

High Altitude Training

Learning to fly World War II combat missions was a hazardous undertaking. Practically everyday aircraft accidents were recorded at Army Air Force training bases across the United States as the military prepared aircrews for deployment to battle theaters. Sergeant Thomas Joseph Bass, Jr. of Latta was an aerial gunner on a B-17 Flying Fortress heavy bomber based at Pyote, Texas.

Tom Bass attended Clemson during the 1938-39 school year. Tensions in Europe were already escalating as Hitler, after uniting Austria with Germany, turned his attentions on Czechoslovakia. Bass and the other young men of the Class of 1942 were less likely to be concerned with Teutonic territorial grabs than with the rigors of life as freshmen cadets. An engineering major, Bass was assigned to Company E, 2nd Battalion, 1st Regiment of the Clemson Cadet Brigade.



Bass, who also attended Furman University, returned to Latta and worked in farming. In October 1942, he traveled to Shaw Field in Sumter and enlisted in the Army Air Force. Bass trained at Seymour Johnson Field at Goldsboro, North Carolina; Wright Field in Dayton, Ohio; and Buckingham Field in Fort Myers, Florida where he received the wings of an aircrewman. Assigned to the 729th Bomb Squadron of the 452nd Bomb Group, Bass's operational training as part of an aircrew carried him to Oregon, Washington State, and Texas.



Bass was trained as an aerial gunner and engineer on the B-17, one of the Army Air Force's workhorse heavy bombers. His group was nearing the completion of its stateside training and preparing for deployment to England when Bass and his crew took off from the Rattlesnake Bomber Base at Pyote, Texas on a high-altitude gunnery training flight on December 3, 1943. The hard experience of 8th Air Force aerial gunners in Europe had revealed that the ballistics of bullets fired at the higher operating altitudes of combat varied from those observed in gunnery practice at lower altitudes. The mission on December 3 would give Bass and his fellow gunners

more realistic training and better prepare them for the dangerous missions they would soon be flying over Nazi-occupied Europe.

While flying at approximately 20,000 feet 140 miles west of the base, Bass's aircraft was given permission to form up with three other bombers. Bass's B-17 was to occupy the number four position in the formation. Bass's bomber approached from below and turned to the left as the formation was turning slightly to the right. Accident investigators surmised that the sun's glare caused Second Lieutenant James Rholet, pilot of Bass's aircraft, to lose sight of the number three aircraft he was closing with. The two aircraft collided and Bass's bomber disintegrated in mid-air over Salt Flat, Texas. Only two of the men aboard were able to parachute to safety. Bass and seven others were killed. The other aircraft was able to land safely.

Sergeant Thomas Joseph Bass, Jr. was survived by his parents and his sister. He was eulogized for his fidelity, thoughtfulness, perseverance, and dependability. Bass was buried in the family plot in Latta's Magnolia Cemetery.

