

Two Clemson Men, One Fateful Flight

James Coleman and Jesus Badia would not at first glance appear to have much in common. Coleman, twenty years older, hailed from Abbeville, South Carolina and was a broad-chested football player. Badia, a native of Puerto Rico, was of smaller stature. Coleman was interested in radio; Badia in flying. Those disparate interests would bring the two together on a fateful flight.

Coleman, “Jim” as he was known to his classmates, was active on campus. He played football as a freshman and then served as manager of the football team. He was a member of the Abbeville Club and served as treasurer and secretary of the Block C Club. Selected for membership in the American Institute of Electrical Engineers, Coleman’s passion appears to have been radio, the medium which would soon unite the world—and which would play such an influential role in World War II. Coleman graduated from Clemson College in 1923 and then studied at Rutgers, earning a degree in electrical engineering. From there, he worked with Westinghouse Electric and Champion Paper Company. As America edged closer to war, Coleman, who had completed ROTC training as a Clemson Cadet, entered military service. His expertise made him an ideal fit for the Army’s Signal Corps.

We know less about Jesus Badia. Badia was a member of the Class of ’43, but likely left Clemson for military service before completing his degree. Like so many other young men of the day, Badia was attracted to the skies and entered flight training. By early 1944, he was one of the millions of Americans serving in all corners of the world. Jesus Badia’s corner happened to be the Southwest Pacific.

Badia was assigned to the 823rd Bomb Squadron, part of the 5th US Air Force which supported General MacArthur’s “island-hopping” campaign in the Southwest Pacific. Badia was assigned as copilot to fly a mission ferrying a repaired Mitchell B-25 bomber from the Townsville maintenance depot on Australia’s northeast coast to Durand Airfield outside Port Moresby, New Guinea. The bomber was likely a replacement for aircraft lost during the previous month’s air campaign to support MacArthur’s invasion of Cape Gloucester, New Britain.



With millions of military members in theater, personnel movements were happening nearly every hour of every day. It was routine for service members to “hop” a ride on any conveyance heading in the right direction—from a jeep to a truck, ship to airplane. Jim Coleman, supervising the installation of

communications facilities, needed to take advantage of the fastest means of travel to cross the vast expanses of the Southwest Pacific Area. Captain Coleman was heading to Port Moresby as well, and he climbed aboard a B-25 piloted by Army first lieutenant Donald Renshaw. Copiloting from the right seat was second lieutenant and fellow Clemson alumnus Jesus Badia.

The B-25 took off at 11:30 am from Townsville's Garbutt Field. In addition to Renshaw and Badia, the aircraft carried three other crew members, Coleman and five other passengers bound for New Guinea. Renshaw turned his aircraft north, over the Coral Sea, toward Port Moresby 700 miles away. The plane never reached its destination. A radio check of all fields in Australia and New Guinea within range failed to reveal the missing plane's whereabouts. Rescue Service was notified and extensive searches were conducted. Possible wreckage was sighted 97 miles south of Port Moresby, but no survivors and no bodies were recovered.

The 823rd Bomb Squadron report stated: *What strange trick of fate was sprung on this plane, we shall probably never know. They are gone and sadly, but with Honor, we add their names to the long list of "Unsung Heroes" of World War II.*

A final report presuming the death of all aboard the flight was issued by the War Department in April of the following year.

Jim Coleman and Jesus Badia were just two of millions of Americans to serve in the Pacific. Their Clemson experiences were separated by twenty years. It is not known whether the copilot and his passenger even recognized their common bond, but on that fateful flight 71 years ago, two Clemson men were briefly united as they made the ultimate sacrifice in service to their country.