

LIEUTENANT THOMAS JEFFERSON RAINEY

By Lillian Frye Rainey

This is the story of the brief but full life of Lieutenant Thomas Jefferson Rainey, a pilot in the 359th Fighter Squadron of the First Army Air Force, one of those who died that all mankind might be free.¹

On June 14, 1943, a telegram bearing two stars was brought to me. It said that my son Tom had been killed when his plane, a P-47 Thunderbolt, crashed near Fire Island, New York City. That was all. That is still all that we know of Tom's going, but of Tom's stay on earth there is so much to tell!

Born on the 4th day of July, 1921, he would have been twenty-two years old his next birthday. As a boy growing up he was particularly glad to have been named for President Jefferson and thought it great fun that his birthday should have been the Fourth of July. This may have had some slight bearing on his marked interest in the history and government of our country. While president of the student body of Harding Junior High School, Oklahoma City, in 1936 he was awarded the Sons of the American Revolution medal for outstanding scholarship, leadership, citizenship and character. Later, at Episcopal High, Alexandria, Virginia, where he prepared for college, he won the history award for his paper on American History, and at Yale in his freshman year received the much coveted Andrew D. White history prize for the outstanding paper on Modern European History. I mention these recognitions, which he would depreciate if he could, as they point the trend of his mind and explain in part his sense of personal responsibility and eagerness to get into the war.

The American Creed was not just words or a formula to Tom. He believed with all his heart that it was his duty to support his country; to love it; to support its Constitution; to obey its laws; to respect its Flag; and to defend it against all enemies. To that end immediately after the tragedy at Pearl Harbor he left Yale University where he was in his Junior year, and enlisted as an aviation cadet. Believing that war was certain to come, he had, on entering school in the fall, taken the C.A.A. course offered and had learned to fly.

¹ Written as a labor of love with no thought of publication and placed for all time in the Oklahoma War Memorial, this story is presented in *The Chronicles* as an expression representing that of thousands in our State experiencing the sacrifices of a gigantic struggle. It is the story of an Oklahoma pilot written by his mother, envisioning the spirit of American youth setting forth with high hope into the realm of the unknown where only brave pioneers venture and embodying that warm devotion which all parental life is now giving to their loved ones involved in this great Global War.—Eds.

In a letter written on Dec. 19, 1941, he said: "During the last two or three weeks I have been so busy that I have not been able to do many of the things I should like to do. As an example I should have liked to put down a few of my general views about the war and the events leading up to our entrance into it in my letters home. There will be time enough for this when I get home, however." And, again: "After all has been said and done I have reached my decision. I am entering the Air Corps. My appointment has come through and I am accepting. Perhaps my decision is not the right one, and I know you all would have preferred to see me wait but I think that I have considered the matter rather calmly and coolly, and I feel very strongly that what I am doing is right and best. At any rate there is no turning back now but only looking to the future." Before leaving Yale he wrote in regard to leaving school and the friends of several years' making: "Packing up and leaving is a rather gloomy and unpleasant operation and I am not enjoying it in the least but it is a necessary by-product of the course of action which I am pursuing."

As early as the spring of 1941 Tom was convinced that America must get into the war and was concerned at the apparent apathy and indifference and even outspoken isolationism in the country. About this time he read a small book entitled "America", written by David Cushman Coyle which carried such chapters as, "What Are We Up Against? What is Nazism? Defeatism? Why Help England? All American" and others dealing with similar subjects. He thought it should be widely distributed and discussed, and implemented that belief by dipping into his own meager funds to buy and send out fifty copies to those whom he thought it might arouse.

This was the summer he spent in Washington as secretary to his good friend, Mike Monroney, the representative from our district in Congress. I doubt if Tom ever spent a happier two months. Washington was unbearably hot, and frightfully crowded but overnight, as it were, it had become alive. It had become the Capital of the World. And, as Tom might have expressed it, it was right down his alley. His letters home were full of comments on bills pending before Congress and of what various people whom he had met thought and said about the important public questions.

When he returned to Yale in the fall he was particularly interested in the debates before the Political Union Club where both sides of many questions were presented by the ablest speakers in the country. Tom had a judicial mind and liked to weigh the relative merits of such arguments. As his roommate once wrote me, "Tom's marvelous sense of humor, breadth of understanding and tolerance were amazing. It was these qualities which enabled us

to get along so intimately for so many years in prep school and in college."

In Tom's Sophomore year he headed the Yale News and lost by a fraction of one point. I know now that it was a great disappointment to him but at the time he made light of it and accepted it with a fine spirit. John Taber, the secretary of the class of 1943, shared that experience with Tom and wrote me:

"I had the pleasure of knowing Tom well. We headed the News together Sophomore year, and ever after that valuable experience for both of us we saw much of each other. Always during our friendship he impressed me by his ability to appreciate true values in people, in issues and in tastes. His intellectual curiosity was all too rare in our community; had it had time to expand further it would have left its impress on our class. But Tom felt the tug of events more strongly than most of us and so left a Yale he really loved early. His going was just another manifestation of the social responsibility he felt. He wanted to serve his country unselfishly; he had that sense, too, far beyond most of us. He did serve and will serve still as an inspiration in many worthy fields to those members of Yale 1943 who shared several of the years of his rich life."

