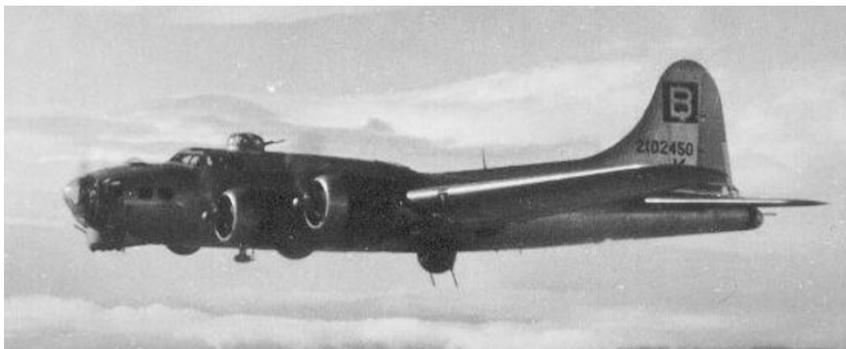


Sign of the Times

By March 1945, the Third Reich and its once vaunted Luftwaffe were on their last legs. Rarely did German fighter aircraft seriously threaten the waves of Allied bombers that almost daily delivered their deadly payloads to German targets. Anti-aircraft guns were still deadly, but even these had become less effective as their crews suffered casualties and resupply of ammunition became problematic as Germany's transportation networks crumbled. Even so, the skies over Germany could hardly be termed safe, as Robert Louis Duncan, Clemson Class of 1945, would discover.

Duncan was an engineering major from Orangeburg, a member of the last class to enroll at Clemson during peacetime. Before the end of his first semester, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, jerking America into the war it had so desperately tried to avoid. Despite the war, Duncan remained in school. Assigned to Company B, 1st Battalion, 1st Regiment of the Cadet Brigade, Duncan marched with the Pershing Rifles and was tapped for membership in the new social club, Rho Alpha Tau, or "RAT," which pulled its members from the freshman class on the basis of "character, personality, and their ability to mix with others." With the end of the spring semester in 1943, Duncan reported for active duty with the Army Air Corps.

After completing his flight training, Duncan went overseas as a replacement B-17 pilot and was assigned to the 335th Bomb Squadron of the 95th Bomb Group stationed at Horham, England. Second Lieutenant Duncan flew his first combat mission on February 9, 1945, as part of a formation of B-17s bombing munitions factories at Weimar, Germany. Duncan flew six combat missions in seven days to close out February, but rarely in the same aircraft on successive days.



B-17G serial number 42-102450, Paisano.



On March 3, for his tenth combat sortie, Duncan was assigned to pilot *Paisano*, a veteran B-17G with 82 missions to its credit. The target for the day was the *Muhlenbau und Industrie Aktiengesellschaft* (MIAG), the manufacturer of assault guns, light tanks, and parts for the Messerschmitt Bf 110

fighter. Sixty-one bombers were assigned to the target, including thirty-seven from the 95th Bomb Group.

At 1024 hours, a 95th Bomb Group B-17, *Aunt Callie's Baby*, piloted by Stacy Tavis lost its position in the formation and fell in directly behind Duncan's *Paisano*. *Aunt Callie's Baby* apparently was buffeted by the prop wash from *Paisano's* four 1200-horsepower engines. The right wing of *Aunt Callie's Baby* struck the tail of *Paisano*, cutting into it and causing it to separate at the waist from the rest of the aircraft. Without the rudder and horizontal stabilizers, Duncan's aircraft was uncontrollable. Doomed, *Paisano* fell out of the formation, its crew unable to escape the tumbling wreckage of their veteran airplane.

Tavis and his crew aboard *Aunt Callie's Baby* survived the collision and returned to Horham. 95th Bomb Group logs reflect no further combat missions for Tavis, though *Aunt Callie's Baby* would continue to fly missions through the end of the war in Europe.

In a sign of the Allies' increasing air supremacy, only eight of nearly 1,300 heavy bombers launched on March 3 were lost. Of these, *Paisano* and three others crashed due to mid-air collisions, not enemy action.

Robert Louis Duncan was survived by his father. His remains were returned to Orangeburg after the war and were reinterred in the city's Memorial Park Cemetery. Duncan and his crew are also memorialized at Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery in Saint Louis, Missouri.

