

The Vanishing Smile

In every photo, he wears a wide smile, as though he's just enjoyed a funny joke or is looking forward to a good time--in every photo, except one. The one picture without the smile is the one with his crew in front of their bomber. In that one photo, maybe because he knows he'll be leading these men into combat, William Neville Nickles wears a more somber expression.



William Neville Nickles was a member of Clemson's Class of 1946, but left campus for the Army Air Force in February 1943. Nickles, from Charleston, planned to be an architect, but before he could realize that goal, America and millions of its young men were sucked into World War II.

Nickles earned his pilot wings and commission at Turner Field in Albany, Georgia and completed combat training at Tonapah, Nevada. He was ordered overseas in February 1945 to join the Fifth Air Force.



Second lieutenant Nickles was the pilot of a B-24D Liberator heavy bomber assigned to the 408th Bomb Squadron which was part of the 22nd Bomb Group (Heavy). The squadron was based at Clark Field on the Philippine Island of Luzon and its targets ranged from Borneo to China. Nickles had completed 16 missions when a June 22, 1945 strike was planned against a major oil refinery complex at Toshien on the Japanese-occupied island of Formosa.

The strike force took off from Clark Field at 1045 hours on that Friday morning. Nickles' aircraft was carrying its 10-man crew plus a passenger, Second lieutenant Ernest Hodous, who was functioning as a radio security officer. When the formation reached the rendezvous point, Nickles' aircraft was not spotted. There was, however, an ominous cloud of black smoke in the area at an altitude of 10,000 feet. It was never determined what happened to Nickles and his crew. A search of the area revealed neither the aircraft nor any survivors.



George White, Nickles' nephew and a columnist for the *Black Mountain News*, wrote "...my grandparents got a telegram. It said their eldest son was Missing In Action. More letters followed until a box came with a purple heart, the Air Medal and a form letter from the president. A service was held. A grave marker was chiseled... His would be the first stone in the family plot."

The citation for Nickles' Air Medal commended the young pilot for "meritorious achievement while participating in sustained operational flight missions in the Southwest Pacific area..." and noted the "courage and devotion to duty displayed during these flights."

Lieutenant Nickles was survived by his parents, the Reverend Dr. and Mrs. George Nickles. Dr. Nickles was the pastor of Charleston's Westminster Presbyterian Church. William Neville Nickles is memorialized at Manila American Cemetery in Fort Bonifacio, Manila, Philippines and Greenville Presbyterian Cemetery near Hodges, South Carolina.

