

Flying the Unfriendly Skies: North Carolinians in the Two World Wars

By Tom Belton

From *Tar Heel Junior Historian* 43:1 (fall 2003).

When North Carolinians first heard the news of the Wright brothers' successful flights at Kitty Hawk in December 1903, probably few envisioned the military potential of aircraft. However, only a few years later, scores of North Carolinians found themselves flying primitive aircraft across the unfriendly skies of France, and in less than four decades after the Wrights' first flight, thousands of Tar Heels would fly missions in a global war that reached the corners of the earth.

Today North Carolina is a major center for aviation-related military bases. These include the Coast Guard station at Elizabeth City; the Marine Corps Air Station at Cherry Point, which provides support for marines at nearby Camp Lejeune; Seymour Johnson Air Force Base in Goldsboro; and Pope Air Force Base and Simmons Army Airfield at Fort Bragg, which support elements of the army's Eighteenth Airborne Corps. Many of these bases experienced troop deployment recently in Operation Iraqi Freedom, and those stories will be told in coming years. Here you can read brief narratives of a few Tar Heels who took to the skies in World Wars I and II.

WORLD WAR I

Kiffin Yates Rockwell

Tennessee native Kiffin Yates Rockwell (1892–1916) moved to Asheville when he was fourteen years old. Like a number of Americans, Rockwell fought for France before the United States entered World War I. In 1914 he joined the French Foreign Legion and was wounded in ground combat. In 1916 he became one of the seven original members of the Lafayette Escadrille, a group of American flyers fighting for the French. On May 18 of that year, Rockwell became the first American to shoot down a German plane. He shot down three more enemy aircraft before being killed in combat on September 23, 1916.

James Rogers McConnell

Born in Chicago, James Rogers McConnell (1887–1917) was living in Carthage, Moore County, when World War I began. McConnell joined the volunteer American Ambulance Corps in France in 1915. He became a war correspondent and then joined the Lafayette Escadrille in 1916. He was killed in combat on March 19, 1917.

Arthur Bluethenthal

Arthur Bluethenthal (1891–1918), a native of Wilmington, was a star football player at Princeton in 1912. In 1916 he joined the French army as an ambulance driver. He underwent flight training and was assigned to Escadrille 227 of the Lafayette Flying Corps as a bomber pilot in March 1918. Bluethenthal was killed in action on June 5, 1918. His body was brought from France in 1921 and reinterred in Oakdale Cemetery in Wilmington. Later, the Wilmington airport was named Bluethenthal Field in his honor.

WORLD WAR II***George E. Preddy Jr.***

George E. Preddy Jr. was born in Greensboro in 1919 and attended local schools. He enlisted in the National Guard in 1940 and later received a pilot's license and a commission as second lieutenant in the Army Air Corps. Preddy flew his first mission against the German Luftwaffe (air force) in September 1943. On August 5, 1944, Preddy shot down six enemy planes in one day, for which he received the Distinguished Service Cross. On Christmas Day 1944, Preddy's plane was shot down by friendly fire, and he sustained fatal wounds. He flew a total of 143 missions, logged more than 532 combat hours, and scored 5 ground victories and more than 26 aerial victories.

Robert Morgan

Born in 1918 and raised in Asheville, Robert Morgan joined the Army Air Corps in 1940. He flew the B-17 *Memphis Belle* to England in October 1942. Seven months later that plane became the first American heavy bomber to complete twenty-five missions over Europe. It accomplished this feat without losing a single crew member (and losses among bomber formations flying into Europe reached 80 percent). After returning to the United States, the crew of the *Memphis Belle* toured the country to promote war bonds. Morgan then served in the Pacific theater, flying a new B-29 he named *Dauntless Dotty*. After completing another twenty-five successful missions, he retired from active duty in April 1945. He served in the Air Force Reserve until retiring as a full colonel in 1965.

Thomas Ferebee

Thomas Ferebee was born in 1918 and raised on a farm near Mocksville, Davie County. He joined the Army Air Forces and, after two years in flying school, was assigned as a bombardier in England. He flew in the first American bombing mission over Europe, successfully attacked German-held oil fields in Romania, and led the first bombing runs over North Africa. Because of Ferebee's skill and accuracy, pilot Colonel Paul Tibbets chose him as bombardier on the *Enola Gay*, which released the world's first atomic bomb over Hiroshima, Japan, on August 6, 1945. After World War II, Ferebee was promoted to colonel. He served on B-52s during the Vietnam War and retired from the military in 1970. Ferebee died on March 16, 2000.

Thomas Oxendine

Thomas Oxendine, a Lumbee from Pembroke, Robeson County, was born in 1922. In November 1942 he became the first American Indian commissioned as a naval aviator. After completing flight training at the Naval Air Station in Jacksonville, Florida, Oxendine was assigned as a scout observation pilot aboard the USS *Mobile*. On July 26, 1944, he landed his seaplane in the midst of Japanese gunfire, in adverse weather, to rescue a downed fellow airman. For this he received the Distinguished Flying Cross. He later served in Korea and Vietnam and was director of plans for the navy's Office of Information in the Pentagon. After retiring in 1970, he became chief of public information at the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Katherine Lee Harris Adams

Durham native Katherine Lee Harris Adams (1919–2002) became a civilian aviator while a student at Duke University. She joined the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) in 1943 and served at Napier Field in Dothan, Alabama, for much of 1944, flying and testing repaired AT-6s. Her unit disbanded in December 1944, but Adams stayed in Alabama and instructed flight cadets on Link trainers until the end of the war.

Vernon Haywood

Vernon Haywood was born in 1920 and reared in Raleigh. He attended Hampton College in Virginia, one of six African American institutions that offered civilian pilot training. After completing his instruction in 1941, Haywood studied at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. In 1942 Haywood was called into the Army Air Corps. He became a member of the 332d Fighter Group and was sent to Italy. There he flew seventy combat missions in a number of different aircraft. In 1948 Haywood, then a colonel, was assigned to Williams Air Force Base in Chandler, Arizona, where he became one of the first African American jet pilots and also one of the first black jet instructors.

Raymond H. Wilkins

Raymond H. Wilkins (1917–1943), a major in the Army Air Corps and a resident of Columbia, Tyrrell County, received the Medal of Honor for heroic action on November 2, 1943. During a bombing raid on Japanese ships near Rabaul, New Britain, Wilkins died after attacking and sinking two Japanese vessels and damaging others. On April 5, 1944, the War Department honored Wilkins posthumously by awarding him the Congressional Medal of Honor.

Edward F. Rector

Edward F. Rector was born in Marshall, Madison County, on September 28, 1916, and attended Catawba College. He joined the navy in 1939 and received training as an aircraft carrier pilot. Rector was an early recruit to the American Volunteer Group, nicknamed the Flying Tigers. That group was organized to protect Chinese cities and the valuable supply route known as the Burma Road from Japanese attack. On December 20, 1941, Rector downed a Japanese bomber near Kunming, China, during the group's first combat mission. When the Flying Tigers disbanded on July 4, 1942, Rector joined the Twenty-third Fighter Group. By the war's end, he had risen to colonel and had been credited with

destroying more than ten Japanese planes. Rector remained in the military after the war, retiring from the air force in 1962. He died on April 26, 2001, and was buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

Tom Belton works as the curator of military history at the North Carolina Museum of History. He is currently working on a book about Civil War flags.