



Major Pierce McKennon and his favorite mount, the North American P-51D RIDGE RUNNER III, in the spring of 1945.
(Photo - by Sgt Joe Sills, in the Mrs. P. D. McKennon collection)

THE STORY OF MAJOR PIERCE M^cKENNON

By Dr. JAMES J. HUDSON

"This will be a rough mission," First Lieutenant Pierce W. McKennon of Fort Smith, Arkansas mused to himself as he pulled his six foot frame into the snug little cockpit of the P-51 Mustang fighter plane. Schweinfurt had been a veritable hell of flak and a nest of aggressive, highly-capable German fighter pilots for many months. On 14 October 1943, only six months before, a fleet of 228 American B-17 and B-24 bombers had lost 60 planes while attempting to knock out the ball bearing plants located in that central German stronghold. (1) In fact, the losses had been so heavy as to win the title "Black Thursday" for the mission and virtually end daylight bombing on such strongly-defended targets so deep in enemy territory. Today, 13 April 1944 (another Thursday), Schweinfurt was the target again! By this time, however, the American bomber formations were escorted by long-range fighters--a comfort not available to them the previous October.

With the help of his crew chief, Sgt Joe Sills, McKennon squirmed into his parachute, fastened his safety belt and shoulder harness, pulled on his RAF-type flying helmet, plugged in his radio cord, and adjusted his oxygen mask. After these chores were taken care of, the handsome young flyer moved carefully through the 21 steps in the "pre-starting" cockpit check. Now he was ready for the signal to "press" which would be given by the 4th Fighter Group Commander. (2) The signal was not long in coming, and the engines of the 4th's 48 red-nosed Mustangs roared simultaneously to life. During the next few minutes the pilots taxied to the end of the airfield, faced into the wind, and prepared to take off. As Lt McKennon's own unit, the 335th Fighter Squad-

ron, was the last to take off, he had time to glance about the Debden airdrome and reflect on whether in a few hours he might be touching down again to its comforts. These thoughts were short-lived, however, for it was now his time to turn into the wind, push on maximum power and start the take off run. As the airspeed indicator touched 100 mph he gently eased back on the control stick and felt his Mustang, RIDGE RUNNER, become airborne. A quick glance to the right told him that his wingman was in position a few feet away. Then the Arkansan began his turn to the left to join the squadron circling the field.

One climbing circuit of the Debden Airdrome was sufficient for the three squadrons comprising the 4th Fighter Group to move into formation. The group was made up of experienced pilots, many of whom traced their combat careers back to Eagle Squadron days before the United States entered the war. With the formation completed, the "Debden Terrors" set course toward the east to Germany. Soon the green of the English countryside dropped away to the rear, and the pilots climbed up over the choppy blue of the North Sea. At 1245 hours, some 50 minutes after take off, they crossed the Belgian coast at an altitude of 25,000 feet and leveled off to pick up cruising speed. The rendezvous with the "Big Friends" (B-17s and B-24s) was to occur at 1341 hours at a point a few miles west of the target city--Schweinfurt.

Time passed slowly as the sleek little fighters cruised on at 300 mph. Moving his head from right to left and back again, in what the fighter pilot called the "Messerschmitt twitch," Pierce McKennon's keen eyes searched the sky in all directions. In spite of the fact

that young McKennon was not responsible for navigation, he was vaguely aware of checkpoints passing five miles below. Liege, the Rhine, Koblenz and Frankfurt followed one after another. Except for an occasional burst of flak, all seemed quiet, and the Arkansan let his thoughts wander back to more peaceful things--to his home at 216 North 21st Street in Fort Smith, his mother, his winning of a tri-state piano contest, and finally to the Freshman German course under Dr. A. E. Lussy at the University of Arkansas. Pierce had had much trouble with the course, and it seemed ironic that he was now fighting over the land where that language was spoken by almost everyone.

Suddenly the plane's radio crackled with the urgent cries for help from the bombers a few miles ahead. All thoughts of home were erased from McKennon's mind as he pushed the throttle forward to keep up with his formation, now speeding to the rescue. In an instant he saw below him the bomber formation lumbering along dead ahead of his own position. Two or three Flying Fortresses were already aflame and slowly falling out of their neat formation boxes. Almost at the same instant his eye caught the source of their distress. A score or more of Focke-Wulf FW 190 fighters had completed their first attack on the bombers and were now queuing up for a second firing pass from above and slightly behind. It was into this melee that the 335th Fighter Squadron plunged.

The Arkansas flyer soon found himself going around in a "mad circle trying to find a FW 190 to latch on to." Everyone seemed to be firing, and the sky was full of tracer bullets. Then off to one side he spotted two Focke-Wulfs flying line astern and a little below the general dogfight. Rolling his Mustang over, he dived with full throttle upon the rearmost "Jerry." The German leader broke into a sharp turn to the left and the second FW 190 followed suit. McKennon's vision dimmed as he turned sharply to keep the second German aircraft in his sights. After two complete circles the American was able to maneuver into firing position and "gave him several bursts" with his six .50 caliber machine guns but could "not observe the results." Finally the German "straightened out" and McKennon "took a long burst, getting strikes on the engine and fuselage." The Hun did not seem heavily damaged but suddenly the glass canopy flew off the FW 190 and the pilot bailed out. The Arkansas boy watched the enemy fighter spin down through the broken clouds below, then climbed to rejoin his mates as the 4th Fighter Group resumed its escort task. This time, because of the long range fighter, the Schweinfurt hornet's nest would claim only a few of the "big friends." Late that same afternoon Sgt Joe Sills happily supervised the painting of a ninth German cross on the nose of McKennon's P-51. Before the war was over the amiable Fort Smithian was to be credited with 21.68 victories--twelve in air-to-air combat and 9.68 destroyed on flak-destroyed airdromes. (3)

Born in Clarksville, Arkansas, on 30 November 1919, Pierce was the youngest of three sons of Dr. Parma Dixon and Inez Winningham McKennon. Dr. McKennon, soon to be known as one of the leading dentists in Arkansas, moved his family to Fort Smith in 1921, and it was in that western Arkansas city that Pierce grew up as a laughing, happy-go-lucky boy. Encouraged and constantly helped by his charming mother, Pierce turned to music at an early age. So talented was he at the piano that he won several state contests and one tri-state prize while still in high school. On graduation from St. Anne's Academy, Fort Smith, he was given a music scholarship to the University of Arkansas. Although the fighting in Europe enticed him away from the University long before he won a degree, he was to thrill audiences all over Canada and Great Britain with his "boogie-woogie" renditions. Several night clubs offered him a job and many told him he "should be playing and not flying."

