

JAMES ROWE CLELAND

LIEUTENANT
U.S. ARMY AIR CORPS

WORLD WAR II
1923 - 1944

WRITTEN BY LYDIA CAMPBELL, AMELIA DAHL, AND MADDIE MOATS
GRAFTON HIGH SCHOOL
INSTRUCTED BY REBECCA BARTLETT

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CLELAND, JAMES ROWE
Oak Park, Ill. Hobby: Gas Model Airplanes — Women. Ambition: To get wings and commission. "I should write a letter tonight. They miss me back there."

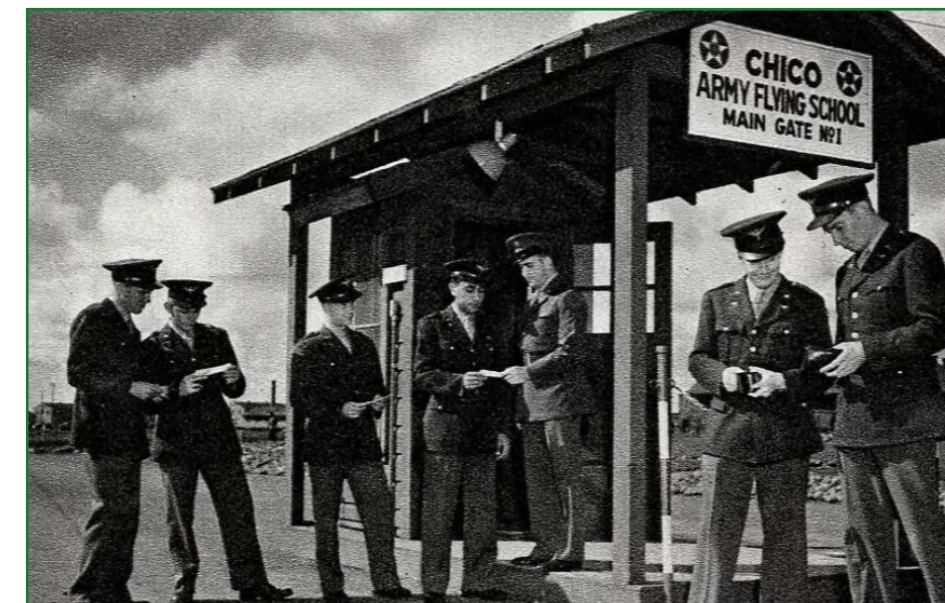
During a desperate flight over enemy territory, a B-24 Liberator named "Heaven Can Wait" struggled to stay airborne as it plummeted toward the Austrian countryside. Despite the best efforts of its pilot, James Rowe Cleland, nothing could save the shattered bomber and its crew as German machine guns tore into its airframe. Among the debris, remains of eight of the ten crewmen were later recovered and collectively transferred home. These brave airmen now rest together in Grafton National Cemetery in Grafton, West Virginia.

James Cleland was born on May 4, 1923, to DeWitt and Margaret Cleland in the Chicago suburb of Maywood, Cook County, Illinois. James was four years younger than his sister, Judith Ann. While Cleland grew up during the Great Depression, he and his family likely avoided much of the economic turmoil that gripped the nation. James' father DeWitt, a former World War I pilot and leading member of the local American Legion Post in Englewood, was a prominent attorney at the firm of Cleland, Lee, and Phelps and was the assistant attorney general of Illinois throughout the late 1920s. Dewitt's clients included the Walgreens Corporation, which was rapidly expanding across Chicago and the Midwest.

The Clelands were an outgoing family of performers. DeWitt had been involved in plays and musicals while attending college. James' mother, Margaret Rowe, was a musician with wide-ranging tastes who also worked as a church choir leader. She toured the community with a group of singers she organized known as The Melodists. James followed in his mother's musical footsteps, playing the trombone in both his high school band and an honors concert band.

