

Lt. Col. Preston McConnell, a member of Habersham Central's 1991 graduating class, has been selected as the recipient of the 2023 HCHS Lifetime Achievement Award. McConnell graduated from the United States Air Force Academy in 1995 where he attained a degree in Civil Engineering and lettered in football. He was awarded a Master of Science degree in Civil/Environmental Engineering from the University of Colorado in 1996 and completed pilot training and A-10 training the following year.

After completion of pilot training, McConnell was assigned to the 81st Fighter Squadron based in Germany where he was deployed for Operation ALLIED FORCE in Italy and Operation SOUTHERN WATCH in Kuwait. He was later assigned to the 357th Fighter Squadron at Davis Monthan Air Force Base where he served as an A-10 instructor pilot. McConnell graduated from the United States Air Force Fighter Weapons School in 2003 where he was awarded the Top Academic Award. As a pilot for the 354th Fighter Squadron, he was deployed for Operation ENDURING FREEDOM and Operation IRAQI FREEDOM. He was a member of the first active duty A-10 squadron to train and deploy Northrop Grumman LITENING Advanced Targeting Pods. He also served as the lead of the Target Engagement Team at Al Udeid Air Base Qatar where he was responsible for all deliberate targeting in Afghanistan and Iraq.

In 2004, McConnell was assigned to the 422nd Operational Test Squadron at Nellis Air Force Base where he served as an A-10C Operational Test Pilot and played an instrumental role in the largest A-10 upgrade in history resulting in a new designation to the A-10C. He served as the A-10C Division Commander with the responsibility of all A-10C test plans and execution. Working with engineers, he developed the targeting pod and integration plan for the A-10C as well as serving as the lead on the A-10 3-1 tactics manual that provided improved tactics for the entire A-10 fleet. The A-10C is designed for close air support of ground forces with excellent maneuverability at low airspeeds and altitude while maintaining a highly accurate weapons-delivery platform. McConnell was recognized as the 53rd Wing Instructor Pilot of the Year in 2005 as the Wing's top instructor pilot among all fighter aircraft to include the A-10, F-16, F-15C, F-15E, and F-22.

McConnell left active duty in 2008 and joined the Air Force Reserves assigned to the 303rd Fighter Squadron at Whiteman Air Force Base in Missouri. He has been responsible for A-10 flying operations, deployment, and flight training. He was deployed for Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Freedom Sentinel to Kandahar Air Base in Afghanistan. McConnell has served as OSF Commander, Inspector General, and Chief of Safety for the 442nd Fighter Wing, being named the United States Air Force Reserve Command's Safety Officer of the Year in 2021. He continues to serve his country as the 442nd Deputy Operations Group Commander. McConnell has served over 400 hours of combat time, more than 3500 hours of A-10 flight time, and over a 1000 hours of instructor time.

Lt Col Stephen Chappell, who has worked with McConnell for the past 15 years, referenced McConnell's arrival to Chappell's squadron as a young weapons officer who was placed in "the most critical position in a fighter squadron, Weapons and Tactics." Chappell said McConnell's flight instruction in new systems and weapons capabilities was tested quickly when the squadron was deployed to Afghanistan and was able to successfully engage "new aircraft capabilities at a very high

level, a level that ultimately saved American lives.” Chappell described McConnell as “a great example of someone who blends in his family, friends and faith to recharge his busy work life.” He also noted McConnell’s “ability to spiritually lift people during stressful periods by sincerely listening and providing tangible advice.”

442d Fighter Wing Commander, Brigadier General Stephen Nester, described McConnell as a “top gun” in the A-10 Air Force Community, further saying, “this is the best of the best and top 1% of all A-10 pilots in the Air Force.” Noting McConnell’s contributions, Nester called him “a legend in the A-10 community” and pointed to four areas where McConnell achieves excellence: faith, family, leadership in his community, and professionalism in his career.

McConnell serves as a leader for AWANA Truth and Training at Summit Woods Baptist Church. He is the Offensive Coordinator for the football team at Summit Christian Academy. McConnell and his wife, Michelle, have six children: Zachary, Joshua, Madelin, Savannah, Noah, and Hope. The Raider Nation is very excited to have the opportunity to award Lt. Col. Preston McConnell the 2023 HCHS Lifetime Achievement Award and to welcome him home to the John Larry Black Football Stadium for this year’s graduation ceremony.