

Major General William Durward Connor
Honorary Member of the Rotary Club of Tientsin 1923-1926
By Herbert K. Lau (劉敬恒) (Rotary China Historian) 10 December 2024



Major General William Durward Connor (11 February 1874 – 16 June 1960) was an Honorary Member of the Rotary Club of Tientsin (天津扶輪社), Republic of China (中華民國), from 1923 to 1926 when he was Commanding General, United States Forces in-China. Connor was a Brigadier General when he was first posted to China. He was later promoted to Major General on 1 September 1925.

Connor was a career United States Army officer and civil engineer who rose to the rank of Major General, most notably serving as Superintendent of the United States Military Academy at West Point from 1932 to 1938. Born in Newark, Wisconsin, as the second of seven children to Edward and Adeline Powers Connor, he was appointed to West Point from Clinton, Iowa, and graduated first in his Class of 1897, earning a commission in the Corps of Engineers.

Connor's early military service included combat roles in the Spanish-American War and the Philippine Insurrection, where he earned a Silver Star for gallantry at the Tuliahan River on Luzon in 1899 and served as City Engineer of Manila. He later instructed in civil and military engineering at West Point, attended the Army War College, and commanded engineer units, advancing to Major in 1910 and Colonel in 1917. In 1907, while serving as district engineer in Memphis, Tennessee, he married Elsa Van Vleet, with whom he remained until his death.

During World War I, Connor held key staff positions with the American Expeditionary Forces, including chief of the G-4 Coordination Section and chief of staff of the 32nd Division, before commanding the 63rd Infantry Brigade in major offensives such as Château-Thierry and the Vesle River, for which he received a second Silver Star and promotion to Brigadier General in 1918. Postwar, he re-organized the Services of Supply in France, succeeded General John J. Pershing as Commanding General of American Forces in France, and commanded U.S. Army forces in China from 1923 to 1926, earning promotion to Major General in 1925 at age 51. He later commanded the 2nd Infantry Division and served as Commandant of the Army War College before his tenure at West Point.

Connor retired in 1938 but was recalled in 1941 to chair the War Department Construction Advisory Committee during World War II. His decorations included the Distinguished Service Medal, Silver Star with Oak Leaf Cluster, Commander of the French Legion of Honor, Companion of the Order of the Bath (British), and Croix de Guerre with Palm. He died of pneumonia at Walter Reed Army Hospital in Washington, D.C., and was buried at West Point Cemetery.



«The Rotarian» magazine, April 1926 – Major General William Connor and Tientsin Rotarians reviewing the parade of school boys while a troop of Chinese Boy Scouts formed the Guard-of-Honor during the “Father and Son Week” celebration sponsored by the Rotary Club of Tientsin, Republic of China.





The Story of William Durward Connor

Early Life and Education

William Durward Connor was born on 22 February 1874 in Newark, Rock County, Wisconsin, to Edward D. Connor and Adeline Rebecca Powers Connor. He was the second of seven children born to the couple.

The Connor family maintained strong ties to Clinton, Iowa, where Connor spent much of his childhood. In Clinton, he received his early education, graduating from Clinton High School in 1893.

Around age 19, Connor secured an appointment to the United States Military Academy at West Point from Iowa, a decision influenced by the era's ideals of national service and his family's Midwestern pioneer heritage. He entered West Point as a cadet on 21 June 1893.

During his four years at the Academy, Connor excelled in the rigorous curriculum, which placed heavy emphasis on civil and military engineering, mathematics, natural philosophy, and French, alongside military tactics and leadership training. This program, designed to produce officer-engineers capable of supporting national infrastructure and defense projects, included practical instruction in surveying, drawing, and ordnance. Connor's outstanding academic performance positioned him at the top of his class, reflecting his aptitude for the engineering-focused track that prepared graduates for the Corps of Engineers.

[Note] Adapted for 1890s context from historical overview of Academy's engineering curriculum evolution.

As a cadet, Connor demonstrated strong leadership qualities, serving as captain of the 1896 football team and as the senior officer of the Cadet Staff, experiences that honed his command skills and camaraderie among peers. These roles, under influential instructors such as those in the Department of Engineering, shaped his early expertise in military engineering and discipline, setting the foundation for his career.

Connor graduated number one in his class on 11 June 1897, and was immediately commissioned as an additional Second Lieutenant in the Corps of Engineers. His initial posting was to Portland, Oregon, where he began duties related to river and harbor improvements until April 1898.

