primitive start initially, but rapidly grew with the onset of World War II. Throughout the 1930's and 1940's the importance of aircraft in air search and rescue was proven again and again by the hundreds of civilian and military searches and rescues performed by the use of aircraft. There are those who will question the authenticity of this information because the basic concept of air search and rescue was started in many places at the same time.

It was 1947, when another prospector disappeared in the Superstition Mountains of Arizona. James A. Cravey, a retired Phoenix photographer vanished from his camp deep in the mountains. Cravey had hired a helicopter from the Arizona Helicopter Service in Phoenix to fly him to a secret location in La Barge Canyon. On June 3, 1947, Charles Marthens, a pilot for Arizona Helicopter Service, had flown Cravey to a predetermined location and planned to return two weeks later to pick Cravey up. When he returned he could not find Cravey and then reported him missing to the Pinal County Sheriff's Office. Sheriff Lynn Early organized the search for James A. Cravey. Cravey's trip was the first time a helicopter was used for a prospecting venture in the Superstition Wilderness. Ironically, the same helicopter was used unsuccessfully to locate James A. Cravey.

Marthens used his helicopter for several hours trying to locate Cravey, but failed. The search for Cravey continued on the ground led by Sheriff Lynn Early. The search for Cravey continued for several weeks, again without success. 1st Lt. Clifford Gibson, Arizona National Guard, searched several hours for Cravey on July 4, 1947, but failed to find any sign of him. This was the first recorded use of a helicopter in an air search and rescue in the Superstition Wilderness.

Since that first helicopter search hundreds of stranded and lost hikers have been rescued from the cliffs, mountain peaks and canyons of the Superstition Wilderness by military helicopters stationed at Williams Air Force Base or Luke Air Force Base since the early 1950's.

On October 1, 1972, the Arizona Department of Public Safety acquired their first air rescue helicopter. This unit has made many rescue and search flights over the Superstition Wilderness Area. Even with this modern and sophisticated helicopter it is still a difficult and time consuming task to extract an injured person from rugged terrain, especially areas like the western face of Superstition Mountain.

During the summer of 1985, Deputy Gene Berry of the Pinal County Sheriff's Office, in cooperation with the Department of Public Safety's Air Search & Rescue Unit and the Apache Junction Search & Rescue, introduced a method of mountain rescue which has increased the chances of survival for injured people involved in accidents in rugged mountain terrain. The method of rescue requires the extraction of an injured victim from a site, where a helicopter cannot land, by rappelling a trained rescue team down to the injured person. The victim is then stabilized and lifted out by the helicopter, which never has to land.

From the efforts of this highly trained and professional mountain rescue team emerged the Pinal County Mountain Helicopter Rescue Team. Arizona residents and visitors can rest assured they have one of the best mountain rescue teams in the world now based near the Superstition Mountains at Falcon Field.

Paul Ruble was quite a visionary in the early 1920's when he advocated the use of flying machines for search and rescue work in the rugged mountains and desert of Arizona. It is also interesting how the rugged Superstition Mountains have played such a role in aviation's rescue history.