

Honors for war pilot lost in bureaucracy

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DAILY NEWS WASHINGTON BUREAU

Posted Tuesday, May 29th 2007, 4:00 AM



AP

James (Earthquake McGoon) McGovern

WASHINGTON - "Looks like this is it, son," James (Earthquake McGoon) McGovern radioed in his last call before his plane went down in the Laotian jungle.

McGovern, of Elizabeth, N.J., nicknamed for the hulking "Li'l Abner" cartoon character, died a hero of covert and overt wars for the U.S.

But his country still has difficulty finding an official method of honoring him and other shadow warriors, even for Memorial Day.

McGovern's Fairchild C-119 "Flying Boxcar" cargo plane carried French insignia and was on loan from a CIA-front contractor when it went down on May 6, 1954, after being riddled by anti-aircraft fire.

The crash came after a desperate airdrop mission to the doomed French fortress of Dien Bien Phu in northern Vietnam in the colonial struggle against the Communist Vietminh forces.

But McGovern's name does not appear on the CIA's Memorial Wall to the spy agency's fallen, because he technically was not a direct CIA employee.

"The agency, however, still honors the service and sacrifices of those who flew for its proprietaries," a CIA spokesman said.

McGovern, 32, and his co-pilot, Wallace Buford, 28, also arguably were the first U.S. fatalities of the Vietnam conflict, but their names are not on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial because they were not then members of the armed forces.

France had no such problems in 2005 paying tribute to McGovern, Buford and six surviving pilots from the French Indochina war. They were presented with France's Legion of Honor.

In the U.S., the memorializing has been left to the University of Texas at Dallas, where the names of McGovern and 242 others are on a plaque listing those who died flying for the CIA "proprietaries" Civil Air Transport and its successor, Air America, from 1947 to 1975 in Southeast Asia.

"They did an important job for this country and they are often forgotten," said Erik Carlson, head of the school's aviation collection.

Even among such legends as Claire Chennault, founder of the Flying Tigers, McGovern, who packed more than 260 pounds on a 5-foot-10 frame, was legendary. At age 22, 2nd Lt. McGovern flew P-51 Mustangs for Chennault's 23rd Fighter Group and became an ace, shooting down at least two and possibly four Japanese aircraft. After World War II, McGovern stayed with Chennault when he formed Civil Air Transport and ferried troops and cargo in Chiang Kai-shek's fight against the Communist

Chinese.

When the U.S. secretly began helping the French in Vietnam in the 1950s, McGovern flew C-119s out of Haiphong harbor.

His remains were found in northern Laos in 2002, and he was laid to rest last Thursday at Arlington National Cemetery.

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