Not only was young Pierce McKennon interested in music, but he also excelled in sports--especially in boxing and track. In 1937 he won the state Civilian Military

Training Corps boxing championship for his weight division. Still later he was on the college track team for a brief period. At home Pierce and John Earl, his middle brother, spent many noisy hours in gymnastic contests, much to the annoyance of his studious eldest brother Parma, who was already contemplating following his father into the field of dentistry.

Armed with his music scholarship and a letter of introduction to Professor L. A. Passarelli of the Romance Language Department, Pierce entered the University of Arkansas in the fall of 1937. He gave up music as a major his first semester and decided on a pre-medical program, but his grades in freshmen chemistry and German got him into scholastic difficulty and in February 1938, he dropped out of the University. For the next several months he attended Fort Smith Junior College. In the Spring of 1939 he returned to the University of Arkansas but never finished his degree. The flying bug had bitten him, and in the winter of 1940-41 he joined the United States Army Air Corps as a flying cadet.

McKennon's first flying was at Hicks Field, Fort Worth, Texas. After approximately 15 hours of dual time in Stearman biplane trainers he flew solo for the first time. On 4 April 1941, after still more dual time and five hours of solo flying, Pierce McKennon was "washed out" of the Army Air Corps. Refusing to heed his check pilot's final words that "flying just isn't for you," Pierce within a few weeks made his way to Canada and joined the Royal Canadian Air Force.

In Canada McKennon found that the RCAF meant business and that they were in a hurry to produce war pilots. One either made it or was dropped with no fuss or furor. In a letter to his mother Pierce described Eglington Hunt Club in Toronto, where he was to complete pre-flight training, as a place "darn near like West Point. Discipline is really strict and the penalties severe." Buckling down to the hard work, the young Arkansan passed the pre-flight program with "flying colors." "I have gotten really good in wireless," he wrote his mother. "I took three of my buddies' final exams in it." "There are so many of us," he continued, "that they don't know one from another...." A few days after completing pre-flight training, Pierce was transferred to Windsor, Ontario, for first stage flight training. On 8 August 1941 he had his first dual flight in a Fleet Finch and on 27 August soloed after only eight hours with an instructor.

The RCAF worked the cadets hard. "I fly about an average of four hours a day," Pierce wrote his mother in September. His confidence in himself had returned. "I don't want to appear bragging but I am learning to fly pretty good."

In spite of the rigorous flight training Pierce McKennon found time for relaxation. An occasional visit across the border to Detroit "for a show," dates with Mary Mackennon, a comely lass from Moncton, New Brunswick, and the piano filled his off duty hours. At every weekend dance or party Pierce was a success with his "boogie-woogie." "They have plenty of pianos and they are trying to make me wear out all of them," he informed his mother. "Pierce could have earned over \$100 a week in any of the large night clubs in Canada for piano playing as he was a favorite wherever he went," wrote one of his Canadian friends. (4)

Late in September 1941, "Mac," as Pierce McKennon was affectionately called by his friends in Canada, began the second phase of his flight preparation at an airfield near Aylmer, Ontario. Here he trained in the North American Harvard (known in the United States Army Air Force as the AT-6), a low-wing monoplane with a retractable landing gear. Things continued to go well with the "washed out" cadet as the months of October and November passed. Instrument, formation, acrobatic and cross-country flying were the order of the day. "Mac" continued to prove himself a capable aviator and as the moment of the presentation of the coveted wings of the military pilot approached, only the frigid Canadian weather seemed to trouble him. "I am about to freeze to

death up here....I sure miss that sunny old South," he wrote his mother in September. Still later he requested her to send "my pajamas if I have any there, also any old jerseys....they would be good to fly in."

On 14 December 1941 Cadet McKennon became Sgt. Pilot McKennon and proudly sewed on his RCAF wings. To his family and friends "Mac" had at last proved the U. S. Army Air Corps wrong, but in his own mind the final proof would have to come in the skies over Europe. He paid a quick visit to Fort Smith during the Christmas holidays, but seemed anxious to be on his way to England and the combat zone.

Despite his eagerness to try his spurs in combat, Sgt Pilot McKennon was destined to spend many more months in training. He arrived in Scotland in January 1942 and shortly thereafter was transferred to Hastings, Sussex County, some 60 miles southeast of London, where he had "a room overlooking the English Channel." During the next several weeks there was little to do except visit historical sites and other points of interest in "England and southern Scotland." His letters, usually addressed to "my darling mother," were full of comments about Trafalgar Square, Westminster Abbey, Picadilly Circus, Tower of London, searchlights, barrage balloons, bombed out buildings and English girls who were so friendly that they frequently asked one "to come home and spend the night with them." Apparently, he had difficulty in acclimating himself to English weather, for during the early weeks of his stay he referred to the climate as "terribly damp and cold." "I sure long for sunny Arkansas," he commented in one letter, and in another, he indicated that he hoped to be posted to a squadron in the Far East or in North Africa--apparently to get away from the rain and fog of an English spring. In many of his letters he seemed almost home-sick and frequently worried about the health of his brother John Earl, then very ill with tuberculosis in the Booneville, Arkansas Sanatorium. He also "hoped" that Parma, his eldest brother, a dentist assigned to the 142nd Field Artillery Group in training at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, would not be sent overseas. Frequently he would send his regard to "my best girl, Ann [Williams]," the little four-year-old who lived next door to the McKennons in Fort Smith. (5)

Toward the middle of March 1942 Pierce McKennon was attached to a Royal Air Force fighter training unit at Shropshire, 40 miles northwest of Birmingham. Almost immediately his mood changed, for he was now back at the flying game. After four weeks of practice on the Miles Master, a two-seated trainer, he was ready for bigger things. On 18 April he checked out in the Hurricane, a first line fighter and the backbone of the RAF Fighter Command during the Battle of Britain. Two weeks later he flew the famed Spitfire. Now "Mac" felt he was on his way. For the next several months he practiced weather flying, acrobatics, reconnaissance and dogfighting under the careful tutelage of veteran RAF fighter pilots.

