

In the Thick of the Fight

We tend to think of the World War II in the Pacific as the Navy's and Marine Corps' war, but the Army Air Force was in the thick of the fight as was Dayton Stokes Altman, Jr. of Mullins. According to University records, Altman attended Clemson, but graduated from North Carolina State. He also attended dental college in Atlanta.

Born to Dr. and Mrs. Dayton Altman, Sr., in June 1919, young Altman was inducted into the service in July 1940 at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. At the time, he was living in Marion. With his background, Altman requested assignment to the Army's Medical Services Corps and expressed a preference to be stationed in Puerto Rico. Given the workings of the military, it will surprise no veteran to learn that Altman instead wound up in the Air Corps.



Following completion of his flight training, Altman was assigned to the 320th Bomb Squadron of the 90th Bomb Group, then stationed at Long Beach, California. In October 1942, Altman was part of a flight of B-24 heavy bombers that flew first to Hawaii and then on to Iron Range, Australia.

The squadron arrived at Iron Range on the northeast side of the Cape York Peninsula in mid-November to find two unfinished strips, nicknamed "Claudie" and "Gordon." Accommodations were primitive, with tents pitched among the trees. Snakes, insects and scorpions were prevalent. From Iron Range, the squadron commenced operations against the Japanese.

On January 9, 1943, Altman and his nine-man crew boarded their B-24, "Little Eva," for an attack mission against a Japanese convoy heading for Lae some 500 miles to the northeast on the east coast of New Guinea.

Flying through broken clouds at 7,000 feet, Altman's formation didn't see the Japanese ships until they overflew the convoy. As the B-24s turned around to begin their bomb run, they were jumped by Japanese Zero fighters. Attacking in pairs, eight Zeroes dove on "Little Eva," making several passes from head on. When its nose gun ceased firing, a Zero fired a shell which wounded Altman in the head and also injured the aircraft's radio operator.



"Little Eva" photo courtesy PacificWrecks.com

The copilot, Lieutenant Norman Smith, took control of the aircraft and dove down to 2,000 feet in an attempt to evade the Zeroes, but they continued to attack. Within minutes, the number 3 engine was on fire, but the pilots were able to extinguish the flames. Then, the number 2 engine caught fire. Again

the flames were put out, but the propeller would not feather; that meant that the blades of the propeller created significant extra drag, making it harder to keep the big bomber in the air. Smith called for the crew to prepare to ditch in the sea, but no one responded.

Working as a team, Smith and the wounded Altman did their best to land their fatally injured airplane smoothly on the water, but a violent impact submerged the nose section. Smith was able to escape through a cockpit window, but no other crew members surfaced. Smith swam to a floating life raft and, alone, rowed to shore.

Altman and the rest of the crew, save Smith, were officially declared dead that day. Their bodies were not recovered, but each is memorialized on the tablets of the missing at the Manila American Cemetery. In addition, a marker to Altman's memory was placed at the Cedardale Cemetery in Mullins.

Dayton Stokes Altman, Jr., was awarded the Air Medal and the Purple Heart. He was survived by his parents, three sisters and two brothers.

