

AVIATOR



The Military Career of George W. McKenna

AVIATOR

The Military Career of George W. McKenna

SEAN P. MCKENNA, ED.

Copyright © 2010 Sean P. McKenna

All rights reserved. No part of this work may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without prior written permission of the editor.

This manuscript was produced using L^AT_EX and printed by Lulu.com.

September 2010

In memory of my Dad

Contents

Foreword	vii
Background	1
Military Service	3
The Aviator	7
Medals and Awards	11
Retirement	21

Foreword

I never really knew my father. It wasn't until I was eight or so that I met him. I can count on my hands the number of times we were together before his death. The memories I have of him are not particularly strong, nor do they provide me with a feeling for the kind of person he was. The sense I have, plus the stories my mother has relayed to me, lead me to believe that my father returned from Vietnam a different person. Maybe not the best person.

What I do know is that he was a great soldier, a man who spent twenty years—nearly half of his life—serving our country. Combing through his Army records and reading about his awards and medals has created a picture in my mind of who he really was—a skilled aviator who excelled at what he did, dedicated, professional, intelligent, and someone who would put himself in harm's way to help others in need. This is how I have chosen to remember my father, and this short volume is intended to document and preserve that memory.

August 2010

Sean P. McKenna

Background

AFTER graduating from high school, George W. McKenna (b. 11 April 1945) enrolled at Syracuse University. There, he studied in the Forestry Department. He also pledged and became a brother in the Zeta Psi Fraternity¹. It soon became evident that college academics did not suit George, and he left Syracuse after his first year.



¹ Coincidentally, I also became a brother in Zeta Psi (at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute), and this was without knowledge that my father had done so as well.

Military Service

ON 25 April 1966, George enlisted in the United States Army. At the time, he resided in West Islip, New York, at 631 North Chicot Avenue. He enlisted at the Armed Forces Examining and Entrance Station (AFEES) at Fort Hamilton in Brooklyn, New York. His enlistment record indicates that his occupation was in construction (weekly wage, \$100) and that he was to serve for a period of three years. He enlisted as an E-1 PVT. The reason George enlisted is not clear, but it is likely that he did so as a proactive way of entering the military rather than face the unknowns of the draft.

Following enlistment, George was sent to Fort Jackson in Columbia, South Carolina for eight weeks of Basic Combat Training. Today, Fort Jackson is the largest and most active Initial Entry Training Center in the U.S. Army, training 50 percent of all soldiers and 80 percent of the women entering the Army each year. Providing the Army with new soldiers is the post's primary mission. From Fort Jackson, George went on to Advanced Individual Training at Fort Benning in Columbus, Georgia. The post is home to the U.S. Army Infantry School as well as the Army's airborne (parachuting) school. Fort Benning is the primary training installation for all U.S. Army infantry enlistees. George went through Officer Candidate School at Fort Benning and emerged as a 2nd Lieutenant (Infantry) on 17 April 1967.

AVIATOR

Soon after Officer Candidate School, George applied to flight school. George attended flight school at Fort Wolters and Fort Rucker. Fort Wolters, located four miles northeast of Mineral Wells, Texas, was a United States military base that, at the time, housed the United States Army Primary Helicopter School. Fort Rucker is a U.S. Army post located mostly in Dale County, Alabama. The post is the primary flight training base for Army Aviation and is home to the United States Army Aviation Center of Excellence (USAACE) and the United States Army Aviation Museum. George's flight training consisted of a 32-week Officer Rotary Wing Aviator Course and a 3-week AH-1G Aviator Qualification Course.

In July 1968, George was deployed to Vietnam, to the Bien Hoa airbase with the 334th Armed Helicopter Company. This would be his first tour in Vietnam, which lasted about a year. Sometime during this tour, George was promoted to the rank of 1st Lieutenant.

In August of 1969, George returned briefly stateside to Georgia, after which he was stationed in Gelnhausen, Germany at Coleman Kaserne with the 1st Battalion, 48th Infantry from 1969 to 1971. There, he was initially in charge of the motor pool. While in Germany, George was promoted to the rank of Captain. George then was reassigned from the motor pool and became Company Commander of the Headquarters Company of the 48th Infantry.