Late in June 1942 Pierce was assigned to a Spitfire squadron and his joy was apparent in a letter to his mother on 28 June when he wrote, "I am really in it." If, however, he imagined that the new assignment meant combat patrols over enemy territory and wild dogfights with the "Jerries" he was doomed to disappointment. The squadron was based in a rear area in the north of England and had as its prime objective further training. In September Pierce wrote Dr. J. W. Hickman, Pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Fort Smith, "My work here isn't very exciting. I am attached to a Spitfire squadron which will soon be moving further south in England. It is there I expect to have my first fight with Jerry."

During the summer months of 1942 "Mac" fretted about transferring to the United States Army Air Forces, the former Army Air Corps. America had been in the war since the previous December and many of his RCAF friends had decided to throw in their lot with the USAAF. Young McKennon, however, was not convinced that the transfer was the wisest course. In October he wrote his mother

that he planned to stay with "the RAF awhile because speaking truthfully, and having been in the war longer than we have, the RAF is further advanced than we are, and at present is an all round better air force." Apparently, his mind was still open on the subject, for on 24 November Sgt Pilot Pierce Winningham McKennon of the RCAF became Second Lieutenant McKennon of the USAAF. The transformation in his thinking may have come about as a result of the social pressure of his American friends who had made the switch, or, perhaps, it was due to the promise of higher pay and an officer's commission in the AAF. There can be little doubt, however, that the boredom of assignment to a rear area RAF squadron had much to do with the decision. His RCAF discharge read simply, "Pilot. Above average. He is very keen to be operational and should make an excellent fighter pilot."

For several weeks after his transfer to the AAF McKennon was assigned to Headquarters, Eighth Air Force, and attached to the 6th Fighter Wing for further training in Spitfires. Although Pierce chafed at his failure to get into the "real war" he was building up flying experience and becoming a superb flyer. His Log Book on 7 February 1943 showed nearly 400 hours of flying time, with approximately half of that time in Spitfires. Actually, he was to be a much more polished product than most when he finally got into combat.

McKennon's days of waiting were over when on 18 February 1943 he, along with several other RCAF transfers, was ordered to report to the American commander at Debden Air Base, some 40 miles north of London, for duty. Next day he was assigned to the 335th Fighter Squadron, 4th Fighter Group. The 4th Fighter Group was flying Spitfires and the Fort Smith flyer found himself at home immediately. Furthermore, many of the group's pilots were transfers from RAF Eagle Squadrons and thus had had many similar training experiences. Perhaps a majority of them had actual combat time--several could already claim victories over the Nazi flyers. The 4th was commanded by Colonel Chesley Peterson, the most celebrated of the Eagles, who had knocked down a Jerry during the Dieppe raid in August 1942. (6) The group also numbered among its members Lt Col. Don Blakeslee, who later replaced Peterson as Group Command and went on to become one of the really great air combat leaders of the Second World War. Before VE Day he was to fly over 500 missions and well over 1,000 combat hours. In addition, Debden was the home base of Don Gentile of Piqua, Ohio, who was to become the first to pass Captain Eddie Rickenbacker's record of 26 victories, and of such future aces as John T. Godfrey and James Goodson.

Most of the original members of the 4th Fighter Group were mavericks in one way or another. Young McKennon, never a stickler for military protocol, fitted in well. Only a few days before his graduation from RCAF flying school he and four other cadets had been put on report for "failing to appear on parade." The charge was dropped. On still another occasion he and another pilot had been temporarily "grounded" for flying under the newly-constructed Niagara Bridge. Fortunately, the Canadian authorities decided to channel this reckless, daredevil spirit to the combat zone, and "Mac" went overseas. A few months later the Arkansas was the subject of a report which read: "At approximately 1130 hours on 1 April 1943, 2nd Lt. P. W. McKennon of the 4th Fighter Group appeared in front of the Sales Store, New Oxford Street, London in a cap which in appearance was so disreputably mangled as to reflect serious discredit on the American Forces. The cap bore no resemblance to the usual officers cap, and appeared to be more like a skull cap!" (7)

The commander of the 4th Fighter Group was seemingly more interested in how McKennon fought the Hun than in how he dressed in London, for no punitive action was taken. Two years later while "Mac" was serving as commanding officer of the 335th Fighter Squadron, he revealed the same distaste for senseless protocol when he "chewed out" a young lieutenant for ordering Joe Sills, McKennon's crew chief, "to come to attention and salute"

him while Sills was working on the flight line. According to the story, McKennon, then a major, invited the young officer to transfer to another squadron. The close relationship between "Mac" and his ground crew paid off, for Pierce never was forced to abort a mission due to engine trouble after Sills became his crew chief. Right or wrong, Pierce felt protocol technicalities were of no great importance in combat situations. Never, however, did McKennon violate air discipline in battle conditions, as did many of the glory-seeking air aces. Always he worked for the safety and success of the team.

On 27 February 1943 McKennon flew his first combat mission--an escort for British Ventura bombers in a raid on Dunkerque. His Flight Log Book summed up the mission with the remarks: "Flak heavy--nothing happened." This was followed by a couple of uneventful convoy patrols "off Barrows Deep." However, the young lieutenant was not unhappy, for at last he "was in it" and he knew the action would pick up.

The Spitfire V, then being flown by the 4th Fighter Group, had a short cruising range (approximately two hours), thus the possibility of bearding the German fighters deep in France or the Low Countries was out of the question. Nevertheless, the ex-Eagles loved the graceful, highly-maneuverable, little plane, and when they heard that they were soon to be re-equipped with the American P-47 Thunderbolt, they were far from happy. Little was known about the Thunderbolt, and it was "anticipated that it would be about as good as the P-40, which the RAF had sent to the Middle East because it wasn't good enough for combat with German pursuit craft."

⑧ The "Bolts," as the P-47s were soon to be dubbed, began appearing on the Debden airdrome early in March 1943, and on 22 March Pierce flew the type for the first time. His only remark in his Flight Log Book was a "sweet kite."

The new fighter could not turn as sharply as the lighter Spitfire and, because of its weight, it climbed slowly, but its 2100 horsepower radial engine gave it a speed of 430 mph. The Thunderbolt had excellent high altitude performance and carried eight .50 caliber machine guns. The pilots of the 4th Fighter Group soon discovered that this "seven ton milk bottle" could out-dive anything in the skies. Col. Don Blakeslee, soon to be commander of the group, summed it up by snorting: "By God it ought to dive--it certainly won't climb." Like the big fighter or not, pilots of the 4th spent the next six weeks getting ready for combat in it. As the Operational Diary of the 335th Fighter Squadron read: "Most of the pilots felt the P-47 a better plane but were a little sorry to see the old Spits go."

