Before Texas A&M...

Strong Ties to Texas: Although Tommy McAdams was a "Child of the Service," and was born in Michigan, he had strong ties to Texas and to Texas A&M.

Tommy’s father, James O. "Mac" McAdams and his uncle, H. H. "Mc" McAdams were members of the Class of ’37 from Devers, TX, about eight miles east of Liberty. "Mac" McAdams, served in WWII and remained a career Army officer after the war, advancing to the grade of Colonel. Like most soldiers, Mac’s career caused the family to move often, sometimes at short notice and often to strange places. Like many kids in this situation, Tommy learned to be comfortable in new environments and adapt quickly to every situation he found himself.

High School Years: Tommy McAdams graduated from Fort Knox High School. It was a relatively small Kentucky high school and the student body came from military families assigned to the Army post. These schools have a continuous turnover – on average one third of the student body changes each year. It appears that Tom adapted well to this environment. A search of high school yearbooks suggests that he came to Fort Knox sometime before his sophomore year.

Tom was very involved in student activities and sports. He lettered in baseball and football, playing halfback on a team that was undefeated his Junior year. Tom had diverse interests - he was also involved in the Chess Club, the Flying Club, the Rifle Club and the Drill Team among several other activities listed on his senior honors list. The 1960 high school yearbook described Tom as “...easy going... generous... audacious... spontaneous... wants to succeed”.

At some point in all these student activities, a cute blonde named Anita Foster caught Tom’s eye and changed his life forever.
While at Texas A&M...

Tom McAdams began his life as an Aggie when the Class of ’64 reported in September 1960. Tom was assigned to Company D-2 and began as a Mechanical Engineering major. Later, he would change to Personnel Management. His two years in Company D-2 showed clearly that Tom had exceptional leadership qualities. He was the D-2 “Best Drilled” his sophomore year.

Tom made a lot of friends during his freshman and sophomore years, but none could match the friendship that he developed with his D-2 Fish Buddy, Gary Byrd ’64, from Dallas.

“Tom and I became very good friends over the next year and a half. Tom invited me to go to his home at Fort Knox, Ky. For the long Easter weekend in ’62. He wanted me to meet his parents, Colonel J.O. McAdams and mother Nathalie. Colonel McAdams was the commander of the Tank Infantry School at Ft. Knox. Tom also wanted me to meet his fiancée, Anita Foster. Tom and Anita had gone to Ft. Knox High School together. They were planning to get married the following summer and asked me to be Tom’s best man.

We drove all night, arriving at Ft. Knox mid-morning, ... and headed to Lexington to pick up Anita and my blind date. Both girls were beautiful and we had a great time seeing the sights, partying and dancing. During the time at Ft. Knox, since we had a little pull, we got the grand tour of Ft. Knox and even got to drive a tank.”

Gary Byrd ’64

During Tom’s first two years at A&M, the TRIGON obviously noticed his ability to lead. At the end of his sophomore year, when Tom announced that he would become a married “day-duck” as a Junior, the TRIGON appointed Tom as First Sergeant of Company H-3, the traditional company for all married guys and cadets from College Station and Bryan who lived with their parents.

Tom and Anita stuck to their plans to marry between Tom’s sophomore and junior years. Gary Byrd, Tom’s Best Man, gives us a detailed description:

“That summer (1962) I went back to Ft. Knox to attend the wedding. I learned a valuable lesson on that trip: Don’t have a bachelor party the night before an afternoon wedding. Tom had rented or borrowed a long white Cadillac convertible for the occasion. The bachelor party was at the Officer’s Club - if I remember correctly. We had a lot of fun and way, way too much to drink. Tom was easily three sheets into the wind. Thankfully, I was only two sheets gone, so I was designated driver. After getting some help carrying Tom to the car, I had to figure out where his parents' house was at 3 or 4 o’clock in the morning.

