

Half A World Away

The Japanese initially invaded China in 1931, seizing the province of Manchuria, but it was not until the fall of 1937, that widespread fighting broke out all across northern China. The season would end with the infamous rape of Nanking in December.

Half a world away, William Thomas McCoy of Camden would be finishing his initial semester at Clemson. McCoy and the other boys who had survived their “Rat” season, were members of the College’s Class of 1941. Though they didn’t yet know it, the drama playing out in faraway Asia would impact the lives of each of these young men. No other Clemson class suffered so greatly in the coming World War as McCoy’s Class of ’41.



W. T. McCoy

William McCoy studied textile engineering at Clemson. His military proficiency was evident in his selection for the Sophomore Platoon and membership in the Pershing Rifles drill team. As a senior, he served as the adjutant of 2nd Regiment’s 2nd Battalion. But his leadership ability wasn’t limited to military matters. He served as vice president of Chi Kappa Chi, a club for the cadets from Kershaw County and was also a member of the Young Democrats on campus. Attending ROTC summer training at Fort McClellan, Alabama the summer before his senior year, McCoy qualified on the rifle range as a marksman.



By the spring of 1941, it was clear to many that the world crisis might expand to ensnare the United States. Immediately following graduation, McCoy, along with many of his fellow cadets, was commissioned a Second Lieutenant of Infantry in the US Army. In April of the following year, he transferred to the Army Air Force. In December 1942, he completed his aviation training at Spence Field in Georgia and earned his wings as a fighter pilot.

McCoy was assigned to the 25th Fighter Squadron of the 51st Fighter Group then located at Dinjan in India. McCoy arrived in February 1943 as the squadron was ordered to defend Fort Hertz near Myitkyinain, Burma. Fort Hertz was a key installation in the air operations near “The Hump,” the treacherous airway over the towering Himalayan Mountains and the only way to get desperately needed supplies to Allied forces operating in China. The 25th strafed Japanese troops, supply depots, bridges and enemy communication lines for twelve consecutive days, but failed to slow the Japanese advance. In the absence of heavy or medium bombers, The 25th’s P-40 fighters were modified to carry 1,000 pound bombs and by May, the Japanese offensive had been stopped.



On October 10, 1943, McCoy was part of a flight ordered to attack a match factory and ammunition dump at Tangchung, China. His P-40, christened “Duc,” his wife’s nickname, did not return from the flight for unknown reasons. Two P-40s searched for 2 days, but unable to locate the pilot or wreckage, tersely and poignantly reported “no luck.”

First Lieutenant McCoy was survived by his parents, his wife, Edna Owens McCoy, and their three-month-old son William T. McCoy, Jr.

McCoy was awarded the Purple Heart and the Air Medal. He is memorialized on the Tablets of the Missing at the Manila American Cemetery and Memorial in Manila, the Philippines. There is also a memorial stone erected for him at Mount Zion Baptist Church Cemetery in Camden.

William Thomas McCoy is one of more than fifty members of the Class of 1941 who gave their lives in defense of freedom during World War II.

