James Lee Burnet

Childhood and Life before WSC

James Lee Burnet was born 17th October 1920 in Walla Walla, Washington to Oscar Burnet and Fern Burnet (nee. McCord). James was Fern and Oscar's first son and was followed by his younger sister Lois who was six years his junior. Growing up, James' family lived with his maternal grandparents Samuel and Mary McCord. Oscar and Fern moved to Walla Walla from Illinois shortly before their marriage in 1918.[1] Oscar worked as a dairy farmer and the Burnet family lived on their independently owned farm in College Place, Walla Walla for the duration of James' childhood. James attended Walla Walla High School between 1934 and 1938. While there he was active with the Rifle team and served on the school's legislative Assembly in his senior year.

Experience at WSC

James Lee Burnet attended Washington State College between 1939 and 1942. Despite a documented interest in flying before 1941, he majored in Agriculture, graduating in Spring 1943.[2] Little other information is available about Burnet's time at WSU, this may be due to the variance of his name is school records. James is listed as "Burnett" in his yearbook, and "Burnette" in the reports in the school newspaper, but he only appears by his legal name "Burnet" in the registrar's records. James also went by "Jim" in social settings. From this we can infer that James may have served on Washington State Colleges Spring 1941 Sophomore baseball team, where a "Jim Burnet" is listed on the roster and that he may have also served in

---

[1] *The Spokesman-Review*; Publication Date: *25/ Dec/ 1918*; Publication Place: *Spokane, Washington, USA*; URL: https://www.newspapers.com/image/568505281/?article=610546e8-650b-4d58-98d5-86220f457ba2/a9b4f96d-aa56-47f5-beaa-2afca2aba808&focus=0.24115929,0.24131519,0.35674444,0.28668618&xid=3398

[2]

the Independent Men's Association, where a "Jim Burnette" is noted as helping to run the membership drive in October 1941.[3]

Military Service and Death

His experiences with the Civilian Pilot Training Program (CPTP) and the United States Army Air Force are documented in a registrar's report on Burnet's service: "At the beginnings of the war, due to defective vision, he was unable to pass the physical examination at the college for entrance into the U.S. Air Corps."[4] After arriving in Washington, Burnet discovered that the Civilian Pilot Training Program offered flight training to college-aged men precluded from Air Corps service by minor physical defects and enrolled this program. While the CPTP was distinct from the US Army Air Force beginning in 1941, after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, many CPTP graduates were commissioned by the Army to act as flight instructors after the CPTP was incorporated into the War Training Service (WTS). This is the route that James would have followed.

The registrar report states: "primary and secondary training was held at Whitman College in Walla Walla, Washington, with flying instruction at Martin's Airfield."[5] Additional training for the CPTP is noted in the report as being offered in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho; Yakima, Washington; Prineville, Oregon; and across the South which we can confirm included institutions in California, Arizona, Arkansas, and Texas. Student experiences in the CPTP looked very different to what one might expect from the US Air Corps: "the course was to be eight months duration but proved to be eighteen… these boys received no pay or uniforms, just their board and room."[6]

---

[3] WSU 1, WSU Publications: Evergreens https://libraries.wsu.edu/masc/finders/wsu001_999.htm at Washington State University Libraries' Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections (MASC) https://libraries.wsu.edu/masc
[4] State College of Washington Office of the President: War Records, 1918-1950. WSU MASC, Washington.
[5] Chinook, 1942, Washington State University.
[6] State College of Washington Office of the President: War Records, 1918-1950. WSU MASC, Washington.

James graduate from the CPTP in fall 1943. His last training station was at Randolph Field in San Antonio, Texas. In the winter of 1944, he was sent to Phoenix, Arizona by the US Army Air Force to serve as a flight instructor at Thunderbird Field. The registrar notes: "About this time, returned overseas veterans were being used as instructors. Boys who had taken the Civilian Pilot Training were given the choice of remaining in the air corps or going into some other training."[7] James elected to reenroll as an air cadet with an anticipated graduation as a Flight Officer in Fall 1945.

James was killed in a midflight collision on the 31st of May 1945. The collision, documented in the *San Angelo Evening Standard* involved two officers and two cadets, all training at Goodfellow Field, all of whom died on impact. James was flying with Second Lt. Alf E. Stromsborg in an AT-6 plane when they crashed into the other Officer and cadet pair piloting an identical craft.[8]

Postwar Legacy

James was remembered by his Commanding Officer in a letter sent to his parents and shared with Washington State College leadership after the war. Brigadier General M. F. Davis wrote: "I realize that no written words would be of much avail to lessen your grief, but I do feel that you should know the high esteem in which your son was held by all of us, and the distinct sense of personal loss which his untimely death has brought to us. His work here was of the highest order, and he had the respect of everyone with whom he came in contact. Not only has the Service lost a fine officer, but his death has left a vacancy in our hearts as well."[9] James'

[7] State College of Washington Office of the President: War Records, 1918-1950. WSU MASC, Washington.
[8] San Angelo Evening Standard: *Four Killed in Midair Collision This Morning.* 31st May, 1945. Accessed June 3rd, 2023. https://www.newspapers.com/image/779361604
[9] State College of Washington Office of the President: War Records, 1918-1950. WSU MASC, Washington.

parents were very engaged in keeping their son's memory alive, engaging directly with President Holland to return records of James' service and death.