

The South Atlantic Route

Tunisia had fallen and the surrender of the remaining German and Italian troops in North Africa was just days away in May 1943. Allied planners were continuing to ship equipment, ammunition and men to North Africa to build up resources for Operation Husky, the invasion of Sicily. Among the war materiel being sent overseas were aircraft, lots of aircraft of all types. Smaller aircraft were partially disassembled and shipped over. The larger planes with greater range were flown across the Atlantic to airfields in Africa. But flying across the ocean in 1943 was a vastly different and far more risky endeavor than it is today.



The war introduced many young men to the thrill and challenge of flying. John James Hester, Jr. from the tiny Greenwood County crossroads of Troy was one of those men. Jim Hester was the son of John James and Annie Matilda Hester. He entered Clemson in 1934 during the Depression and graduated as a member of the Class of 1938. A civil engineering student, he was a member of the campus chapter of the American Society of Civil Engineers. As a cadet, Jim served as a second lieutenant in the Corps and attended ROTC summer training at Fort McClellan, Alabama.

May 1943 found young Hester assigned as the navigator of an Army Air Force B-25C bound for Africa. The plane was ordered to follow the South Atlantic ferry route to minimize the length of its over-water leg and avoid the often harsh weather of the North Atlantic. Aircraft like the twin-engine B-25 medium bomber would converge on airfields in Florida and then hop south to Puerto Rico then Trinidad and on to British Guyana's Atkinson Field on the northeast coast of South America.



Second lieutenant Jim Hester's crew departed from Atkinson Field on May 11, 1943 bound for Belem, Brazil. From Belem, the next leg would be 965 miles to Natal on the coast of Brazil and from there, the most challenging leg, flying across the open ocean to Ascension Island a small 34 square mile island located 1,400 miles from Brazil and 1,000 miles from Africa. From that island, aircraft would conclude the open-ocean portion of the trip by flying to Liberia on the west coast of the continent of Africa.

But the vast Atlantic wasn't the only hazard the intrepid airmen had to face. The 868 mile leg from Atkinson Field to Belem flew over the dense rain forest of the Amazon River basin. It was

here that Hester's B-25 disappeared. Although there was a report of a parachute sighting, an extensive search of the area yielded no results. Hester and the rest of the six man crew were declared missing in action and were presumed dead.

John James Hester, Jr. was memorialized on the Tablet of the Missing of the East Coast Memorial in New York.

