

Heroic Twenty Year Old

By the time he was 20 years-old, Doctor Samuel Boyce Bridges, Jr., of Cliffside, North Carolina, had graduated high school, attended college, gotten married, enlisted in the armed services, earned his pilot's wings and flown more than fifty combat missions. Then came March 23, 1945.

“Doc” Bridges’ first name had nothing to do with the medical profession. He was named for his father, head of the weaving department at Cliffside Textile Mill. Doc graduated from Cliffside High School in 1940 and enrolled in Clemson College as an engineering student. On Christmas Day 1941, just weeks after America’s sudden entrance into World War II, Doc married Mary Elizabeth Carpenter.



Bridges left Clemson in November 1942 and enlisted in the Army Air Corps as a private. Accepted as an aviation cadet, he completed flight training in Tennessee, Alabama and Mississippi before earning his pilot's wings at Jackson, Mississippi on April 15, 1944.

In September, Bridges deployed overseas and was assigned to the 406th Fighter Squadron. Initially based in England, the squadron soon moved onto the continent, flying from the airfield at Tantonville, France. The 406th flew the rugged, powerful Republic P-47 Thunderbolt fighter in both bomber escort and ground support missions.



On March 20, 1945, Bridges was promoted to first lieutenant. Three days later, he was assigned a dive-bombing mission on enemy positions near Speyer, on the west bank of the Rhine River just south of Mannheim, Germany. It would be Bridges’s 58th combat mission. In the face of intense anti-aircraft fire, Bridges dove his Thunderbolt to strafe German transports and gun positions. His fighter was hit by ground fire, but Bridges was able to radio his wingman that he would attempt to belly-land the plane. As he lined up his aircraft for a crash-landing, the plane was hit by more enemy fire setting it ablaze. Nearing the ground, Bridges’s fighter struck a high voltage power line, flipping it over. It crashed into a field. Bridges struggled to free himself from the burning wreckage and escaped—only to be shot and killed by a German sniper. Allied troops reached the area and recovered Bridges body only an hour later.

Lieutenant Bridges was awarded the Silver Star for exhibiting “extraordinary courage and devotion to duty” while leading his flight on this mission. He was also awarded the Air Medal with Four Oak-Leaf Clusters, Purple Heart, European-African-Middle Eastern Theater Ribbon with two Bronze Service Stars for the Rhineland and Central Europe Campaigns, World War II Victory Ribbon, Pilot Aviation Badge, American Theater Ribbon, and Good Conduct Medal.

Bridges was originally buried in St. Avold American Military Cemetery in France, but in 1948, his body was returned to his family. He is now buried in Cliffside Cemetery, North Carolina. Fittingly for a young hero, his marker is said to be the tallest in the cemetery.

