

The “Snoopers”

The specially-equipped SB-24 bomber took off in the early morning darkness bound for its target some 800 miles to the west. It was planned to be a long flight out and back, but not nearly as long as some of the missions being flown by the 868th Bombardment Squadron. The squadron, known as the “Snoopers” because of the SCR-717 radar that allowed its aircraft to identify and attack targets without actually seeing them, had already logged missions over record-setting distances of as much as 3,000 miles. This morning’s mission was destined for a premature ending and would mark the final flight of Staff Sergeant James Bruce Tolleson, Clemson College Class of 1946.

Tolleson was born in Spindale, North Carolina. His family moved to Laurens, South Carolina where he attended Ford High School. He entered Clemson in September 1942 with the first cohort to enroll after the United States entered World War II. Tolleson, a mechanical engineering student, left campus at the end of 1943’s spring semester. Like most of the other cadets, he was bound for military service.

Tolleson reported for active duty in January 1944 and trained as an Army Air Corps aerial gunner. Once his training was completed, Tolleson shipped west to the Pacific Theater where he was assigned to the 868th Bombardment Squadron headquartered at Pitoe Airdrome on the island of Morotai in the Dutch East Indies. The “Snoopers,” part of the 13th Air Force, flew missions in General Douglas MacArthur’s Southwest Pacific area. The squadron participated in the destruction of Truk in 1944 as well as long-range attacks on Batavia in Java. Their targets were primarily Japanese shipping and port facilities.

It was against such a target that the 868th dispatched Sergeant Tolleson’s SB-24 on July 17, 1945. The radar equipment on board the 868th’s aircraft required a trained operator, adding an additional crew member, an officer, to bring the crew up to eleven members. The radar would help the bomber strike targets under the cover of darkness, often allowing the aircraft to achieve tactical surprise with all the advantages such an attack enjoyed.



Tolleson's aircraft, under the command of pilot Second Lieutenant Robert Marcotte, lifted off of the runway at 0329 hours. The aircraft turned to the south toward Halmahera Island, possibly to minimize its flying time over water. After its departure from the airfield, there was no further contact with the aircraft. Before it turned west on its course to attack enemy shipping on the Mahakam River in Borneo, the SB-24 crashed into the side of a mountain on Halmahera Island. Miraculously, one of Tolleson's crewmates, gunner Richard Rutledge, survived the catastrophe that claimed the lives of Tolleson and the nine other members of the crew. Rutledge was able to make his way through enemy territory and back to friendly lines.

After the war, Tolleson's remains were buried in Arlington National Cemetery. He was awarded the Air Medal and the Purple Heart.

