

# Estill airman Fairce Conner declared MIA after bombing run

by JERRY ELTZROTH

The Estill County Tribune recently published a story about the Rolling Thunder K5 organization honoring a local veteran. The veteran was Fairce (pronounced Fair-is, like Ferris wheel according to his family) Connor. He has a memorial marker in the Sand Hill Christian Church Cemetery. The Rolling Thunder K5 members performed a Facebook Live Remembrance at Noon on June 20, 2020 for Fairce who lost his life during World War II on June 20, 1944, 76 years ago, and was declared MIA—Missing in Action.

Tracy Patrick had an excellent story about Fairce and the Rolling Thunder K5 remembrance. However, I had to find out more about this veteran. Tracy put me in touch with a distant relative of Fairce Conner who lives in Indiana—Vince Shockney. Some of the excellent information from Vince was gleaned from his mother, Zula Rene (Conner) Shockney. Zula was the son of Leonard 'LG' Conner, an older brother of Fairce. If my 'math' is correct, Fairce is the uncle of Zula and the great uncle of Vince. Additional information about Fairce was pulled from Ancestry.com and military records.

Edd and Louellen (Hendricks) Conner were the parents of Fairce and 13 other children. Fairce was born on March 23, 1916 in Estill County. His given name on his birth certificate is stated as "Fairbanks." The Conner family lived on the Richmond/Irvine Pike (old KY 52 Highway) in Estill County according to the 1920 Federal Census. The 1940 Census found them living again on Highway 52. Fairce was living with his parents and several of his siblings in 1940 when he was 24 years old; however, he would soon enter military service. The 1940 Census also stated that his highest grade of school completed was "elementary, 7th grade." His occupation was listed as an "unpaid family farm laborer." He may have attended Winston School. Pepper Hardy received information from Cecil Turpin that "Fairce and his brother Andrew lived in front of the Winston School years ago."

Vince Shockney said the Conner family spent several generations in Estill County, possibly back to the founding of the State. Fairce's paternal grandparents were Garland and Margaret Ann 'Docia' (Wise) Conner. Garland was a Private with Co. H, 8th Kentucky Infantry during the Civil War. Garland Conner was living alone in a separate household next to Edd and Louellen Conner on the Richmond/Irvine Pike in 1920.

Fairce's maternal grandparents were Elijah and Millie Ann (Richardson) Hendricks. They lived in the Forks area of Estill County.

Edd Conner (1890-1947) and Louellen Hendricks (1893-1973) had 14 children in total from 1909 to 1937. They were Hobert (1909-1928), Albert (1910-1967), Sherman (1912-1987), Leonard Garland 'LG' (1914-1988), Fairce (1916-1944), Phoebe 'Pheby' (1918-1922), Zula May (1920-2003), Andrew Jackson (1923-1983), Eula Agnes (1925-2009), Edward Junior (1927-1929), Robert Donald 'Buster' (1929-1964), Ted Wakefield (1932-1932) 3 months, Irene (1934-2015), Betty Jean (1937-), the last living sibling of Fairce Conner. Betty Jean is residing in a nursing home near Richmond, Indiana. After Fairce volunteered for the Army Air Corps in 1941, the Conner family soon followed the migration north to find better jobs in Indiana.

To the right of Fairce's military marker in about the middle of Sand Hill Cemetery are markers for three of his siblings--Ted, Junior (Edward Junior), Hobert, and Pheby. I found a death certificate for Ted that stated he died of cholera. Dr. James Blackwell of Witt Springs was the physician that signed the death certificate. The place of death was Elliott, Kentucky. To the left of Fairce's military marker is a grave marker for Nettie (Conner) Hutton, the sister of Edd Conner.

Fairce Conner enlisted in the U.S. Army on August 6, 1941 at Fort Thomas, Newport, Kentucky with the rank of Private. He was listed as being 70 inches tall, weighing 154 lbs. and was 25 years old.

According to a historical account of the Army Air Force, Fairce was a member of the Lt. Milton Goodridge B-24 Liberator Bomber crew that trained in Alamogordo, New Mexico. They transferred in as crew 116 from the 331st CCTS (Combat Crew Training School) in Casper, Wyoming on January 26, 1944. They were assigned to the 858th Bomber Squadron, designated as Crew 812.

Lt. Goodridge signed out for a B-24J Liberator Bomber. They gave it the nickname 'Bottle Baby.' In April 1944, Lt. Goodridge and his crew flew their assigned aircraft to North Pickenham, England, via the southern route. Lt. Goodridge's crew flew a total of 15 missions. Staff Sergeant Fairce Conner served as the Ball Turret Gunner during these missions. As Ball Turret gunner Fairce was positioned at the bottom rear of the Liberator Bomber—a tough, dangerous job.

