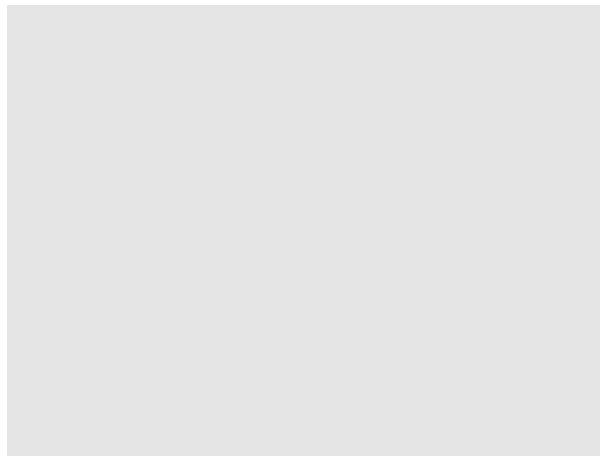


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## From WKU to historic Dresden air raid, WWII vet shares his story

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Field McChesney Jr.

After parachuting out of a burning B-17 bomber in February 1945, World War II radio operator and aerial gunner Field McChesney Jr. said he didn't receive the warmest welcome when he was captured by German forces following the historic bombing of Dresden.

"I sensed right away that they weren't there to give me the key to the city," said McChesney, who recently blew out the candles on his 98th birthday cake and proudly declared that he "got 'em all."

The longtime Bowling Green resident and supporter of Western Kentucky University is currently receiving care at Hospice of Southern Kentucky.

McChesney spoke there in an interview with the Daily News about his experience as a WWII veteran and prisoner of war, his later career in journalism and government and his family connection to WKU since Henry Hardin Cherry was president.

## Early life at WKU: 'It was our playground'

McChesney's father, Hardin Field McChesney Sr., came to Bowling Green in 1927 to teach foreign language for Ogden College before it merged with the Western Kentucky State Teachers College the next year. Between 1928 and his retirement in 1959, he taught at WKU.

McChesney Jr. said his father taught several languages, including French, German and Spanish, and he counted the late Democratic congressman William Natcher among his students.

From the time he entered kindergarten in 1927 until the late 1980s, McChesney said his father's children attended classes on the Hill in a nearly continuous line.

As a young boy, McChesney Jr. recalls living with his family in a house on Normal Street, near where Jody Richards Hall now stands. Living in a house filled with sisters, he calls it "only fitting" that it became the current home of WKU's Alpha Delta Pi sorority.

“I thought it all belonged to me,” McChesney joked, recalling his 5-year-old self.

At the time, McChesney could look out on campus and see what felt like his own backyard.

Maria Flynn, McChesney’s half sister who was born after their father remarried following his mother’s death in 1935, views the Hill in the same way.

“It was our playground,” she said.

McChesney would later go on to graduate from WKU as well in 1946, but not before he was called into military service in 1943, a year that would turn the tide for the Allies in WWII.

## Shot down over Dresden

Shortly after basic training, McChesney thought he would serve as a combat infantryman, but that changed when an opportunity to fly on aerial missions came along.

McChesney learned early on that he would never be a pilot, but he did discover an ability to serve as a radio operator and gunner and did so on a mission to deliver a B-17 across the Atlantic with a crew of nine men, each from a different state.

At the time, the U.S. was taking a “terrible beating” in its air war, McChesney said. Not long after landing in Wales, a pilot and a navigator from McChesney’s crew split off to fly with another crew and never returned, he said. A new pilot and substitute navigator then joined his crew, he said.

McChesney had his own brush with death during the bombing of Dresden in mid-February 1945. The aerial attack on the capital of the German state of Saxony, which was a rail transport and communication center at the time, is estimated to have claimed up to 25,000 lives.

McChesney nearly escaped being among the casualties, he said. All but one of his crew survived by bailing out of the burning B-17 bomber after it was shot down over Dresden.

It was then that McChesney was captured and held as a prisoner of war until late April of that year. While he was back at home in Bowling Green during a 60-day leave, McChesney watched the U.S. detonate atomic bombs over Japan, ultimately ending the war.

For McChesney, it meant that he could finish his college degree at WKU and start a career.

## From Frankfort to Washington

After earning his bachelor’s degree from WKU in 1946, McChesney worked as a teacher, a child welfare worker and as a newspaper journalist in Kentucky and Indiana.



After several stints at newspapers that McChesney said ceased production, he got in touch with a friend who worked for the Kentucky Governor's Office in Frankfort. McChesney then took a job in public affairs, working in Gov. Lawrence Wetherby's administration to promote the state of Kentucky and state government happenings, he said.

His work continued under Gov. Bert Combs, and when Gov. Ned Breathitt took the office, McChesney worked as his chief administrative assistant for most of his administration.

In 1968, McChesney took a job in Washington, working for the reelection campaign of President Lyndon B. Johnson, but after Johnson later announced that he wouldn't seek or accept his party's nomination for a second term, McChesney remained in D.C.

During the next 20 years, McChesney served within the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs in various roles, including as assistant director of public information. Just before his retirement in 1988, he worked as the senior assistant to the chief benefits director.

McChesney's retirement brought him back to Frankfort and then Bowling Green in 2003. He and his wife Marilyn split their time between here and Santa Fe, N.M., until her death in 2007.

## Giving back: McChesney Field Campus

When McChesney looks back on his relationship with WKU – and the life it allowed him to lead – it's like a debt he can never repay, he said. At least six of his siblings earned degrees from the university where his father taught for more than 30 years.

So when McChesney sought to keep his father's legacy alive at WKU, he turned to a 140-acre plot of land the family owned along the Green River in northern Warren County. One day, McChesney recalls, he spotted then-WKU President Gary Ransdell on campus and approached him about making a donation.

In 2009, the family celebrated the dedication of the McChesney Field Campus.

“It's our family's great honor and pleasure to symbolically turn this land over to Western Kentucky University,” McChesney was quoted in a university announcement at the time. “May it be enjoyed for generations



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