

From Love Story Ends In Friendly Fire

Tracy Howard Jackson entered Clemson College from Florence in the late summer of 1930. As a cadet, Jackson, was a member of both the marching and concert bands. An engineering student, he joined the American Society of Mechanical Engineers. But it was his participation on the ROTC swimming team that changed his life. The YMCA building, now Holtzendorf Hall, sat at the corner of the Clemson College campus, next to the post office and just above the football stadium. In the basement of the "Y" was a pool. Members of the swimming team would regularly practice there and the pool was also open to YMCA members from the small Clemson community. One day during his "Rat" season in the late summer of 1930, Tracy Jackson was practicing with his ROTC swim team. Jackson's attention was drawn to a cute girl who was enjoying an afternoon swim in the echoing pool chamber. As practice ended, Jackson worked up the nerve to approach the girl whose name he discovered was Virginia. By the end of their conversation, Jackson, shaved head and all, was walking the sixteen-year-old home. The two dated, fell in love and eventually eloped!

Tracy graduated from Clemson in 1934. He and Virginia moved to Greenwood and had two children, son Tracy and daughter Beverly. Tracy was teaching in Greenwood when he entered military service in July of 1941.

Just two years later, on July 11, 1943, Tracy Jackson lifted off on his last mission. The sun had already completed its arc across the Mediterranean Sea by the time the 144 C-47 and C-53 aircraft of the 52nd Troop Carrier Wing began their slow rolls down the runways of American airfields in North Africa. At 2107 hours, a C-47A carrying sixteen paratroopers from the 376th Parachute Field Artillery Battalion and five crew members lifted off from the Enfidaville Airfield on the Tunisian coast. Two additional passengers were aboard as observers: Brigadier General Charles Kerrans and his aide Major Tracy Jackson. The paratroopers would be jumping into the fight near Gela, on Sicily's southwestern coast to support ground forces which had landed across the island's beaches the previous day.

Seven Allied divisions, three British, three American and one Canadian, were slugging it out in bitter fighting against German and Italian defenders. General George Patton had called for the 504th to reinforce his American divisions and maintain his advance. Their objective was Farello Airstrip, already in American hands.

Three thousand Allied ships and vessels of all kinds were supporting the invasion. The vast fleet was on station all along the southern coast of Sicily, bringing its big naval guns to bear on enemy targets and continuing to offload supplies for the troops on the ground. As the C-47s headed northeast from Tunisia, a swarm of twin-engine German Ju-88 bombers appeared over the fleet from opposite direction, their bombs raining down on the ships and sailors below. Anti-aircraft guns lit the night with bright tracers, their staccato reports a deafening reminder that the success of the Allied invasion was far from assured.



Bomb loads depleted, the German attackers turned northeast, back toward their Italian bases. Into the void droned the slow-moving, twin-engine C-47s. Two formations of transport aircraft, flying in nine-airplane “V” formations, delivered their paratroopers to the assigned drop zones. The next formation flew unwittingly into disaster. A nervous gunner on the ground, likely on edge from the just-completed German raid, opened fire on the friendly aircraft. Within moments, the sky was again alight from the streaking tracers of Allied anti-aircraft. Jackson’s aircraft was hit, but managed to discharge its jumpers before turning back toward the water. As the paratroopers floated through the raging battle, Jackson’s plane was hit again. It exploded in midair, raining debris into the sea.

Allied gunners shot down 23 of the slow-flying C-47s and damaged 37 more. Ten percent of the airborne force was killed or wounded. It was the deadliest friendly fire incident to that point in the war. Jackson, General Kerrans and the five-man crew of their aircraft were never recovered.

Major Tracy Jackson is memorialized on the Wall of Missing of the Sicily Rome Cemetery.

Unfortunately, Tracy Jackson wasn’t the only Clemson casualty of this friendly fire disaster, as we will read in the next edition of *The Echo*.

