



THE AIR ATTACK ON TARLETON

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(Photo of TSU cadet guarding damaged NTAC plane used with Permission from Tarleton State University – All Rights Reserved)

The winds of wars were swirling in Europe. Germany had overrun Poland. The Soviet Union had just invaded Finland. The Great Depression was in full force, and the U.S. national unemployment rate was 17.2%. The year was 1939, the month late November. Arlington was a small rural town surrounded by cotton farms. Just south of the town, was the North Texas Agricultural College (NTAC, forerunner of UTA), a part of the Texas A & M System. On the NTAC campus, the students (all male students were cadets) were at fever pitch, preparing for the coming battle, not the war in Europe, but the big football game with John Tarleton State College (JTAC), a sister institution in the Texas A & M System (now Tarleton State University in Stephenville).

The rivalry between the two schools was intense, partly because of history and tradition, partly because the cadets had few other diversions. Most of the students were desperately poor and could not afford off-campus entertainment of any type. BY 1926, the rivalry between the two schools had become so “spirited” that the two schools cancelled all scheduled football games from 1927 to 1933. The football rivalry resumed in 1934, apparently without any loss of mutual antagonism for the opposing college. Each year, cadets at both schools built a huge pile of logs, scrap lumber, and wooden boxes for a great pre-game bonfire and homecoming celebration to inspire their respective football teams. Students made frequent attempts to raid the other campus and set fire to its “pile” ahead of schedule. According to the Tarleton Student Handbook (which counts this story as one of it’s major traditions), the students were driven by “the desire to cause premature conflagration to the accumulated rubbish.”

On Monday, November 27, 1939, a raiding party from Tarleton burned NTAC’s bonfire “pile” and then burned Tarleton’s initials into the NTAC football field as an added insult. The students at NTAC were greatly agitated by these hostile actions, and after some “inspirational potions” a large group of NTAC students retaliated. A freshman cadet from Caddo Mills, Chester Phillips Jr., took the lead. Chester happened to be a student pilot. The plan of attack involved both air and land operations, with a coordinated assault.

Selecting cadet James E. Smith from San Antonio as his co-pilot and bombardier, Chester rented a small Taylorcraft airplane (single engine, two-seater), loaded it with a sackful of phosphorous “bombs,” and took off for the Stephenville campus. Simultaneously, three truckloads of NTAC cadets departed by ground. Meanwhile, word of the impending attack had reached Dean Edward E. Davis at NTAC. Alarmed, he telephoned a warning to Tarleton, and dispatched Major Max Oliver, the NTAC Commandant, to bring the errant raiders home.

Tarleton students were lying in ambush to repel the attack. The small plane flew low over the bonfire pile and James attempted to drop the phosphorous bombs on the target. According to some reports, one of the bombs set fire to the Tarleton “pile,” but the defenders quickly extinguished the fire. While most of the bombs missed the wood pile, the sticks and boards hurled up at the airplane did not. One of the Tarleton defenders, L.V. Risinger, hurled a 2X4 into the air. It struck the propeller and brought the small plane down. Chester managed to fly the “wounded” plane over what is now the Hall of Presidents, barely clear a rock fence, and crash-land into a clump of trees. (Or some say, come to a stop three feet away from crashing into the rock wall). Chester and James survived the crash, only to be captured by the Tarleton defenders. Meanwhile, the three truckloads of cadets likewise fell into ambush, and most of the attackers were captured. Each of the captured cadets had a block-T cut into his hair, according to Col. Charles McDowell (a JTAC

defender and later the Professor of Military Science at UTA). Several of the JTAC students climbed atop the bonfire pile to make speeches about the “spirit” between the two schools, and to tell their defeated rivals to “take your plane and go back home.” The NTAC boys were treated to hot coffee and doughnuts and set loose to return to Arlington. A picture of the crashed airplane appeared in the next issue of Life Magazine, according to some accounts (but we have not been able to find any issue with the photo).

According to the Fort Worth Telegram, discipline and quiet reigned on both campuses the next day. Chester and his bombardier, James, had to appear before the Federal Civil Aeronautics Authority for a routine investigation into the incident. Dean Davis of NTAC told the Dallas Morning News that, “There is no ill will between the student bodies, but the enthusiasm gets out of hand, interferes with normal school work and might result in an unfortunate accident. It is all in fun now, and no one has been hurt, but such raids as were made by Tarleton boys and the one made at Stephenville Tuesday night by our students could very well result seriously.” He added, “There is a possibility that the athletic contests will be suspended between NTAC and Tarleton.”

The much anticipated football game was held as planned in Arlington, Thursday, November 30, 1939. Arlington’s great opportunity for redemption and revenge reverberated in the stadium, but this was not the year. The Tarleton “Plowboys” beat the NTAC “Hornets” 7 to 0. Afterwards, officials of the two schools held a meeting in Stephenville to discuss disciplinary actions and future relationships between the two schools. Faculty committees of both schools agreed to eliminate the traditional bonfire preliminaries to the annual football game. They also agreed that the 1939 football game would be the last Texas Conference contest for each school. However, athletic relations of the two schools would continue, with faculty supervision of pre-game activity. The matter of disciplinary action toward the student raiders from both schools was left to the individual schools.

NTAC executives ratified the actions of the Stephenville conference and instructed the discipline committee of North Texas Agricultural College to confer with the 30 or so students who were known to have participated in the raid. The discipline committee, which included Dean Davis and Major Oliver, decided to expel James Smith for the remainder of the semester, and to recommend the suspension of Chester Phillip’s flying license for six months to the FCAA for violating flying rules of safety. For the other students there would be a discussion on behavior and a warning against similar activities in the future. At John Tarleton, Dean J. Thomas Davis (the brother of NTAC’s Dean Davis) said that he was not certain that any severe discipline would be meted out.

Chester Phillips, Jr. did not let this incident daunt his flying career. With U.S. involvement in World War II fast approaching, Chester joined the Army Air Corps, as did many of the young

cadets at both schools. He trained military pilots, and when the war began in earnest he was shipped out to Shipdam, England. According to a Blackie Sherrod column in the Dallas Morning News, Chester was assigned to a B-24 Liberator, called the "Little Beaver." German submarines at the time were causing havoc to Allied shipping, and Chester's mission in May of 1943 was to destroy the submarine pens at Kiel. He and his crew encountered German fighter planes and heavy anti-aircraft flak. Chester and several of his crew were killed instantly. Others bailed out and were held as POWs for the rest of the war. Chester is buried somewhere in Belgium.

Many of the other bonfire raiders and defenders also served their country well and still remember the incident. Col. Charles McDowell, now in the UTA Foreign Language Dept. (Soviet Studies) was one of the JTAC bonfire defenders who helped to bring the plane down. He remembers his group of defenders throwing everything that they could get their hands on up at the plane as it came over. L.V. Risinger, the young man reportedly responsible for the successful 2X4, became a hero at Tarleton. The present day Homecoming Bonfire is dedicated to him. He died in 1994. James Smith left UTA and almost assuredly fought in World War II, although his trail has been lost.

Aaron Williams, a native of Greenville and a relative of Chester Phillips, told Blackie Sherrod that "If Chester were here, he probably would get a good chuckle to know that people are still talking about his airplane antics." Chester and all the others who participated in the abrupt ending of the flight would also be amazed at the variety and the disparity in the details remembered and recounted over time.