

## Ball Turret Gunner

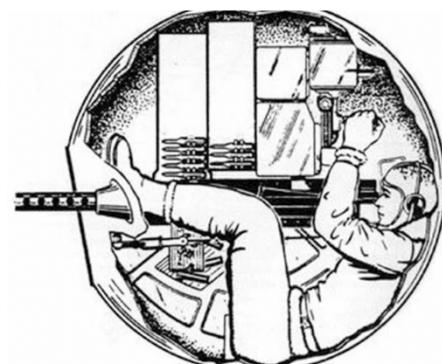
Dock Graham Thomas, Jr. attended Clemson as a freshman during the 1940-1941 academic year. An English major from Greenville, Thomas was a member of the Class of 1944. We know little about his Clemson career.

After leaving campus, Thomas volunteered for the Army Air Force and was trained as an aerial gunner. By mid-1943, he was part of the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force and on the frontlines of America's fight against Germany in the skies over Europe.



Thomas was assigned to the 432<sup>nd</sup> Bomb Squadron of the 306<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group (Heavy), flying B-17 Flying Fortresses from Thurleigh, about sixty-five miles north-northwest of London. The 306<sup>th</sup> was one of the first bomb groups to deploy to England, arriving in the autumn of 1942 and flying its first combat mission in October. In January 1943, the 306<sup>th</sup> participated in the first penetration into Germany by 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force heavy bombers. This was a period of evolving doctrine for the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force. It was committed to the concept of massed, self-defending formations of heavily armed bombers flying daylight missions in order to deliver bomb loads with precision against specific military targets.

Staff Sergeant Thomas was the ball turret gunner on a B-17 piloted by 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Easley Courson. Thomas's turret hung from the belly of the aircraft and was often the domain of the smallest man on the crew due to the tight confines of the forty-two inch diameter turret. The gunner lay with his eye to his gunsight and his hands on the turret's hydraulic controls. His job was to protect the bomber from enemy aircraft attacking from below.



On July 26, 1943, Courson's crew took off from Thurleigh for a bombardment mission to strike the Limmer synthetic rubber factory at Hanover, Germany. One hundred nineteen B-17s took off, but by the time they reached the target, more than twenty of the bombers had turned back due to mechanical issues or combat damage. Ninety-six bombers dropped their bombs on the target beginning at about noon. Shortly after releasing its bomb load, Thomas's aircraft was hit by

anti-aircraft fire, damaging the tail. Courson turned the aircraft west, back toward England.



Over the Netherlands, Thomas's injured ship was attacked by a German fighter, a Messerschmidt Bf-109 piloted by Luftwaffe Major Anton Mader. Mader's attack finished off the aircraft, setting it on fire. The crew, even Thomas from his constricted turret, was able to bail out and witnesses counted ten parachutes. Seven of the crew landed safely and were taken prisoner by the Germans, but Thomas and two other crew members died, perhaps from wounds suffered during the anti-aircraft or fighter attacks.

Staff Sergeant Thomas was awarded the Purple Heart. He is buried in the American Military Cemetery, Margraten, Netherlands.

