

OpenVoiceNews

Transparent. Unbiased. Yours.

Nebraska's WWII Ace Pilot Donald McPherson Dies at 103

August 22, 2025

— Categories: *Breaking News*

ADAMS, Nebraska Donald McPherson, believed to be America's last surviving World War II "ace" pilot, has died at the age of 103.

McPherson earned the title of "ace" after shooting down five enemy aircraft during the Pacific campaign. He flew F6F Hellcat fighters from the USS Essex and was credited with multiple aerial victories against Japanese planes during the final years of the war. His combat service earned him the Congressional Gold Medal and three Distinguished Flying Crosses.

Despite his wartime accomplishments, his family said McPherson preferred to be remembered for his faith, family, and community service. "When it's all done and Dad lists the things he wants to be remembered for ... his first thing would be that he's a man of faith," his daughter Beth Delabar told the *Beatrice Daily Sun*, which first reported his death on August 14.

Born in 1921, McPherson enlisted in the U.S. Navy in 1942 at just 18 years old. After completing his 18-month flight training program in 1944, he married his wife, Thelma. He joined fighter squadron VF-83 and flew missions over the Pacific.

In one account preserved by the Fagen Fighters WWII Museum, McPherson described shooting down two enemy aircraft during a single mission. His Hellcat sustained damage, but he returned safely to his carrier. Such experiences, his family recalled, left him convinced that "Maybe God is not done with me."

After the war, McPherson returned to Adams, Nebraska, to work the family farm. He dedicated himself to his community, helping establish local baseball and softball leagues, serving as a Scoutmaster, and taking on leadership roles in the Adams United Methodist Church, the American Legion, and Veterans of Foreign Wars. The local ballfield was later renamed McPherson Field in honor of him and his wife, who often volunteered at games.

McPherson was recognized nationally as the final surviving U.S. ace, a title confirmed by the American Fighter Aces Association and the Fagen Fighters WWII Museum. He was honored at the museum's Victory at Sea event in Minnesota just days before his passing.

His daughter Donna Mulder said her father believed his survival in combat carried a purpose beyond wartime heroics. "Maybe God is not done with me," she recalled him saying, reflecting his lifelong faith and commitment to serving others.

With his death, a living link to America's World War II aviation history has closed, marking the end of an era for the nation's fighter aces.