



Aubrey Holbrook Rion, '41

“...to wrest our future from the throes of another dark age.”

When Aubrey Rion of Columbia entered Clemson College in 1937, his attention was likely focused on getting a first rate education and on sports—not on the ominous situation in Europe. A football standout at Columbia High School, Rion would become a three-sport letterman at Clemson, competing in track, boxing and football.

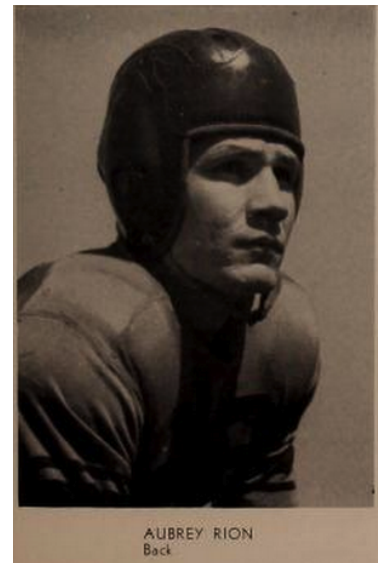
Rion was a general science major and a member of the Block C Club and the Columbia-Clemson Club, but it was in athletics that he made his mark. As a junior, Rion shared the football backfield with Clemson legends Banks McFadden and Charlie Timmons on a team that also included Joe Blalock and Shad Bryant. This team, the 1939 Tigers, finished the season with 9 wins and a single loss and became the first Palmetto State team ever invited to a bowl game. That game, the 1940 Cotton Bowl, saw Rion and his teammates defeat Boston College 6-3, claiming the Tigers first bowl victory in front of a crowd of 20,000. In 1940, Rion and his teammates achieved another first by winning Clemson's first Southern Conference football championship.

By the spring of 1941, the European war and the deteriorating situation in the Pacific had muscled their way into the national conscienceness. The editors of *Taps*, the Clemson College annual, realized the war would deflect the lives of Clemson's Class of '41. In the annual's dedication, the editors wrote:

We, who are entering into a world torn by turmoil, filled with economic unrest, and fraught with perils to international democracy, see fit to dedicate the '41 "Taps" to the members of the class who accept the challenge and stand firm, seek no quarter and ask none, evermore striving to wrest the future from the throes of another dark age.

Aubrey Rion was one of those who rose to the challenge. Less than two years after his final appearance on the gridiron and only six months after Pearl Harbor, Rion volunteered for duty. Assigned to Fort Benning, GA for infantry training, Rion soon transferred to the new parachute infantry. Rion was assigned to the 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment of the famous 101st Airborne Division. The Screaming Eagles had been the vanguard of the invasion of France on D-Day, dropping behind enemy lines, wreaking havoc and disrupting the flow of German reinforcements to the beaches. In September, the 501st had jumped into Holland as part of the MARKET GARDEN combined armor and airborne attack and was still in that low country when Rion arrived as a replacement officer in October.

After more than two months of combat in Holland, the 101st, including the 501st, was finally withdrawn and sent to a staging are in Mourmelon, France for a well-deserved rest. Many men were on leave,



including the division commander, Maxwell Taylor. In his absence, brigadier general Anthony McAuliffe, the commander of the division's artillery, assumed command.

At dawn on December 16, the Germans launched their last major offensive in the west, an attempt to reach allied supply depots and ports, in what would become known as the Battle of the Bulge. Late on the evening of December 17, the 101st was alerted to move to the Belgian crossroads of Bastogne, a key road junction in the path of the Germans' thrust. Though ill-prepared for winter combat and short of full strength due to the many leaves, McAuliffe ordered the division to immediately move out by truck. Rion's 501st PIR, after a grueling all night journey through freezing temperatures and blowing snow, was the first regiment to make contact with the Germans.

Thus began the defense of Bastogne in which the 501st gave up not one foot of ground, and in which the division, and its comrades, stopped cold everything the Germans could throw at them, ruined Hitler's offensive time table and eventually won the 101st the first presidential unit citation ever awarded to a full division. By Christmas Day, clearing weather enabled Allied air power and General George Patton's Third Army to reach the embattled 101st. But Aubrey Rion would not live to see the victory. Rion was killed in combat on December 20, one of 580 501st paratroopers killed, wounded or captured during the merciless fighting.

1LT Aubrey Holbrook Rion was awarded the Purple Heart. He was survived by his wife Janette and son Aubrey and is buried at the Luxembourg American Cemetery.

Aubrey Rion accepted the challenge and gave his life 'to wrest our future from the throes of another dark age.'

