

Last of the Era

If you fought in Europe, you might feel that World War II ended with Germany's capitulation on May 8, 1945. If your theater of operations was the Pacific, hostilities ceased with Emperor Hirohito's broadcast to his subjects on August 15. The formal surrender ceremony aboard the USS *Missouri* in Tokyo Bay on September 2 is the date recognized by most historians as the official end of the war. For legal purposes, the United States also defined the end of World War II in public law. Title 38 of the Code of Federal Regulations § 3.2 sets the legal end of World War II as December 31, 1946. The date is important for determining which individuals qualified for the benefits awarded to World War II veterans by a grateful nation.



When he enrolled at Clemson College in September 1941, Wilfert O. Davis, Jr. was probably not concerned with veterans' benefits. Davis, a member of the Class of 1945, arrived on campus from Weldon, on the Roanoke River in eastern North Carolina. He majored in mechanical engineering. The big issues on campus that fall were the record enrollment of more than 2,200 cadets and the hazing practices of some campus organizations. The main references to the war in Europe found in the first edition of *The Tiger* that fall were in a tongue-in-cheek editorial entitled "Why We Should Love Hitler." The editor gave the German dictator credit for getting young American men "out of the streets and pool halls and...into comfortable camps. Millions of men have been employed making munitions and supplies as a result of Hitler's activities... And last, but not least, he gives us something to talk about, other than the weather." Three months later, nobody would be laughing.

After America's entry into the war, Davis traveled to Camp Croft near Spartanburg where he enlisted as a private in the Army's Air Corps in March 1942. His enlistment was deferred, originally until June 1946, but in February of 1943, Davis left Clemson and reported for active duty.

Davis seems to have served stateside from his basic training until mid-1946. In July of that year, he was ordered to report to the Overseas Replacement Depot at Kearns, Utah for a foreign assignment.

On July 18, 1946, First Lieutenant Davis boarded a C-47 Skytrain transport plane at Forbes Air Force Base in Topeka, Kansas. The C-47 was the Army's workhorse for aerial transportation during World War II. More than 10,000 of the versatile aircraft were manufactured during the war. They were used to haul personnel and cargo, paratroopers



The first of more than 10,000 C-47s delivered to the American military during World War II.

and VIPs. Along with Davis were nine other passengers plus the three-man crew of the aircraft.

En route to Lowry Air Force Base at Aurora, Colorado, Davis's flight encountered severe weather. The pilot of another Army plane flying the same route reported heavy rain and high winds as storms closed in on the flight path.

At 9:10 pm Mountain Standard Time on that hot and humid Thursday, farmers living about four miles north of Goodland, Kansas reported a brilliant flash, which they assumed was lightning from an electrical storm sweeping through the area. It wasn't. Davis's airplane had crashed and exploded at that moment as determined by the stopped wristwatches found on the bodies of several of the victims. Two local men were the first to reach the site, but by that time all they found were charred bodies and wreckage strewn over an area 400 to 500 yards long. All thirteen crew and passengers aboard the flight were killed.

Davis was survived by his parents. He is buried in Cedarwood Cemetery, Weldon, North Carolina and is memorialized on a plaque at the crash site. Using the legal definition found in the Code of Federal Regulations, Wilfert O. Davis, Jr. was the last Clemson alumnus to die while on active military service during the World War II era.