To those who knew Tom, or Tommy or T. J., as he was called, what I have written would seem a bit on the serious side. For Tom was gay and full of fun. As his friend Archie Ragan of Atlanta wrote, "Tom worked hard and played hard and when he was out relaxing all of us were insured of a good time because of his infectious spirits and exuberance." The world was an intensely interesting place to Tom. He liked people, liked to talk with all kinds of people; he wanted to know what they thought and how they felt and why. On vacation trips home and with transportation in his pocket he often hitch-hiked for the sheer adventure of meeting people and finding out how they lived. Some of his accounts high-lighted by his sense of humor were often most amusing—sometimes a little sad. In spirit he was the most democratic person I have ever known.

In my hand I hold his marked copy of *Standard English Poetry*. He liked Robert Burns' dry Scotch wit. Underscored is this line from "Cotters Saturday Night": "Princes and Lords are but the breath of Kings. An honest man's the noblest work of God." And, again, from another poem this line: "The rank is but the guinea's stamp, The Man's the gowd for a' that." Farther on I come on Tennyson's prophetic lines from Locksley Hall:

"For I dipt into the future far as human eye could see,
Saw the Vision of the world, and all the wonder that would be;
Saw the heavens fill with commerce, argosies of magic sails,
Pilots of the purple twilight, dropping down with costly bales;
Heard the heavens fill with shouting, and there rain'd a ghastly dew
From the nation's airy navies grappling in the central blue;
Far along the world-wide whisper of the southwind rushing warm,
With the standards of the peoples plunging thro' the thunder storm;
Till the war-drum throb'd no longer, and the battle-flags were
furled,

In the Parliament of man, the Federation of the world."

In thinking of the people, the books, the places and the associations which influenced Tom most, I should say, of people, his father; of books, Carl Sandburg's *Life of Lincoln*; of places, our summer home, an island of towering pines, moss and rock in the Georgian Bay area of Canada; of associations, the Boy Scouts. As a member of "Troop Fifteen" at the First Presbyterian Church he put his whole heart into the building and furnishing of their scout house at Camp Kickapoo and later spent happy weeks two different summers at Y.M.C.A. Camp Cunningham in the Arbuckle Mountains. He became an eagle scout and made his first trip to Washington to the scout Jamboree. His old felt scout hat was one possession dating back to scout days which he refused to give up. Battered and without shape, which bothered him not at all, he clung to it for reasons of sentiment, I suspect, though he insisted that for trolling and motor-boating up Moon River which flows by our door in summer it stayed put in any breeze and was easy on the head. It hangs still in company with a favorite faded red sport shirt on a peg in the house on Moon River.

His first appointment in service was to Maxwell Field, Montgomery, Alabama where he was inducted and attended pre-flight school. From there he went to Dorr Field, Arcadia, Florida, for primary training, then to Bush Field, Augusta, Georgia, for advanced training, and on January 14, 1943, at Napier Field, Dothan, Alabama, he received his wings and his commission as Second Lieutenant in the Army Air Force.

Almost at once he was sent to Chickopee Falls, Massachusetts to Westover Field to learn to fly the new fighter plane, the P-47 Thunderbolt which he had requested. In the spring his squadron was advanced to Trumbull Field at Groton, Conn., and in June moved to Mitchell Field, New York City for the last flying before going overseas. It was here on June 14th, five months after having received his wings, that his plane crashed into the ocean near Fire Island.

His father, his sister and I saw him in April while he was still at Trumbull Field. He loved flying and was happy and enthusiastic about his plane. He said to me: "I wouldn't change places with anybody in the world." He knew well the risks and dangers which lay ahead but was eager to get over and do his part in the war.

When I mentioned a poem about flying I had read he cited me to the one below which he said better expressed his feeling about it. It is called *High Flight*:

"Oh, I have slipped the surly bonds of Earth
 And danced the skies on laughter silvered wings;
 Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth
 Of sun-split clouds—and done a hundred things
 You have not dreamed of—wheeled and soared and swung
 High in the sunlit silence; hovering there,
 I've chased the shouting wind along and flung
 My eager craft through footless halls of air.

Up, up the long, delirious burning blue
 I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace
 Where never lark, or even eagle flew—
 And, while with silent lifting mind I've trod
 The high untrespassed sanctity of space,
 Put out my hand and touched the face of God."

Tom's faith was not a formal creed, but an inward spirit and conviction. As some one said of him, "His cheerfulness, his winsome friendly way, his readiness to bear his own weight and a little more were reflections of what had become his deepest faith about life." He had a feeling that those who had enjoyed social privileges had great social responsibilities and that he who had been favored by Fortune should be among the first to accept the hardship and danger of days such as these.

I do not know how the accident happened, or why just at the fulfillment of long months of training Tom was not to go on, but surely God has a use for him and somewhere he is busy in a great service.

His body lies in Fairlawn Cemetery. Four of his boyhood friends, two of his favorite teachers and Paul Henry Habbe, his "buddy" who brought him home were the pall-bearers. Doctor Harold Walker, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church, conducted the services. Clark Snell sang, with violin accompaniment, two hymns which Tom and his sister, Dorothea, used to sing together: "Our God Our Help in Ages Past" and "Dear Lord and Father of Mankind," and at the close, Tennyson's "Crossing the Bar." Through the service a warm shaft of sunlight pierced the stained glass window and lay for a time on his flag draped casket as if to say: Do not mourn for him; there is no death; and even now he is in God's tender keeping.