

Carpetbagger

William Patrick Kavanaugh was only at Clemson for one year, 1942-43, before he was called to active duty. Kavanaugh, an agriculture major from Annapolis, Maryland, was assigned to Company I, 1st Battalion, 1st Regiment of the Cadet Brigade. He also signed up for the Enlisted Reserve Corps, which provided him with the status of an Army reservist and allowed him to remain in school while other young men of his age were drafted into the military.

At the end of his freshman year, Kavanaugh and most of the other cadets on campus packed their bags and reported to Army posts all over the country. Kavanaugh had volunteered for the Army Air Force and was sent to radio operator school.

In 1945, Kavanaugh was assigned as a B-24 crew member in the 492nd Bomb Group. The 492nd was a hard luck outfit. The group flew 67 missions in 89 days in mid-1944 and despite a high level of training proficiency, suffered more combat losses and casualties than any other bomb group in the European Theater. As a result, the 492nd became the only group to be disbanded due to high casualties. But that wasn't the end of the 492nd. Rather than deactivate the group, Air Force authorities assigned it a new mission. Instead of flying daylight strategic bombing missions over the Third Reich, the 492nd began to fly Carpetbagger missions in support of the OSS, the Office of Strategic Services.

Carpetbagger was the code name for aerial supply of weapons and other equipment to resistance fighters in German-occupied Europe. B-24 Liberator bombers were modified for their missions by removing some guns and other equipment in order to lighten them and create more cargo capacity. Agents and supplies were dropped by parachute through openings created by the removal of the aircrafts' belly turret. Most Carpetbagger missions were flown on moonlit nights so that navigation could be accomplished by following visible landmarks like roads, railroads, and rivers.

Drops were made from low altitudes to limit the amount of time the agents and cargoes were under canopy, reducing their visibility and improving accuracy of the drop. When approaching the target drop zone, the B-24 would slow to 120 miles per hour and descend to 400 feet, leaving little margin for error.



Kavanaugh, standing second from right, and his crew.

On February 9, 1945, Kavanaugh's aircraft was on loan to the 15th Special Operations Group in the Mediterranean Theater. On a rare daylight mission, the B-24, *Hell's Warrior*, was seen to explode in mid-air and crash near the village of Velike Brisnice, Yugoslavia. Kavanaugh and his seven crewmates were killed.

After the war, the remains of the crew were returned to the United States and buried at the Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery in Saint Louis, Missouri. Staff Sergeant Kavanaugh was survived by his wife, Vivian, and was awarded the Purple Heart.



Air crew photo courtesy 801492.org.