

Gen. John Paul McConnell
February 1, 1965–July 31, 1969



Portrait by Woodi Ishmael



JOHN PAUL McCONNELL was born on February 7, 1908, in Booneville, Arkansas, the son of a doctor. He graduated magna cum laude from Henderson Brown College at Arkadelphia, Arkansas, with a bachelor of science degree in 1927. He then coached high school football and was an oil field roustabout before entering the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. There he set an academy four-hundred-meter hurdle record and was first captain of the corps of cadets for the class of 1932.

After taking flying training at Randolph and Kelly Fields, Texas, he received his wings in 1933. Serving as a fighter pilot during his early years in the Army Air Corps, McConnell gained broad experience through a variety of operational and administrative assignments, including duty as assistant executive in the Office of the Chief of Army Air Forces in Washington. He subsequently served in key Air Force positions in Asia and in Europe.

In 1943 McConnell became chief of staff of the China–Burma–India Air Force Training Command at Karachi, India, and remained in Asia for the rest of the war. While serving as a senior air staff officer at Air Command Southeast Asia and deputy commander of the Third Tactical Air Force in 1944, he participated in combat operations against the Japanese in Burma. In 1946 he was named senior air adviser to the Chinese government and, at the same time, commanded the Air Division, Nanking Headquarters Command. McConnell married Sally Dean, whom he met in Ceylon where she served as a Women’s Army Corps officer on the staff of Lord Louis Mountbatten. They had two sons.

McConnell returned to Air Force headquarters in Washington, D.C., in 1947 to become chief of the Reserve and National Guard Division and the next year was appointed chief of the Air Force’s Civilian Components Group. Assigned to England in 1950, he served as deputy commander and, later, as commander of the Third Air Force. He then took command of the 7th Air Division of the Strategic Air Command (SAC), simultaneously commanding the Third Air Force. This was followed by a four-year tour as director of plans at Headquarters SAC, Offutt Air Force Base, Nebraska. In 1957 McConnell was named commander of SAC’s Second Air Force at Barksdale Air Force Base, Louisiana, and four years later returned to SAC headquarters to become vice commander in chief.

In 1962 General McConnell was assigned to Europe as deputy commander in chief of the United States European Command and was promoted to four-star rank. He was appointed vice chief of staff of the United States Air Force in August 1964.

McConnell's appointment as chief of staff of the Air Force on February 1, 1965, was considered by many inside and outside the Air Force as the beginning of a new era. His predecessor, Gen. Curtis E. LeMay, possessed an international reputation as the last of the World War II heroes and the premier architect of the Strategic Air Command—the most powerful military organization in all of history. Although McConnell was a wartime flying general by the age thirty-six (he had served in the China–Burma–India theater as director of plans for LeMay's SAC and had been deputy commander of the United States European Command in NATO), he was seen as one of the new breed in Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara's Pentagon—an organization man highly regarded in for his planning ability, his interpersonal skills, his intellect, and his trustworthiness. He was considered McNamara's man, and his appointment was expected to ease some of the tensions that had surfaced while the crusty and sometimes plainspoken LeMay was in office. Many insiders speculated that McConnell's role would be to present the Air Force as an integrated whole, no longer dominated by SAC, with more emphasis on conventional warfare and counterinsurgency.

During his years as chief of staff, General McConnell confronted some of the most difficult challenges ever to face an officer in that post: he directed the expansion of tactical forces for an expanding conflict in Southeast Asia; oversaw controversial weapons procurement problems; and tried to map out the strategic future of the Air Force, its personnel, and materiel. McConnell not only had to deal with a vast array of problems; he had to do it in the unsettled political arena of the 1960s. He worked most of that time with a demanding defense secretary; a colorful and forceful president, Lyndon B. Johnson; and an always-questioning Congress. He also delicately balanced his responsibilities to his commander in chief with his responsibility as the chief spokesman for the Air Force.

McConnell's personality could be as disarming and charming as that of any polished staff officer or as earthy and blunt as his native Ozarks. He could disagree with his critics without seeming abrasive. Little known outside the Air Force when he was named chief of staff, he was sometimes called “the brain” within it. He had a “steel-trap” mind with a gift for staff work and organizational leadership.

Although McConnell's years as chief of staff were difficult, they could be considered largely successful. The Air Force got new planes on the drawing boards and into service, and planning advanced for new strategic weaponry. The general made known his thoughts on combat strategy—which included increasing the number of targets to reduce U.S. ground casualties—and always emphasized his belief in civilian control of the military.

Following retirement in August 1969, General McConnell accepted the position of executive consultant to the Civil Air Patrol, providing executive-level advice on Patrol affairs dealing

with organization, administration, and overall policy. He was no stranger to that organization because he and the late Senator Burnet Rhett Maybank (D.-S.C.) had written the original public law passed by Congress in 1948 making the Civil Air Patrol an auxiliary of the Air Force. General McConnell also served on various corporate boards of directors, including the aerospace board of Hayes International Corporation. On November 21, 1986, McConnell died of cancer at the Carriage Hill Nursing Home in Bethesda, Maryland.