

Four-Day-Old Distraction

Nelson flew into battle with more on his mind than just his mission.

The previous edition of *The Echo* featured the tragic story of Tracy Jackson, Class of '34, whose C-47 transport plane was downed by friendly fire during the early days of the July 1943 invasion of Sicily. Unfortunately, Jackson's aircraft wasn't the only American plane shot down by Allied forces—nor was Jackson the only Clemson pilot lost to friendly fire on the fateful night of July 11.

Military scholars estimate that between two and 25 percent of all battle casualties are the result of friendly fire. According to historian Charles Kirke, author of *Fratricide In Battle*, the rate of friendly fire casualties has remained “remarkably stable” over the past 200 years despite advances in military technology. Friendly fire deaths were recorded as early as 1643 when Royalist commander the Earl of Kingston was killed by fire from Royalist cannon during the English Civil War.

Friendly fire incidents were common during the American Civil War. Confederate general Stonewall Jackson was shot and fatally wounded by a Confederate patrol as he was returning from a night-time scouting mission during the Battle of Chancellorsville in May 1863.

The scope and scale of World War II and the employment of modern weaponry may not have changed the rate of friendly fire casualties, but these factors combined to increase the absolute numbers of such battlefield deaths. The worst single friendly fire incident of the war—at least on the American side—occurred on the night of July 11, 1943 as 144 aircraft from the 52nd Troop Carrier Wing transported American paratroopers to reinforce General George Patton's invading Seventh Army in Sicily. Among the pilots of the ill-fated transport planes was Captain Walter Scott Nelson, Jr.

Walter Nelson was born in 1915 in Savannah, GA, son of Walter S. and Lois S. Nelson. He attended public schools in Savannah and entered Clemson in 1935 to study engineering. He returned to Savannah after his sophomore year and took a job as a salesman in an auto parts store.



On November 8, 1941 he enlisted in the Army Air Corps to become an aviation cadet. On July 6, 1942, as America was building its military to fight both in the Pacific and in Europe, Nelson took a break from his training to marry Lenoir Sanders. Following the invasion of North Africa that November, Nelson, now assigned to the 36th Troop Carrier Squadron, found himself training there with America's new airborne forces for future operations in the theater.

As dusk fell on the evening of July 11, C-47 transport aircraft began departing the dusty airfields along the northeast coast of Tunisia. Across the Gulf of Hammamet, some 225 miles to the northeast lay the German-occupied island of Sicily. Two days earlier, American and British troops had invaded Sicily supported by a 3,000 ship armada. General Patton had called for his paratrooper reserve to strengthen his already committed ground forces.

As Captain Nelson taxied his C-47 to the runway, he no doubt felt anxious for the paratroopers riding in the back of his aircraft as well as for his crew. Flying just 400 feet above the Mediterranean Sea, at night, with no lights and in radio silence, in a nine-plane V formation, would tax the concentration and skills of the most experienced pilots. Along with the rigorous flying conditions and the inherent danger of any

mission into a combat zone, Nelson had an additional distraction with which to deal: news had arrived just that afternoon that he was the father of a four-day-old daughter.

Nelson's aircraft arrived over Sicily shortly after a night-time raid by German twin-engine bombers had set naval and ground forces on edge. As the C-47s droned toward their drop zones, nervous gunners below, mistaking them for another enemy attack, opened fire with devastating effect. Twenty-three aircraft were shot down and another 37 badly damaged. Three hundred paratroopers and aircraft crewmen were killed—including Walter Scott Nelson, Jr.

Nelson was originally buried in Mount Soprano, Italy, but at his family's request, his body was returned to the Greenwich Cemetery in Savannah, Georgia. He left behind his wife, Lenoir Sanders Nelson, and Sandy, the daughter he never knew.