

Demarrah L. Turner

1921-1944

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A note from the author...

In Shakespeare's 154 sonnets, there is a recurrent idea that threads his poetry together: immortalization through writing. Shakespeare realized the transcendental power of literature and thus continually memorialized his own lovers in fourteen lines of iambic pentameter.

With that sentiment, this is my tribute to Demarrah Turner. It is incomplete; it will never be able to fully encompass all that was Demarrah; it is merely a glimpse into the life of a man in order to save his memory from oblivion. His premature death meant he would never have children or grandchildren, or even meet his sibling's children. There are very few people left to keep Demarrah's legacy alive, so here enters this biography. It is a patchwork of letters and reports and flight logs and censi, all come together to create a semi-fluid story of a soldier only made significant in his deployment and death. But more than that, it is a grand Shakespearean gesture, an expression of immortalization.

“But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st;
Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st:
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.”

Shakespeare's Sonnet 18¹

¹ William Shakespeare, "Sonnet 18: Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day? by William Shakespeare," Poetry Foundation, 2019, www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45087/sonnet-18-shall-i-compare-thee-to-a-summers-day.

Demarrah L. Turner, 1921-1944

Demarrah Lee Turner was born in 1921, beginning his life in a small house and a small town. His mother, Della, died young but lived long enough to give Demarrah four younger siblings, making 118 Cromwell Street, Montgomery, AL, a crowded -- and no doubt lively -- place to live. With a five year gap between the two eldest children and a nine year gap between Demarrah and baby Lorna, Demarrah played parent alongside his father, Eulas Turner. Between his role as pseudo-father, high school student, and employee at a local laundromat, he had very little time for extracurriculars and was involved in no clubs or sports at his school.² He proved to be quite an elusive character, appearing only once in Lanier High School's 1938 yearbook: the Seniors Without Pictures page, where beneath his name hung the fragmented words of his senior quote, "little bit, 'yesterday,' reticent, Sarge, bashful." Though he may not have left much more than a footprint in the dust of Lanier's courtyard, Demarrah's small life exploded rapidly after graduation.

In 1910 the Wright Brothers Flying School opened on a retired plantation just outside of Montgomery, bringing aviation to a largely rural city as its establishment launched the opening of Maxwell-Gunter Air Force Base, an important communications site and home to the Air War College that trains flockings of Air Force officers today. On August 15, 1941, Demarrah enlisted in the United States Army Air Corps and left everything he knew behind as he pursued defense through flight. The following three years of his life were dedicated to the war effort as he spent two years training in the United States and one year of combat in Europe. Though Basic Training was in Montgomery, the change in lifestyle was vast and immediate; life was no longer ironing

² United States. U.S. State Department, World War II Enlistment Records, Electronic Army Serial Number Merged File, ca. 1938-1946, Record Group 64. 6/1/2002-9/30/2002.

and dyeing, but intensive priming for an unimaginable war. After a final year in Alabama, Demarrah left his Southern home to head north, landing in Westover, MA, for cadet training in the 370th Fighter Group. Life suited him better as a cadet; with the formalities and processing over (or “iron assing,” as the boys called it), ground school was filled with “a series of lectures, full session and moving pictures”³. Training in P-47 Thunderbolts, the boys began to fall into the Air Corps mentality as they flew high-precision fighter jets and practiced combat simulations, beginning to focus on their training more intently than they had at Basic. The military felt realer with war-hardened commanders, several of whom had both been shot down and shot down enemy planes themselves, and who prominently conveyed the gravity of their situation. But life was also more entertaining, not always weighed down by the war -- graduation from flight school was in sight, friends were getting married (though Demarrah himself never saw the logic in that), and many boys were anticipating being promoted to instructor.

Graduation finally reached the boys by mid-March of 1942. It was a long-awaited event that proved the boys were making the transition from boys playing battle to men facing war. It also highlighted the strained, distant relationship between Demarrah and Eulas. In his many letters to his father and sisters, Demarrah always wrote in a fatherly way, reminding them of prosaic tasks that must be done, encouraging them to rest and remember their limits, just as a parent might do while away on a trip. Demarrah and Eulas were not particularly close, but it becomes apparent that Demarrah tries to remedy the awkward connection while enlisted. To any son, graduation is a natural milestone to invite his father to, but Demarrah’s invitation was tentative and shy. In a letter written to his dad about a month before graduation, he offered a very

³ Demarrah Turner, *The Diary of Demarrah Turner, 1942-1944*, Feb. 3, 1942.

noncommittal branch to his father: “Would like you to be here but I don’t suppose you could get away.”⁴ To his sister Maxine, he wrote honestly that he would rather Eulas come for graduation than send a gift, because seeing his father would mean so much more. Even after his bout of truthfulness, Demarrah asked Maxine to maintain the stoicism so as not to pressure Eulas into attending.⁵ But throughout the war, as Demarrah’s distance from home increased, Eulas and the Turner family began to write more often (with constant encouragement from Demarrah), and a more conventional relationship seemed to fall into place with each letter sent.

