

Collapsed Gear

During the winter of 1943, the training of pilots and aircrews in the United States was proceeding at a rapid pace. By February of 1945, the Army Air Force would activate more than three hundred bomb groups. Depending on the type of unit and the aircraft it flew, each of these groups would be staffed by as many as 2,200 men. All of these men had to be trained and the aircraft they learned in had to be maintained. James Edwin Thomason of Simpsonville was one of the unsung aircraft mechanics keeping the training aircraft airworthy.

Thomason was a vocational agricultural education major who graduated from North Greenville Baptist Junior College in 1937 before enrolling at Clemson that fall. At Clemson, he was a member of the track team and was a senior private in Company G, 2nd Battalion, 2nd Regiment in the Cadet Brigade. Thomason was a member of the Dairy Club, the FFA, and Alpha Tau Alpha, the agricultural education honorary fraternity. Following his graduation on June 2, 1941, Thomason accepted a position teaching agriculture at the White Plains School in Anderson County.

After the United States entered World War II, Thomason was called to active duty. Assigned to the Army Air Force, Thomason trained at the Curtis Wright Institute in Glendale, California before being ordered to Williams Field, about thirty miles southeast of Phoenix, Arizona. Williams Field hosted training for Army Air Force multi-engine pilots, including those selected to fly the P-38 twin-engine Lightning fighter.



J. E. THOMASON



Initially, the pilots were introduced to twin-engine flying in the AT-10 Beech Wichita, but the hot, dry climate at Williams caused the aircrafts' wood and glue construction to dry out, leading to at least ten fatal accidents. The AT-10s were transferred to more humid climates and replaced with the Cessna AT-17 Bobcat.

Army Air Force commanders understood that accidents were a reality of training, especially in complex, multi-engine aircraft. As an aircraft mechanic, it was Private Thomason's job to repair training aircraft that had been roughly handled by inexperienced student pilots and return them to airworthy status as soon as possible. And there was plenty of opportunity to do so. Training accidents at stateside Army Air Force bases during the first two weeks of March 1943 averaged 52 per day.

On Saturday, March 13, Thomason was assigned to work on an AT-17 with landing gear issues. The Bobcat was an advanced trainer used to bridge the training gap between single-engine aircraft and larger, more complex multi-engine combat aircraft the pilots would soon be flying to war. The Bobcat, with its five-man crew had a wingspan of more than 32 feet and an empty weight of 3,500 pounds. We can't know whether fatigue was a factor, but given the pace of training and the need for repairs, it is easy to image Thomason hurrying to complete the work needed on the Bobcat's landing gear. In doing so, he neglected to position jack stands to support the aircraft. When he removed the nuts and bolts from the landing gear retracting screw bracket, the gear collapsed and the airplane crushed Thomason, killing him instantly.

James Edwin Thomason was survived by his parents, two sisters, and a brother. His body was returned to South Carolina and buried in Greenville's Woodlawn Memorial Park.