

Fiery Descent into the Sea

The war reached out and grabbed the boys of the Class of 1944. Having endured the hazing and harassment of their Rat seasons, the academic rigors of their sophomore years, and the increasing responsibilities that fell on their shoulders as juniors, these young men would have been looking ahead to their senior year, when they would have taken command of the Corps of Cadets and would have left their mark on the Clemson College campus. Instead, all too many of them would leave their lives on the world's battlegrounds.

Ernest Theron Epps of Kingstree was an agronomy major and a member of Kappa Alpha Sigma the honorary society for agronomists. With the end of the 1943 school year, most of Clemson's students left campus for the military services. Epps, who had signed up as a Navy reservist the previous November, was called to duty in June.



By 1945, Epps was flying as an aerial gunner on a Navy PBM-5 patrol bomber based at Kaneohe Air Station on the east coast of Oahu, Hawaii. One suspects that Epps and his comrades greeted the May 8 surrender of Germany with restraint knowing that the Japanese continued to fight ferociously in the Pacific. Two days later, on May 10, Epps was onboard his patrol aircraft as the pilot, Lieutenant (junior grade) Roland Cocker, lifted the seaplane into the sky.

At some point after dark, a fire ignited in the wing between the engine nacelle and the fuselage. Unable to control the aircraft, Cocker, Epps and the crew crashed into the sea. Nine men aboard were killed, including Epps. Three survivors were rescued the following day by their squadron commander, Lieutenant E. E. Albertson. Epps's body was lost to the sea.



A U.S. Navy PBM-5 Mariner

Ernest Theron Epps is memorialized at the Courts of the Missing, Honolulu, Hawaii and at the Williamsburg Presbyterian Cemetery in Kingstree. He was survived by his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Peel Epps, two sisters and a brother.

