

## A Bittersweet Homecoming

March 25, 1949 was a bittersweet day for Mabel Brooks. Her son was due to arrive on the 11:50 train.

Joseph Benjamin Brooks left the tiny Colleton County crossroads of Smoaks, South Carolina after graduating from its high school in 1932. "JB" enrolled that same year as a member of the Clemson College class of 1936. Franklin Roosevelt was elected to his second term that fall, but the Depression still held the country in its iron grip of unemployment and despair.



At Clemson, JB, an agricultural economics major, was a bookish student, working as an assistant in the campus library and serving as a member of the Calhoun Literary Society. He was a member of the YMCA Council and trained at ROTC Camp at Fort McClellan, Alabama the summer between his junior and senior years.

Following graduation, young Brooks taught school for two years in Georgia before accepting a position with Liberty Life Insurance in Charleston. By 1940, he'd been promoted to assistant manager of the Charleston office.

Perhaps JB understood better than many Americans the looming perils in the Far East and in Europe, for on Armistice Day 1940, he volunteered for military service. He was stationed at Fort Jackson in Columbia for ten months before shipping out for the Panama Canal Zone. He was serving at Camp Paraiso in the Canal Zone when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. In March 1943, Brooks returned to the States being assigned first to Camp Van Dorn, Mississippi and later to Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge as a military science instructor.

On the day after D-Day in France, Brooks again volunteered, this time for overseas service. With the vital need for replacement officers due to the losses sustained during the invasion, the Army moved quickly. By July, Brooks had joined his unit, the 134<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, in France. The 134<sup>th</sup> entered combat on July 11 near the key road junction of St. Lo. The regiment was part of the 35<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division which halted a dozen German counterattacks before entering the town on July 18. The next day, the 134<sup>th</sup> occupied positions to defend the hard-won crossroads from further German attacks.

Brooks, serving most likely as an infantry platoon leader, was killed a week later, on Wednesday, July 26, on what the regimental combat diary described as a "damp and cloudy" day. First Lieutenant Brooks was awarded the Purple Heart and was buried at La Cambe, France, seven miles southwest of Omaha Beach.

Following the war, JB's widowed mother Mabel, like the next-of-kin of all fallen troops, was given the choice of having his remains permanently interred in an American Military Cemetery in France or returned home for reburial. She waited a long time, as American soldiers, sailors, Marines and airmen had fallen in great numbers and on battlefields all over the world.

Eventually, 171,000 remains of US service members were returned home, including those of Joseph Benjamin Brooks of Smoaks, South Carolina. First Lieutenant Brooks' remains arrived home nearly five years after his death in combat. He was finally laid to rest in the cemetery of the Smoaks Baptist Church on Saturday, March 26, 1949, a bittersweet day indeed.