

Side By Side

James Arthur Norton, Jr. and Edward Robertson Norton came into the world together, the twin sons of Dr. and Mrs. J. A. Norton of Conway. Arthur and Edward, known within their family as “Wack” and “Hoagy,” graduated from high school together and enrolled in 1938 at Clemson College. They were both civil engineering majors and were assigned to the same unit within the Cadet Brigade, E Company, 2nd Battalion, 2nd Regiment. Outstanding athletes at Conway High School, the twins continued their athletic careers at Clemson, playing on the freshman football team.



Arthur and Edward Norton, as Army pilots and freshmen football players

With war raging in Europe and China, the brothers left Clemson, enlisted in the Army Air Corps in 1941 and began flight training. Still side by side, Arthur and Edward were eventually assigned to the 452nd Bomber Squadron of the 322nd Bomber Group (Medium). Their squadron was equipped with the B-26 twin-engine, medium bomber.

The B-26, nicknamed the “Marauder,” was manufactured by the Glenn L. Martin Company and was sturdy, fast and responsive. Powered by two Pratt and Whitney R-2800 turbocharged engines, the aircraft was armed with up to twelve fifty caliber machine guns and could carry a 4,000 pound bomb load. But, the B-26, with its small wing and heavy wing-loading, was not a forgiving aircraft, and for the young, rapidly-trained pilots coming out of flight school, the airplane was a challenge with a pulse-quickenning landing speed of up to 135 miles per hour depending on the aircraft’s load. It was judged particularly difficult to handle at low altitudes.

The 322nd was formed in July 1942 at MacDill Air Base in Florida. Training missions were often flown over water at altitudes from eight to twelve thousand feet as the air crews would bomb target rafts anchored in the Gulf of Mexico.

In late 1942, the 322nd began its overseas movement. By the spring, the group was established in England and assigned to the 8th Air Force. The group's first mission came on May 14, 1943 when it was ordered to attack the IJmuiden power plant in Holland. It would be an over-the-water mission just like in training, but with a dramatic difference: instead of flying at medium altitude, the bombers were ordered to fly at "zero altitude," tree top level, tactics for which the group had not trained.

According to historian James Openshaw:

During the spring of 1943, there was intense political pressure to get everything available in action as soon as possible. In addition, for humanitarian reasons, the politicians at this stage of the war were advocating the use of low-level bombing in the occupied countries of Europe. This was considered the most accurate form of bombing, especially against targets in congested civilian areas.

The IJmuiden facility provided electricity for a large industrial complex including a submarine pen and the railway system for the Amsterdam-Rotterdam area. Aircraft from two of the group's squadrons attacked the power plant but missed the target. It was too important to leave unharmed, so headquarters ordered a second strike for May 17.

The return trip to IJmuiden called for a twelve-plane attack divided into two flights, but Lieutenant Colonel Robert Stillman, commander of the 322nd, could muster only eleven aircraft as many were still undergoing repairs from flak damage incurred on the May 14 mission.

According to Openshaw, the route to the target would be the same as on the previous mission. "The crews to fly this mission were selected and with the exception of four men, all were freshmen crews." Stillman opted to lead the formation and the first flight of aircraft while his deputy, Lieutenant Colonel W. R. Purinton, would lead the second flight.



At 10:56 a. m. Monday, May 17, 1943, the B-26s began to take off from their home field at Bury St. Edmunds. They climbed to 250 feet and headed east toward the English Channel. Once they

cleared the coast, the eleven aircraft descended to just fifty feet, heading toward the Dutch coast at more than 200 miles per hour, skimming along just above the water-- and just below the Germans' radar.

Then, things began to go wrong. About thirty miles from the Dutch coast, the aircraft piloted by Captain Raymond Stephens, aborted the mission due to electrical problems. Stephens turned his aircraft back toward England and climbed to a new altitude of 1,000 feet, possibly alerting German radar to the presence of the formation. Ten aircraft continued to streak toward the target, including the one piloted by Edward Norton. Sitting to his right in the cockpit was copilot Arthur Norton. The twins were about to face their first combat side by side.

Surface vessels were sighted to the formation's front causing Stillman to order a heading diversion. As a result, once the aircraft reached the Dutch coast they were off course and disoriented. Then things got worse.

Almost immediately, Stillman's B-26 was struck by ground fire and crashed. A second aircraft was shot down, crashing into the Maas estuary. As the next senior pilot maneuvered his ship to lead the formation, he collided with another aircraft causing both to lose control and crash. A trailing plane was severely damaged by debris from this mid-air collision and was forced to belly-land in a field.

From Stillman's original flight only two aircraft remained, including the Nortons'. These two B-26s now joined up with Lieutenant Colonel Purinton's flight. But Purinton, flying low and unable to identify landmarks as the country-side streaked by below, was lost. Purinton decided to abort the mission, but just then, his bombardier intervened, "Hold it a minute, I think I see the target."

Purinton led the remaining aircraft toward the target—but what they thought was their objective was actually a gas facility on the western side of Amsterdam. Instead of hitting their assigned target, their route now took them through a heavily defended area. Purinton's, the Nortons' and one other aircraft were heavily damaged by anti-aircraft fire. The three aircraft cleared the coast, but crashed into the North Sea. Now only two of the mission's aircraft remained aloft. These were chased over the North Sea and shot down by German fighter planes. By 12:30, it was all over.

Of the ten airplanes that crossed the Dutch coast that morning, none returned. Fifty-eight crewmen were lost, thirty-eight of these killed—including Edward and Arthur Norton. From the Nortons' aircraft the only survivor was tail gunner Bennett Longworth who was taken prisoner by the Germans.

Arthur's body washed ashore and was buried. Edward's remains were never recovered. Speaking of the tragedy sixty-seven years later, Larkin Spivey, the twins' nephew said, "These tragic events devastated my family, especially my grandmother. I once heard my mother say that when her brothers were lost she had to reverse roles and become the mother in her family. Her parents never seemed to recover completely from this tragedy."

According to historian Openshaw, the disastrous results of the second attack on IJmuiden caused the 8th Air Force to reevaluate the employment of the B-26. Tactics were revised and subsequent missions were flown at the medium altitudes at which the B-26 crews had trained. The B-26 would prove to be a very effective bomber, even against heavily defended targets, and by the end of the war have the lowest loss per sortie ratio of any Allied bomber. These painful lessons, of course, came too late for the Norton family.

Arthur was buried at the American Military Cemetery, Margraten, Netherlands and later reinterred at Lakeside Cemetery in Conway. Edward is memorialized in both locations. The general aviation terminal at Myrtle Beach International Airport was dedicated to the memory of Arthur and Edward Norton in 2010.