Military Career

Pre-World War I Service

Following his graduation from the United States Military Academy in 1897, where he received a strong foundation in engineering, William Durward Connor was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the Corps of Engineers and soon deployed to the Philippines in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War. Arriving in 1898, he served at Cavite Arsenal, Camp Dewey, and Manila during the Philippine Insurrection, where he took charge of the public water supply system in Manila starting 24 August 1898, and later became City Engineer on 10 June 1899 overseeing infrastructure projects including roads and utilities essential to the occupation. For his gallantry in action during these campaigns from 1899 to 1902, Connor received the Silver Star Citation. He was promoted to First Lieutenant on 5 July 1898, and returned to the United States in 1900 after his initial overseas tour.

Connor's subsequent assignments emphasized his engineering expertise in domestic and educational roles. From 1903 to 1904, he served as an instructor in civil and military engineering at West Point, contributing to cadet training while assisting in fortifications at the eastern entrance to Long Island Sound under Colonel Charles F. Powell. Promoted to Captain on 23 April 1904, he attended the Engineer School at Willets Point, New York, and the Staff College, graduating in 1905. In 1905–1906, as district engineer in Memphis, Tennessee, he led improvements to the first and second districts of the Mississippi River, including temporary oversight of the Little Rock, Arkansas, focusing on flood control and navigation enhancements critical to the Mississippi Valley. During this period in Memphis, Connor married Elsa Van Vleet on 6 November 1907 beginning a family life that accompanied his frequent relocations across Army posts.

By the early 1910s, Connor's responsibilities expanded into leadership and staff positions. He attended the Army War College from 1908 to 1909, then commanded Company B of the 1st Battalion of Engineers before his promotion to Major on 9 February 1910. From 1910 to 1912, he commanded the 1st Battalion of Engineers and served as director of civil engineering at the U.S. Engineer School in Washington Barracks, D.C., training officers in practical applications of military engineering. Detailed to the General Staff Corps in 1912, he became

assistant director of the Army War College and a member of the Board of Engineer Troops, roles that honed his strategic planning skills until 1916, when he briefly served as assistant chief of staff in the Southern Department before departing for the Philippines as department engineer. These pre-war years solidified Connor's reputation as a versatile engineer officer, balancing field projects with institutional development amid his growing family commitments.

World War I Contributions

Connor deployed to France on 28 July 1917 as a Lieutenant Colonel in the Corps of Engineers, joining the Operations Section of the General Staff in the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) shortly after the United States entered World War I. His early duties focused on operational planning and coordination amid the rapid buildup of U.S. forces in Europe, drawing on his prior engineering experience in the Philippines to support infrastructural and logistical preparations. Promoted to Colonel on 5 August 1917, he assumed the role of Chief of the Coordination Section (later G-4) of the AEF General Staff from 16 August 1917 to 30 April 1918, where he oversaw logistics and supply lines critical to sustaining the expeditionary force's expansion to over two million troops.

In 1918, Connor's responsibilities expanded to direct combat support. Promoted to Brigadier General on 26 June 1918, he served as Chief of Staff for the 32nd Infantry Division from May 1 to July 21, managing operations in the Belfort sector, before commanding the 63rd Infantry Brigade from July 22 to August 5 during advances from Château-Thierry to the Vesle River, earning a Silver Star for gallantry on August 3. From 8 August to 11 November 1918, as commander of Base Section No. 2 in the Services of Supply (SOS) at Bordeaux, he directed rear-area logistics, including supply distribution via ports and rail networks, which facilitated key offensives such as the Meuse-Argonne by ensuring timely delivery of munitions, equipment, and provisions under combat pressures. His engineering expertise contributed to efficient infrastructure management, though specific feats like bridge-building are not detailed in records. Overall, these efforts were recognized in his Distinguished Service Medal for meritorious service in coordination and supply roles.

Following the Armistice on 11 November 1918, Connor continued in high-level SOS positions, serving as Chief of Staff from 12 November 1918 to 12 May 1919, and then as Commanding General of the SOS from 26 May to 31 August 1919 overseeing the demobilization and repatriation of AEF personnel through organized port and transportation systems. From 1 September 1919 to 11 January 1920, he commanded remaining U.S. Forces in France at Paris, managing occupation duties in the Rhineland and the disposal of surplus property without incident. He returned to the United States in early 1920.

Interwar Assignments and Promotions

Following World War I and his return to the United States, Connor was promoted to permanent Brigadier General on 3 July 1920, but reverted to Colonel on 4 March 1921 before

re-promotion to Brigadier General on 27 April 1921. He served as Commandant of The Engineer School at Camp A. A. Humphreys, Virginia, from 1 April to 15 August 1920. From 16 August 1920 to 31 August 1921, he was Chief of the Inland and Coastal Waterways Service and Chief of the Transportation Service in the Quartermaster Corps, where he oversaw the modernization of Army logistics through the consolidation of inland and coastal waterways operations, drawing on his prior experience in supply chain management during the war. In this role, he also chaired the Special Panama Canal Commission in the summer of 1921, focusing on enhancing transportation infrastructure for military purposes. From 1 September 1921 to 10 November 1922, he acted as Assistant Chief of Staff G-4 in the War Department, contributing to supply and logistics policies that supported emerging mechanized capabilities in the Army.

