



In January of 1915, while World War I was already well underway, an American named James McConnell went to France. Although he first wanted to simply observe the war, he soon became directly involved. He joined the American Ambulance Field Service as a driver.

From February to December of 1915, McConnell worked with Section No. 2. He was around when heavy fighting occurred near Pont-a-Mousson and the Bois-le-Pretre.

By October of 1915, Jimmy had won France's Croix de Guerre, with Star for "courage and fearlessness worthy of the highest praise." But being an ambulance driver was not enough for him. He later wrote (in his book, *Flying for France*):

The more I saw the splendor of the fight the French were fighting the more I began to feel like an embusque [shirker]. So I made up my mind to go into aviation.

He began his flying lessons in October of 1915. By February, of the following year, he was ready to learn how to pilot a Nieuport. On the 16th of April, 1915, he joined Kiffin Rockwell and Victor Chapman at the Reserve General Aeronautique (R.G.A.) and was assigned to the Escadrille Americaine. He was one of the first seven U.S. pilots to be assigned to a new unit called N-124. In short, he became an American pilot who was flying for France.

It was extremely dangerous to be a pilot during World War I, and that was also true for the members of N-124 (which was later called Escadrille Americaine and Lafayette Escadrille). By the 23rd of June, McConnell had lost his close friend Victor Chapman who was killed during aerial combat.

McConnell continued to fly with his friends Raoul Lufbery and Norman Prince.

During the third week of August, that year, McConnell developed engine trouble while flying a mission. Taking evasive action, to save his life, he put his plane into a nose-dive maneuver.

At speeds approaching 100 miles an hour - extremely high for a WWI plane - he thought he would be able to put his plane down on a landing strip, but he misjudged its location. Speeding toward a stand of trees, he sent soldiers running for their own lives.

His landing was not fatal, however, since he was able to plow between the trees instead of hitting them. Even so, he injured his back which would bother him for the rest of his life.

Captain Thenault ordered McConnell to get some rest, at a hospital, but Jimmy was anxious to return to his unit. Then, on the 23rd of September, he learned more bad news. His close friend, Kiffin Rockwell, had died in combat.

Jimmy rejoined his squadron on the 11th of November, 1916, even though his back had not healed. By early 1917, the weather was so cold that the planes were impacted. Jimmy wrote what it was like:

The machines freeze up while one is flying. ... I have never seen such a spell in France before. Worst winter since 1870.

With his back continuing to bother him, McConnell returned to the hospital - on orders from Captain Thenault. His book - *Flying for France* - was published (by Doubleday) during his stay. Historians believe that book helped to stimulate a sense of patriotism in America, not long before the U.S. entered the war.

By this time, McConnell and William Thaw were the highest-ranking pilots in the Lafayette Escadrille.

On the 13th of March, 1917, McConnell was about to turn 30 years old. He wrote these words in his diary:

This war may kill me, but I have it to thank for much.

Six days later, on the 19th of March, McConnell flew a patrol over the Somme battlefield. Deep into enemy lines, Edmond Genet and McConnell encountered German planes. Injured in an encounter with a German two-seater, Genet also had a heavily damaged plane. While fighting his own battle, he'd lost sight of McConnell.

Jimmy was missing for days. His friends wondered whether he had been shot down and captured as a prisoner of war.

Then ... on the 23rd of March, a call came to the squadron. A French cavalry patrol had found a heavily damaged Nieuport with a body nearby. The plane bore number 2055 - Jimmy McConnell's number.

The war - and life - was over for the pilot who had just turned 30. He, and his wrecked plane, were found near the village of Detroit Bleu.

There is a [statue of James McConnell](#) at the University of Virginia. He was that university's first alumnus to die in World War One.

Today, his body rests in a crypt near Paris, in a memorial dedicated to the Lafayette Escadrille. The remains of some of his flying friends are there, too.

Credits:

Image online, courtesy [New England Air Museum](#).

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James McConnell and His Flying Machine

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