Debden Airdrome, a permanent RAF base leased to the AAF, was a big comfortable place. The roomy, permanent-type living quarters and mess halls were a far cry from most makeshift air bases occupied by other U. S. fighter and bomber groups in England. During the period of transition to the new Thunderbolt several parties "with all the trimmings" were held, and Pierce McKennon quickly became a favorite of the whole group. An account of one of these affairs, reported in the Operational Diary, stated that, "Lt McKennon slapped out the St. Louis Blues on the piano in true 'boogie' style much to the enjoyment of everyone present." Pierce had won a music scholarship to the University of Arkansas by his sensitive renditions of the great classics, but at Debden it was "The Slow Train Through Arkansas" and "That Hypothetical, Theoretical Son-of-a Bitch Colombo" that carried the day. ⑨ In fact, McKennon played both types of music with equal expertness. In 1000 DESTROYED, Grover Hall described "Mac" as:

"...tall and well proportioned, fast and agile. He had an acute sense of mimicry and gift for slapstick. Every moment was a rhythm. At the piano in the lounge during periods of bad weather, Mac was a one-man morale section.... His performances were blent of the dance of Indians and the whirl of der-vishes, Lennox Ave., and the whistle of trains in

the night and the dead pan of Ned Sparks. A cigarette would hang on the starboard underlip; a beer mug would ring the piano at 10 o'clock to his flailing, nimble fingers....The Slow Train Through Arkansas was picking up speed on a piney-wood grade.... what chance did a fellow like Beethoven have at Debden."

But it was not all play at Debden. On 13 May Lt McKennon flew his first operational mission in the P-47 when his squadron escorted B-17s in a raid on St. Omer in France. Three days later his career as a fighter pilot almost came to an early end in a fighter sweep over Flushing, Holland. In McKennon's words,

The Group Commander ordered a starboard turn to attack a formation of Huns. As we swung around I was tail end Charlie [the last man in the formation]. I looked up and saw four FW 190s on my port side and knew it wasn't going to be long. Sure enough they came down on us, and I knew I would be the first one on the list. I could see the wing guns of the lead FW flashing. It was really pretty and I damn near looked too long. He shot up my tail assembly pretty bad. The only way I could give him the slip was to roll her over [his own P-47] and hit for the deck [dive to low altitude]. I went into a vertical dive and nothing can catch a Thunderbolt in a dive. I turned up at least 700 miles per hour...shot across Holland and eluded them. ⑩

During the next two months the Arkansas pilot flew a dozen missions of the fighter sweep and Ramrod type. Because of the comparatively short range of the P-47 being used in the spring of 1943 none of these missions was of more than two hours duration and seldom penetrated more than 50 miles into enemy-held Belgium and France. Bombers could not be escorted all the way to the target and the Luftwaffe realizing this, frequently withheld interception until the U. S. fighters had to turn back to England.

With the advent of the "belly tank" (auxiliary fuel tank) in July 1943, the whole bomber escort picture changed. The 28th of July was the day of the "first belly tank show in the ET0" and, also, was the first time any Allied fighter craft had been briefed to penetrate beyond France into German skies. As the German pilots queued up for the attack on the Fortress formations over Emmerich they were astonished to find themselves under Thunderbolt attack. Before the dogfight ended, no less than nine Me 109s and FW 190s had gone down under the machine guns of the 4th Fighter Group.

On 30 July 1943 Pierce McKennon scored his first aerial victory when he shot down a "yellow nose" FW 190 over Zalt Bommel, Holland. The Arkansas described the action as follows:

I was flying at about 27,000 feet around the second box of Bombers when I noticed a Fort over on one side and out of formation, being clobbered by two FW 190s. The first FW made his attack out of my range but as the second one came in I cut my throttle and dived on him. He spotted me coming down, broke away immediately and went into a diving turn starboard. I shoved everything forward and went after him, closing rapidly all the time. He turned into a sharp climbing turn to port. I gave him a two second burst that missed, but closed to within about 150 feet and got in a three or four second burst with about 15 degree deflection. Something flew off his port side and large quantities of white smoke came pouring out. He flicked violently to starboard and I almost hit him. I passed within a few feet of him and saw his engine afire with long streamers of flame and smoke.

A short time later the Hun fighter plowed into the countryside. Lt McKennon's Squadron destroyed five and damaged three others in the same action. Indeed, the belly tank was getting the Americans into the Luftwaffe's nest where the action was hot.

Although the 4th Fighter Group continued to roll up

an impressive score against the Luftwaffe, McKennon was to have another long wait before scoring again. During the next five months he was to fly 23 tough missions to such German cities as Emden and Bremen. On most of these operations he flew as a wing man in the squadron formation. From this position he had few opportunities to engage the enemy, as the chief function of the wing man was to protect the element or flight leader. Junior officers were usually assigned the wing position and moved up to element (two planes) or flight (four planes) leadership as the older pilots were killed or completed tours of duty and returned to the United States.

McKennon was promoted to 1st Lieutenant in September 1943, and by January 1944 he was considered experienced enough to lead combat flights. With this advancement he was ready to participate in a significant way in the Air Force's "Big Week" air offensive against the Luftwaffe which started on 19 February 1944. (The main objective of the "Big Week" effort was to knock out the German Air Force and took the form of bomber attacks on aircraft factories while Allied fighters destroyed the defenders in the air. The operation was successful in forcing a German strategy change. During the succeeding months the Luftwaffe refused to commit itself to full scale opposition to the daylight bombing campaign. Instead, it would offer only token resistance to some missions, then concentrate heavy opposition to others.)

On Sunday, 20 February Lt McKennon blasted an FW 190 from 200 yards astern and "the pilot bailed out" over the German city of Marienburg. Two days later he damaged an FW 190 in a wild World War I-type dogfight over Koblenz and then maneuvered in such a manner as to cause an Me 109 to crash. On Friday, 25 February 1944, young McKennon was to score his third kill of the week and his fourth total victory when, as leader of a flight, he sent an FW 190 crashing a little south of Luxembourg. On the same day the Squadron Operational Diary commented that McKennon "is going pretty hot lately but he deserves all credit for he does know his flying."

