

Bacot Contributed to “Lessons Learned” and Helped Save Lives

There was a lot going on in Henry Bacot’s life. His bride Martha Jane was pregnant with the couple’s first child; he was shortly to be promoted to captain; and he was taking part in the Army’s large scale war games in Tennessee. It was June 1941 and Bacot, along with the rest of the United States Army, was preparing for a war that all hoped to avoid—but which few believed we would.

Henry Parrott Bacot was born in Florence, South Carolina on December 13, 1915. He spent his early boyhood in Virginia and New York City. In 1933, he returned to the Darlington County community of Lamar where he graduated from high school. He entered Clemson Agricultural College as a member of the Class of 1937. Henry was a general science major who was active on campus. He was a member of the State Championship swim team, the track team and served as president of the Minor Block “C” Club. A member of the Palmetto Literary Society, Henry was also a Taps staff editor. He demonstrated military aptitude as well, rising through the ranks to cadet captain and marching with the Freshman, Sophomore, Junior and Senior Platoons. An outstanding cadet, Henry was appointed executive officer of the 2nd Battalion, 2nd Regiment of the Cadet Brigade during his senior year.



Following his 1937 graduation, Henry Bacot went to Randolph Field, Texas, where he trained as an aviation cadet. He earned his wings at Kelly Field, Texas, graduating with honors. At Barksdale Field, Texas, he received his commission as first lieutenant and later served as an instructor. From Barksdale, he was sent to other posts to assist in the training of parachute jumpers, then detailed to Fort Benning, Georgia.

General George Marshall, the Army Chief of Staff, was one of the American leaders who recognized the likelihood that the European war would eventually ensnare the United States. He and his staff were working feverishly to prepare the Army for war. New organizational structures, new training methods, new tactics and new equipment had to be created. And, they had to be tested.

The Tennessee Maneuvers of June 1941 were the first large scale exercises by the Army in preparation for an eventual entry into World War II. Throughout June, units of the 2nd Army staged mock battles, often with trucks standing in for yet-to-be-developed tanks and soldiers carrying Great War-era rifles instead of soon-to-be-released modern equipment. In these exercises, a brash cavalry leader named George Patton demonstrated the speed, agility and effectiveness of armored warfare, replicating in the hills of middle Tennessee what the Germans had so clearly demonstrated in their conquest of France a year earlier.

One objective of the Tennessee Maneuvers was the validation of Army tactics and doctrine in a field environment. Mastering the coordination of infantry, armor, artillery and air forces was critical if US forces were to compete on the battlefield with the disciplined, battle-tested Germans.

Henry Bacot, was by now the pilot of an A-20 Havoc light bomber assigned to the 15th Bombardment Squadron. The 15th was participating in the maneuvers, testing low altitude bombardment tactics and close air support for ground forces.



On Thursday, June 12, Bacot and his two crewmen, Corporal L.W. Henley and Private Joseph Buturia, flew into the exercise area to participate along with other 15th Squadron aircraft in the maneuvers. Their mission was a simulated nighttime air attack on the town of Shelbyville and the Army forces gathered there. Shelbyville was completely blacked out according to a report the following day in the *Nashville Banner*. The newspaper reported that many town residents viewed the “spectacle” from their porches and doorsteps while “thousands...packed the sidewalks of the downtown...during the blackout, not a voice was heard—everyone was acutely tense.”

After leaving the exercise area, Bacot’s aircraft developed engine trouble. Bacot, in a driving rain storm, attempted to land in Chattanooga. Private Buturia later reported that when circling the Chattanooga airport he looked out to see the left engine shooting flames. The engine sputtered and stopped, shortly followed by the propeller. The plane crashed into the middle of a field, bouncing three times and ending nose down. Henley was killed in the crash. Buturia was pulled to safety by rescuers as the wreckage went up in flames. Bacot was taken to a Chattanooga hospital where he died the following Sunday.

Bacot’s commanding officer, Captain Colin P. Kelly, said, “There lies one of the finest and most experienced young fliers the Army has known. Next week he was to be made captain to take my place.” Kelly was soon to head to the Philippines, where he would become one of America’s first heroes of World War II.

Historian Joshua Savage of East Tennessee State University wrote that “The strategies, tactics, and lessons learned in the fields of Tennessee ultimately helped the U.S. Army prepare for the coming conflict and gave its forces the tools it needed to accomplish its goals overseas.” The sacrifice of Henry Bacot and his crewmate contributed to these “lessons learned” and helped save lives when the United States entered the war less than six months later.

Henry Bacot was survived by his wife Martha Jane. Their son Henry was born six months after his father's death.

For additional information about the Tennessee Maneuvers of 1941 read Joshua Savage’s paper, “*Thank God It’s Only Maneuvers!:*” *Tennessee and the Road to War*:

<http://dc.etsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3673&context=etd>