

Leisnig - Witness to Disaster

Klaus Schumann & Horst Ries

LEISNIG – Witness to Disaster

A documentary by Klaus Schumann and Horst Ries

Subtitle: **Sergeant Marlyn Bonacker's Short War**

This work is dedicated to him - his memories gave life to bare facts.

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Foreword to the English Edition

The 384th Bomb Group Foundation is indebted to the authors, Klaus Schumann and Horst Ries, for their research into the loss of our two aircraft and twelve crewmembers on 6 April 1945, and for their generosity in sharing their original book – in German – available to all through our website, the creation of a print edition, and for supporting the production of this edition.

Due to the interest in the story among 384th Veterans and their families, an English edition was desired. The translation necessary to produce this edition was undertaken by volunteers Inge Ellefson and Monika Holmes, both native German speakers. Final revision, editing and layout was completed by Fred Preller, in consultation with the authors. Every effort has been made to express, in English, the authors' original ideas and information. Any errors in this process rest with the editor.

In producing this edition, it is hoped that the families (at least) of the crewmen who died in this event will better understand what happened to them.

Foreword

The chronicler Max Grimmer recorded the following in his Leisnig City Chronicle:

"On 6 April 1945, we experienced a special excitement because of the crash of two American four engine bombers near Leisnig. On this day, in the foggy morning conditions, about 600 enemy aircraft passed over Leisnig. Two of them collided in mid-air and crashed, one after the other."

Klaus Schumann and Horst Ries, both born in 1939 in Leisnig and raised there, investigated this incident as amateur historians many years later. The incident only remained in the memories of the older Leisnigers. Both men wanted to investigate as many facts and as much background as possible. They found out that both planes, after a bombing mission to Leipzig, collided and crashed in the vicinity of Leisnig. They were able to reconstruct almost completely the path of the planes from takeoff to the crash and also the fate of the crews.

These were not just any airplanes. They were B-17Gs, the so called "Flying Fortress" bombers, the heaviest bombers of World War II.

One exploded in mid-air, and parts rained down on Hetzdorf and Naundorf. The other plane crashed above the "Einertbrücke" (a railroad bridge crossing the River Mulde) into a field, about a mile from the center of Leisnig.

The Idea

In the early summer of 2010, two school friends from Leisnig relaxed together many evenings. Klaus Schumann: *"We talked about everything under the sun, including Leisnig and World War II. Horst mentioned a plane crash in Leisnig in 1945 which he had witnessed as a boy."*

Klaus Schumann, an amateur military historian and versed in the field, had the idea to investigate these events further.

Both were immediately excited and decided to bring the idea to fruition.

Grimmer's Chronicle was the only source when we started our quest in June 2010: we did not know whether, where, and how we could gather any more information than was known at that time about the crashes in and around Leisnig.

What really did happen that day when our hometown, Leisnig, and the villages across the valley escaped a possibly devastating catastrophe? Were there any witnesses left? What happened to the crews of these "Flying Fortresses" from America? Could it be possible that some of the crewmembers were still alive? Why did these two planes crash around Leisnig and what was the cause?

Without doubt, a gripping story, and we wanted to know for sure. This started an extensive research project. We began first in and around Leisnig, and then later in the U.S.A.

We researched German and American archives, found surviving witnesses and interviewed them.

Without the generous and committed support of the witnesses around Leisnig and the historians and archivists in the U.S., we would not have gone very far. During our investigations we discovered very interesting and, up until then, little known details, facts, documents, and pictures.

Leisnig, Early April 1945

The 6th of April in 1945 was a Friday. On that morning, it was a little hazy with some high overcast which soon broke up. It turned into a sunny spring day.

The weekend before had been Easter. The horrible World War II, which was started on German soil, was coming to an end on this same soil.

On 6 April, the American troops who would later occupy Leipzig, and who would also for a short time maintain a small contingent in Leisnig (the Fifth Corps of the 1st U.S. Army, including the 69th Infantry Division), were still relocating from the "Ruhr Pocket" in central Germany to the areas of Warburg and Kassel. They reached Northern Thuringia on 10 April. The resistance of the German Army was only sporadic and weak.

The "Home Guard," consisting of disabled people, elderly men, soldiers with home passes, and the "Werewolf" groups of the Hitler Youth, were supposed to save the German Reich. The retreating German Army units and their related home front units destroyed bridges and built anti-tank obstacles. One such anti-tank blockade was erected in Chemnitzer Street adjacent to the cemetery wall. This was intended to stop the mighty enemy. The Einertbrücke and The Fischendorf Bridge were still standing in early April. They would be blown up later.