About 6:30, Tom’s mother came in and asked if I was all right. She made me a pot of coffee and invited me downstairs to the kitchen to get a SITREP on what had gone on the night before. With much effort, I was able to get Tom up and dressed in time for the early afternoon wedding. He looked terrible but made it through the beautiful ceremony.”

Gary Byrd ’64
In 1962, there were very few off-campus apartments available in College Station for married students. To remedy this, A&M offered two kinds of apartments just across University Boulevard from where the Bonfire Memorial stands today. At the lower end of the spectrum were the College View Apartments. For $48.00 a month, a couple could rent a fully-furnished, all utilities-paid, 2-bedroom apartment in a converted, army surplus barracks building. For about twice that amount, a couple could rent a newer and more modern Hensel Apartment.

Tom and his new bride returned to College Station and set up house-keeping in the Hensel Apartments just in time for the Fall Semester. Being a newlywed and a “Day-Duck” did not hamper Tom’s progress in the Corps. Early in his junior year, Tom was selected to join the Ross Volunteer Company. That same year, Tom began the Army flight program, spending many hours at Easterwood Field in ground training and flight training, and culminating with several solos.

At the end of his Junior Year, Tom took command of Company H-3. A company full of fellow “Day Ducks” can be a challenge to any commander. Nevertheless, he was ready for the challenge so that under Tom’s leadership Company H-3 built a reputation as a high-performance outfit.

As far as accomplishments go, nothing that Tommy did in the Corps could match what he and Anita accomplished at home. On December 3, 1963, Anita delivered little Sheryl Lynn McAdams and Tommy’s family began to grow.

**After Texas A&M...**

At graduation, Tom continued in his father’s footsteps and was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant of Armor. After tanker training at Fort Knox and parachute training at Fort Benning, Tom, Anita, and little Sheri traveled to Amberg, Germany in Northern Bavaria, for duty with the 2d Squadron, 2d Armored Cavalry Regiment. This was classic cavalry duty, patrolling the “Iron Curtain” along the Czechoslovakian border.

All who were in uniform, and especially those serving in Europe at the time, will recall that 1966 marked the beginning of what became known as the “Vietnam Draw Down”. In the space of a few months, every Infantry, Armor, and Cavalry unit across Europe received orders to send all able Majors, senior Captains, and senior Non-Commissioned Officers to Vietnam. The few junior Captains that remained were challenged to do the work done previously by senior and more experienced officers.
It appears that Tom met the challenge. In 1967, Tom was named Outstanding Officer of the Year by the 2d Cavalry Association. About the same time, Clan McAdam’s grew again with the arrival of Shelly Ann. In early summer of 1967, Tom received orders to return to Fort Knox for the Armor Officers Advanced Course with subsequent assignment to Vietnam.

**In Vietnam...**

On June 9, 1968, Captain Thomas A. McAdams reported for duty in the Republic of Vietnam and was assigned to the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment operating in II Field Force, just to the north and east of the capital of Saigon. The regimental headquarters and base camp, called “Blackhorse”, was near Xuan Loc, about 55 miles east-northeast of Saigon.

Again, Tom found himself in the perfect cavalryman’s assignment. The Blackhorse Regiment had a clear-cut, cavalry mission – patrol the area northeast of Saigon and stop infiltration of North Vietnamese and Viet Cong from the northeast. Adding to Tommy’s good fortune was the fact that none other than Colonel George S. Patton IV took command of the regiment only a month earlier.

**Colonel George S. Patton IV**

The Patton name needs no introduction, especially in military circles. The exploits of General George S. Patton III are a large part of the history of World War II. However, many may not realize that the legendary General Patton had a son who made a mark of his own on the history of the Vietnam War.

The younger Patton was 1946 graduate of the United States Military Academy and an Armor officer. He came to Vietnam as a lieutenant colonel and took command of the 11th Cavalry soon after he was promoted to Colonel. His impact on the regiment was obvious and the younger Patton soon began making his own history.