The Clelands' suburban hometown of Maywood contained a mix of middle- and working-class families—many of whom worked in the American Can Company factory, Hines Veteran Hospital, or the Canada Dry beverages factory. Though the Clelands themselves were relatively insulated, the Great Depression hit the community hard with bank closings, foreclosures, and rising unemployment rates. President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal provided funding for projects such as a new football stadium for Proviso Township High School, which was completed in 1934 by formerly unemployed local workers. Simultaneously, the New Deal also offered funding for the high school to establish night school, enrolling roughly one-third of the high school's student body that worked during the day. James Cleland would have witnessed and possibly experienced many of these changes while he attended school and earned about ten dollars a week as an usher at a local movie theater. In the spring of 1940, Cleland graduated from Proviso Township High School and went on to attend Northwestern University for two years, where he was part of the Acacia Fraternity, before leaving school to work as a clerk for his father and later for a crane company.

On April 8, 1942, five months after the United States officially entered World War II, James enlisted in the Army. Following in his father's footsteps, James volunteered for the Air Corps and entered flight school. The Army's training regimen for pilots took Cleland across six different states in the span of a few months. In May 1943, James completed basic pilot training with 43-E,



Pilots at Chico Army Field, California, one of many locations where James Cleland trained. *CSU Chico Special Collections*

LEFT: Cleland's portrait from his 1943 Chico Army Field yearbook. *CSU Chico Special Collections*

Squadron 15 at Chico Airfield, California, where he trained on the Vultee Bt-13 Valiant training aircraft. Following graduation, the Army sent him to La Junta Army Base, Colorado, where in June 1943 he earned his pilot's wings and a promotion to second lieutenant. This is where he likely learned to fly bombers. By August, he was in Moses Lake Army Base, Washington, where he received additional flight training. During this time, he also found himself in Nebraska and New Mexico where he joined the 455th Bombardment Group, known as the Vulgar Vultures, which the Army had activated that summer in Clovis, New Mexico. By October 1943, Cleland arrived at Langley Field, Virginia, where the 455th received their B-24 Consolidated Liberators and prepared for overseas deployment. Their job would be to support the Allied offensive in Europe by bombing strategic military and industrial targets in Axis-held territory.

Cleland and the 455th arrived in Tunisia, North Africa, via Brazil in January 1944. The following month, the Vulgar Vultures arrived at their new airfield in San Giovanni, Italy, where they joined the 740th Bombardment Squadron, 15th Army Air Force. The unit lost no time: Cleland and his comrades conducted one of their first combat missions on February 12, 1944. James was in the pilot seat of his B-24 as they targeted an enemy supply dump north of Campoleone, Italy, in a midday raid that reported no American losses.

JAMES ROWE CLELAND



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The squadron's luck held through the next operation as Allied commanders launched a coordinated air offensive against Axis military and infrastructure targets across the European theater. Known as Big Week, these missions extended from February 20 to February 25, 1944. The objective was to reduce Axis military strength—particularly German air forces—well in advance of the D-Day landings in France scheduled for that summer. James flew again on February 22, 1944, to bombard the Zara Dockyard in what was then Yugoslavia. He and his crew dropped 5,000 pounds of ordnance, alongside the rest of the 455th, and again sustained no lost aircraft. Two days later, the Army promoted James to first lieutenant. But Cleland's luck in these first weeks of combat was soon to run out.

The day after his promotion, on February 25, 1944, Cleland's bomber and 37 additional B-24 Liberators took off from their San Giovanni airfield to bomb enemy installations in Graz, Austria, a round-trip of about 800 miles across the Adriatic Sea. Each plane carried ten 500-pound bombs. They flew without fighter escorts, a mistake made early on by Allied strategists who predicted that the bombers' machine gunners, paired with mutually supporting bomber formations, could protect themselves well enough from German fighter attacks. This overconfidence was to prove fatal to many American bomber crews across Europe until remedied with the addition of escort fighters equipped with external fuel tanks.

About 36 minutes away from the target, Cleland reported engine trouble and struggled to keep up with the formation. He jettisoned his bombs which seemed to allow him to maintain his speed for another five minutes. Then "Heaven Can Wait" began to lag behind again. After about 15 more minutes trying to solve the problem, Cleland decided to return to base, no longer having bombs to drop. Second Lieutenant Robert Beckner, a fellow pilot who dropped back three times to keep an eye on Cleland's plane, saw "Heaven Can Wait" drop from sight below.