The LEISNIGER TAGEBLATT (newspaper) had not been published since January. Fear slowly spread among the Leisnig population. What will happen? How will it end? Secretly, people listened to the forbidden enemy radio stations, tired of the "Final Victory" reports of the German Reich's Radio.

Who would reach Leisnig first, the Americans or the Russians? The latter did not have the best reputation. Refugees from Silesia and East Prussia, who had arrived in Leisnig, told horror stories, or would not even talk about their experiences.

So, they would rather be occupied by the Americans.

These questions were discussed daily among the terrified population. Clearly there were plenty of rumors. Many people had been hoarding food for even worse times. The ration cards introduced in 1939 had long since ceased to provide adequate food. There were still frequent air raids. The people ducked into the air raid shelters. Elderly people we interviewed still remember the awful howling of the sirens which announced enemy aircraft formations.

At night the streets in Leisnig were deserted and pitch dark. No street lights were allowed because of approaching enemy aircraft. "Lights out" the air raid warden shouted while on his rounds when he saw that people had not darkened their windows properly. To achieve this, special blackout blinds had to be installed on the inside. Some people wore a phosphorescent $\frac{3}{4}$ inch diameter button on their clothes to be visible in the dark. Above many basement windows was painted a white arrow with the letters LSR - "Luftschutzraum," meaning "Bomb Shelter" - a help for the rescue crews searching for those trapped in bomb-damaged buildings. On some of the houses in Leisnig, a faint remnant of these arrows can still be detected. Only the older Leisnigers still know their meaning. Openings were broken from cellar to cellar. Air defense training was compulsory.

The roofs of the barracks, cigar factory, and other important buildings were painted in camouflage colors to simulate ruins when viewed by enemy aircraft. The hospital roof sported a large red cross.

Toward Leipzig, one could make out the ghostly fingers of the flak searchlights flitting across the night sky. The bombarded city of Dresden colored the horizon red, visible even from Leisnig.

During the day, contrails of the huge bomber formations marked the blue sky. Occasionally, a sort of tinsel rained down. This was to disrupt the German aircraft defense. And when it was really quiet, one could hear the constant frightening humming of airplanes.

At the firing range, the Home Guard was trained in the use of bazookas. At the soccer field next to the clubhouse, instructors demonstrated the use of this weapon.

In the front yard of Chemnitzer Street 64, soldiers were busy excavating a machine gun position. The war had reached our home in Leisnig.

Our Search Begins

At first we did not quite know where to begin. The information we gathered from Grimmer's Chronicle was meager, so we decided to try our luck at "the home front."

We first asked ourselves these questions:

- Who could still remember the day of the crash?
- Who had seen and experienced anything?
- Who could we still find as an eyewitness 65 years later?
- Which documents and reports could be found in various archives? At the city archives – negative – no reports of the incident.
- Could there be photos anywhere?

Our point of reference was the Leisnig History and Local Home Association (Leisniger Geschichts- und Heimatverein e.V.). We built our hope on the fact that, in the archive of the well-known master photographer, Richard Hertzsch, some photos might be found. This collection is now owned by the Home Association. Unfortunately, this hope was dashed since his work from between 1933 and 1945 no longer exists.

It became clearer and clearer what a difficult logistic task we would encounter.

Where and how should we start? Finding a needle in a haystack seemed easier: at least you know what you are looking for.

We had nothing to begin the search – no information about the planes. Horst remembered that the plane at the Einertbrücke was painted with dark green camouflage paint. Of course, nobody remembered the identification number.

Horst browsed the internet nightly for information regarding this incident. Nothing! There were websites that dealt exclusively with B-17s and detailed descriptions of crashes and accidents but information about the crashes in Leisnig did not exist.

Also, an inquiry with the U.S. Embassy produced no results.

Finally, almost by accident, on an American website, we discovered a small note:

"1945-04-06. collision between 43-38801 and 43-39164 happened about 120 miles southwest of Frankfurt (Oder) near Lipsnig, Germany."

The date was correct – two planes crashed – and Lipsnig could only mean Leisnig. This assumption proved correct as we later confirmed on several occasions. The Americans had just called Leisnig "Lipsnig."

