



Willmon Thomas Burnett

1st Lieutenant United States Army Air Force

Died when his plane crashed on the Gawdy Hall Estate on 21st June 1945

2nd Lt. Wilmon Thomas Burnett¹

W. J. Burnett Death Occurs at Residence Here

Wilmon J. Burnett, for many years active in music circles and longtime resident of Muscatine, died at his home, 411 West Third street, at 7:15 a. m. today.

Mr. Burnett was born at Garden Plain, Ill., June 21, 1863, the son of James and Frances Orruthers Burnett. He married Alice Burghardt at Garden Plain, Ill., in 1887 and they established their home in Muscatine in 1916. He was a member of the First Congregational church. For many years Mr. Burnett was associated with the Muscatine Music House and served for a long period of time as organist of the First Congregational church and of the Muscatine Elks lodge.

Surviving are his wife, one son, E. Burnett of Raymondville, Tex., three daughters, Mrs. C. J. Dyche of Muscatine, Mrs. John Gorham of rural route No. 1, Illinois City and Mrs. L. C. Day of Muscatine. Six grandchildren and one great grandchild also survive.

The body is at the Fairbanks Home for Funerals and services will be held at the chapel there at 2 p. m. Thursday.

Burnett was born in Willacy County, Texas in October 1921 and was named for his grandfather. This gentleman had been born in Illinois and wound up in Iowa whilst his son, James Elliot, moved down to Texas. Today Willacy County is one of the poorest counties in the United States and Burnett would have grown up during the great depression. Perhaps his father's job as a Dairy



Proprietor saved him and his three brothers from the worst poverty prevalent during the thirties. However, the obituary of one of his brothers, Harlan Ivan (aka Tuffy) revealed that the family had a farm at a time when American Agriculture was in a time of collapse. Harlan also enlisted and, other than the time he spent at college and his naval service at Guadalcanal, he spent all his life in Raymondville, Willacy County Town. This brother, Harlan, seems to have been a witty and entertaining person who did well in Raymondville Local Government becoming director of

various departments, thus giving a hint of what Willmon may have gone on to achieve had he survived.

*The Muscatine Journal and News-Tribune
Muscatine, Iowa
16 Jan 1945*

¹ This portrait and the picture of the Debbie Lee both posted by Jeff Carless on Ancestry uk.

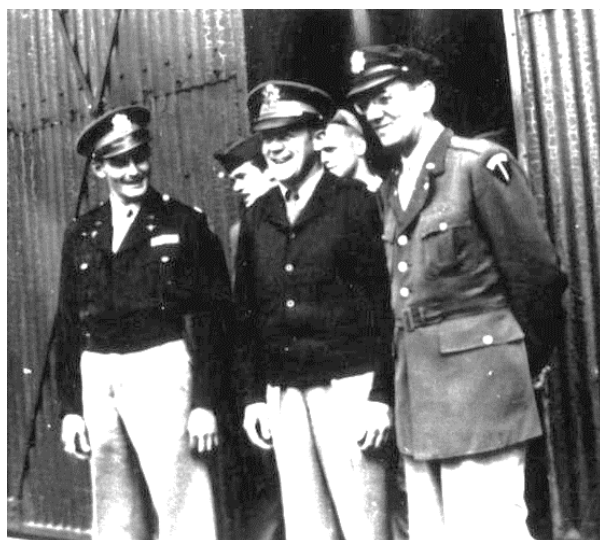
Willmon Burnett (normally using his middle name of Thomas) enlisted just a few weeks before his 21st birthday and was posted to Steeple Morden in Suffolk in January '42, having his first, minor, accident only few weeks later when taxiing his plane in February of the same year.

Presumably his skills improved and he was promoted to 1st Lt . in April, shortly before meeting his end when his plane crashed onto the Gawdy Hall Estate fields in June 1945. This was a training flight and it was alleged that the planes were doing 'follow the leader' manoeuvres, designed to improve the pilot's skills.

