

## Widowmaker

William Alexander Johnson attended Clemson College from 1939 to 1941. A mechanical engineering major from Hamlet, North Carolina, Johnson was appointed a corporal in Company I, 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment as a sophomore. He was a member of the Class of 1943 but did not return for his junior year on campus, opting instead to enlist in the Army Air Force.

Johnson applied for and was accepted into the Army Air Force flight training program. Upon completion, he was commissioned and earned his pilot's wings. Johnson was designated as a bomber pilot and was assigned to the 454<sup>th</sup> Bomb Squadron of the 323<sup>rd</sup> Bomb Group.

Before it could go to war, Johnson's squadron had to complete its operational training, mastering the many tasks it would employ during combat flying. Its first phase of operational training took place at MacDill Field, Florida in the fall of 1942. In early November, the 454<sup>th</sup> headed north to Myrtle Beach, South Carolina and the bombing and gunnery range there.

The 454<sup>th</sup> was equipped with the B-26 Martin Marauder, a twin-engine medium bomber which quickly gained a reputation as a "widowmaker." The B-26 made use of advanced aeronautical engineering to gain airspeed, but at a cost. Its flight characteristics demanded higher than normal minimum controllable airspeeds. An unusually high speed of 150 miles per hour on final approach to the runway intimidated some pilots who were used to slower approaches. Dropping below the prescribed speed led to the loss of lift, stalls, and crashes.



Then too, early models of the B-26 were equipped with the Pratt and Whitney R2800 engine which was prone to failure. If an engine failed and the pilot was unable to maintain the required airspeed, disaster often ensued.

On November 15, 1942, Lieutenant Johnson was the copilot on a B-26 commanded by Lieutenant Eugene Huntley. The aircraft departed Myrtle Beach on a training flight to Columbia Army Air Base. At approximately 2115 hours, the bomber crashed into an open field about 7 miles southeast of Columbia.

Army accident investigators were unable to determine the cause of the crash. They speculated that "possible engine trouble may have contributed to the loss of altitude. One wing was too low and touched the ground causing the plane [to pivot] almost crosswise to its line of flight."



Later versions of the B-26 would be modified by increasing the wingspan to enhance performance. Ironically, the “widowmaker,” after earning such a frightening reputation, completed the war with the lowest combat loss ratio of any American bomber.

Lieutenant William Alexander Johnson was survived by his widow, the former Martha Leach, his parents, and one brother. He is buried in the Mary Love Cemetery, Hamlet, North Carolina.