Now we had two aircraft identification numbers and therefore the beginning of a successful trail. Now that we knew what to look for, Klaus Schumann could use his good relations with American history buffs to follow the proverbial thread further.

Next we examined the current Hetzdorf telephone directory. We selected the first names that could possibly belong to older people.

By sheer good luck we had chosen first the woman named Herta Kretzschmar. The lottery would describe this as a "Grand Prize." This friendly woman was very excited to tell us what she experienced as a young girl on 6 April 1945. So, we had the beginning of our long journey.

We continued to phone citizens in Naundorf, Altenhof, and later, for good reason, Leipnitz. We were amazed at how many older residents still remembered the incident and were willing to help us. Volunteers gave us information and were active in our search.

We also talked to older people in the villages. Almost everyone could remember something, knew something, or at least had heard about it. We thought:

"What a dramatic experience the disaster 65 years ago must have been for the residents."

We found friends, who – at work, or at the "Stammtisch" (a restaurant table reserved for regulars) – remembered who had mentioned the airplane crash and who might give us more information. The telephone did not rest.

We also visited many residents who could tell us about their own experiences – or remembered the stories their parents told them.

Mr. Eckehart Klotsche brought us to Mr. Kurt Pönitz of Naundorf, who led us to the crash site near the Einertbrücke. He also had important memories of the crewmembers descending in parachutes. More about that later...

- Code-Name "Haddock" -

Today, Grafton Underwood is a tranquil little English village, surrounded by agriculture, located about 70 miles north of London.

Tranquility is relative, because the war was still going on in 1945. Next to the village was an airfield, home of the 384th Bombardment Group (Heavy), which belonged to the U.S. Eighth Air Force. It was one of the many American points of support in England during the war.

From there, missions were dispatched to Poland, Belgium, France, Czechoslovakia and, of course, Germany. Grafton Underwood Airfield, Station 106, was the official designation.

The planes based at Station 106 were not simply American warplanes. The B-17F and B-17G models were, at that time, the largest and most advanced long-range bombers in the world.

It was not for nothing this bomber was called "Flying Fortress."

Heavily armed and fitted with armor (see Appendix), they had the reputation of being able to return and land, even after being severely damaged.

At war's end, German Air Defense did not have much ability to defend against them.

The four-engine aircraft from Station 106 had an 8 to 10 man crew. As seen in the photo, the tail of the airplane had a white triangle with a black "P" inside, while underneath the triangle was the serial number of the plane.

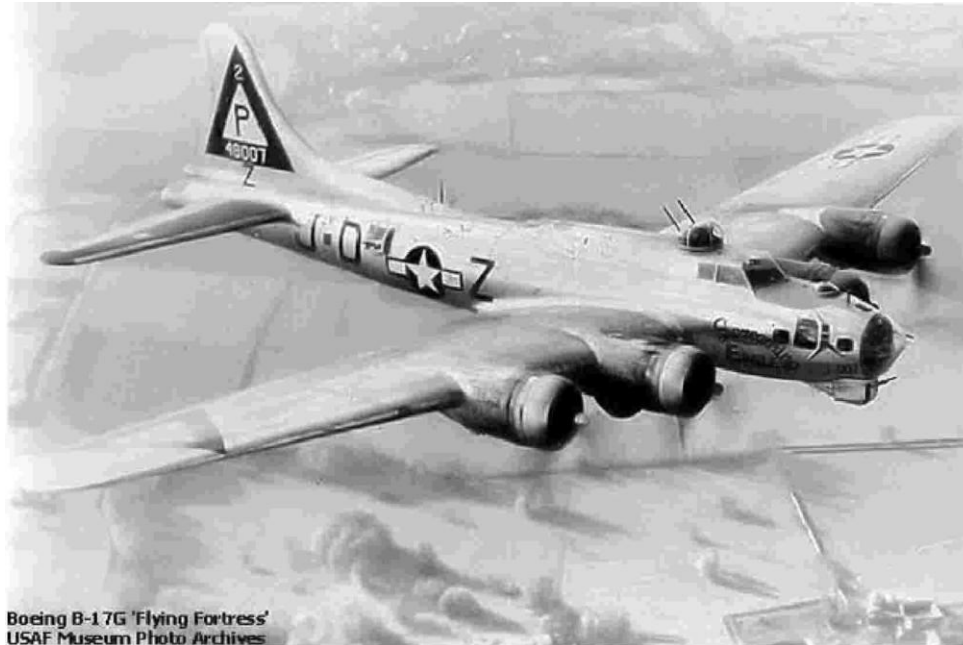


Photo: U.S. Army

Some pilots gave "their" airplane a personal name – which was painted on the nose of the plane.