George's second tour in Vietnam began in September of 1971. He returned to Fort Benning in the fall of 1972 and was stationed at Fort Benning until the fall of 1978. George was promoted to the rank of Major in September 1977. While at Fort Benning, George served as an Operations Officer and was responsible for overseeing the air operations of the 121st Assault

Military Service

Helicopter Company, the 187th Infantry Platoon, the 478th Aviation Company (heavy helicopter), and the 498th Medical Company (air ambulance). He later assumed the role of Commander of the 121st Assault Helicopter Company where he was responsible for 23 UH-1 aircraft and 265 officers. In this capacity, he supported all TRADOC (Training & Doctrine Command), FORSCOM (United States Army Forces Command), U.S. Army, and National Guard units in the states of Georgia, Florida, Alabama, and Mississippi—*successfully* (the two previous Commanders were relieved).

From Fort Benning, George then was assigned to Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, Texas. “Fort Sam’s” mission includes serving as the headquarters for numerous commands and departments. While at Fort Sam Houston, George served as an Evaluator/Analyst in the Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff—Training, Headquarters, 5th U.S. Army (now, U.S. Army North). He also served as a Unit Training Officer where he was responsible for coordinating and scheduling annual training for U.S. Army Region 5. In addition, he coordinated and scheduled National Guard and U.S. Army Civil Affairs, PSYOP (Psychological Operations), and MP (Military Police) units to support Fort Chaffee and Fort McCoy during the Cuban Mariel boatlift crisis. The Mariel boatlift was a mass exodus of Cubans who departed from Cuba’s Mariel Harbor for the United States between 15 April and 31 October 1980.

In September 1981, George moved to Fort Bragg, outside Fayetteville, North Carolina, where he would finish his career in the Army. Fort Bragg is home to many U.S. Army units, most notably, the 82nd Airborne Division and the U.S. Army Special Operations Command. While at Fort Bragg, George was involved with the ROTC (Reserve Officers’ Training Corps) and

AVIATOR

acted as the XO (Executive Officer) to three Area Commanders simultaneously. He also served as the Protocol Officer during ROTC Advanced Camp, handling such dignitaries as the Secretary of the Army, the Chief of Staff of the Army, and numerous MUSARCs (Major United States Army Reserve Command). In addition, George was involved with the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center (USAJFKSWC). The USAJFKSWC trains United States Army personnel for the U.S. Army Special Operations Command and Army Special Operation Forces, which includes Special Forces, Civil Affairs, and Psychological Operations personnel. George's Army career culminated with him serving as the Deputy Chairman of the Civil Affairs Department, USAJFKSWC.



The Aviator

GEORGE trained for and flew the AH-1G Cobra helicopter. (He also flew a number of other rotary wing aircraft.) The AH-1G is a two-bladed, single-engine attack helicopter manufactured by Bell. The AH-1G Cobra (sometimes referred to as the “Snake”) was first deployed to Vietnam in September 1967. The Cobra’s primary mission was to give fire support to troop-carrying UH-1 “Hueys.” Its introduction to service was a trial-by-fire, as the AH-1G in Vietnam immediately provided ground commanders with air superiority without the wait of calling in the Air Force. The narrow 38-inch wide airframe presented a much more difficult target than its derivative, the 100-inch wide UH-1 Huey.

During the Vietnam War, the AH-1G Cobra was used extensively in a variety of missions ranging from armed escort and reconnais-



sance to fire suppression and aerial rocket artillery. The Cobra was often used effectively when paired with an unarmed OH-6A Cayuse “Loach” or an OH-58A Kiowa light observation helicopter or a UH-1H “Nighthawk” (UH-1Hs specifically equipped

AVIATOR

for night missions). The former pairing was referred to as a “Pink Team,” in reference to the existing terminology of “White Teams” for light observation helicopters and “Red Teams” for attack helicopters (Blue was used to refer to troop-carrying elements). So-called Light Fire Teams (LFRs) or “hunter-killer” teams of a single OH-6A and two AH-1Gs were also operated. A team featured one OH-6 flying slow and low to find enemy forces. If the OH-6 drew fire, the Cobra could strike at the then exposed enemy.

