

B-17 Bombardier

Jesse Eugene Gregory's day began early when the squadron orderly woke the sleeping bombardier. Gregory just had time for breakfast before the 0430 mission briefing. The operations officer pulled back the cover on the map board to reveal the day's target: the aircraft factory at Magdeburg, Germany. It was Gregory's fifth—and final—mission.

Jesse Gregory came to Clemson College from Colquitt, Georgia as a member of the Class of 1945. An electrical engineering major, Gregory's collegiate career was interrupted during his sophomore year as the War Department prepared to order most able-bodied young men into uniform. Gregory joined the Army Air Corps at Miami Beach, Florida on February 26, 1943.

Gregory attended bombardier school and upon completion was assigned to a B-17 Flying Fortress crew under pilot Charlton Deuschle. A replacement crew, Gregory and his crewmates deployed to England in the summer of 1944 and were assigned to the 838th Bomb Squadron of the 487th Bomb Group at Lavenham, Suffolk, in southeastern England.

The 487th had arrived in England in April, just before the invasion of Europe. It had been a B-24 outfit, flying the Liberator heavy bomber, but just before Gregory's arrival, the group transitioned to the B-17.

Gregory's first combat mission occurred on August 1, 1944 with a bombing attack on targets in France. With good flying weather, Gregory's crew flew again on each of the next three days. On August 5, Gregory and his crew were alerted for their fifth mission in as many days. The group's briefed target was the AGO *Flugzeugwerke* in Magdeburg. The facility manufactured the German's rugged and powerful Focke-Wulf 190 fighter plane. The Fw 190, along with the Messerschmidt 109, was the backbone of the Luftwaffe's fighter force. Destroying the planes on the ground, even before their assembly was complete, seemed like a lower risk means of gaining air supremacy than having to battle them in the skies.



Gregory, standing second from left, with his crew.

With the mission briefing completed, the aircrews checked out their equipment and headed to their aircraft. Deuschle and Gregory climbed into a B-17 nicknamed *The Moldy Fig*. Engines were started at 0710, the group's bombers whining like a great hive of angry—and lethal—bees. Five minutes later, the big airplanes began to taxi into position for takeoff. On schedule at 0730, a green flare from the control tower signaled the start of the mission. For the next seventy minutes, the B-17s accelerated down Lavenham's runway and thundered into the sky. After assembling into their formation, the 487th, part of the 3rd Bombardment Division, turned to the east and Germany.

Jesse Gregory's job was to release *The Moldy Fig's* ten 500-pound bombs at the precise moment for them to land some 25,000 feet below on the aircraft factory. As the bombardier, he controlled the aircraft's heading for the final moments of the bomb run. At approximately 1240 hours, a minute or two from the bomb release point, *The Moldy Fig* took a direct hit in its bomb bay from German anti-aircraft fire. With its aileron controls severed and its rudder jammed, the aircraft fell into a spin. Second Lieutenant Deuschle, the pilot, and Sergeant Crooker, one of the waist gunners, were able to bail out of the stricken bomber. Gregory was unable to escape and was found dead at the crash site near Lostau. The Germans buried the dead crew members in the community cemetery the following day.

After the war, the remains of Second Lieutenant Jesse Eugene Gregory were returned to Georgia and buried in the Colquitt City Cemetery.

