

The Soaring Eagle
William B. Lyttle

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William B. Lyttle led an extraordinary life. He was born on January 28, 1920, the same day as his mother, in Belfast, Northern Ireland. His parents, Robert and Annie Lyttle, were of Scottish and Irish descent. He has only one sibling, a younger brother named Woolsey. William had a relatively normal childhood, as normal as one can be during the Great Depression. At the age of seven William and his family left the green hillsides of Northern Ireland and traveled by boat to the east coast of the United States. There they settled in Massachusetts. William attended Woodlawn Grammar School and graduated from South Hadley High School in 1937. He continued his education at Syracuse University, and went abroad to finish his studies at Queens University in Belfast and Cambridge University in England. He majored in Mechanical and Electrical Engineering.

After graduation, William pursued his life long dream of being a pilot and joined the Army Air Force Cadet program in 1941. He was commissioned as a second lieutenant and bombardier in 1942 at Victorville Air Force Base in California. Shortly afterward, he volunteered for overseas duty during World War II. He was assigned to the Eighth Air Force Base in England with the 351st Bombardier Division. It was during that time, that he flew 48 missions over France, Norway, and Germany. He was credited with destroying two enemy fighters and for his courage response to duty. He was promoted to the rank of Captain in 1945. He received several medals of honor for his service in the war, including the Asiatic Theatre of Operations ribbon, the European Theatre of Operations Service ribbon, five battle stars, the Distinguished Flying Cross with three oak leaf clusters, a French Croix Degure with a gold star, and his entire unit received the Presidential Unit Citation with one oak leaf cluster!

When he returned he applied for pilot training and was assigned to Randolph Field in Texas for primary and basic pilot training. At this time he also married a Scottish girl from Northern Ireland, Eileen Mary Moffat, whom he had met overseas during the war. The wedding was performed in full military dress. Not much time passed before he and his new bride moved to Williams Field, Arizona, where William received advanced single engine training and most importantly, his pilot wings. He was then assigned to March Air Force Base to fly F-80 jet planes and finally he was assigned to the 4th Squadron Fighter group at Langley Field in Virginia before being released from active duty in 1950 with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel.

His experience with aircraft and degree in mechanical engineering present him with the opportunity to begin a new career in the aerospace industry. He became a design engineer with McDonnell Corporation and worked with helicopters, missiles and spacecraft. His position had many responsibilities, including the full qualifications testing for the GAM-72 missile and both the Gemini and Skylab spacecraft. William was instrumental in preparing Vandenberg Air Force Base to receive the space shuttle landing for the Air Force and worked closely with NASA on the space launches at Cape Canaveral, Florida. He often took his wife and his children with him to vacation at the Cape.

After 20 years he retired from McDonnell Douglas to spend a leisurely retirement with his wife of 48 years. William is now 76 years old and has survived two heart attacks and six bypass surgeries. He currently satisfies his love for flying by watching the eagles soar over his home in Clarksville, Missouri.