The 25 February "kill" was to be McKennon's last combat mission in the P-47. During late February and early March the 4th Fighter Group began the transition to the fighter pilot's dream plane, the P-51 Mustang. So "hot" was the Fort Smith flyer during the preceding weeks that he was chosen to conduct the G-Suit (gravity suit enabling pilots to make tighter turns without "blacking out") experiments with the new aircraft. For several days in late February the inhabitants of Debden were treated to a real acrobatic show as "Mac", wearing the experimental suit, put the new machine through its paces. Toward the end of the month the 335th Fighter Squadron and its parent group completed the change-over to the Mustang. McKennon named his P-51 RIDGE RUNNER and under the name on the side of his plane was painted an angry, snorting Arkansas razorback.

The "Debden Terrors" now had their "seven league boots." The P-51 was capable of ranging deep into Germany and with auxiliary tanks could fly completely across central Europe to Russian bases. (The 4th Fighter Group escorted the "heavies" on one shuttle bomb raid to Russia in June 1944.) On 4 March 1944 Col Don Blakeslee led the first U. S. fighters over the German capital, an event which convinced Herman Goering that Germany had lost the war. (11) McKennon was forced to turn back from that historic mission when his wing man developed engine trouble over Holland and had to be escorted back to England.

Although keenly disappointed at missing the first Berlin show, Pierce and RIDGE RUNNER did not have to wait long to see "Big B", as the sprawling city on the Spree River was called. On 6 March he was one of 48 4th Fighter Group pilots to escort the bombers back to Berlin. The reception was warm! Stung by having their capital city assaulted, the Hun airmen threw every fighter available into the air to turn back the Americans. The result was a blazing dogfight over the very heart of the city. The chatter of .50 caliber machine guns and 20mm

cannons, the howl of straining aircraft engines, the sight of crippled planes streaming flame and smoke, the rain of debris from exploding bombers and fighters, accompanied by the white canopies of young Germans and Americans parachuting to safety, must have been a tremendous show to those Berliners who dared to expose themselves to watch. McKennon described it laconically in his Flight Log Book as the "biggest show I have ever seen--Jerries all over the place--got an Me 109--he hit the deck." His Combat Report, however, gave a more complete description of the destruction of the aircraft which made him an ace with five kills. The Combat Report read:

I was flying Green 3 in Greenbelt. The section was climbing to get to some smoke trails at 1 o'clock to the bombers. When from the port side we saw about 50 plus coming in on the bombers. We jettisoned our wing tanks and started diving on them. From then on out the section was split. An Me 109 came over me about 500 feet and started turning toward me. I pulled up in a steep turn and got on his tail. He started diving and I followed giving him a short burst. I got strikes on the cockpit, engine and wing roots. He started smoking rather badly going toward Berlin. I got a dead line astern shot and got in some more strikes. He led me right down over the airdrome which was Templehof. I have never seen so many Jerry A/C as I saw there. They were in the circuit and some taking off. I followed this guy right over the drome and gave him another short burst when making a port turn. It was at about 500 feet in this port turn that he flicked on his back, went in and exploded over at one edge of the airdrome. I pulled up and started after another 109 but due to oil all over my windscreen, he got away.

The whole mission required a little less than four and one-half hours during which the ex-Razorback had flown 600 miles to Berlin, fought in an epic air battle, and returned to his base in England. Later, a tired but happy Arkansan watched as his ground crew carefully painted a fifth German cross on the nose of RIDGE RUNNER.

German fighter plane strength reached alarming proportions in the spring of 1944, and it was obvious, to almost every military strategist, this force would have to be knocked out before any invasion of the continent could be undertaken. Thus, the Eighth Air Force had embarked on an offensive to destroy the Luftwaffe in the air and on the vine. American fighter units picked fights with the German Air Force at every opportunity and the recently-beefed-up bomber command proceeded to concentrate on aircraft factories to prevent replacements. Consequently, February, March and April of 1944 were to be the great days for the AAF fighters. Hun fighters were still plentiful and fought ferociously to protect their aircraft factories. The end result of the dual campaign was defeat for the Germans, with the official Air Force history concluding that "the air battles did more to defeat the Luftwaffe than did the destruction of the aircraft factories." (12)

In the blazing air battles of the spring, the 4th Fighter Group was to score heavily and became the first U.S. group to pass the 500 victory mark. Pierce McKennon was to play a large role in running up this impressive score. On 21 March McKennon, now a flight commander, shot down over Bordeaux an FW 190 whose "pilot bailed out." Early in the afternoon of 29 March "Mac" led his flight into an air engagement over Brunswick, Germany. In a twisting, turning dogfight that started at 19,000 feet and ended at 5,000 feet, Pierce knocked down an Me 109 for his seventh air kill. His own aircraft was slightly damaged by the wreckage of the exploding German fighter. While escorting a Fortress formation on 8 April, McKennon became involved "in the biggest fight I have ever been in." His Combat Report read:

I was flying Greenbelt White 3 when we saw a large formation of about 85 plus A/C flying SW about 2000

feet below us. They passed under us, headed for the bombers, getting a few before we got tangled with them. I cannot give a very coherent description because it was the first fight like it I have ever been in. FW 190s were all over the place and every time I turned around I started shooting. I made attacks on about five different 190s; one of which I got strikes on.

Then glancing over to one side of the fight, Pierce noticed an FW 190 and a P-51 locked in combat and dived to the rescue. Swinging in at a sharp angle he "lobbered" the German "pretty good" and watched him "hit and litter a field with pieces." On the following day Pierce shared in the destruction of two Junkers 88 bombers on the Lingen-Plantlune Airdrome. One day later, while escorting the "Big Friends" on a raid in the Tours, France area McKennon spotted several enemy aircraft on the Romorantin airfield and roared down in a strafing run. Crossing the field at 400 mph he watched his machine gun tracers rip into an unidentified single engine aircraft, but the intense anti-aircraft fire made it impossible to confirm a victory.

McKennon's ninth aerial victory, an FW 190 fighter over Schweinfurt, described at the beginning of this article, occurred on 13 April. Air victory number ten was represented by a new model "long-nosed" FW 190, shot down from 25,000 feet in the Rhine Canal area on the afternoon of 18 April. Kill number 11 came next morning when McKennon "got strikes all around the cockpit and wing roots" of a silver-colored Messerschmitt fighter "and parts went flying in every direction." "Pretty good for an old beat-up piano player", he elatedly wrote his brother a day or so later. Few would have disputed his statement.

