

In Mid-Air

Folks in Woodruff knew when Ezell Lanford was flying over. He would circle the main street and usually drop a note, cap, or some other article at his family's home to let them know he was passing by. Soon, rather than notes, he would be dropping deadlier cargoes over Hitler's Third Reich.

Lewis Ezell Lanford was a vocational agricultural education major and a member of the Class of 1940. At Clemson, he was a member of the Calhoun Forensic Society, 4-H, the Dairy Club, Future Farmers of America, and the Grange, which he served as treasurer. Lanford was on the staff of *The Tiger*, the campus newspaper, and was a member of the Baptist Student Union Council. In the summer of 1939, he attended ROTC training camp at Fort McClellan, Alabama. As a senior, Lanford was a cadet second lieutenant assigned to Company I, 3rd Battalion, 2nd Regiment.



Following graduation, Lanford took a teaching position at Sharon High School near Abbeville, but the deteriorating international situation soon resulted in his call to active duty. On June 2, 1941, Lanford enlisted in the Army Air Corps at Fort Jackson. Lanford earned his pilot's wings at Barksdale Field, Louisiana and emerged from flight training as a bomber pilot. He was then assigned as an instructor at Ellington Field, Texas where he accumulated flying hours and experience.



Lanford received new orders assigning him to the 496th Bomb Squadron of the 344th Bomb Group, a medium bomber outfit flying the Martin Marauder B-26. The group had deployed to England in the winter of 1944 as part of the Ninth Air Force. First Lieutenant Lanford joined the unit that summer. The 344th flew missions supporting the breakout of US forces from the invasion lodgment area around St. Lo, attacking German troops, supply depots, railway lines, and bridges in an attempt to isolate front line enemy forces and prevent their reinforcement.

In late September, the group relocated from its bases in England to airfields closer to the front lines in France. As the Allies closed in on the German border, the 344th focused on enemy transportation targets. During the Battle of

the Bulge, the group flew missions to assist outnumbered American ground forces in turning back the German attackers.

With the Germans' winter offensive defeated and the bulge eliminated, the 344th returned to its attacks on transportation links and German oil facilities. On March 9, Lieutenant Lanford embarked on his 29th mission, an attack on German production facilities at Wiesbaden, at the confluence of the Rhine and Main Rivers. Technical Sergeant George Glick was the flight engineer on Lanford's B-26. Glick had been a member of Lanford's crew since they arrived in England and described the young lieutenant as "one of the most popular pilots in the group." By this point in the war, the German Luftwaffe or air force, had been virtually eliminated. The fighters that remained to defend the skies over Germany were limited by a scarcity of fuel and by the inexperience of their pilots. But missions over enemy territory were still perilous for the medium bombers.

As Lanford's bomber approached the target, it was hit by German anti-aircraft fire. Lanford was wounded, struck in the arm by shrapnel, but he battled to control the stricken plane to allow time for his crew to bail out. With his left wing on fire, Lanford pulled the plane out of formation. Glick, the copilot, and the navigator escaped the burning airplane as it entered a spin. Lanford and three other crew members, one of who had been killed by the flak, were still aboard the plane when the fire reached the fuel tanks or the undropped bombs causing the aircraft to explode in midair.

First Lieutenant Lewis Ezell Lanford was survived by his parents, four sisters, and a brother then in the service. After the war, his remains and those of his crew members killed in the aircraft were returned to the United States and reinterred in the Zachary Taylor National Cemetery, Louisville, Kentucky.



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