

In An Instant

It had been a beautiful, sunny Thursday on the blue waters of the Mediterranean Sea. The sun was sinking in the west and merchant seaman Howard Morseburg was playing cards with some of his shipmates when they felt the explosion. “It was so great that we were convinced immediately that our ship had been hit,” Morseburg remembered sixty-two years later. As he dashed topside to his action station, Morseburg realized that his ship was still safe—at least for the moment—but that another ship in the convoy, the SS *Paul Hamilton*, had been blown to “smithereens.” Morseburg declared, “It’s a sight I never forgot.” Five hundred eighty men had been aboard *Paul Hamilton*, including Thomas Grayson Poats, Jr., a member of Clemson’s Class of 1935.



Grayson Poats had deep roots at Clemson College. He had been born there in 1914 while his father and namesake was serving the young institution as a physics professor. His sister, Bessie, married Clemson English professor John Lane. When it came time for Grayson to leave Spartanburg and go to college, Clemson seemed like the logical choice. Grayson enrolled at Clemson in the late summer of 1931. An engineering major, Grayson was assigned to Company K in the Cadet Regiment. He remained at Clemson for only his freshman year.

After leaving Clemson, Poats took a job with the Wilby-Kincey chain, which operated motion picture theaters across the southeast. He managed the Ritz theater in Columbia, before being transferred to Rockingham, North Carolina where he served as Wilby-Kincey’s city manager. Poats was a prominent member of the Rockingham business community, serving as chairman of the county Red Cross and as a member of the Rotary Club. He was working in Rockingham when he was called to active duty.

Poats was trained as an aerial photographer and assigned to the 32nd Photographic Reconnaissance Squadron. In April 1944, the squadron left Will Rogers Field at Oklahoma City to head overseas. The squadron was slated to join the 15th Air Force at San Severo in southern Italy. The 32nd was equipped with Lockheed F-5s, the unarmed, camera-equipped version of the P-38 fighter. Its mission in Italy would be to take pictures of enemy installations for



subsequent targeting by aerial bombers. But first, the squadron had to get there.

Three hundred seventeen members of the 32nd boarded the Liberty ship *SS Paul Hamilton* at Hampton Roads, Virginia. Also onboard were contingents from the 485th Bomb Group and the 831st Bomb Squadron. On April 2, *Paul Hamilton* sailed as a part of large, slow convoy UGS 38 composed of 105 merchant ships and 21 escorting vessels.



SS Paul Hamilton explodes after being struck by an aerial torpedo.

*Photo: PhoM I/c Arthur Green, USCGR, aboard the USS Menges (DE320)
US Coast Guard photo*

Convoy UGS 38 crossed the Atlantic and passed through the Strait of Gibraltar and into the Mediterranean Sea. Thursday, April 20, was a sunny, pleasant day, but trouble was in the offing. A France-based German reconnaissance aircraft had spotted the convoy and relayed its course and speed to its headquarters.

German Ju-88 twin-engine torpedo bombers flying from bases in southern France made their way across the Mediterranean Sea, reaching landfall over North Africa. They turned toward the west and dropped low over the Algerian coast before approaching the unsuspecting convoy. Their low altitude made it difficult for radar operators to distinguish them against the mountains above Cape Bengut. Attacking as dusk turned to dark, the stealthy approach of the bombers stymied visual lookouts as well.

At 2105 hours, three waves of German planes pounced. A torpedo launched by a Ju-88 in the first wave struck *Paul Hamilton*. Aircrewmembers were not the ship's only cargo. Also onboard was a hold full of ammunition. The torpedo penetrated the hold and ignited its contents. The resulting catastrophic blast startled crewmembers on nearby ships—and obliterated *Paul Hamilton* in an instant. All 580 onboard were killed. The only body recovered was one that the blast had flung into the air, and which landed on a nearby ship.

Sergeant Poats's remains were never recovered. He was survived by his mother, two sisters, and a brother who was then serving at Camp Wolters, Texas. Thomas Grayson Poats, Jr. is memorialized at the North African American Cemetery, Carthage, Tunisia and at Old Stone Church Cemetery in Clemson.