The 'Bottle Baby' crew's first rough mission was their fifth one. It was a bombing raid on the synthetic oil refineries at Politz, Germany. Lt. Goodridge wrote that for him the mission was fairly routine until they started home. The German fighters came at him head-on. One of them came in, flipped up on a wing and slid between him and his wingman. "I thought we had a pretty tight formation," said Goodridge, but the attack left the bomber with no rudder controls as the tail section was badly damaged. [The lower tail section is where Fairce was positioned as a gunner. Lt. Goodridge made a note that his tail gunner missed the next mission because of his wounds on the Politz mission. Although Lt. Goodridge never named the tail gunner who was wounded, it most likely was Fairce.] They managed to limp back to England where they landed at Oulton. A plane was sent over to pick up the crew.

The Lt. Goodridge Crew 812 was re-assigned to the 856th Bomber Squadron on June 19, 1944. The Goodridge crew were just several of many casualties on June 20, 1944 during another bombing raid on the well defended German synthetic oil refineries at Politz. While approaching the target from the Baltic Sea, the Group came under an attack by the Luftwaffe. The 'Bottle Baby' was hit by cannon fire. It lost a wing, rolled over and dove out of control. Then it blew up. Lt. Goodridge, the only survivor, didn't jump, but was blown from the bomber. He was picked up by a German patrol boat and was held prisoner for the duration of the war. The rest of his crew, which included Fairce Conner, was claimed by the Baltic Sea—8 Killed in Action, 1 POW (Goodridge). Not only was the Goodridge bomber shot down, but also the entire Bomber Squadron consisting of eleven B-24 Liberator Bombers and crews were shot down that same day.

Another report I saw stated that the 'Bottle Baby' was shot down at Stettin, Germany. Stettin was actually a part of Poland, near the German border by the Baltic Sea. Germany of course had conquered and claimed Poland in World War II.

Fairce was declared Missing in Action (MIA) and still has that designation today. The Rolling Thunder organization regularly honors our MIA's from all wars. Fairce was awarded the Air Medal and the Purple Heart with one Oak Leaf Cluster, which would indicate he was wounded twice—once on the fifth mission and then when he lost his life.

Staff Sergeant Fairce Conner is memorialized on the 'Tablets of the Missing' at Cambridge American Cemetery, Cambridge, England. The Cambridge American Cemetery is one of fourteen permanent military cemetery memorials established on foreign soil by the American Battle Monuments Commission to honor the dead and missing in action of World War II. There are 3812 interments of American servicemen and women, a great number of whom were crew members of British-based American aircraft.

Besides being honored with a military marker in the Sand Hill Cemetery, Fairce's name is on the Memorial Plaque hanging beside the gym door at the Estill County High School and is on the WWII

Obelisk at the Ravenna Veterans Memorial Park.

Fairce Conner gave his life to defend our freedoms and to save the world from being conquered by the AXIS pow-

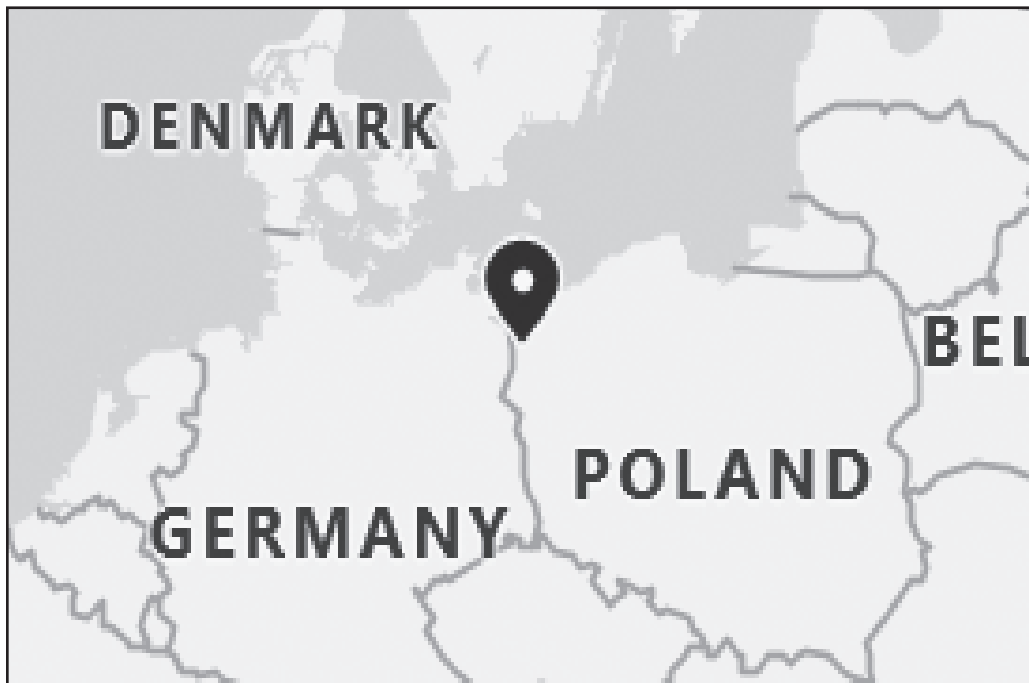
ers. He was a member of our "Greatest Generation" who believed in this country and its freedoms. That generation believed in serving their country and did not try to destroy it.



