

## Flak

John Barksdale's Clemson career was interrupted by the War Department, which in 1943 ended most educational deferments in order to meet the military's expanding need for manpower. Barksdale and his fellow members of the Class of 1945 headed off for basic training, after which service in active war theaters was likely for many.

John Barksdale was a mechanical engineering major from Charlotte, North Carolina. He was a member of Gamma Kappa Alpha, a social fraternity composed of cadets from North Carolina. He also marched with the Pershing Rifles drill team.

After leaving Clemson, Barksdale applied for flight training in the Army Air Force. By September 1944, Barksdale had earned his pilot's wings, been commissioned a second lieutenant, and deployed overseas. He was assigned as a copilot on a B-24 Liberator heavy bomber of the 466<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group. The 466<sup>th</sup> was stationed at Bungay in Suffolk County, England, about ten miles from the English Channel.



On September 10, 1944, Barksdale's crew was alerted for a mission to bomb railway marshalling yards at Heilbronn on the Neckar River in western Germany. They were slated to fly *Rough Buddy*, a veteran B-24 with twenty-one combat missions to its credit.

The 8<sup>th</sup> Air force dispatched more than eleven hundred bombers on that Sunday morning. One hundred bombers were in the formation with Barksdale's aircraft as it flew east. By this point in the war, Allied air forces had chased the German Luftwaffe from the skies. Enemy fighters were less and less likely to threaten Allied bombers—but there was still plenty of danger from enemy anti-aircraft artillery.



*Second Lieutenant Barksdale, standing second from right, and the Rough Buddy crew.*

Barksdale's aircraft was leading a group of fifteen aircraft as it flew over eastern France between shortly after 10 a.m. A German flak battery at Schirmeck, a suburb of Strasbourg, opened fire on the formation. At 1038, *Rough Buddy* was struck and immediately

began to spin out of the formation. Only one member of the crew, the ball turret gunner, was able to parachute out of the doomed airplane. The other nine were killed when the bomber crashed into the village of Barenbach and its bomb load exploded. The detonation destroyed nine houses and killed one person on the ground. Staff Sergeant Albert Forton, the lone survivor, though he landed within sight of friendly forces, came down in German-occupied territory and was captured.

*Rough Buddy* was the only bomber lost on the Heilbronn mission, an indication of the Allies' growing superiority in the air. Second Lieutenant Barksdale was awarded the Purple Heart. After the war his remains were returned to Charlotte where he was buried in Sharon Memorial Park.

