



Roscoe Turner Aviator



A Corinth Native

A Question. What does a famed air-race pilot have to do with the Civil War in Mississippi? A native of Corinth, Roscoe was born on September 29, 1895, the eldest son of farmer Robert Lee Turner and his wife Mary. His parents bought a large parcel of land on the west side of town in 1903. Later known as Turner Hill, the low ridge on their land overlooked Turner Creek.

The Civil War

On October 3rd and 4th, 1862, during the Battle of Corinth, the property along the narrow creek was crossed over numerous times by the two contending armies. On the morning of October 4th, Maj. Gen. Mansfield Lovell’s division was ordered to attack the Union left flank a the final part of a three-division *en echelon* assault on the federal defenses. On the heights above the stream (soon to be called Turner Creek) was the brigade of Brig. Gen. John Villepigue.

Lovell never committed his troops to the attack left to themselves, the other two divisions failed to defeate the Union Army. The battle was over. The Confederates were defeated. Controversy and debates have followed Lovell’s performance since 1862. Could the Confederates have succeeded if Lovell had made the attack?

Early Life

Roscoe attended the Glover School in West Corinth and completed the 10th grade, the highest level then available in Corinth. He stuided at a local buisness college for six months and held a variety of jobs, but his days were most often spent on the family farm. “Looking at the rumps of two mules all day in the hot sun made me resolve that I didn’t want to grow up to be a farmer.” At the age of 16 he moved to Memphis, TN.

With dreams of being an automobile mechanic, Roscoe’s ambition was fuled by the opportunities of the big city. He progressed from auto mechanic, to chauffer, dispatch clerk and salesman, always attributing his successful interviews to taking time to give a first good impression with sharp clothes and well-groomed appearance.



Taking to the Air

Roscoe saw his first airplane in 1913 and three years later he became determined to be a pilot. His application for flight training with the Army was denied due to lack of a college education. When the United States entered WWI in April 1917, Roscoe again saw an opportunity for flying. In March 1918, he became a balloon pilot with the rank of 2nd Lt. Whenever the opportunity presented, he began unofficial training and began flying airplanes.

After the war, Turner became an airplane mechanic, wing-walker and parachutist. With a partner he performed on the cross-country barnstorming circuit. Corinth was his base of operations and he also worked diligently as a car salesman and mechanic. In 1927, he began to operate a charter airline service.



Golden Age of Aviation

Roscoe found work in Hollywood flying in films and as a stunt advisor. He rubbed elbows with celebrities and was instantly recognizable by his jaunty pointed mustache and a big toothy grin. He habitually wore a striking uniform of his own design with a blue uniform coat, tan jodhpurs and polished riding boots.

In the early 1930's Roscoe was winning aviation races from coast to coast. Next to Major League Baseball, air racing drew the biggest crowds of any sporting event. He won trophy after trophy as his powerful race planes took him to victories. He set air speed records for local races and transcontinental flights.



Gilmore

One of Roscoe's many sponsors was Gilmore Oil whose logo was the "Red Lion." He adopted a lion cub, appropriately named Gilmore, who became his flying partner.

The famous little lion had his own custom parachute, but as he grew into adulthood, he was permanently grounded due to his size and weight. Gilmore died in 1952 with his old flying buddy holding his paw.



Legacy



Roscoe's achievements were recognized by Congress in 1949, when he was the last civilian ever to be awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. He died in June 1970 and the Roscoe Turner Airport in Corinth recalls the

life of this legendary local aviator. Thanks to the American Battlefield Trust, the land where Roscoe grew up is now part of the Corinth Unit of Shiloh National Military Park.