Much of Colonel Patton’s success came from the rapport he established with Officers, NCOs and troopers. He could quickly recognize an exceptional young officer and knew how to get even better performance from them without demanding it. Conversely, Colonel Patton could recognize incompetence at the first encounter and had little tolerance for it - especially true for lieutenant colonels or majors.

“*I once heard him use his command and control radio to summarily fire a staff lieutenant colonel who failed to deliver needed support to a subordinate unit.*”

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Shortly after arriving in country, Tom became the Regimental S-3 Air, responsible for the coordination of all air support for Colonel Patton and his subordinate commanders. The job also required that Tommy travel with Colonel Patton to visit commanders in the field and plan tomorrow’s battles. Tom served as the Commander’s “memory”, keeping detailed notes at each stop on their travels.
There is a popular t-shirt available in stores around A&M declaring the admiration that the WWII General Patton had for Texas Aggies. There has been some debate regarding whether General Patton ever made the statement. There is clear evidence that his son recognized the special value of Aggies as leaders and staff officers. For example, in late 1968 and early 1969, the Regiment’s 2d Squadron had three Aggie captains in leadership positions, with Tom Templar ’65 commanding E Troop, Tom McAdams commanding F Troop, and Mario Macaluso ’65 commanding the squadron’s Artillery Battery.

When Colonel Patton noticed that we knew each other, Tom explained to his boss that we were classmates at A&M. Colonel Patton responded with a smile “Damn it! If we don’t watch it, you Aggies are going to be running this war!”

John Dickson ’64

Thus, it was no surprise when Tom first reported to the regiment that Colonel Patton selected Tom for the important S-3 Air position without interview.

The 11th Cavalry Regiment spent the summer and fall of 1968 patrolling the area northeast of Saigon, looking for enemy units and setting ambushes along routes toward the Capital – all working to prevent the rumored “Second Tet Offensive”. Finding the enemy was often frustrating, but cavalry was made for this purpose and the 11th Cavalry enjoyed great success in the latter half of the year. The Regiment’s work, and the effort of other units around Saigon must have been effective because the second enemy offensive never matched the scope and intensity of the battle seen in January - February 1968.

“After 6-8 weeks of combat operations under the control of the 11th Cavalry, our battalion, the 2d Battalion 28th Infantry, received orders to detach from the 11th Cavalry and stand-down for a few days. Colonel Patton flew out to our location to say goodbye and thank us for the work we had done. Tommy came with him, along with the Regimental Chaplain and the Sergeant Major.

Colonel Patton and my Battalion Commander, LTC Vernon Coffey, withdrew to Colonel Coffey’s tent for a private conversation, giving Tommy and me a chance for a conversation of our own. Tom and I found a low wall of sand bags to eat a quick lunch of C-Rations and talk about things like when the next attack would come or our hopes for Aggie football that year.

Halfway through our lunch, the colonels emerged from their tent and Colonel Coffey asked our officers and senior NCOs to gather round. Colonel Patton said a few words, thanked us for the support, and, in jest, gave us a few
"orders" for what to do during our stand-down that drew the polite objection of the Chaplain. When Colonel Patton was finished, we exchanged salutes and he headed toward the helipad where his command and control Huey had begun warmups. Tommy was already strapped in to the Huey, with his headset on and his maps out, talking on the radio, probably to regimental headquarters.

With Colonel Patton onboard and strapped in, the pilot ratcheted up the throttle, the Huey rose three or four feet off the ground, dropped its nose like an angry animal, and chugged off to the northwest. As it did, Tommy looked out and gave me a quick “Gig'em”, then turned back to his maps and the radio.”

In the subsequent months, Tom continued to impress his commander so that early in 1969 he was given command of F Troop, Second Squadron. In February 1969, F Troop was operating about five miles east of Lai Khe and just north of an area the troops called “East-West Village”. The area had been known as an enemy stronghold for many years, so much that the cavalry had operated there from a small firebase called “Bandit Hill”.