On 23 April 1944 McKennon was promoted to the rank of captain and although he had been overseas a long time and had more than enough missions to qualify for rotation back to the United States, he was eager to continue combat flying. "We are having some sweet fights with the Huns and it is the biggest thrill in the whole world", he had written his mother in early April. Still later that month he wrote, "It will be quite a while before I come home because by staying my chance for advancement is much better." About the same time he informed John Earl "I would like to be enjoying some of that good old Arkansas weather...[but] am just beginning to roll up a fair score." Apparently his plans were paying off, for in May he wrote that he expected a promotion to major as he was then serving as squadron operations officer--a position calling for that rank. Indeed, Pierce was "getting to be an old timer" in the 335th, since many of the old Eagle Squadron boys were being transferred back to the Zone of the Interior or were being lost in combat.

Late in June 1944 Captain McKennon, veteran of 140 combat sorties and wearing the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Air Medal (each with three oak leaf clusters), returned to Fort Smith for a 30-day rest leave. Although Pierce may have hoped to spend the time relaxing with his family and friends, he was soon caught up in civic club luncheons, newspaper interviews and public adulation. As an air ace with 13 official kills and five others damaged to his credit, he was a real live hero. It was only natural that the handsome, wavy-haired youth would attract attention.

Without a doubt, the young captain could have remained in the United States as an instructor in the fighter training program, but the combat magnet pulled him back to England. Certainly, men of his experience were needed in positions of leadership in operational squadrons. Whether it was a desire for more combat, advancement, or simply a sense of duty, McKennon returned to the 4th Fighter Group early in August and on 22 August was made commander of his old unit, the 335th Fighter Squadron. On 25 August he flew his first sortie in nearly four months, when he led his squadron in an escort mission to Schwerin, Germany. Two days later he

flew a mission to Liege in Belgium--both flights were uneventful.

Captain McKennon's third operational flight as a squadron commander came close to being his last one, when on 28 August 1944 he was shot down by flak near Neuweiler, France, some 20 miles behind enemy lines. For three weeks he was listed as "missing in action."

Since the Normandy invasion in June, the 4th Fighter Group, like most other fighter groups in the Eighth and Ninth Air Forces, had been engaged in strafing German trucks, trains and canal traffic in an effort to paralyze German armies and isolate the battlefield areas. The fateful mission on which McKennon was shot down was such an operation. Spotting several locomotives in the Sarreburg marshalling yards "Mac" had led the 335th down to the attack and within a few minutes two of the locomotives had blown up and 13 others had been severely damaged. As the Mustangs zoomed away from the smoking marshalling yards, Pierce's RIDGE RUNNER was hit by light anti-aircraft fire. A few minutes later his engine quit and the Arkansan was forced to bail out from an altitude of 1,000 feet. Members of his squadron circling their downed commander saw him land in a plowed field, quickly unbuckle his chute, and run into a nearby woods.

After hiding in the woods for several hours, McKennon spotted a French farmer working in a field a few hundred yards away. Risking the possibility that the Frenchman might turn him over to the German authorities, Pierce ventured over to where the farmer was laboring. The Frenchman's first expression, "Oh! American", was a friendly one and in a matter of an hour he put the pilot in contact with "Paul" who was a youthful and active member of the French Underground. "Paul" proceeded to hide the American in a cave under the city dump. In the cave there was a board to sleep on and plenty of wine and cheese. Brush was piled over the entrance to the cave to make it more difficult for German patrols to find. In a few days, after the German search for the downed airman subsided, Pierce was provided with civilian clothes along with fake identification papers and moved to an attic in the home of an elderly school teacher. On being asked by the teacher if there was anything special he needed, Pierce replied, "Yes, a bath." A wash tub was filled and the pilot was told he could bathe in the kitchen where he would be "alone." However, it was not long before there was a knock at the door and McKennon discovered that "alone" meant with the teacher, his wife and a neighbor woman as spectators. After remaining doubled up in the tub for several minutes, Pierce finally stood up and completed his bath. (13)

For the next several weeks McKennon hid during the day and assisted the Maquis in their sabotage activities at night. At the end of the war he was awarded the French Croix de Guerre for his action with the underground movement. Toward the middle of September, when it appeared the Germans were at the point of discovering his hiding place, Pierce and two other downed Allied pilots were moved to a deep salt mine nearby. It was necessary to descend several hundred feet into the mine by rope ladder and the stay in this location was far from comfortable. Fortunately, the underground was able to get the flyers through the lines and back to England in a few days. (Only a few hours after Pierce was moved from the salt mine a stray bomb from an American bomber dropped down the shaft and completely destroyed the mine.)

Captain McKennon reported back to his squadron on 22 September, and a week later was restored to his former position as Squadron Commander and given a new RIDGE RUNNER. One of his first actions after returning to England was to write his mother, who had been notified in August of his being missing. "Don't worry about me", he said, "because I am in fine shape and don't have a scratch on me....I got to see a lot of France and learned a little French." A month later he confessed to his mother that, "I thought being shot down would break my nerves and I wouldn't ever be any good for combat flying

anymore--but it did the very opposite. I feel better and have more nerve than I ever had. Personally I don't think my nerves will ever break--they are too good for that."

During October-November-December 1944 the 4th Fighter Group continued the routine escorting of B-17s and B-24s deep into Germany, where, if no air opposition was met, the fighters continued to drop down to tree top level to strafe airdromes and surface transportation. In fact, during the fall and winter of 1944-45 the Luftwaffe seldom challenged the AAF P-47 and P-51 fighters in the air--instead they conserved their strength to attack the bombers when and if they could catch them unescorted. McKennon's mission reports during this period read like a tourist guide of Germany--Berlin, Giesen, Hamburg, Cologne, Mainz, Leipzig, Koblenz, Merseburg, Munster and Dresden were only a few cities visited with destruction. His sole air victory during these months was an FW 190 shot down some 10 miles south of Bonn on Christmas Day.

In the opening months of 1945 the fighter forces were frequently turned loose in grand free-lance, low-level missions to seek out and destroy Hitler's remaining air forces. To encourage strafing attacks on flak-infested airfields the Eighth Air Force had some time earlier started the practice of giving "kills" for aircraft destroyed on the ground. Strafing had long been considered the most dangerous of all air operations, and many of the great aces of the war were lost in low-level attack.

