

First Mission

James Francis Crawford was a member of Clemson's Class of 1944. By the time the fourteen members of the class still on campus crossed the stage of the Outdoor Theater in May, Crawford had already made the ultimate sacrifice.

Crawford, from Columbia, was a mechanical engineering major who attended Clemson two years. Following America's entry into the war, Crawford enlisted in the Army Air Force on March 31, 1942.

After basic and advanced training, Crawford was assigned to the 785th Bomb Squadron of the 466th Bomb Group as an aerial gunner. The group was formed at Alamogordo Army Air Field, New Mexico on August 1, 1943. It moved to Kearns Army Air Field, Utah and began training on the B-24 Liberator heavy bomber. In late November, the group returned to Alamogordo, remaining there until February 1944 when it headed east to Topeka, Kansas. Ground elements of the group departed New York aboard the *Queen Mary* at the end of the month. The air echelon flew the southern ferry route to South America, across the Atlantic to Africa, and then north to England, arriving at Attlebridge in March. The 466th became part of the 8th Air Force Bomber Command.



The crew of First Lieutenant Prosper Pinto including Sergeant James Francis Crawford, kneeling, second from left.

The 466th commenced combat operations on March 22, participating in a daylight raid on Berlin, but Crawford's crew, under the command of pilot First Lieutenant Prosper Pinto did not fly the mission. The first mission for the Pinto crew was a March 27 raid on airfields in German-occupied France. The 8th Air Force was helping prepare the way for the coming invasion of France by attacking

German Luftwaffe targets to secure air superiority for the Allies. Seven hundred bombers were dispatched to hit eleven different airfields. Crawford's aircraft was one of forty-nine designated

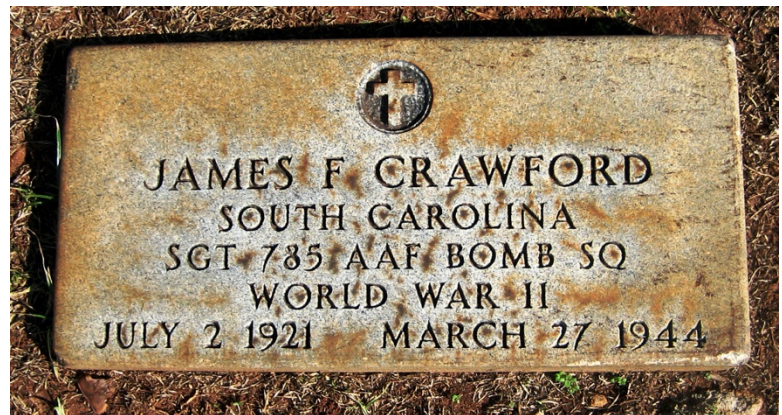
to attack the aerodrome at Biarritz, on the Bay of Biscay just north of France's border with Spain.

No part of an 8th Air Force combat mission was without risk. The bombers were heavily loaded with sufficient fuel to reach their often distant targets, heavy machine guns with their ammunition, a crew of ten men, and up to eight thousand pounds of bombs. The high mission payloads meant that the big bombers needed the entire runway to make it into the air. Any malfunction of engines or other systems during the critical takeoff roll could result in disaster. The danger didn't end once the bomber clawed its way into the sky. Hundreds, and often more than a thousand, bombers from airfields all over southeastern England would assemble into mission formations in crowded airspace, sometimes in less than ideal weather conditions. Mid-air collisions were an everyday threat, especially during a climb to altitude in thick clouds—like those over England on the morning of March 27.

After taking off and ascending into the clouds, Crawford's aircraft wandered off course. It is possible that it collided with another B-24 and suffered material damage. Army Air Force investigators believed that Lieutenant Pinto was searching for a place to land when his aircraft crashed near North Green Hoe at 1020 hours. Another B-24 crashed a mile and a half away, though a mid-air collision could not be proved by the remaining evidence.

Sergeant Crawford and the other members of the Pinto crew were killed on their first mission before they reached enemy territory. Their B-24 was one of seven lost or damaged beyond repair that day. Twenty airmen were killed, one wounded, and thirty-one declared missing.

James Francis Crawford was awarded the Air Medal and the Purple Heart. He was survived by his parents and brother. After the war, Crawford's remains were returned to Columbia where he was buried at Elmwood Memorial Gardens.



Crew photo courtesy [The American Air Museum in Britain](#).