On February 28th, F Troop encountered stiff resistance as they maneuvered in the heavy foliage – probably double and triple-canopy jungle north and west of East-West Village. Ground navigation in this terrain is very difficult, often forcing commanders to try to get above mess to see where their troops were and where the enemy was. The Light Observation Helicopter, or LOH, was an excellent solution. It was powerful and agile. The LOH was relatively quiet and often came with a 7.62 mm Gatling gun or a pod of rockets. The helicopters usually operated in pairs, with one flying low while the “wingman” covered him from above. Flying below treetop leaves the aircraft and its crew as vulnerable to groundfire as a soldier on the ground.

Tom’s pilot that day was Warrant Officer David H. Irby. Irby was only 23 years old and on his first assignment as a chopper pilot. Like many others, he was probably one of those daring pilots that you wanted to have for a mission like this - old enough to fly like an expert but young enough not to fear death. Irby would play a big role in what happened on February 28th and would be recognized for his role.

Tom’s cavalry troop along with elements from the regiment’s Air Cavalry Troop were exploiting an earlier B-52 strike when they discovered an extensive enemy basecamp and began driving its occupants deeper into the jungle. Throughout the battle, Tom used his “elevated” vantage point to see the enemy and direct his troopers toward them. Dave Irby skillfully maneuvered the LOH where he could use his Gatling gun and Tom could manage his troops.

“The day Tom was KIA (Killed In Action) he was conducting reconnaissance in force for the 2nd Squadron in an area between Tam Bien (East-West Village / Bandit Hill) and Ben Cat. Tom was in a LOH above his Troop directing them toward an enemy bunker complex when he was hit by enemy automatic weapons fire. We, the other ACAV Troop CDRs and the Tank Company CDR were told that he passed away on the operating table. I believe he was evacuated to Lai Khe.”
In his after-action report, the 2d Squadron Commander, Lieutenant Colonel Lee Duke, reported that Dave Irby maintained control of the helicopter, despite several hits by enemy groundfire. Realizing that Tom was seriously wounded, Irby immediately broke contact and turned west toward the Field Hospital at Lai Khe, just five miles from the battle. LTC Duke reported that Tom was at the hospital in Lai Khe only a few minutes after being hit. Doctors in Lai Khe determined that Tom needed help that they could not give, and he was air evacuated to the 24th Evacuation Hospital at Long Binh.

Tom McAdams died at 3 PM on February 28th, on the operating table at the 24th Evacuation Hospital. David Irby and his enlisted door-gunner survived the action and were back in the air soon, flying LOH missions.

Tom was posthumously awarded the Silver Star Medal and the Purple Heart for his actions. Warrant Officer Irby was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross.

THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
HAS POSTHUMOUSLY AWARDED
THE SILVER STAR MEDAL
TO
CAPTAIN THOMAS ARTHUR McADAMS
for gallantry in action while engaged in military operations involving conflict with an armed hostile force on 28 February 1969 while serving as Troop Commander of Troop F, 2nd Squadron, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment in the Republic of Vietnam. While on an aerial reconnaissance mission, Captain McAdams located an occupied enemy bunker complex. After flying in low to pinpoint the hostile fortifications and estimate the enemy troop strength, he called in friendly ground troops. Despite intense hostile antiaircraft fire, he continued to make low level passes over the enemy positions so that his gunner could place suppressive fire on them. Under Captain McAdams’ expert direction, the friendly ground force overran and destroyed the enemy bunker complex. While he was directing his troops in a search of the surrounding area, they suddenly came under a deluge of enemy small arms, automatic weapons, and rocket-propelled grenade fire. After assessing the enemy's strength, he began directing his men in assaulting the hostile positions. During a low-level pass over the enemy emplacements, Captain McAdams was mortally wounded by a burst of enemy automatic weapons fire. Captain McAdams' courageous leadership and unwavering devotion to duty were in keeping with the highest traditions of the military service and reflect great credit upon himself, his unit and the United States Army.