Cleland struggled to keep his plane in the sky as the squadron's formation disappeared from view, still en route to the target. As he flew back over Austria, locals on the ground watched the low-flying plane. Just then a German fighter plane appeared and placed the helpless "Heaven Can Wait" in its gunsights. Bullets tore into Cleland's bomber, sending it tumbling down over the rural village of Trahütten (Trahuetten in American reports), in Nazi-occupied Austria.

Austrian authorities scrambled the crash site. After the fire died away they could find the remains of only eight crewmen, and believed the other two might have parachuted and escaped. These remains were subsequently recovered, however, when salvage crews arrived to dismantle and remove what remained of the plane. Two of the crewmen, machine gunner Staff Sergeant Jacob Snavelly and navigator Second Lieutenant Kenneth B. Skuldt, were identified in initial German reports. The remains of another gunner, Sergeant Ray Clark, were identified later. The Austrian report on the incident, later attached to the Missing Aircrew Report, also indicates that authorities recovered an individual they were able to identify as the pilot. All ten crew members were interred in a common grave in the cemetery at the Catholic church in Trahütten. Cleland's death came so soon after his promotion that some reports continued to list him as a second lieutenant.

Officially, Cleland and his crewmates were listed as missing in action until February of the following year. They remained interred together in Austria for 27 months until American officials were able to retrieve their remains and temporarily transfer them to a U.S. military cemetery near Saint Avoird, France. The families of Jacob Snavelly and Ray Clark, both gunners aboard the B-24, elected to have separate markers in Arlington National Cemetery and Cedar Lawn Cemetery in New York, respectively.

On April 14, 1950, the remainder of the crew including James Rowe Cleland, William C. Minnick, John A. Cripps, Sigmund Pfeifer, Louis N. Krentzman, Joseph L. Haass, Ralph L. Haney, and Kenneth B. Skuldt were reinterred in a shared grave at Grafton National Cemetery. Though none of the crewmen hailed from West Virginia, the Grafton location was chosen because it was equidistant from each serviceman's families for the purpose of visiting their loved ones. These crewmen remain together in Section A, Site 4, one of several such group interments in Grafton.

LEFT: A 15th Air Force B-24 bombs Graz, Austria, in October 1944. National Archives, NAID 204840388

BELOW: Excerpt from the squadron's planning document from Cleland's final mission, showing part of the bombers' formation. Cleland is shown at bottom right. The asterisk indicates missing in action. 455th Bomber Group website, 455th.org

Formation over Target			
257 HARP		0	0
235 FIBER	216 LANFORD	2	1
266 NORWARD		3	1
271 DEEBIE	299 JORDAN	2	1
223 MOORE		1	0
269 SCRIMSHAW		0	0
219 SAINTE	210 HANSON	0	0
198 BETHUNE		0	0
239 BECKNER	210 CLELAND*	1	0
476 HUDSON		0	0
456 CURTIS		0	0



SOURCES FULL BIBLIOGRAPHY TO BE INCLUDED IN FINAL VERSION

SOURCES

ABOUT THE PROJECT

Full bibliographies will be included in the final draft of each biography, available later in the summer of 2024.

The West Virginia National Cemeteries Project is a program of the West Virginia Humanities Council, funded in part by the Veterans Legacy Grant Program of the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs and initiated in 2021. All biographies produced as part of this program are composed by West Virginia high school students, who conduct original research on veterans interred at the Grafton National Cemetery or the West Virginia National Cemetery, both of which are located in Grafton, Taylor County, West Virginia.

As home to one of the nation's first National Cemeteries—founded shortly after the Civil War—the community of Grafton has longstanding traditions of honoring America's veterans, including the longest continuously celebrated Memorial Day parade in the United States. The Grafton National Cemetery, located in the heart of the city and founded in 1867, is typically the endpoint of each year's parade. Since the Grafton National Cemetery began to run short of space during the 1960s, the West Virginia National Cemetery was dedicated in 1987, just a few miles outside of Grafton.

The West Virginia Humanities Council is proud to thank the following organizations for their participation in the West Virginia National Cemeteries Project: West Virginia Archives and History, the West Virginia University history department, Taylor County Historical and Genealogical Society, Taylor County Public Library, Grafton High School, and University High School.

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