Bell built 1,116 AH-1Gs for the U.S. Army between 1967 and 1973, and the Cobras chalked up over a million operational hours in Vietnam. Out of nearly 1,110 AH-1Gs delivered from 1967 to 1973, approximately 300 were lost to combat and accidents during the war.



The AH-1G Cobra was capable of using a variety of weapons. It was often armed with 2.75-inch (70-mm) Folding Fin Aerial Rockets (FFARs) in M158 7-tube or M200 19-tube rocket launchers. The Cobra also had an integral chin turret, designated the M28/M28A1 armament subsystem. The chin turret could mount two M134 7.62-mm miniguns or two

M129 40-mm automatic grenade launchers, or one of each. The AH-1G could also be armed with the M134 minigun in a fixed side-mounting M18/M18A1 gun pod, or the side-mounting M195

The Aviator

20-mm automatic gun on the M35 armament subsystem (only capable of being fitted to the port side of the aircraft). The AH-1G could also mount the XM118 smoke grenade dispenser.

The AH-1G Cobra was powered by a single Lycoming T53-L-13 1400-shp turbine engine and had a speed of 196 mph, almost twice the speed of the UH-1 Huey. The Cobra performed its job so well, it was possible, for the first time, for troop-carrying “Slicks” and gun ships to be operated as true air cavalry. Details of the AH-1G Cobra follow on the next page.



AVIATOR

General characteristics

- Crew: 2, one pilot, one CPG (co-pilot/gunner)
- Length: 44 ft 5 in (13.4 m)
- Rotor diameter: 44 ft (13.4 m)
- Height: 13 ft 5 in (4.1 m)
- Empty weight: 6,073 lb (2,754 kg)
- Maximum takeoff weight: 9,500 lb (4,309 kg)
- Powerplant: 1 Lycoming T53-L-13 turboshaft
- Rotor system: 2 blades on main rotor

Performance

- Maximum speed: 190 knots (219 mph, 352 km/h)
- Range: 310 nmi (357 mi, 574 km)
- Service ceiling: 11,400 ft (3,475 m)
- Rate of climb: 1,230 ft/min (6.25 m/s)

Armament

- 2 x 7.62-mm (0.308-in) multi-barrel miniguns, or 2 x M129 40-mm grenade launchers, or one of each, in the M28 turret (When one of each was mounted, the minigun was mounted on the right side of the turret, due to feeding problems.)
- 2.75-in (70-mm) rockets – 7 rockets mounted in the M158 launcher or 19 rockets in the M200 launcher
- M18 7.62-mm minigun pod or XM35 armament subsystem with XM195 20-mm cannon

Medals and Awards

GEORGE was awarded numerous medals, ribbons, and decorations over the course of his Army career. In what follows are the major medals and their descriptions. Where available, the text for each medal is taken directly from its formal write-up. Certain medals indicate an OLC number. OLC stands for Oak Leaf Cluster. An Oak Leaf Cluster is placed on U.S. military awards and decorations to denote those who have received more than one bestowal of a particular decoration. The number of OLCs typically indicates the number of subsequent awards of the decoration. The medals/awards are presented chronologically.