Colonel Patton kept a detailed journal of each day he was in command. Almost every page in his journal was full of detailed descriptions of what transpired that day.

The journal entry for February 28, 1969 is very different. Only these few words about Tommy's death are the entry for that day, telling us much about how the loss stung the old cavalryman.

Friday, February 28

“Tom McAdams KIA this date. He died at 1500 hrs. after being hit at 1300... He had F Troop.
He was a fine young soldier.”

We have only one eyewitness account of Colonel Patton’s reaction when he learned that Tom was killed. Patton’s command pilot, Warrant Officer Charley Watkins vividly remembers Patton’s reaction upon hearing the news:

“Colonel Patton took Tom’s death very hard. He commented that Tom was one of the finest Captains he had ever met. He had a great deal of respect and trust in him as a leader.”

Charley Watkins

With Full Military Honors....

On March 9, 1969, the Army buried Captain Thomas A. McAdams at Arlington Cemetery with full military honors. In an act that showed clearly his high regard for Tommy, Colonel Patton asked his wife, Joanne Holbrook Patton, to attend the funeral for him.

Afterwards, Mrs. Patton gave her husband a detailed and touching description of Tom's funeral and how the McAdams family handled this exceptionally difficult event.

"... the crowd had thinned out, and it was just the family there. I introduced myself to his parents, Colonel and Mrs. McAdams. First of all, the father said, “Tom was kind of hard to handle as a boy, a real fighter, but he wrote home and said, ‘Colonel Patton is my kind of commander, this is really a fella I’d like to go all the way for.’”

And then the little widow came up and said, “Yes, you know what we’re proudest of? We were able to arrange for Tom to be buried on Patton Drive, the same name as his commander.” And then, Colonel McAdams said, ‘Yes, he’s the first person to be buried on Patton Drive.’

And I thought, “Well you know, that’s one of the loveliest compliments I’ve ever heard...” that they sought out this privilege for this young boy and that they’re proud to have him buried on the street that bears your family name because you were his commander...”

Mrs. Joan Holbrook Patton
From: GROWING UP PATTON - Reflections on Heroes, History, and Family Wisdom by Benjamin Patton, Pages 293-294
Some Afterthoughts....

Hollywood has given us notable movies about the Vietnam War like Apocalypse Now, Platoon, Full Metal Jacket, and The Deer Hunter. I am told that they are great films, perhaps even masterpieces. But Hollywood’s effort to portray war inevitably becomes fantasy, with unrealistic situations and unbelievable characters. This is especially true for those who were there, those with all-too vivid memories that set the standard for realism. The names they hear and faces they see are real!

Colonel George Patton was real. Only five minutes of conversation, or ten seconds of a tail-chewing, told you this was a real Patton. This was not a George C. Scott dressed in boots and polished helmet liner, standing in front an oversized American flag. This was a real Patton.

Tommy McAdams was real! His love for the U.S. Cavalry was real. He was the quintessential young cavalry officer - smart, “audacious”, and innovative. He always seemed to be where the action was, perhaps because he often created it. But he was not loud or overbearing. He was a quiet but compelling leader – the kind of leader you could “go all the way for.” Tommy McAdams was real!

Whenever you hear the word “Cavalry”, forget John Wayne or Fort Laramie or “She Wore a Yellow Ribbon.” Instead, remember Captain Tommy McAdams, Commander, F Troop, 11th Cavalry!

“Tom was one of the good guys. He was a good friend, a good Aggie, a good husband and father and a true American hero.”

Gary Byrd ’64

Captain Thomas Arthur McAdams
was buried with full military honors at the
Arlington National Cemetery, Arlington, Virginia
Section 8, Site 5500-I

Tom is remembered on the Vietnam Memorial at
Panel W31, Line 95

The Fort Knox High School football team plays its home games on
Captain Tom McAdams Field

WELCOME HOME, TOM McADAMS