

## William Sylvester Crosland Jr., '46



Flight Officer (FO) Billy Crosland would spend his 20<sup>th</sup>, and last birthday as a B-17 co-pilot in Lavenham, England. Billy was born in Bennettsville, SC. He graduated from high school and attended Clemson College. Studying to become an engineer, Billy must have been a pretty good student, but the world was changing rapidly. Pearl Harbor had been attacked on December 7<sup>th</sup>, America was at war, and his country was calling.

Billy left Clemson to join the Army Air Force at the age of 17 and went to Douglas Field to attend Flight School. Douglas Army Air Field was an advanced flying training school where aviation cadets received their pilot wings and commissions as second lieutenants or appointments as flight officers in the Army Air Force. Billy received his wings and became a flight officer. He returned home for a short break before attending training to become a B-17 copilot.

The B-17 played a pivotal role in WWII. After training, FO Crosland was assigned to the 839th Squadron, 487th Bomb Group (H), Station 137 - Lavenham, Suffolk, UK to fly B-17s. The B-17 Flying Fortress became famous as a precision bomber over Germany in 1943, 1944 and 1945. A total of 12,677 Fortresses were built before production was cancelled. After thousands of missions where aircraft and aircrew did not return, bomber crews were encouraged by the arrival of a heavily armored aircraft. It could take some heavy battle damage and keep on flying. By August of 1944, more than 33 overseas combat groups were utilizing the B-17. The B-17 dropped over 640,036 tons of bombs on European targets, over a third of all bombs dropped in theater. Approximately 4750 B-17s were lost in combat, which was about one out of every three B-17s built. It carried a crew of 10: a pilot, copilot, bombardier, navigator, radio operator, and five gunners. The Fortress could carry up to eight 600-pound bombs internally. Loaded weight was 43,000 pounds.



The 487<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group flew its first mission on May 7<sup>th</sup>, 1944 and its last on April 21<sup>st</sup>, 1945. The 487th flew over 185 missions, 6,021 sorties and dropped 14,641 tons of bombs. During that period, they had 33 aircraft Missing in Action and 24 lost in other operations. They claimed 22 enemy aircraft destroyed, 6 probable and 18 damaged.



On Sunday, March 11<sup>th</sup>, FO Crosland and his crew were assigned targets, which included industrial areas and shipyards in Hamburg, Germany. The B-17 was well armored for its day, but the nose area was a weak point. On this mission, anti-aircraft shells burst through the cockpit of the aircraft. It is believed that the pilots were killed instantly and the aircraft went immediately into a spin. All

crewmembers except one were killed on impact. The surviving crewmember, TSgt Harvey Schlotte was thrown clear of the aircraft and taken prisoner by the Germans. At the end of the war, the lone TSgt Schlotte contacted the Crosland family to inform them of the last heroic flight of their son, Flight Officer William Sylvester Crosland Jr.