

## Dead Man's Curve

Richard King Thackston of Greenville grew up on his family's dairy farm off of Buncombe Road and graduated from Parker High School. He enrolled at Clemson College as a member of the Class of 1933 but would not graduate with his class. A dairy major, King Thackston joined the Dairy Club and was assigned to Company B of Clemson's Cadet Brigade. He was also a member of Kappa Phi Fraternity. Thackston attended summer school at Alabama Polytechnic Institute, now Auburn University, during the summer of 1932. After graduating from Clemson in just three years, he continued his studies with post-graduate work at New York's Cornell University.



Returning to Greenville, he managed Thackston Dairy which produced more than nine thousand bottles of milk daily. He also immersed



himself in community service. He chaired Greenville County's Live-at-Home program for farmers, served on the board of directors of Franklin Savings and Loan, and was a trustee of the Greenville County Library. He was a member of the Rotary Club and served on the executive board of the Blue Ridge Council of the Boy Scouts.

As the United States reluctantly prepared for war, Thackston registered for the draft in October 1940. Although Thackston's cadet curriculum at Clemson had focused on infantry training, he would end up in the Navy.

In June 1942, Thackston applied for the Navy's Aviation Cadet program. Based on his education, business background, and glowing references, King was appointed a lieutenant, junior grade in the United States Naval Reserve on August 11, 1942. He reported for instruction to the Naval Training School at the Quonset Point Naval Air Station in Rhode Island on October 20.



Upon completion of his course of instruction at Quonset Point in mid-February 1943, Thackston received orders to proceed to the Twelfth Naval District in San Francisco for the first available transportation to the Pacific Theater where he was to report to the Commander, Air Force, Pacific Fleet for aviation intelligence duties. Thackston's orders authorized five days of leave prior to his departure.

On February 20, Thackston, his colleague Lieutenant (jg) James Joseph Britt, and Britt's wife Margaret set out from Quonset Point for New York City where they planned to dine with Britt's

father. Traveling in Thackston's Chevrolet Coupe, the trio headed west on US Route 1. In the vicinity of Madison, Connecticut, they reached Jannas curve, a hazardous bend in the road.

As Thackston guided his vehicle through the curve, the left front of his car clipped a tractor-trailer rig headed in the opposite direction. The collision caused Thackston to lose control of the car which crashed, seriously injuring all three occupants. In those days before seat belts, Lieutenant (jg) Britt suffered cuts, bruises, and broken ribs. Mrs. Britt's pelvis and collar bone were broken. Thackston's injuries were the most serious: two broken legs, several broken ribs, and a fractured skull. All were taken to New Haven Hospital where Thackston was listed in critical condition. The Britt's survived their injuries, but Thackston died six days later.

The Navy's official investigation into the accident noted that Jannas curve was "deceptive and dangerous." "The curve is not apparent to the driver of a car approaching" from the west, as Thackston was. "There are no adequate signs to warn an approaching driver of the serious nature of the curve." The report said that there had been so many serious accidents there that the curve was "popularly known in the vicinity as 'Dead Man's Curve.'" The Navy determined that Thackston's and Britt's injuries had occurred "not as the result of their own misconduct."

Thackston's story is a reminder of an often overlooked tragedy of American involvement in World War II: non-battle deaths made up approximately one-quarter of US military deaths. Among Clemson men, the percentage was slightly higher, 26%.

Sixty-five Clemson men died during the war in non-battle aircraft accidents, most of them training accidents Stateside, but some in operational theaters while on non-combat missions. Illness claimed at least thirteen and drownings, both during training exercises and leisure, accounted for seven more. Two men were lost to friendly fire accidents and eight, including Thackston, to vehicle accidents. One Clemson soldier was struck and killed by a train. None of the more mundane ways people died took a hiatus during the war years. The sacrifice of non-battle death was just as tragic, just as grievous, as death in combat.

Lieutenant (jg) Richard King Thackston was survived by his mother and two brothers, both then serving as officers in the United States Army. He is buried in Greenville's Christ Church Cemetery.



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