

Operation Varsity

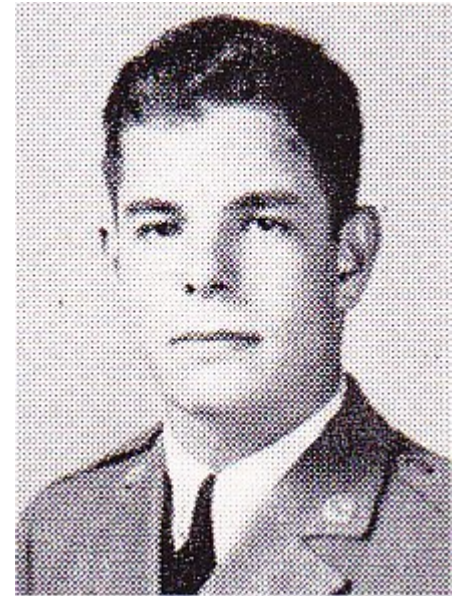
Jack Britton celebrated his twenty-fifth birthday by checking the equipment of his soldiers as they prepared for the largest airborne operation in military history, Operation Varsity. Britton, a second lieutenant assigned to the 513 Parachute Regiment of the 17th Airborne Division, was about to parachute across the Rhine River to seize key bridges for the final Allied push toward Berlin. It was March 23, 1945.

John Daniel Britton, Jr., was a general studies student from Kingstree. Although he only attended Clemson for one year, his fellow cadets in the Class of 1942 saw in him leadership ability and elected him secretary-treasurer of the freshman class. He was assigned to A Company, 2nd Battalion of the 2nd Regiment.

After leaving Clemson, Britton got a job with Corn Products Company headquartered in Atlanta. In 1942, following America's entry into the war, he volunteered for Army service. He later volunteered for the paratroopers.

Three years later, Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery's 21st Army Group stood poised on the west bank of the mighty Rhine River. His American, British and Canadian divisions were prepared to force the river, the last great natural barrier between the Allies and the open terrain of Northern Germany beyond. Operation Varsity would air drop three divisions across the Rhine to capture key roads and villages and screen the assault river crossing by ground troops. Jack Britton and his comrades in the 17th Airborne Division were ordered to seize the village of Diersfordt and clear the adjacent forest of German forces.

Transport aircraft lifted off in the early morning hours of March 24. In route to the drop zone, the aircraft carrying Britton's 513th Parachute Infantry Regiment were hammered by German anti-aircraft. Twenty-two transports were shot down, another thirty-eight damaged. Pilot error and ground haze added to the chaos and resulted in the 513th landing on the wrong drop zone. Nonetheless, the paratroopers rallied quickly and by two o'clock p. m., the regiment had secured its objectives.



Jack Britton was killed in battle near Wesel, Germany on that March morning. He was survived by his wife, the former Gladys Ashford, his parents and a sister. Britton was awarded the Purple Heart and was buried at the American Military Cemetery in Margraten, Holland. In 1948, Britton's remains were returned to South Carolina where he was reinterred in Kingstree's Williamsburg Presbyterian Cemetery.

Jack Britton was one of thirteen hundred 17th Airborne Division casualties. Even so, Allied commanders judged Operation Varsity a success. The Rhine had been crossed and the road to Berlin was opened.