On 18 March 1945 Major Pierce McKennon, only recently promoted, was involved in one of the most unusual incidents of the Second World War. He was leading the 335th Fighter Squadron in an attack on Prenzlau Airdrome, some 40 miles from Berlin, when flak suddenly blanketed the sky. Pierce felt his plane lurch violently to one side and hastily checked the cockpit for signs of trouble. A single glance at the instrument panel revealed that the engine oil pressure had dropped to zero. This meant one thing--the engine had been hit by flak, and it would be only a matter of moments until he would have to crash land or bail out. Flak had knocked him out of the sky the previous summer, and he simply could not believe that lightning could strike twice in the same place. "I have had my bad luck...I will be okay from here on", he had then reasoned. The smell of smoke and burning oil quickly dispelled his momentary disbelief and convinced him of his danger. Drawing on his earlier experience in bailing out over enemy territory, Pierce maneuvered away from the populated area near the airfield.



Lt George Green sitting in the lap of Major Pierce McKennon at the end of the sensational air rescue of 18 March 1945. (Courtesy of Mrs. P. D. McKennon)

At 4,000 feet he pulled back the cockpit canopy and prepared to jump.

"I almost killed myself", he wrote his mother, "getting out of the aircraft--I got caught on something in the cockpit when I was only half way out. The plane was in a dive and the slipstream was so strong that it held me against the fuselage. The plane was going straight down when I tore myself loose. I figured right then that this was my last ride because of the position I was in it was 99 times out of a hundred that I would hit the tail and you can't do that and live. Anyway, as luck would have it, I missed the tail by a couple of inches--my chute opened OK and the landing wasn't too hard."

Picking himself up from the ground and struggling to get out of his chute, McKennon became vaguely aware of a Mustang trying to land on the narrow little meadow into which he had parachuted. On the third attempt the fighter plane touched down and skidded to a stop only a few yards from McKennon. The engine continued to idle at low RPM as the bubble cockpit canopy slid back. When the pilot stood up and motioned to him to run to the plane, McKennon saw that it was his wing man, Lt George Green of Whittier, California. Sprinting up to the Mustang, Pierce watched Green shed his flying gear to make room for a second man in the cramped little cockpit of the single seater. No word passed between them as both knew what was being attempted was absolutely forbidden in every Air Force rule book. For Green it probably would mean a court martial if successful--a German prison camp if unsuccessful. (14)

McKennon released the wing tanks to lighten the plane and reached into the cockpit to adjust the wing flaps for short take off. Meanwhile, Green stood on the wing keeping a watchful eye on a German factory a few hundred yards away. As the smaller of the two men, Green would have to sit in McKennon's lap and attempt to fly the plane. The whole rescue effort was made even more precarious as several German soldiers, armed with machine guns and accompanied by police dogs, came running toward the two Americans. However, one of the 22 pilots circling above quickly ended that threat by diving down to strafe the approaching Huns. Now with both pilots squeezed into the little fighter, Green shoved on maximum power and prayed that they could clear the trees which lined the tiny field. Just as it seemed that the Mustang would certainly crash, it groaned into the air and hurdled the trees by inches. But the unbelievable rescue effort was far from over--it was still 600 miles back across Germany, Holland and the North Sea to England and safety. Heavy rain and poor visibility below 15,000 feet forced Green to climb to high altitude. On one occasion during the climb McKennon lost consciousness due to lack of oxygen. After that the two pilots alternated in using the single oxygen mask. Two and a half hours later the cramped and exhausted pair landed at Debden. "What that boy did for me has been done only three times this war successfully", Pierce wrote a few days later. He added in the same letter, "We were both lucky, especially myself. I shall never be able to repay George although I am going to do everything in my power for him. I am getting him a D.F.C. for it and will promote him to Captain."

On 9 April 1945, only three weeks after his sensational rescue, Major McKennon, flying his third RIDGE RUNNER, led his squadron in one of the classic airdrome-strafting sorties of the European war. Having broken an uneventful escort of B-17s in a raid on Neuburg at the scheduled time and place, McKennon led his unit toward Munich in search of grounded aircraft. Flying at 6,000 feet, a reconnaissance disclosed some 60 of the enemy's carefully hoarded planes parked along a road and among trees in the Munich-Brunnthal area. Although he had twice previously been forced to bail out of a flak-damaged plane into enemy-held territory while participating in strafing operations, Major McKennon personally elected to test the fire from defensive gun positions before



Major McKennon discusses the 9 April 1945 strafing mission against the Munich-Brunnthal Airfield with his crew chief, Sgt Joe Sills. He'd destroyed two Ju 52s and an Me 410 on the ground. (Mrs. P. D. McKennon)

leading the squadron down to attack. He made three lone passes at the field, in which he destroyed two enemy aircraft, and was then joined by the rest of his mates. Before the operation ended, the 335th Fighter Squadron had destroyed 14 German aircraft and damaged 15 others. Of this number, McKennon claimed two Ju 52 transports and one Me 410 fighter destroyed and a third Ju 52 damaged. This ran his total victory list to 17 destroyed and another eight damaged.

Pierce McKennon flew his last combat mission of the war when, on 16 April, he participated in a 4th Fighter Group strafing attack on a German airdrome in the Prague, Czechoslovakia area. Prior to attacking the parked aircraft on the ground, one squadron circled at 4,000 feet to draw flak and spot the locations, while the others, after an interval of one minute, swept in line abreast at tree top level on their strafing run. As the attention of the anti-aircraft gunners was concentrated on the squadron circling above, the line abreast attack at deck level caught them completely by surprise. Within a few minutes the .50 caliber machine guns of the Mustangs had converted the airdrome into an inferno. Approximately 100 Hun planes were destroyed with a loss of only a half dozen AAF fighters. This smashing success ran the 4th Fighter Group score over the 1,000 mark and made it the top American group in the Second World War. McKennon's share of the Prague massacre included two Dornier Do 217 bombers and one unidentified twin-engine transport destroyed, and one Me 410 fighter badly damaged. For all his success on this final mission, the Arkansan came close to paying for it with his life, when on his sixth firing pass he was hit by an explosive shell. He described his narrow escape in a letter to his brother:

While strafing an airdrome a Jerry gunner put a 20mm explosive shell in my cockpit. I got shell fragments all over the right side of my face and a small hole in my right forehead. Luckily my eyes were missed. I bled like a stuck hog but managed to get my ship back to friendly territory and land.