Once a Westover graduate, Demarrah was shipped off to the Dale Mabry Army Airfield, a civilian airport turned military, near Tallahassee, FL. There he was a part of the 53rd Pursuit Group, continuing to focus his training in the Thunderbolt while also learning to fly four other ships. Florida was not well loved by the boys: “Our time at Tallahassee was just wasted. Not exactly wasted either I don’t suppose. It was a good experience. By the time I finish training here I will have time in five different types of pursuit ships. We will fly P-40 F’s here and it is rumored we will have P-47s for combat.”⁶ Tallahassee gave way to a brief stop at the Charleston Army Airfield, SC, before the first overseas leap to the Panama Canal Zone. Recognizing the Canal Zone as a crucial trading and transportation location, FDR steered the United States toward pushing out Japanese ships and solidifying fortifications by sending troops of man-power to their southern holdings. Even as Panama was building defenses and preparing for attack, Demarrah and the other men thoroughly appreciated their station, enjoying the climate, cities, and lifestyle (though the lack of women, who were advised to evacuate, was more than disappointing). The wet season and island orientation often made flying difficult, and sometimes

⁴ Demarrah Turner, Demarrah Turner to Eulas Turner, March, 1942. Letter.

⁵ Demarrah Turner, Demarrah Turner to Maxine Turner, March, 1942, Letter.

⁶ Demarrah Turner, Demarrah Turner to Eulas Turner, 1943, Letter.

the humidity was distasteful, but Panama was “a wonderful trip”⁷ overall. Demarrah was an avid photographer, often flying with a camera and capturing aerial views of their work when not photographing his friends or himself. He documented the deployment, memorializing his experience in a scrapbook filled with men smiling, laughing, reading, joking -- men unbothered by the trauma and violence they had yet to face on the Western Front. When away from flying, training, photography, and tourism, Demarrah and the boys fought to protect their hard-earned softball title of “hottest team on the base.” Life was still peaceful for the men of the 53rd, but great change awaited them in Europe.

After spending a brief period of time in Palo Alto, CA, Demarrah was sent to Luke Field in Phoenix, AZ, where he graduated pilot school. He was now ready for combat.

Winter of 1944 saw the departure of the 370th Fighter Group to RAF Aldermaston. The group was subsumed into the Ninth Air Force once in England, and then relocated to RAF Andover, where it remained until shortly after D-Day. The English winter months were not compatible with Demarrah’s Alabamian disposition: “This is beyond a doubt the coldest place I have ever been... The English have no conception of household heating as we know it. They don’t seem to notice the cold. But I do.”⁸ February to May saw intense training as the men were ordered to cover the invasion in the P-38 Lightning rather than the expected Thunderbolt. Affectionately known as the “fork-tailed devil” by the Germans, the Lightning revolutionized fighter jets by adding a second engine, allowing the jet to climb to higher altitudes faster than any other American plane while also being more maneuverable to decrease losses and increase function, like “dive bombing, level bombing, ground strafing and photo reconnaissance

⁷ Demarrah Turner, Demarrah Turner to Eulas Turner, Tuesday, 1943, Letter.

⁸ Turner, Feb. 22, 1943.

missions.” The Lightning could reach a maximum speed of 414 mph and a ceiling of 40,000 ft.⁹ Compared to the P-47, which could reach a similar maximum speed and was an exceptional plane during a nosedive, the P-38 was still a more versatile and flexible vessel and thus was chosen for combat during Operation Overlord. Prior to the beach invasion, the Ninth Air Force carried out a series of dive bombings, the act of falling into a nosedive before striking in order to bomb targets with more accuracy and precision, with the objective of eliminating Nazi coastal defenses and communication landmarks; P-38s also escorted powerful bombers like the Douglas A-20 Havoc and the Martin B-26 Marauder across the Channel to destroy German holdings in Normandy.¹⁰ According to his June 1944 flight records, Demarrah flew a P-38 on June 2 as a bomber escort and flew the same plane on June 3 with dive bomb listed as the objective. He had several more accounts of both in the days following the invasion.

After years of training and simulations, June 6 finally arrived. Just as D-Day was the largest amphibious attack ever executed, it was also the “single largest aerial bombardment in history.”¹¹ The landings were preceded by a night of airstrikes and paratrooper landings to secure German complexes farther inland, then heavy fire from naval support to destroy some of the shoreline defenses before the men landed on the beaches themselves. By June 1944, the Luftwaffe had been reduced to a very small number and had little power in defending against the D-Day invasion. USAF and RAF airstrikes from the night prior also ensured a damaged Luftwaffe that barely participated in the morning’s events. The Lightnings of the 370th Fighter

⁹ United States. U.S. Air Force, P-38 Lightning, 30 Jan. 2004, web.archive.org/web/20090727150514/http://www.af.mil/information/transcripts.

