



DYESS

One-Man Scourge

The remarkable life of Lt. Col. William Edwin Dyess ended in December 1943. Amazingly, some 13 years passed before the Air Force finally got around to naming a base after him.

Dyess was a genuine World War II hero—a fighter pilot, infantry commander, unbreakable prisoner of war, guerrilla warrior. *The New York Times* called him “a one-man scourge” of Japanese forces in the Philippines.

Growing up in Albany, Texas, Dyess (he went by “Ed”) was the archetypal winner—the star athlete and class president. In college the story was much the same. Ed seemed bound for law school. Yet in 1937 Dyess dropped that plan and joined the Air Corps. Soon he was a flying cadet at Randolph and Kelly Fields in Texas.

Ed Dyess—smart, bold, tough, matinee-idol handsome—was a born leader. He was only a first lieutenant when he took command of the 21st Pursuit Squadron. Dyess deployed to the Philippines in November 1941. He arrived just in time for the war.

On Dec. 8, Japan struck. The Texan led his outnumbered fighter forces in many missions. When the badly under-supplied 21st could no longer sustain combat operations, Dyess reformed it as an infantry unit and fought on.

Dyess on Feb. 8, 1942, led the first US amphibious landing of the war, taking a party of airmen ashore at Agloloma Bay, under fire, to finish off an entrenched enemy force. For this, Dyess was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross.

Once back on flight duty, Dyess scavenged beat-up P-40s to create flyable ones. On March 2, he led an audacious raid



on enemy forces in Subic Bay, an action bringing Dyess a second DSC.

Defeated in the Battle of Bataan, Gen. Douglas MacArthur departed Luzon, Philippines. Dyess disobeyed an order—issued to all pilots—to leave, choosing to stay with his men. He was captured on April 9 and was forced to walk on the infamous Bataan Death March to a POW camp.

Dyess spent a year in captivity but then organized a 12-man escape from Davao prison. On April 4, 1943, “the Davao Dozen” broke out and fought alongside local guerrillas. Dyess’ exploits led to a third DSC. He was picked up by a US submarine on July 15, 1943, and brought home to recuperate.

Unsurprisingly, Dyess prepared for a quick return to war. On Dec. 23, 1943, the P-38 in which he was training caught fire over Burbank, Calif. He refused to bail out and instead steered the fighter to an unpopulated area and died in the crash. He was 27.

Even then, the Dyess story was not over. He had cooperated with the *Chicago Tribune* and, in January 1944, the newspaper began publishing his tale, the first widely circulated eyewitness account of the horrors of the Bataan Death March.

Ed Dyess, the decorated hero from Albany, Texas, grew up 36 miles from what is now Dyess AFB, Texas. Long a Strategic Air Command facility, it is now home to the 7th Bomb Wing—a B-1 bomber unit—and the 317th Airlift Wing, composed mostly of C-130 transports.

1/ Ed Dyess. 2/ A B-1B at Dyess Air Force Base. 3/ Abilene AFB before it was renamed. 4/ Dyess (left), two fellow POW escapees, and Gen. Douglas MacArthur (second from right).

WILLIAM EDWIN DYESS

Born: Aug. 9, 1916, Albany, Texas

Died: Dec. 22, 1943, Burbank, Calif.

College: John Tarleton Agricultural College

Service: US Air Corps, US Army Air Forces

Occupation: US military officer

Main Era: World War II

Years Active: 1937-43

Combat: Pacific Theater

Final Grade: Lieutenant Colonel

Honors: Distinguished Service Cross (3); Silver Star (2); Legion of Merit; Distinguished Flying Cross (2); Bronze Star Medal; Purple Heart; Texas Legislative Medal of Honor

DYESS AIR FORCE BASE

State: Texas

Nearest City: Abilene

Area: 10.1 sq mi / 6,409 acres

Status: Open, operational

Opened: (as Tye Army Airfield) Dec. 18, 1942

Renamed: (Abilene Army Airfield) April 8, 1943

Inactivated: Jan. 31, 1946

Reactivated: Sept. 1, 1955

Renamed: (Abilene Air Force Base) April 15, 1956

Renamed: (Dyess Air Force Base) Dec. 1, 1956

Current Owner: Air Force Global Strike Command

Former Owners: Second Air Force, Continental Air Command, Strategic Air Command, Air Combat Command