The Distinguished Flying Cross

For heroism while participating in aerial flight evidenced by voluntary actions above and beyond the call of duty: First Lieutenant McKenna distinguished himself by exceptionally valorous actions while serving as a firefly mission commander, and aircraft commander of an AH-1G helicopter. He directed his team to a suspected enemy location, and upon arriving in the area,

20 March 1969



AVIATOR

he contacted the allied unit who had been in heavy contact with the enemy for twenty-four hours. He determined the location of the friendly units and directed his lightship towards the enemy position. Six enemy soldiers were illuminated and fell victim to the planned attack. At the same time, First Lieutenant McKenna's ship came under intense automatic weapons fire, and received many hits. With complete disregard for his own safety, he proceeded to fly at a low level with his aircraft lights on, in an attempt to draw enemy fire and further disclose enemy positions. Taking over the mission of the lowship, he flew at tree top level to continue the attack. After running low on fuel and ammunition, he called for and adjusted artillery fire to keep the enemy pinned down until the fire team could return. His selfless acts of heroism were responsible for the destruction of thirty-one enemy soldiers and prevented the enemy from continuing the attack on the friendly positions. His actions were in keeping with the highest traditions of the military service and reflect great credit upon himself, his unit, and the United States Army.

The Bronze Star Medal

3 May 1969

The Bronze Star Medal is a U.S. Armed Forces individual military decoration that may be awarded for bravery, acts of merit, or meritorious service. Details not available.

Purple Heart

20 May 1969

The Purple Heart is awarded in the name of the President of the United States to any member of the Armed Forces of the United States who, while serving under competent authority in any capacity with one of the U.S. Armed Services after 5 April 1917, has been wounded or killed, or who has died after being wounded. The Purple Heart differs from all other decorations in that an individual is not “recommended” for the decoration; rather he or she is entitled to it upon meeting specific criteria. While details are not available, George’s Purple Heart was likely awarded for injuries he sustained during at least one “hard landing” of his helicopter.



Broken Wing Safety Award

26 June 1969

For demonstrating extraordinary skill during an inflight emergency while flying an AH-1G helicopter. Complete loss of collective control and high RPM forced him to make a 180-degree power-on autorotation to a site 700 meters away. 1LT McKenna accomplished this forced landing, preventing injuries and extensive damage to the helicopter.

Silver Star¹

22 July 1969



For gallantry in action, in connection with military operations involving conflict with an armed hostile force. First Lieutenant McKenna distinguished himself by exceptionally valourous actions as aircraft commander of an AH-1G Cobra, working on the Bo Bo Canal close to Cambodia. After sinking a small sampan, the team came under intense enemy anti-aircraft fire from six .50 caliber machineguns and thirty or more automatic weapons positions. In the violent fire fight that followed, the enemy suffered terrific losses. Five of the .50 caliber machineguns were destroyed, at least thirty enemy were killed, and numerous small automatic weapons were put out of action. In the process however, the enemy shot down the light ship and the low flying Cobra cover ship. Still receiving fire, Lieutenant McKenna, in the sole surviving aircraft of the team, gave a “May Day” call and swooped down on the lightship, which was the only one he could immediately find. Quickly he loaded three crew members on his ammunition bay doors and took off for Duo Hoa while organizing the rescue efforts. Returning from the secure area at Duo Hoa, he was the first to spot the scattered wreckage of his wingman’s Cobra under the light from an Air Force flare ship. He then directed the lightship from a sister firefly team to rescue both crews of his team from the enemy who were enclos-

¹ The Silver Star is the third-highest military decoration that can be awarded to a member of any branch of the United States Armed Forces for valor in the face of the enemy. The two higher decorations are the Service Crosses and the Medal of Honor.

ing the area. All of the crew members were safely extracted and only three had slight wounds. His actions were in keeping with the highest traditions of the military service and reflect great credit upon himself, his unit, and the United States army.

The Air Medal, 1st – 40th OLC

29 September 1969

For distinguishing himself by meritorious achievement, while participating in sustained aerial flight, in support of combat ground forces in the Republic of Vietnam. During the period 17 July 1968 to 20 June 1969, he actively participated in more than twenty-five aerial missions over hostile territory in support of operations against communist aggression. During all of these flights, he displayed the highest order



of air discipline and acted in accordance with the best traditions of the service. By his determination to accomplish his mission, in spite of the hazards inherent in repeated aerial flights over hostile territory, and by his outstanding degree of professionalism and devotion to duty, he has brought credit upon himself, his organization, and the United States Army.

