

Leroy R. Grumman (1895-1982)

Founder of Grumman Aircraft Company

Born in Huntington on January 4, 1895, Leroy Randle Grumman demonstrated an early interest in aviation. As a Huntington High School salutatorian (class of 1911), Grumman predicted that “the final perfection of the airplane will be one of the greatest triumphs that man has gained over matter.” Still, it’s doubtful that young Grumman, ever reserved and self-effacing, allowed himself to dream that one day he’d form an aircraft company that would help his country win a great war and build a flying machine that would take mankind to and from the surface of the moon.

After graduating from Huntington High School, Grumman went on to receive a degree in engineering from Cornell University in 1916. Enlisting as an Ensign in the Naval Reserve, he took advanced flight training in Pensacola, Florida, and eventually became a flight instructor. Later the Navy, sent Grumman to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to study the brand-new discipline of aeronautical engineering.



In 1919 the Navy sent Grumman to Loening Aeronautical Engineering Co. in New York City to supervise the firm’s construction of 50 monoplanes under contract with the Navy. The company was so impressed with Grumman that they hired him as general manager in 1920, a position he held until the company was sold in 1929 to Keystone Aircraft. Keystone closed the NYC factory and moved operations to Bristol, Pa. However, Grumman and fellow Loening employees Leon “Jake” Swirbul, and Bill Schwendler decided that, rather than move, they would quit and form their own company.

Grumman mortgaged his house and Swirbul’s mother borrowed \$6,000 to set up Grumman Aeronautical Engineering Co. Because both Grumman and Swirbul had grown up on Long Island and liked the region, they decided to locate the company there. They set-up shop with \$64,325 in capital on January 2, 1930 in an abandoned auto showroom-garage in Baldwin that had once been the Cox-Klemin Aircraft Co. factory. The new company repaired damaged Loening amphibians, built aluminum pontoons, and produced aluminum truck bodies until receiving its first Navy production contract for a two-seater biplane. As the company expanded they moved to bigger quarters – to Valley Stream in 1931, Farmingdale in 1932, and finally Bethpage in 1937.

On the eve of World War II the struggling company was hardly an industrial giant – in 1939 Grumman still managed to protect all of its property with the services of a single security guard. However, the next year brought significant change as the war in Europe prompted France and Britain to order F4F Wildcats, the 330-mph fighter planes that Grumman had first flown in 1937. Employment exploded from 700 in 1939 to 25,500 in 1943, as Grumman became the primary source for Navy fighter planes, first with the Wildcat and then with the F-6 Hellcat. At the peak of production in March 1945, Grumman built a record 664 aircraft in one month, setting production records that have never been equaled. During World War II Grumman aircraft dominated U.S. Naval Aviation Forces and were responsible for 2/3 of all Japanese aircraft destroyed.

Like its competitors, Grumman experienced severe post-war downsizing, dropping to 5,000 employees immediately after the cessation of hostilities. However, Leroy Grumman retained as many veteran employees as possible and successfully guided the company into finding new markets for new products. Among these was civilian airplanes, such as the Agcat crop-dusting biplane and the Gulfstream executive airplane. While continuing its tradition of aircraft production for Naval aviation, Grumman also began a space program that culminated in the Grumman design and production of the Apollo program’s Lunar Excursion Module (LEM) that landed astronauts on the moon in 1969.

In 1966 Leroy Grumman retired as Chairman of the Board of Grumman Aircraft Co., although he remained as a Director until 1972. He continued to visit the company’s facilities until his health began to fail in the early 1980s. He died on October 4, 1982. Although he received many honors during his lifetime, one of the most recent was awarded posthumously in 2001 when *Newsday* announced that Leroy R. Grumman had won the “Long Islander of the Century” competition in the aviation category, beating national aviation hero Charles Lindbergh.

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