

DAKOTA IMAGES

A standout athlete in high school and college, Eugene Vidal went on to become an Olympian. The South Dakota native also pioneered in commercial aviation, a career that placed him in the company of Orville Wright, Charles Lindbergh, and Amelia Earhart.

Eugene ("Gene") Luther Vidal was born 13 April 1895 to Felix Vidal and Margaret Rewalt Vidal in Madison, South Dakota. Gene Vidal excelled in athletics at Madison High School, graduating in 1912. He went on to earn a degree in engineering and win letters in four sports at the University of South Dakota. From 1916 to 1918, he attended the United States Military Academy at West Point, winning prestigious Edgerton sabers as best all-around athlete and football team captain and being named an All-American athlete. Vidal competed in the 1920 Olympic games in Antwerp, Belgium, where he placed seventh in the decathlon. He also coached the pentathlon and decathlon teams at the 1924 Olympics in Paris.

Vidal served with the United States Army from 1918 to 1926, working as a military flight instructor in addition to coaching the army basketball and football teams. He carried his aeronautical training into civilian life, becoming assistant general manager of Transcontinental Air Transport, later Trans World Airlines (TWA), in 1929. Three years later, Vidal, Amelia Earhart, and Paul Collins started the highly successful Ludington Airlines, later acquired by Eastern Airlines.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt named Vidal director of the aeronautics branch of the Department of Commerce in 1933, and *Time* magazine featured the "Chief of Airways" on the cover of its 18 December 1933 issue. Believing that commercial aviation would connect and strengthen the nation, Vidal convinced Roosevelt to create the Bureau of Air Commerce and obtained funds for lighting major airports and building airports in small cities. Returning to private life in 1937, he and Earhart helped organize Northeast Airlines.

In the early 1940s, the airline executive formed Vidal Research Corporation and developed the "Vidal process" for molding veneers of plywood and plastic into products ranging from airplanes to bathtubs. He also served as aviation advisor to the army chief of staff from 1955 to 1965 and advised numerous other government agencies, corporations, and foreign nations about aviation development.

Vidal and his first wife, Nina Gore, had one son, well-known author Gore Vidal. Gene Vidal later married Katherine Roberts, and they had two children, Vance and Valerie.

Gene Vidal died 20 February 1969.

—Clyde Brashier



Eugene Vidal

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