The Air Medal, 41st – 63rd OLC

28 June 1972

For distinguishing himself by meritorious achievement, while participating in sustained aerial flight, in support of combat ground forces in the Republic of Vietnam during the period September 1971 to July 1972.

The Bronze Star Medal, 1st OLC

14 June 1972



For distinguishing himself by outstandingly meritorious service in connection with military operations against a hostile force in the Republic of Vietnam during the period August 1971 to June 1972. Through his untiring efforts and professional ability, he consistently obtained outstanding results. His was quick to grasp the implication of new problems with which he was faced as a result of the ever-changing situations

inherent in a counterinsurgency operation and to find ways and means to solve those problems. The energetic application of his extensive knowledge materially contributed to the efforts of the United States mission to the Republic of Vietnam. His initiative, zeal, sound judgement, and devotion to duty have been in the highest traditions of the United States Army and reflect great credit on him, his unit, and the military service.

The Army Commendation Medal

[date unknown]

The Commendation Medal is a mid-level U.S. military decoration that is presented for sustained acts of heroism or meritorious service. For valorous actions in direct contact with an enemy force, but of a lesser degree than required for the award of the Bronze Star. Details not available.

The Army Commendation Medal, 1st OLC

26 September 1984

For exceptionally meritorious service from September 1981 to September 1984 while serving as Executive Officer to three Area Commanders, Headquarters, United States Army First Reserve Officers' Training Corps Region, Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Major McKenna's exceptional ability, dedication, and professionalism enabled him to manage all personnel, security, operations, and supply actions for more than six hundred cadre and twelve thousand cadets within the commanders' areas of concern. Major McKenna's outstanding service reflects great credit on himself, the Reserve Officers' Training Corps, and the United States Army.



The Meritorious Service Medal

2 June 1986

For exceptionally meritorious service from April 1976 to April 1986 culminating as Deputy Chairman, Civil Affairs Department, United States Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center, Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Major McKenna's service was characterized by consistently outstanding performance in a variety of highly responsible, sensitive, and challenging positions. He planned, coordinated, and conducted the first worldwide G5 conference and acted as proponent for



leadership training within the Center. Major McKenna's outstanding service reflects great credit upon himself, the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center, and the United States Army.

National Defense Service Medal [date unknown]



The National Defense Service Medal is a military service medal of the U.S. military originally commissioned by President Dwight D. Eisenhower. Created in 1953, the National Defense Service Medal was intended to be a “blanket campaign medal” awarded to any member of the U.S. military who served honorably during a designated time period of which a “national emergency” had been declared. Details not available.

Good Conduct Medal [date unknown]



The Good Conduct Medal is awarded for exemplary behavior, efficiency, and fidelity in active Federal Military service. It is awarded on a selective basis to each soldier who distinguishes himself/herself from among his/her fellow soldiers by their exemplary conduct, efficiency, and fidelity throughout a specified period of continuous enlisted active Federal military service (usually three years). It is one of the oldest military decorations of the United States military. Details not available.

ary decorations of the United States military. Details not available.

Medals and Awards

Other

German Army Marksmanship Badge (1971)

Vietnam Armed Forces Honor Medal First Class (1972)

Master Army Aviator Badge (1983)

Armed Forces Reserve Medal

Overseas Service Ribbon

Rifle M-16 Expert Badge

Vietnam Service Medal

Vietnam Campaign Medal

Vietnam Cross of Gallantry with Gold Star

Vietnam Cross of Gallantry with Palm

Vietnam Civil Actions Honor Medal

Retirement

AFTER twenty years in the Army, George retired on 30 April 1986. Less than a year later, George died on 1 March 1987 at his home in San Antonio, Texas. He was only 41 years old. George is buried at Calverton National Cemetery (section 12, site 8171), located in eastern Long Island, New York between the towns of Manorville and Riverhead.





On 25 April 1966, George W. McKenna entered the United States Army, enlisting for a period of three years. Twenty years later, and now a Major, he brought his highly decorated career to a close. This short volume presents the career of Major McKenna as a tribute to his valiant service and as a memory of the man himself.