The flight crews and ground personnel lived in Quonset/Nissen huts under simple conditions.

On 6 April 1945, the weather in Grafton Underwood was bad. It was foggy and hazy, with low visibility - really bad flying weather. At 3:00AM the crews were awakened and had their typical American breakfast - scrambled eggs, ham and corned beef hash.

Afterwards they prepared for the mission. Each airplane had been fueled with about 2,700 gallons of aviation fuel, and the bombs had been hung on the bomb racks. Ammunition had been loaded for the eight gun positions. This was followed by the "briefing," a detailed description of the mission.

The entire offensive operation was code-named "Disney." For reasons of confidentiality, the target was known only to the pilots, copilots, navigators, and the bombardiers. The rest of the crew was told the target after reaching cruising altitude.

Leipzig's code name was "Haddock." The target for 6 April 1945 was called "MYs," which stood for marshalling yards. The marshalling yards in Waren, Mockau, and Engelsdorf, which supplied the German Army, were to be destroyed.

From Grafton Underwood Airfield, it is about 530 miles to Leipzig. The flight altitude could range up to 32,800 feet. The flight range of the B-17G was over 1800 miles. The start of the mission was set for 6:00AM. In Germany, it was already 7:00AM.

During the rapid takeoff sequence of so many airplanes that morning, there was a severe accident in Grafton Underwood.

Jules Levison, the radio operator of Jerry Jerome's Crew:

"It was [our] Mission #27 to Leipzig. We flew our own airplane, 43-38673. We were loaded with eighteen 250 GPs [250 lb. general-purpose bombs] and two incendiary bombs. We had a green light from the tower and rolled onto the runway. Then they flashed us a red light and Jerry Jerome had to hit the brakes.

"Then we were rolling again. Suddenly, we saw the whole sky light up with a series of explosions. We knew that the airplane that exploded was one of ours, but did not know which one it was from the mission.

"When 18 250-lbs. GPs and two fire bombs explode, it feels like the end of the world. Before it was pitch dark and the next moment everything was bright orange."

Thus, the mission began with a bad omen.

The formations flew a roundabout path over France, with zigzag course changes to confuse the German air defenses. This tactic was also used when returning. So, it makes sense that the formation turned to the southeast after bombing Leipzig and then flew over Leisnig.

First Search Results

While our inquiries and investigations were underway in the USA to find the names of the crewmen and possible survivors of the downed aircraft, we went to Hetzdorf and Naundorf.

We contacted Mrs. Kretzschmar in Hetzdorf and were immediately impressed by the warm friendly welcome of this vigorous and open-minded country woman. As an eleven year old girl, she witnessed the disaster in Hetzdorf and was glad that someone was interested in it.

All of the residents of Hetzdorf already knew that "the two" were coming to inquire about the crashed airplane. Of course this had the advantage that we would meet everyone at her home, said Mrs. Kretzschmar.

She pointed us to a place – about 300 meters from the farm – where an American crewmember fell to the ground without a parachute. After investigation, we determined it must have been radio operator, Michael Kustra.

Mrs. Kretzschmar told us about other surviving witnesses. She also told us that that until a few years ago a piece of a wing had been kept in the barn.

"This bulky thing only took up space – then, at some point, my grandson brought it to the scrap dealer."

A shame!

Things were really exciting when her grandson, Henry Hoffmann, who lived at the same farm, brought us to the barn. He showed us parts of the machine which had exploded over Hetzdorf. He even owned the tail wheel tire.



Photo: Ries

"Grandpa saved all this," he told us with pride. Besides the tail wheel tire, we saw an armor plate and several parts of hydraulic mechanisms. He continued, *"And this will stay here where it lies as it has lain here for half a century."*

Yes, it is over half a century ago...

We then had a pleasant conversation with Mrs. Kretzschmar about bygone days. Then she said:

"Go and see Mr. Erhard Pohle at his farm, he can tell you more. I have already told him that I will send you to see him."

We took the advice from Herta Kretzschmar and rang Mr. Pohle's doorbell.