Connor then commanded U.S. Army Forces in the Republic of China from April 1923 to May 1926, based in Tientsin (*Tianjin*) (天津), where he navigated complex diplomatic-military relations amid tensions between Chinese authorities, foreign legations, and the American diplomatic mission. His tactful handling of these challenges earned praise from American Minister Jacob Gould Schurman, who recommended his promotion, leading to Connor's advancement to Major General on 1 September 1925 at age 51. The family resided in China during this assignment, with Connor's wife, Elsa Van Vleet Connor, accompanying him. The couple had no children. Their enduring marriage provided personal stability amid professional rigors.

Later interwar assignments included commanding the 2nd Infantry Division from June 1926 to December 1927 and serving as Commandant of the Army War College from December 1927 to April 1932. Connor's capstone role came as Superintendent of the United States Military Academy at West Point from May 1932 to January 1938, during which he implemented curriculum reforms and overseen physical expansions to address academic pressures and congressional scrutiny. These changes, executed with diplomatic finesse, modernized the institution's structure and solidified its foundational principles, earning acclaim for fostering orderly progress toward its contemporary framework.

World War II and Final Commands

Following his retirement in 1938, William Durward Connor was recalled to active duty on 7 May 1941, amid the escalating demands of U.S. mobilization for World War II. At age 67, he served as chairman of the War Department's Construction Advisory Committee, a body tasked with overseeing the rapid expansion of military infrastructure, including cantonments and training facilities to accommodate the growing Army.

Connor's leadership fostered collaboration and efficiency in this critical advisory role, drawing on his prior experience in Army engineering and administration to address supply chain and logistical challenges for domestic training programs. His interwar tenure as Superintendent of West Point influenced the committee's emphasis on robust officer training

infrastructure. Due to his age, Connor’s service remained stateside and advisory, with no overseas deployments recorded.

Connor concluded his active-duty service on 21 March 1942, transitioning to permanent retirement at age 68, shortly after the U.S. entry into the war. This final role underscored his contributions to Army modernization, particularly in scaling construction efforts that enabled effective training and deployment strategies for the European and Pacific theaters.

Later Life and Legacy

Retirement and Civilian Activities

Following his retirement from active duty in 1938, William Durward Connor was recalled to serve as Chairman of the War Department’s Construction Advisory Committee from 1941 to 1942, where he advised on critical construction projects for the war effort and built lasting relationships with prominent civilian engineers. After returning to full retirement in March 1942, Connor resided in Washington, D.C., and remained engaged with the West Point community through the Association of Graduates, embodying the Academy’s motto of “Duty, Honor, Country” in his post-military life.

Death and Honors

Rotarian Major General William Durward Connor passed away on 16 June 1960 at the age of 86 from pneumonia at Walter Reed Army Hospital in Washington, D.C.

He was buried with full military honors at the United States Military Academy Post Cemetery in West Point, New York.

Throughout his career, Connor received numerous decorations for his service, including the Army Distinguished Service Medal for his World War I contributions and the Silver Star with Oak Leaf Cluster for gallantry in the Philippine-American War and World War I. He also earned foreign honors such as Companion of the Order of the Bath from the United Kingdom, Commander of the Legion of Honour from France, and the Croix de Guerre with Palm from France, recognizing his leadership in Allied operations during World War I.

Connor’s legacy endures through tributes to his embodiment of “Duty, Honor, Country”, particularly during his tenure as Superintendent of West Point from 1932 to 1938, where he implemented key improvements amid challenges. In 2024, he was posthumously inducted into the Clinton County Walk of Fame in Iowa, honoring his roots and military achievements as a Clinton High School graduate.



Awards and Decorations

Personal Decorations



[Army Distinguished Service Medal](#)



[Silver Star](#) (1OLC)

Service/Campaign Medals



[Spanish Campaign Medal](#)



[Philippine Campaign Medal](#)



[World War I Victory Medal](#)
(2SS)



[Army of Occupation of Germany Medal](#)



[Yangtze Service Medal](#)



[World War II Victory Medal](#)

Identification Badges



[Army General Staff Identification Badge](#)
(Not worn)

Other Accoutrements



[WWI Overseas Service Chevron](#)



Army Distinguished Service Medal
World War I