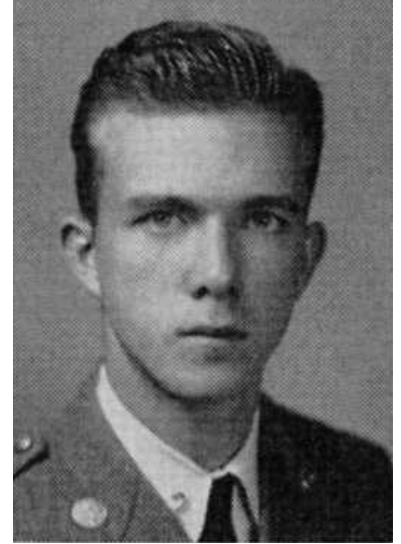


Return to Polebrook

John Franklin McNeill was a civil engineering major from Conway. McNeill's Class of 1945 was the last to enroll at Clemson College before the United States plunged into World War II. After December 7, 1941, McNeill and his fellow cadets waited anxiously to learn how and when they would be called to military service. In the meantime, they continued to drill, attend class, study, and prepare for their inevitable induction into the armed forces. For McNeill, as for most of his classmates, the orders to active duty came at the end of his sophomore year in the spring of 1943.

McNeill enlisted in the Army and volunteered for the Army Air Force. He trained as a bombardier and went overseas where he was assigned to the 511th Bomb Squadron of the 351st Bomb Group based at Polebrook, about 90 miles north of London. The 351st flew B-17 Flying Fortress heavy bombers. By late 1944, the group was targeting German oil production, transportation facilities, and armaments factories.



On February 6, 1945, the 8th Air Force launched more than 1,300 bombers against a variety of targets inside Germany. In addition to the Germans, the big bombers encountered another foe on this Tuesday: the weather.

The forecasted clear weather over the targets failed to develop, making visual bombing impossible. The big bombers were left with no option but to drop their deadly payloads guided by less accurate air-to-ground radar. German anti-aircraft defenses were hampered by the same cloud cover hindering the bombers. But an even greater hazard awaited the bomber formations when they returned to England.



A B-17G returns to Polebrook on a clear day. Note the tip of the horizontal stabilizer from a nearby aircraft to the left of the frame, an indication of the proximity of traffic in the approach pattern. American Air Museum in Britain, <http://www.americanairmuseum.com/media/4314>

“Bad weather,” wrote historian

Donald Miller, “was hazardous for a single plane, flying alone. It could be catastrophic for large, tightly grouped formations. Long-range formation flying required favorable weather at least five different times during the mission: at takeoff, on assembly, on the way to the target, over the

target, and on return to base. A mission could not be sent out in fair skies at 8:00 A.M. if the weather over England was expected to turn wretched when the bombers were scheduled to return six hours later.” Yet that’s what happened on February 6. Weather forecasting, which had improved during the war years as long-range aerial missions became the norm, was still subject to error. As more than 1,000 bombers crowded into the normally friendly airspace above southeastern England, they encountered heavy rain and zero visibility.

McNeill was returning from his twentieth combat mission, flying as the bombardier on the crew of pilot First Lieutenant Edward Ashton. At 1546 hours, Ashton’s bomber was cleared to land. Four minutes later, in skies darkened by rain, a B-17 piloted by Second Lieutenant Rheinhold Vergen pulled directly into the path of McNeill’s aircraft. The tail of Vergen’s bomber struck the right wing of McNeill’s causing both aircraft to plummet to the ground. All nineteen men aboard the two airplanes were killed. The cause of the accident was “100% weather due to poor visibility in rain.”

John Franklin McNeill was survived by his parents. After the war, his remains were returned to Conway and buried in Lakeside Cemetery.



See also *Masters of the Air: America’s Bomber Boys Who Fought the Air War Against Nazi Germany*, by Donald L. Miller, Simon & Schuster, 2006.