He looked at us suspiciously, but he let us in. We explained to him why we were there, and right at the beginning of the conversation we found out that the Horst Ries' father ("... oh - the goldsmith from Leisnig!") and his father used to meet weekly to play Skat (a card game). We had the feeling of meeting an old acquaintance.

We had a long cordial conversation. He gave us interesting information, including his own experiences. He also showed us a large piece of sheet metal from the airplane, obviously an armor plate.

"I wanted the village blacksmith to make a barrier out of it, but he could not even saw or cut it. After heating and bending, it was straight again after cooling."

He then went with us to the crash site of the other airplane. We went to farmer Nollau's field, above the Einertbrücke. It was there, 65 years ago, that Horst Ries had climbed into the plane. Thoughtfully, we stood on that fateful place. Could there be other things under the surface?

Mr. Pohle described very vividly what he experienced on 6 April 1945 when he was 15 years old. He had a lot of information.

Before going into more detail, we turn again to what occurred at the 384th Bomb Group.

- A Flight to Death -

After the USA received our inquiries and responded to them, and it all began to come together as puzzle: a picture slowly emerged. This provided us the names of the crashed B-17G airplanes' crewmembers.

Both bombers had a crew of 8:

Pilot, Copilot, Navigator, Bombardier, Radio Operator, Flight Engineer, Ball Turret Gunner, and in the back, the Tail Gunner, nicknamed "Tail-end Charlie."

In the tail of the airplane in an extremely tight and uncomfortable position facing backwards sat the Tail Gunner. In front of him were twin .50 caliber Browning M2 machine guns. It was the most dangerous position in the plane because fighter planes often attacked bomber formations from the rear.

The airplanes that were of interest to us had the registration numbers:

- 43-39164
and
- 43-38801. This airplane was named "Ruth" by the Pilot, Lieutenant David Hastings. Ruth was his wife's first name. Her first name was painted on the nose.

Both aircraft belonged to the 544th Bomb Squadron.

The number of aircraft taking off on 6 April 1945 for the attack on Leipzig vary between 600 (Grimmer's Chronicle) and 300 (Information on the internet). In the original American documents, a total of 632 aircraft are listed. 324 of those were flying to "Haddock" (Leipzig), and 308 to Stassfurt, Halle and Gera.

After departing Grafton Underwood on 6 April 1945 and climbing to the required altitude above the clouds, they joined aircraft from other Groups, including the 100th Bomb Group.

Near Leipzig, they were greeted with heavy flak fire, but none of the airplanes were hit.

The mishap came in a completely different form!

After dropping their bombs on the marshaling yard in Engelsdorf, the airplanes continued to the east of Leipzig, then swung back to the south to return to England. At the geographical point 51°15' North 12°50' East, at an altitude of 24,500 feet, the two airplanes collided. This was approximately 3.5 km southeast of Nerchau, and it was about 11:15 German time.

Aircraft 43-39164 exploded at high altitude shortly after the collision and the debris scattered across Hetzdorf, Naundorf and the surrounding area.

Miraculously, none of the residents of these villages were injured.

The other plane, 43-38801 nicknamed "Ruth," went into a steep downward spiral and slammed into farmer Nollau's field above the Einertbrücke. The Einertbrücke is in the Naundorfer District.



Photo: Ries

The crash site above the Einertbrücke today, with Leisnig in the background.

Grimmer wrote:

"One of the aircraft flew very low over the Eintracht Subdivision and crash-landed on the hillside on the right side of the valley near the Einertbrücke."

This could have been a "Black Friday" for our hometown. Leisnig narrowly escaped a catastrophe. Each plane still carried approximately 1450 gallons of aviation gasoline for the return trip. If these machines had crashed directly on Leisnig, it most likely would have resulted in a gigantic explosion, with devastating consequences.

Pilot Hastings had apparently attempted an emergency landing in an open field, but could not make it over the hill. The impact killed all crew aboard. More about that later.

B-17G Bomber 43-39164 – which exploded, scattering wreckage over Hetzdorf.

