



EDWARD ORRICK McDONNELL, JR.

1939

Arthur Pier has described how, early in the autumn of 1942, a P-40 "came hurtling over the School at a speed of more than 300 miles an hour, almost grazing the tree tops and the Chapel roof; . . . this pilot seemed bent on putting on a show for St. Paul's School alone; he had disappeared beyond the Lower School pond, but in two or three minutes the roar of the motor announced that he was returning, and instantly he was again gone, having skimmed the roofs of Hargate and the Old Upper. Another minute and he was back once more and now the throng of admirers below saluted him by arranging themselves in V formation on the Lower School playground. On his return and last trip he acknowledged the courtesy by performing a barrel roll as he shot at a breath-takingly low altitude over the Library pond and the roof of Simpson."

This occurred before El Alamein and before Stalingrad. The battle for Guadalcanal had begun but had not yet been won. In those dark days, McDonnell's visit to the School in his P-40, which he had but lately learned to fly, brought a message of hope; and the V into which the Lower Schoolers spontaneously arranged themselves expressed the elation which many felt at this near evidence of American air power, an elation not unmingled with anxiety for the young pilot, known of course to be an Alumnus, though his name was not learned until later in the day. About to leave for Africa, he had come to say good-bye.

Edward McDonnell had come to the School a Second Former in 1934 and had spent five years there, graduating in 1939. He be-

came one of the best boxers in the School and he played on Old Hundred football, hockey and baseball teams. He belonged to the Library Association, he was treasurer of the Deutscher Verein and he was a Supervisor. He was a quiet, friendly person, conscientious, unobtrusive, interested in many things, doing his work well and attracting little attention to himself. He entered Yale in 1939, but left to join the Air Force at the time of Pearl Harbor and graduated as a pursuit pilot in August, 1942. He went overseas that October for further training in North Africa.

From Africa he wrote early in March, 1943: ". . . We have been moving about so much lately that it seems all I do is drive tent stakes in the ground and pull them up again. Now and then a desert sandstorm blows in and pulls them up prematurely, which doesn't help matters at all. . . . We are now camped in an almond and grape orchard, and the blossoms are in full show, so that all in all, it is like a summer resort compared to what we have been used to in the barren desert. It almost seems like Mill Neck in the spring with the dogwood and cherry trees in bloom, but then nothing could be quite that good. . . . I have my own ship now, a new one with my name and my crew chief's name painted under the windshield. It's nice to fly your own ship all the time and to get to know the men who are working on it."

Three weeks later, at the end of March, in a letter which he never finished, he wrote: ". . . We are in the thick of things now, and it is just about as exciting as I thought it would be. The Germans have been pretty tough lately, more so than we expected, which in a way makes things more interesting. A complete push-over is no fun anyway, especially when you are trying to pile up operational time. When you get this letter, however, things may have taken an entirely different twist. . . ."

On April 2, during the struggle for Tunisia, and before the account of his last visit to the School had been published in the *Alumni Horae*, McDonnell's squadron was escorting a squadron of fighter-bombers on a raid. It was his ninth mission. Over the Mediterranean, off Sfax, the formation was attacked by a number of ME-109's. McDonnell, according to his posthumous citation for the Air Medal, left the protection of his squadron to cut off an enemy plane that was on the tail of a squadron mate. He saved his friend at the cost of his own life. His plane was hit, and he himself though able to bail out must have been wounded: another member of the squadron who circled him to the water to protect him from attack and spill his 'chute for him is certain that he was either dead or unconscious when he reached the water, half a mile off shore.