



McCONNELL

Brothers in Arms

They were the “Flying McConnells,” three brothers from the American heartland who gained lasting fame in air battles of World War II. Thomas L., Fred J., and Edwin M. McConnell, all natives of Kansas, today lend their illustrious surname to one of the Air Force’s largest bases.

The three all grew up in Wichita and attended North High School, where they excelled in academics and sports. Fred was 24, Edwin was 21, and Thomas was 19 when they joined the Army Air Forces as aviation cadets on the same day (March 22, 1943) at Fort Riley, Kan. They trained together in California and received their pilot’s wings on the same day at Luke Field, Ariz.

The brothers were a media sensation, billed as “Three of a Kind.” All three became B-24 copilots and joined the same squadron in the South Pacific theater, where they went into action on the same day. Yet the brothers fought together for only a few months.

Second Lt. Thomas McConnell, the youngest of the three, was killed in action on July 10, 1943, on his third combat mission. His B-24 had just bombed Japan’s Kahili airfield at Bougainville and was returning to base on Guadalcanal when the bomber, in dense fog, crashed into a mountainside. All 11 crew died. Thomas was 20.

The other two McConnells survived the war. Fred flew 61 missions and attained the grade of captain only to perish on active duty after returning home. He was a military flying instructor stationed at Cook Field, Neb., and was flying to a new assignment at Garden Plain, Kan., when his aircraft on Oct. 22, 1945, struck a power line and crashed. Fred was killed instantly. He was 27.

Edwin flew 56 combat missions and returned home with a Distinguished Flying Cross. He resigned from active duty in August 1945 and spent two years as a commercial airline pilot, eventually enrolling in college and taking a job in industry. Edwin remained in the Air Force Reserve and finally ended his military career in 1981. Retired Lt. Col. Edwin McConnell died at his home in Englewood, Colo., on Sept. 1, 1997. He was 76.

On April 12, 1954, Wichita AFB, Kan., was rechristened McConnell Air Force Base in honor of Tom and Fred. Edwin was not included due to policy against naming a base after a living person. At a rededication ceremony on June 14, 1999, Edwin’s name was added.

Throughout World War II, B-29s were built at a Boeing factory adjacent to the base. McConnell became a Strategic Air Command base for B-47 bombers. Today, McConnell’s mission is to provide global reach via its many airlift and tanker aircraft.

THOMAS L. McCONNELL

Born: April 9, 1923, Wichita, Kan.
Died: July 10, 1943 (KIA), Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands
Service: US Army Air Forces
Era: World War II
Combat: South Pacific
Final Grade: Second Lieutenant
Years Active: 1943
Occupation: US military officer

FRED JUNIOR McCONNELL

Born: April 23, 1918, Wichita, Kan.
Died: Oct. 22, 1945, Garden Plain, Kan.
Service: US Army Air Forces
Era: World War II
Combat: South Pacific
Final Grade: Captain
Years Active: 1943-45
Occupation: US military officer

EDWIN MAURICE McCONNELL

Born: Jan. 29, 1921, 0Wichita, Kan.
Died: Sept. 1, 1997, Englewood Colo.
Colleges: Michigan State University, University of Colorado
Service: US Army Air Forces, Air Force Reserve
Era: World War II
Years Active: 1943-45 (active duty); 1945-81 (Reserve duty)
Combat: South Pacific
Final Grade: Lieutenant Colonel
Honors: Distinguished Flying Cross
Occupations: US military officer, Engineer

McCONNELL AFB, KAN.

State: Kansas
Nearest City: Wichita
Area: 4.7 sq mi/3,000 acres
Status: Open, operational
Opened (Wichita Municipal Airport): June 28, 1929
Leased: by USAAF August 1941
Returned to Civilian Use: Oct. 11, 1942
Reopened: (by USAF) May 31, 1951
Renamed: Wichita AFB, May 15, 1953
Renamed: McConnell AFB, April 12, 1954
Current Owner: Air Mobility Command
Former Owners: Air Training Command, Strategic Air Command, Tactical Air Command, Air Combat Command
Home of: 22nd Air Refueling Wing

1. Thomas McConnell. 2. Fred McConnell. 3. Edwin McConnell. 4. KC-135s perform an elephant walk on the runway at McConnell AFB, Kan. Tanker and transport aircraft at the Air Mobility Command base sustain airpower operations worldwide.