There was even a crew photo, courtesy of our American friends:

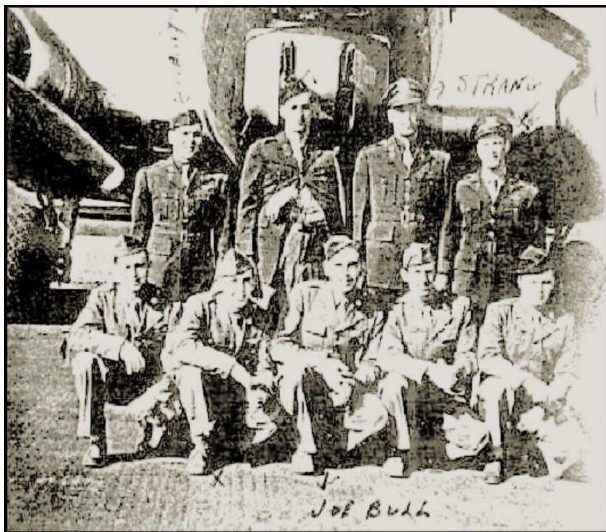


Photo: U.S. Army

Crew of 43-39164 (of the nine shown, only eight flew this mission). Three managed to survive using their parachutes.

SORTIE REPORT			
MISSION			
DATE	384th BG Mission #	8th AF Mission #	384th PRIMARY TARGET
1945-04-06	305	930	RAILROAD MARSHALLING YARDS (VISUAL PRIMARY) TARGET TYPE: TRANSPORTATION LEIPZIG, GERMANY
LEIPZIG RAILYARD BOMBED: THE 384TH BOMBARDMENT GROUP (B) FLEW AS THE 41ST COMBAT BOMBARDMENT WING "A" GROUP. DUE TO 10/10THS CLOUD COVER OVER THE PRIMARY (VISUAL) TARGET AIM POINT, BOMBS WERE RELEASED AT THE SECONDARY (PFF) AIM POINT.			
SORTIE 10964 (SORTIE NUMBER REFERS TO DATABASE LOCATION, NOT A HISTORICAL IDENTIFICATION)			
COMBAT CREDIT	STATUS		TARGET ATTACKED (MODE)
YES	FAILED TO RETURN COMMENTS: COLLIDED WITH 43-38801 AFTER TARGET AT 1018 HRS; AIRCRAFT PEELED OFF TO RIGHT; #3 ENGINE FELL OFF AND #4 WAS ON FIRE; AIRCRAFT WENT INTO A FLAT SPIN AND FELL APART; NO CHUTES OBSERVED; CRASHED NEAR LEISNIG, GERMANY.		SECONDARY (PFF) RAILROAD MARSHALLING YARDS (PFF SECONDARY) TARGET TYPE: TRANSPORTATION LEIPZIG, GERMANY
AIRCRAFT			
TYPE	SERIAL NUMBER	SQ CODE	NAME
B-17G	43-39164	SU*F	NOT KNOWN
CREW			
POSITION	CREWMEMBER	UNIT	STATUS
PILOT	GRAY, FRED PRICE	544	KIA
COPILOT	STRANG, WALTER DAVID	544	POW
NAVIGATOR	MERRIAM, DAVID EUGENE	544	POW
TOGGLIER	POULSEN, LEONARD IRVIN	544	KIA
RADIO OPERATOR	KUSTRA, MICHAEL (NMI)	544	KIA
ENGINEER/TOP TURRET	MCCULLOUGH, JOHN RANDOLPH	544	KIA
BALL TURRET	DONINI, JOSEPH (NMI)	544	KIA
TAIL GUNNER	BULL, JOE WALTER	544	POW
RELATED DOCUMENTS			
TYPE	IDENTIFICATION		
MACR	MISSING AIR CREW REPORT NUMBER 13850		