¹⁰ F. Robinard, "The 9th US Army Air Force in Normandy," D-Day : Normandie 1944 - La 9th U.S. Army Air Force En Normandie, <http://www.6juin1944.com/assaut/9usaaf/>.

¹¹ Robert Goyer, "Warbirds: The Planes of D-Day," Flying Magazine, August 18, 2014, <https://www.flyingmag.com/aircraft/warbirds-planes-d-day/>

Group flew cover throughout the day, laboring to protect the men on the beach and preserve as much Allied life as possible. Demarrah began D-Day with a morning take-off, flying his P-38 as cover for over five hours during the invasion. He survived; over 4,000 Allied soldiers did not. In the days following the attack, he and the other pilots of the 370th Fighter Group continued to fly as escorts and cover until Normandy was secured. By July 24th the Normandy Campaign came to an official close, and the fight became a battle for all of Northern France on the 25th.

June 14, barely a week after the invasion, Demarrah was promoted to Operations Officer, making him second in command of his squadron at a “pretty rough stage of the game to be taking over.”¹² Once the heat of the fighting died out, Demarrah switched to patrol and flew reconnaissance around Falaise until his death on August 14, 1944. At 1:45 that afternoon, Demarrah took off one last time. He had already strafed two Nazi trucks and was on the hunt for more when he and his partner spotted a large truck teetering on the edge of the road. Without hesitating, Demarrah dove down, fired a short burst, and passed directly over the truck at treetop level. His partner, 1st Lt. Royal G. Madden, did not see him clip the trees, but Demarrah appeared to be tangled in their canopies before lunging into the woods. Though his partner did receive small arms fire upon his landing, Demarrah’s crash was likely due to flying dangerously low rather than enemy fire. Nonetheless, it was determination, courage, patriotism, and conviction that carried Demarrah from Montgomery, AL, to his resting place in Normandy. The official death letter sent to Eulas Turner on August 29, 1945 reads

My dear Mr. Turner,

¹²Demarrah Turner to Eulas Turner, June 14, 1944.

With greatest regret I have learned that an official determination has been made of the death of your son, Captain Demarrah Lee Turner, who has been missing in action since August 14, 1944, in the European Area.

Words convey little solace, but I hope you will find comfort in the memory of Captain Turner's exemplary courage and the fact that he gave his utmost for our cause. Information has reached me of his perseverance and singleness of purpose on assignments. After graduating at Luke Field he continued to execute orders as a pilot so conscientiously that he was considered a most valuable officer and a credit to our fighting forces.

I extend my heartfelt sympathy to you and other members of the family.

Very Sincerely,

H. H. Arnold

Commanding General, Army Air Forces¹³

Demarrah's group lost many more men in the Northern campaign but remained true to their objective and continued to push through France and into Germany. Firebombing became more popular in the months following D-Day, and the 370th "went about spreading warmth and light over the world of 'allemand'." Though a number of problems assaulted the 370th -- flying P-38s rather than 47s, the "terrific amount of paperwork," lack of communication between airstrips, and faulty jeeps -- the group eventually trekked through Paris and landed in Belgium. Facing an overcrowded airline that hosted another P-38 fleet and a group of bombers, the field of

¹³ H.H.H.H Arnold, H.H.H.H. Arnold to Eulas Turner, 29 August, 1945. Letter.

fighters struggled to cohabit the strip and turned to their only obvious solution: “quit operating and go get drunk on cognac!”¹⁴

It was all over one year later. Over 70 million people crumpled at the feet of World War II, whether as fighters or noncombatants. Demarrah Turner was among the world’s 3% that never made it -- not home, not to refuge. He exhibited perseverance and single-mindedness to the highest degree as he helped build a brighter future for people he would never meet, people who were not his own. Demarrah joined the fight of his own accord, believing in a freedom that spanned far beyond his home, enveloping every race, color, and creed. He posthumously received the Purple Heart, as well as the Air Medal with two Silver, one Bronze, and the Eleventh Oak Leaf Cluster.

Demarrah died surrounded by legions of living and dead men who believed in the same message of hope, fighting alongside him until their own fight was over. He also remains in the thoughts of his family, his legacy living through his niece, Linda, and until recently his sister, Maxine, who died this year on April 26. Though Maxine suffered from dementia, she remembered her older brother and called out his name in her final moments. Demarrah lived the ultimate life of service, first to his family and then to his country.

¹⁴ United States, U.S. Air Force, Unit Histories, Records of U.S. Air Force Commands, Activities, and Organizations. Brief Summary of Group and its Problems, Capt. Wayne A. Phillips to Lt. Col. Joyce, 3 March 1945, Microfilm Collection, Record Group 342, Frame 677, Box 237, National Archives Building, Washington D.C.

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