

# Colonel Leslie MacDill



U.S. AIR FORCE

1889 - 1938



**Above:** Major Leslie MacDill (center) commanded the American military aviation school at St. Jean De Monts, France. Instructors taught aerial gunnery skills for planes such as the Nieuport 17 (background). This French fighter aircraft was used by the American Expeditionary Forces in World War I.

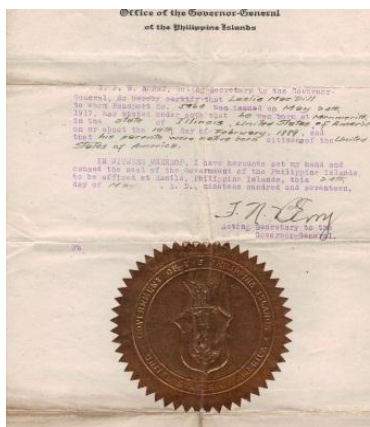
Leslie MacDill was an early pioneer in American military aviation, a veteran of World War I, and an Army air officer who distinguished himself in aviation developmental work during peace time in the 1920s and '30s. He rose to the rank of colonel after becoming a member of the War Department's general staff in 1935. However, on the morning of November 9, 1938, he died piloting a basic combat training plane that crashed shortly after take-off in Washington, D.C. He was 49 years old.

The Army Air Corps honored their fallen comrade in December 1939 by changing the name of a new base under construction near Tampa, Florida from Southeast Air Base to MacDill Field. The base's name was re-designated to its current version, MacDill Air Force Base, in January 1948 after the Air Force became an independent branch of the military.

Leslie MacDill was born in Monmouth, Illinois on February 18, 1889, the son of a Presbyterian minister. During his early years, the family lived in Xenia, Ohio and later moved to Madison, Indiana. He left high school in his junior year to enter a small, nearby college affiliated with the Presbyterian Church. He graduated from Hanover College in 1909 with a Bachelor of Arts degree. Shortly after, he graduated from the University of Indiana in 1911 with a Master of Arts degree in mathematics.

After school, he enlisted in the Army. MacDill received his commission as a second lieutenant in the Army's Coast Artillery Corps in March 1912, and then served at Fort Hamilton, New York. During this time, he committed to becoming an aviator, although he had no considerable background – if any – with flying. In the fall of 1914, he was assigned to the Army's fledgling air service, the Aviation Section of the Signal Corps. He attended flight training school in San Diego, where the officers often stayed at the renowned Hotel Del Coronado. After graduation, he was promoted to first lieutenant and was assigned to the 1st Aero Squadron at Fort Sill, Oklahoma from July to November 1915.

He received his first overseas experience in the Philippines. He served with the Second Aero Squadron in the Army's Department of the Philippine Islands from January 1916 to May 1917. He returned to the U.S. in the early summer of 1917 – shortly after the U.S. declared war on Germany in April that year.



**Above:** The passport issued to Leslie MacDill by the government of the Philippine Islands in May 1917.

**Below:** The Carnegie Library at Monmouth College in MacDill's childhood town of Monmouth, Illinois



## World War I and Later Years

As part of America's preparations to enter "The Great War", Major MacDill organized a detachment of aviation cadets from August to September 1917 who had volunteered to fly in Europe. The men had been picked as the very best flying cadets from air schools all over the United States. However, after their ship arrived in England in early October 1917, problems involving the unit's final destination forced him and his unit to split up. The aviators remained in England under the command of American Colonel Raynal Bolling, while MacDill went on to France. MacDill eventually filled a staff position as a materiel officer for approximately seven months with the American Expeditionary Forces before being reassigned.

The waning months of the war proved fruitful for the diligent minister's son. He commanded an aerial gunnery school at St. Jean de Monts, France. His responsibilities included building and organizing the school, which taught weaponry of various aircraft, especially the Nieuport 17 and Sopwith Camel biplane fighter aircraft. He oversaw the school's operations from May 1918 to Feb 1919.



**Left:** Artist Kleper Hall painted the only known rendition of Colonel MacDill in 1941 for the base's dedication ceremony.

**Right:** The license of the Aero Club of America, formed in 1905, was a requirement for early U.S. Army pilots.

**Below:** MacDill, far right, learned to fly with fellow students at Glen Martin's aviation school on San Diego's North Island.

After the war, MacDill returned home to various assignments, also earning a Doctorate of Science degree in 1922 from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He went on to serve in a number of positions, including chief engineer officer at McCook Field, an airfield and aviation experimentation station in Dayton, Ohio. In 1925, he was appointed as a technical adviser for President Calvin Coolidge's Aircraft Board, also known as the Morrow Board, in Washington, D.C. The board, which convened in the wake of the trial of General Billy Mitchell, advocated in its final report the establishment of an Air Corps within the Army and a five-year program of major expansion. Ironically, when this expansion finally took place in 1939, it included the construction of the air base that would later bear the name of its technical adviser. In 1939, the Army Air Corps named five of its six new air bases and depots – including MacDill Field – for former military aviation officers who had distinguished themselves during the previous 20 years.