Sortie Report: 384thBombGroup.com

B-17G Bomber 43-38801, Nickname "Ruth" – which crashed near the Einertbrücke

SORTIE REPORT				
MISSION				
DATE	384th BG Mission #	6th AF Mission #	384th PRIMARY TARGET	
1945-04-06	305	930	RAILROAD MARSHALLING YARDS (VISUAL PRIMARY) TARGET TYPE: TRANSPORTATION LEIPZIG, GERMANY	
LEIPZIG RAILYARD BOMBED: THE 384TH BOMBARDMENT GROUP (B) FLEW AS THE 41ST COMBAT BOMBARDMENT WING "A" GROUP. DUE TO 10/10THS CLOUD COVER OVER THE PRIMARY (VISUAL) TARGET AIM POINT, BOMBS WERE RELEASED AT THE SECONDARY (PFF) AIM POINT.				
SORTIE 10999 (SORTIE NUMBER REFERS TO DATABASE LOCATION, NOT A HISTORICAL IDENTIFICATION)				
COMBAT CREDIT		STATUS	TARGET ATTACKED (MODE)	
YES	FAILED TO RETURN COMMENTS: COLLIDED WITH 43-39164 AFTER TARGET AT 1018 HRS; AIRCRAFT HAD TAIL DESTROYED AND A HOLE IN THE TRAILING EDGE OF THE RIGHT WING; HE HELD CONTROL FOR A MINUTE, THEN WENT INTO A STEEP DIVE; NO CHUTES WERE OBSERVED; CRASHED NEAR LEISNIG, GERMANY.		SECONDARY (PFF) RAILROAD MARSHALLING YARDS (PFF SECONDARY) TARGET TYPE: TRANSPORTATION LEIPZIG, GERMANY	
AIRCRAFT				
TYPE	SERIAL NUMBER	SQ CODE	NAME	
B-17G	43-38801	SU*M	RUTH	
CREW				
POSITION	CREWMEMBER	UNIT	STATUS	
PILOT	HASTINGS, DAVID SHOVE	544	KIA	
COPILOT	MARTINO, DOMINICK THOMAS	544	KIA	
NAVIGATOR	JOHNSON, THORSTON JULIUS	544	KIA	
BOMBARDIER	CRAWFORD, RAYMOND HAROLD, JR	544	KIA	
RADIO OPERATOR	WEEKS, THOMAS CLAYTON, JR	544	KIA	
ENGINEER/TOP TURRET	GATTO, STEPHEN LAWRENCE	544	KIA	
BALL TURRET	MAY, FRANK DEAN	544	KIA	
TAIL GUNNER	BONACKER, MARLYN R.	544	POW	
RELATED DOCUMENTS				
TYPE	IDENTIFICATION			
MACR	MISSING AIR CREW REPORT NUMBER 13851			

Sortie Report: 384thBombGroup.com

We also found a photo for this crew, also courtesy of our American friends:



Photo: U.S. Army
Crew of 43-38801, (of the nine shown, only eight flew this mission) – Bonacker was the only survivor.

Further Research

Concerning the data of the two planes and their crews, we gained access, via the internet, to the "Missing Air Crew Reports" (MACR). These document aircraft and crew that did not return. We also received additional reports in writing from the US.

The cornerstone of our research was now established. We had identified the planes and the names of the crews.

We also found the "final" burial plots for almost everyone. Emphasis on "final" because, at first, the bodies were interred in Tragnitz and Altenhof. In these two places, the search for data became more difficult.

Of course, we wanted to keep trying to find out what details of the crashes the residents of Hetzdorf and Naundorf could tell us.

Let's first stay with Mr. Pohle and his impressive report:

"We were working in our barn, when outside, in the yard, we heard a terrible crash. We ran outside and there, next to the house, lay this big iron thing. Parts of our roof and gable were damaged. While we were still looking at it, we heard a rustle and then a loud thud on the roof of the house."

"Naturally we were scared; after all, it was war. You never knew!"

"We quickly realized that a big white parachute was lying on top of our house and a human being was attached to it. Our



Photo: Ries

Pohle, pointing: *"Over there, next to the chimney. He was hanging by his parachute."*

neighbor, who had also witnessed this, came running holding his hunting gun and trying to load it. But he was so excited that he could not get the cartridge into the chamber.

"My mother pushed the neighbor's gun aside and, in a stern voice, forbade him to wave the gun around. She also scolded some men who were approaching the site brandishing pitch forks.

"My father retrieved a ladder and we helped the parachutist down. He tried to make us understand that he was American. My mother brought him into our house where she made him lie down. She gave him something to drink and eat and she also ministered to his injuries. You could tell that he had some internal ones.

"Since I was not allowed into the room, I do not know the nature of his injuries nor what he told my mother.

"Instead, I examined the parts which were strewn about the yard. I'm certain I remember parts of a cockpit out of which blood oozed. Whether there were dead people inside, I did not see.

"Well, I was just 15 years old and pretty excited. Next to our house gable laid a large plane engine. I had never seen such great technology."

So far, Mr. Pohle's vivid description fit our U.S. research exactly. There in the U.S. we found the name of the parachutist. He was **Walter D. Strang** from New York, the copilot of **43-39164**.

Strang had been able to bail out of the aircraft which exploded and broke up at a great height.

In the U.S. documents, we found his very moving report of his rescue on the Pohle's farm.

