

## In the Courts of the Missing



The names of more than 28,000 American service members who are missing in action, lost or buried at sea during World War II, Korea and Vietnam are inscribed on marble slabs in the Courts of the Missing, part of the National Memorial Cemetery at Honolulu, Hawaii. The Courts of the Missing flank the Honolulu Memorial's grand stone staircase and memorialize so many brave Americans whose final resting place is known but to God. Among the heroes listed in these Courts is Gilman Felch Thompson, Jr. of Greenville, South Carolina.

Thompson was an architecture major in Clemson's Class of 1946, but like so many of his contemporaries, he was called to active duty before completing his academic work. Instead, he found himself in the Army Air Force, putting his studying skills to use in aerial navigation training. Navigators spent 100 hours in flight training and 500 in the class room learning the skills critical to keeping their assigned aircraft on course. Navigators were taught dead reckoning, radio, and celestial navigation and were also responsible for keeping the aircraft's instruments calibrated. By the end of the war, more than 50,000 navigators had graduated from Army training schools.

Thompson was assigned to the 311th Troop Carrier Squadron which flew both cargo and personnel transport missions. In February 1945, the 311<sup>th</sup> moved from its training base in the United States to Hawaii where it flew primarily cargo missions. In August, it moved to the recently captured Island of Okinawa.

Naha Airfield, on the southwestern end of the island, had been bitterly defended by the Japanese during the spring invasion by United States Marine and Army divisions. It was from this former enemy stronghold that Thompson's last flight originated. It was a personnel mission transporting troops from Okinawa to Iwo Jima, more than 850 miles across the trackless Pacific Ocean. Thompson's C-46 Commando airplane was crammed with passengers, 34 of them, in addition to the 7-man crew. The



aircraft lifted off and turned east at 1145 hours on Friday, October 12, 1945. The war had been over for almost six weeks.

The C-46 was the largest twin-engine aircraft in the world, and was the largest and heaviest twin-engine aircraft to see service in World War II. The C-46's huge cargo volume (twice that of the C-47), three times the weight, large cargo doors, powerful engines and long range made it suitable for the vast distances of the Pacific island campaign. And yet, it was not a beloved aircraft, having earned the nickname "flying coffin" due to a high number of in-flight fires and explosions.

During the war years, the C-46 was noted for an abnormal number of unexplained airborne explosions (31 between May 1943 and May 1945) that were attributed to various causes. In particular, the fuel system, which was quickly designed, then modified for the new, thirstier Pratt & Whitney engines, was criticized. The cause of the explosions was eventually traced to pooled gasoline from small leaks in the tanks and fuel system, combined with a spark, usually originating from open-contact electrical components. Though many service aircraft suffered small fuel leaks in use, the C-46's wings were unvented; if a leak occurred, the gasoline had nowhere to drain, but rather pooled at the wing root. Any spark or fire could set off an explosion.

Thompson's aircraft was last contacted by radio three hours and forty-five minutes after its departure from Naha when a routine position report was given. When the aircraft failed to arrive at Iwo Jima, a search was mounted using 12 search flights of 67 aircraft. No eyewitnesses and no description of the crash were available. As there is no land between Okinawa and Iwo Jima, and since there was no report from or about any of the men aboard, a presumption of death was issued by the War Department.

With no crash site to investigate, no debris and no survivors, the cause of the loss of the aircraft with its 41 souls aboard remains a mystery, as do the final resting places of Thompson and all aboard.

Thompson's name is inscribed on the Courts of the Missing in Honolulu. There is also a memorial marker to him at Woodlawn Cemetery in Greenville, SC.