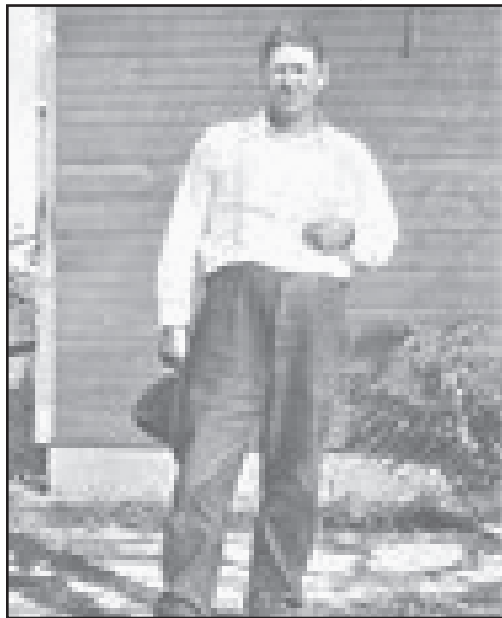
Pictured are the crew members of the ill-fated B-24J Liberator Bomber nicknamed "Bottle Baby" that was shot down by German fighters on June 20, 1944. All were lost except the pilot. Back row left to right: Lt. Milton Goodridge, pilot; Lt. Abraham Schonfield, navigator; Lt. Earl Davis, co-pilot. Front row, left to right: Sgt. Everette Bolte, gunner; Staff Sergeant Charles Ippolito, radio operator; Sgt. James Stuckey, gunner; Sgt. John Stazen, gunner; Sgt. Theodore Kossey, gunner; Staff Sergeant Fairce Conner, Ball Turret Gunner.



The crew nicknamed their B-24J Liberator Bomber the "Bottle Baby" and had this cartoonish emblem painted on their aircraft.



This map shows the approximate crash site of the B24J Liberator Bomber on which Staff Sergeant Fairce Conner served. The marker indicates the location of Stettin, Poland which is very close to the Baltic Sea which lies above the marker.

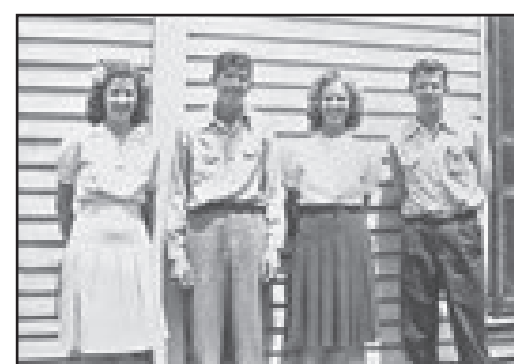


Edd Conner



Louellen (Hendricks) Conner

Four of Fairce Conner's siblings are pictured, circa 1930's—left to right: Eula Agnes, Robert Donald "Buster," Zula May, and Andrew Jackson Conner. Previous photos of these siblings published and taken from the internet identified the boy to the far right as Fairce. Betty Jean (Conner) Fox, the only surviving sibling of Fairce, stated the boy on far right is Andrew, her older brother.



Many undated photos of Edd and Louellen (Hendricks) Conner were shared by Vince Shockney. Vince uploaded the pictures from Ancestry.com. The photos were most likely taken in Estill County.

NOTE: The three Sandhill area books being sold by The Estill County Historical and Genealogical Society are now in and are sold as a set for a total price of \$65. which includes sales tax. Shipping requires \$6.00 additional.

They will be available for pickup after a program on Saturday, August 1st at the Society's Museum at 133-135 Broadway in Irvine.

To order by mail, send \$72.00 (\$65 plus \$6 shipping) to ECH&GS, 133 Broadway, Irvine, KY 40336-1055.