

Hawkins, Decorated Flyer, Lost at Sea

By the time John Kenney Hawkins, Jr. and his Class of '44 comrades entered Clemson College in 1940, they must have felt some premonition that they might soon be learning about more than just engineering. The boys that left home that summer to journey to the small campus in the foothills of northwestern South Carolina were no doubt aware of the desperate situation in England. Edward Murrow, Ben Robertson and other broadcasters and journalists were chronicling the heroic struggle of the British, standing alone against the German war machine as it rained bombs down on English cities night after deadly night.



Hawkins, a textile engineering student from Greenwood, left Clemson during his junior year to join the Army Air Corps. Hawkins emerged from his flight training as a navigator and was assigned to the 515th Bomber Squadron of the 15th Air Force. The 15th was at that time based at airfields all over southern Italy and was attacking enemy targets in southern France, Germany, Czechoslovakia, Austria, Hungary and the Balkans.



On 12 September 1944, as the Western Allies and the Russians squeezed Germany in an ever-tightening vise, Hawkins and the rest of the ten-man crew of a 515th Bomber Squadron B-24 took off from their Italian airfield on a mission to Munich, Germany. By this time, Hawkins was already a decorated airman, having been awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Air Medal with Oak Leaf Cluster.

While flying at 18,000 feet, enroute to the target at Munich, approximately 30 miles west of the Island of Vis, Yugoslavia, a violent shudder racked the heavy bomber. The pilot, Dale Click, switched off the auto-pilot, but the shudder continued to disrupt control of the rudder. Control pressures applied by both the pilot and co-pilot had no effect on the shudder forcing the aircraft to leave the protection of the squadron's formation. As the pilot attempted to reset the auto-pilot, the copilot notified the formation leader of the problem and advised the crew that it might soon be necessary to abandon ship. Unable to reestablish rudder control, the aircraft began a slow spiral turn to the left. Shortly after this, the aircraft slipped into an uncontrollable spin. At this point the crew bailed out of the doomed aircraft. As it spun downward toward the Adriatic Sea, the tail rudder or horizontal stabilizer flew off the ship. The copilot counted nine parachutes plus his own, suggesting that all of the crew had successfully escaped the aircraft before it crashed into the sea.

Fortunately, two friendly Spitfire fighters and a B-17 bomber arrived over the area within an hour and a half of the crash. A Catalina flying boat landed and picked up five of the crew members. An Air Sea rescue launch picked two more men out of the water.

Unfortunately, Hawkins wasn't one of them.

Hawkins was reported as missing in action. A year later, with no evidence of Hawkins' survival, the War Department issued a Finding of Death. Hawkins was survived by his mother, sister, and his brother James, even then a student at Clemson.

John Kenney Hawkins, Jr. was one of approximately 60 Clemson men who lost their lives in the bombers which did so much to hasten the end of the Third Reich. He is memorialized at the Florence American Cemetery, Via Cassia, Italy.