The following report of the accident is taken from a British Legion Publication²

The Accident Report: On 21st June 1945, at approximately 1010, a P-51D-15, type aircraft, AF No 44-14858, piloted by 1st Lt Willmon T Burnett, O- 256897, crashed after going into a vertical dive. The accident proved fatal to the pilot. Lt Burnett was one of a flight of four aircraft on a routine training flight, which had been up for approximately 45 minutes. At the time they were in Battle formation and the leader started a turn into his number two and three men and continued to orbit until they were in a string. They flew level for a few minutes and the leader did a barrel roll. Lt Burnett rolled out and went into a steep dive. He seemed to have started to pull out but immediately went into a steeper dive which is believed to (have) exceeded vertical. By this time, Lt Burnett was too low to pull out. The airplane crashed and exploded on contact. The Aircraft Accident Committee feels that the cause of this accident cannot be determined. Lt Burnett had approximately 150 hours of combat time out of a total of approximately 650 hours. He was a competent pilot and the committee was at a loss to explain the cause of the accident. He apparently was in good physical condition and had been in numerous "rat race" training missions before. The only two conclusions that they could come to was that something went wrong with him physically as he started a normal pull out which could cause blackout or that there was a structural failure rendering his controls useless. However, in the latter he certainly should have had time to parachute out.

The base from which Burnett flew, RAF Steeple Morden was originally a grass field base built in 1940; when it was handed over to the USAAF they put down hard runways. It was only a small airfield and the only evidence that now remains of its war time role is a few perimeter tracks and semi-derelict buildings. However, the renowned band leader, Glenn Miller did visit, on the 8th August 1944, and is photographed here in the company of a few of the base personnel.³.



*Handwritten caption on reverse:
'L/C Stewart, Col Willaims, *Maj Glenn Miller*.' [sic*

² <http://counties.britishlegion.org.uk/media/6537256/tragedy-in-the-skies-over-harleston-updated-24th-jan-2020.pdf>

³ Roger Freeman Collection, Object number. FRE 437 <http://www.americanairmuseum.com/>



Conditions were fairly basic, this photograph taken at Steeple Morden during the war shows how the barrack rooms contained nothing more than a row of beds and a stove for heating. With no wardrobes the airman had to resort to hanging their uniforms from the rafters.⁴ The Officer's club had more interesting decorations.⁵

Mural at Steeple Merton Officers' Mess



Burnett was already a married man having wed Luahna Marjorie nee Riedel, also from Texas. Their daughter, Deborah Lee, was born in March 1945, and was only a few months old when her father died. Hopefully, even if he never met his child, he may have seen a photograph of what was to be their only child.

Burnett had named his airplane, the one in which he was to die, after his daughter, Debbie Lee.



P51D Mustang – Debbie Lee

Burnett's widow remarried, to a Henry Gould, and went on to have at least two more children, the younger of whom, Billy, died in the Vietnam war.

Burnett was awarded a Posthumous Purple Heart and his body was repatriated and buried in Raymondville, the county town of Willacy, in 1948.

⁴ Roger Freeman Collection, Object number. FRE 6056 Image by Alexander "Cal" Sloan. Written on slide casing: 'Typical Barracks other than Nissen. <http://www.americanairmuseum.com/>

⁵ UPL 34366 <http://www.americanairmuseum.com/>

In 1946 Congress authorized the return of bodies, at government expense, for burial in the United States at an eventual cost of nearly \$191 million. The families of 170,752 fallen servicemen chose this option, and graves registration units oversaw the return of these bodies. The families of the remaining 109,866 decided to leave their loved ones overseas. The 172-acre Normandy American Cemetery



and Memorial overlooking Omaha Beach accommodated nearly 10,000 of the latter. Remaining in limbo were over 70,000 fallen servicemen whose bodies were not recovered, as well as the 10,356 remains that were unidentified.⁶

⁶ <https://www.historynet.com/grave-task-men-buried-wartime-dead.htm>