



1/ Frederick Castle. 2/ Two Castle Sabres in 1958. 3/ A satellite view of what is now Castle Airport Aviation and Development Center. 4/ B-52s at Castle.

CASTLE

Whiz Kid and Combat Hero

The Dec. 7, 1941, Pearl Harbor attack drew America into World War II. By that time, Fred Castle had been out of uniform for almost eight years, but soon he, too, was at war. His heroism would lead to the naming of a major air base in his honor.

Frederick Walker Castle seemed fated for a career of arms. Born in 1908 at Fort McKinley in the Philippines, he was the son of 2nd Lt. Benjamin F. Castle, a West Pointer. Fred was the first child born to a member of Class of 1907 and was thus “class godson.”

In 1919, then-Col. Benjamin Castle retired from the Army and settled in New Jersey. Fred graduated from military school and spent two years in the New Jersey National Guard before entering West Point in July 1926, graduating in June 1930. Castle received wings in December 1931 and served two years as a pursuit pilot.

However, the cash-starved, Depression-era Air Corps, as an economizing measure, transferred Castle and many other pilots into the Civilian Conservation Corps. He resigned in early 1934.

For eight years, Castle worked in civilian industry. He was a managerial whiz kid. His last job was at Sperry Gyroscope Co., a defense contractor. Castle might have made it to the top of the company had the war not intervened, but intervene it did.

Air Corps Brig. Gen. Ira C. Eaker had heard of Castle’s business acumen. In

early 1942 he got Castle recalled to active duty to help set up Eighth Bomber Command. Within a year, Castle was promoted to colonel and named assistant chief of staff for supply.

Castle pushed for a combat assignment. In June 1943, he was given command of 94th Bomb Group, a B-17 outfit that in early going suffered heavy losses. He had soon whipped the group into shape and personally led many missions—most notably, a massive raid against an FW-190 plant deep in Germany. Despite bad weather, he decided to press on with just his group. The raid succeeded, with no losses. For this, Castle was awarded the Silver Star.

In April 1944, Castle took command of 4th Bombardment Wing. Soon he was promoted to brigadier general. On Dec. 24, 1944, with Germany engaged in its Battle of the Bulge offensive, Castle took off on his 30th mission. It would be his last.

He was a key part of a maximum 2,000-bomber effort against German airfields and communication centers. Castle’s B-17, with him flying as copilot, was hit multiple times by German fighters. Castle ordered the crew to bail out of the stricken B-17. He took the controls to allow the pilot to retrieve his parachute. Then, a wing tank exploded. Castle and the pilot perished in the resulting crash.

Castle posthumously was awarded

FREDERICK WALKER CASTLE

Born: Oct. 14, 1908, Manila, Philippines
Died: Dec. 24, 1944 (KIA), Hods, Belgium
College: US Military Academy
Service: US Air Corps, US Army Air Forces, New Jersey National Guard, New York National Guard, Air National Guard
Main Era: World War II
Years Active: USAC 1930-34, USAAF 1942-44
Combat: Northern Europe
Final Grade: Brigadier General
Honors: Medal of Honor, Silver Star, Legion of Merit, Distinguished Flying Cross, Purple Heart, Air Medal (5)

CASTLE AIR FORCE BASE

State: California
Nearest City: Merced
Area: 4.34 sq mi / 2,777 acres
Status: Closed
Opened: Air Corps Basic Flying School (Sept. 20, 1941)
Renamed: Merced Army Flying School (April 7, 1942)
Renamed: Merced Army Airfield (May 8, 1943)
Renamed: Castle Field (Jan. 17, 1946)
Renamed: Castle Air Force Base (Jan. 13, 1948)
Closed (by USAF): Sept. 30, 1995
Returned to Civilian Use: 1995
Current Owner: Castle Aviation and Development Center
Former Owner: Strategic Air Command

the Medal of Honor. The citation said his willingness to sacrifice his life was “in keeping with the highest traditions of the military service.”

Merced Army Airfield, Calif., was renamed Castle Field in his honor, and it became Castle Air Force Base in 1947. Castle was for most of its existence a major Strategic Air Command bomber base. It closed in 1995.