

Last Flight

The training flight was another chance, the last chance in fact, to practice formation flying before the group left Alamogordo Army Air Base for overseas deployment. As the B-24 Liberator bombers climbed into the blue New Mexico sky that June morning, Staff Sergeant Arthur Paul Wikle, Clemson College Class of 1944, manned his station as gunner and assistant engineer on a ship piloted by First Lieutenant Donald Kaspervik.

Paul Wikle enrolled at Clemson in the fall of 1940. A mechanical engineering major from Clarkesville, Georgia, Wikle was assigned to Company M, 3rd Battalion, 2nd Regiment. After completing his sophomore year in the spring of 1942, Wikle left Clemson and entered military service.

Wikle volunteered for the Army Air Force and was sent to Wendover Field, Utah for aerial bombing and gunnery school. He met and married the former Madge West of Salt Lake City. Following his individual training, Wikle was assigned to the 392nd Bomb Group at Davis Monthan Army Airfield outside of Tucson, Arizona. The 392nd moved to Biggs Field, Texas in March 1943 and then on to Alamogordo, New Mexico the following month. Alerted for overseas movement, the group worked to complete its organizational training prior to its pending July departure for England.

Early on the morning of June 15, 1943, the group took off on what was to be its final training mission before releasing its crews for pre-deployment leave. The flight path of the formation carried it north toward the Capitan Mountains. At approximately 0650 hours, the formation was flying at an altitude of 12,000 feet, about 3,000 feet above the mountains. Lieutenant Kaspervik's crew, including Wikle, was flying in the lead aircraft of its element. Just behind and to the left was a B-24 piloted by Second Lieutenant Donald R. Lembright.

According to Technical Sergeant Robison, the engineer and top turret gunner on Lembright's crew, his pilot was struggling to hold the aircraft steady in the turbulence caused by the up and down drafts from the mountains below. Robison heard the pilot complain that the turbulence was causing his plane to skid to the right. Lembright's task was made more challenging because he was looking directly into the morning sun to judge his distance and position relative to Kaspervik's lead plane. Robison got Lembright's sunglasses out of the storage bin and was ready to hand them to the pilot when the air suddenly "smoothed out." Without warning, Lembright's aircraft slid toward Kaspervik's lead bomber, striking the lower part of Kaspervik's



tail surface with one of its propellers. Then, Lembright's plane moved slightly forward, causing even more damage to Kaspervik and Wikle's aircraft. Both bombers veered to the left, Kaspervik's in a fatal glide toward the mountains below and Lembright's attempting a futile climb that resulted in a stall and subsequent crash. Robison scrambled out of Lembright's damaged aircraft through the bomb bay, the door of which had been jarred loose by the mid-air collision. Falling through the air, Robison realized that his parachute was on backwards. By the time he was able to find and pull the ripcord with his left hand, he was only about 500 feet above the rugged terrain. He landed hard, fracturing his spine, but was still able to reach the crash site where he found no other survivors. Of the twenty men aboard the two bombers, Robison was the sole survivor.

Staff Sergeant Arthur Paul Wikle was survived by his wife, his parents, two sisters, and two brothers, one of whom was then serving in the Army. He is buried at Providence Baptist Church in Batesville, Georgia.