Three weeks after the Prague mission the war with Germany came to an end with Pierce McKennon's score standing at 20 aircraft destroyed (12 of these in the air) and nine others damaged. He had flown 204 combat sorties, 560 operational hours, and had earned the Distinguished Flying Cross (with four clusters), the Air Medal (with 16 clusters), the Purple Heart and the French Croix de Guerre. Indeed, he was one of the top U. S. Air Force fighter pilots of the Second World War. Even to McKennon's own demanding standards he had proved



RIDGE RUNNER III with each of Major McKennon's 20 victories symbolized by a German cross. The two small parachutes over the back of the Razorback hog indicate his two, forced bail-outs. (Morgan Aviation Books)

conclusively that the flying instructor at Hicks Field, Texas, had been wrong in "washing him out" as a flying cadet. Perhaps in the end he was even grateful for the whole sad episode, for it had channeled him through the RCAF and the careful training by RAF combat veterans.

With the end of the war Major McKennon remained in Europe with the Army of Occupation. "It is a good break for someone with intentions of staying in the army--and, of course, you know that is my desire", he explained to his mother. He continued to command the 335th Fighter Squadron until 22 September 1945 when he was made the Operations Officer of the 368th Fighter Group in Straubing, Germany. During the next several months his duties were varied and a little "boring" but he did have time to see much of western Europe and learned a little of the German language Professor Lussky had tried to teach him at the University of Arkansas. In April 1946 he returned to Fort Smith for a 30-day leave before reporting to his new assignment at Luke Field (near Phoenix), Arizona.

During the next several months Major McKennon served as a fighter instructor at Luke and Williams Fields, Arizona. Much of his time was spent in flying P-51, P-47 and P-80 (one of America's first jet fighters) aircraft. In January 1947, McKennon, now a regular Air Force officer, was transferred to Randolph Field, Texas to instruct aviation cadets. He was not happy in this type of work and worked hard to get an assignment to a tactical fighter squadron. "Mac" had demonstrated remarkable courage in aerial combat against enemy fighters but had once said, perhaps half-jokingly, "There are two things I fear--flak and student pilots." (15) Flak was to knock him down twice and force him down a third time during the war. A student pilot would kill him.

On 18 June Major Pierce Winingham McKennon, the 26-year-old flying ace who had miraculously escaped death many times during World War II, was killed in the crash of a training plane some 16 miles northeast of San Antonio, Texas. At the time of the accident, he was riding as a check pilot with a student engaged in practicing "forced landings." Apparently, the engine of the AT-6 trainer quit while near the ground, and the plane stalled and "spun" into a field. Both pilots were killed by the impact.

At 2 PM Monday, 23 June 1947, Major McKennon was buried with full military honors at Forest Park Cemetery in Fort Smith. As the honor guard stood at attention, six P-51 Mustangs dipped over the grave in a last salute to the flyer who had served his country so well. As Plato wrote over two thousand years before, "Only the dead have seen the end of war." At last Pierce McKennon

was home from the wars.

When the Air Force considered renaming Little Rock Air Force Base in the 1950s, Pierce McKennon's name was seriously considered. However, since the names of several other Arkansas heroes were submitted to the Air Force Memorialization Committee, no action was taken.

FOOTNOTES

- (1) Wesley Frank Craven and James Lea Cate (Eds.), *THE ARMY AIR FORCES IN WORLD WAR II* (7 Vols., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), III, p 9.
- (2) The term "press" (to start engines) was a carryover from the RAF.
- (3) Gene Gurney, *FIVE DOWN AND GLORY* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1958), p 218. McKennon's own records show 12 air victories and 8 on the ground, for a total of 20.
- (4) These are the words of Rex Gravitt told to Pepe Mabrey, a friend of the McKennons. Letter, Pepe Mabrey to Mrs. P. D. McKennon, Los Angeles, California, 17 July 1943.
- (5) John Earl McKennon, at this writing fully recovered from his illness, is presently manager of the Lafayette Hotel, Long Beach, California. Parma D. McKennon is now Head of the Denture Department, Veteran's Hospital, Little Rock, Arkansas and holds the rank of Colonel in the National Guard.
- (6) Grover Hall, *1000 DESTROYED* (Dallas: Morgan Aviation Books, 1946), p 9. For one of the best general histories of this Group see Kenn Rust, "Fourth But First: History of the 4th Fighter Wing", *Air Power Historian* (January 1962), pp 21-34.
- (7) Letter, Ralph Pulsifer, Col AGD, Adj. Gen. to Commanding Officer, 4th Fighter Group, 1 April 1943. This letter is in McKennon's personal 201 file.
- (8) Hall, *1000 DESTROYED*, p 13.
- (9) *Ibid*, p 76.

(10) *Southwest American* (Fort Smith, Ark.), 18 October 1943. In his Flight Log Book, McKennon stated the dive was 500 mph which is a more likely figure. See entry for 16 May 1943.

(11) After the war Goering confessed that the day he first saw red-nosed Mustangs over Berlin was the day "I knew the jig was up." See Hall, *1000 DESTROYED*, p 90.

(12) Craven and Cate, *THE ARMY AIR FORCES*, III, p 63.

(13) Escape narrative in McKennon records. There is a letter from a Paul Bodot in the McKennon file and it seems likely that he is the "Paul" of the escape effort.

(14) *1000 DESTROYED*, pp 264-65.

(15) Interview by the author with Mrs. P. D. McKennon, Fort Smith, Arkansas, 22 August 1963.

OTHER SOURCES: Letters from Pierce McKennon to Mrs. Parma D. McKennon, John Earl McKennon and Dr. J. W. Hickman in the McKennon collection at 216 North 21st Street, Fort Smith, Arkansas.
 Author's interview with Mrs. P. D. McKennon, Fort Smith, Arkansas.
 Operational Diary of the 335th Fighter Squadron, 4th Fighter Group.
 Pierce McKennon's Combat Reports.
 Pierce McKennon's personal U. S. Army 201 file, in the hands of his mother.
 Pierce McKennon's flight log book.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: James J. Hudson, of 721 N. Ashwood Avenue, Fayetteville, Arkansas, earned his BA and MA degrees at the University of Arkansas and his Ph.D. in history at the University of California. He is presently a professor of history at the University of Arkansas, specializing in military history. His most recent work is a combat history of the Air Service in the First World War. During World War II he flew with the 350th Fighter Group in the Mediterranean Theater of Operations and completed 191 missions in P-39s, P-38s and P-47s.