After the war, Lieutenant Strang, like all survivors of the two crashes, was questioned extensively by the U.S. Army Air Forces. In this context, he left a hand-written letter in which he expressed his gratitude to the farmer's wife who had saved him from being shot. A copy of the original letter is shown in the appendix, and is transcribed here:

If the woman and children who saved my life, by arguing for my life with the angry farmers, is interrogated I would like to know the name and location.

At the risk of her own life pushed aside guns that were being pointed at me and helped me into her house. She fed me tended my wounds and I therefore am forever indebted. If possible her name and location would be valuable to me as a personal remembrance.

Thank you.

Sincerely and

Respectfully

Lt. Walter D Strang (Res.)

P.S. I hope my statements are complete enough and prove useful.

This letter, of course, never reached its intended destination.



Photo: Strang Family

1st Lt. Walter D. Strang, WWII

Now, after 65 years, we were able to pass on a copy of the letter to Mr. Pohle.

He was very moved to receive it after all these years, even if the intended recipient really was his mother.

Due to the political changes, Walter D. Strang was denied the opportunity to thank Mrs. Pohle in person, or to get to know her son. Walter Strang passed away in the USA.

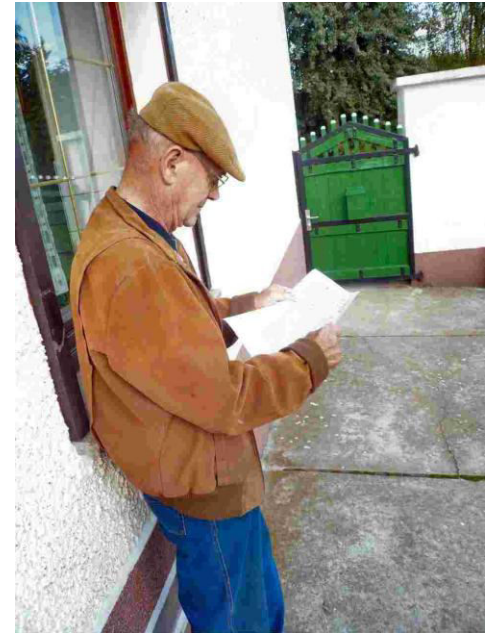


Photo: Ries

Mr. Erhard Pohle, reading Strang's letter about his (Pohle's) mother

- Sensation in Leisnig -

The crash of one of the two "Flying Fortresses" near the Einertbrücke has already been described. Horst Ries remembers well:

"At the time, I wasn't even 6 years old when my two older cousins and I went to see the downed plane above the Einertbrücke. Guards secured the area but I secretly climbed into the back of the destroyed plane. Blood was everywhere. As an interesting souvenir, I removed a small indicator out of the instrument panel in the cockpit."

Hundreds of Leisnigers walked across the Einertbrücke, across Döbelner Hill in Fischendorf or along Riedelsteig to see the crash site.

Mr. Dieter Wittwer, who at the time lived in Fischendorf, told us the following:

"That day we had air raid warnings. For that reason, we were required to get into the nearest air raid shelters as fast as we could. I was walking from Tragnitzer School past Bernhardt Factory, in the direction of the Fischendorfer bridge. My walk ended suddenly at the corner of Rügers grocery store. One house up, a policeman grabbed me, screaming why are you not in the shelter? He pulled me through the front door into the cellar. I knew him by sight, a large respectable person."

"After having been in the cellar for a while, we heard a big thud and felt a violent shaking. At first, we guessed that a bomb had exploded. Later, however, it was established that a plane, which of course we speculated had been shot down, had crashed. After the 'all-clear' signal, I reached our apartment in no time."

"I threw my school-satchel aside because it was already known that a plane had gone down near Naundorf. To reach the site, I ran about 1-½ miles along the country road."

"Near Naundorf Inn – in the direction of Hetzdorf – a roadblock had already been set up. Various items and food could be seen strewn around fields and ditches. However, it was forbidden to pick up or even touch anything because it might have been poisoned.

"The most interesting thing was that on a barn roof, which stood at a right angle to the street, a parachute was caught. One could clearly recognize that a human body was still attached. Alive or not, I do not know."

Thus concludes Mr. Dieter Wittwer's impressive eyewitness account.

In front of the Leisnig Post Office on Bergstraße, lots of people had gathered to look across at the crash site near the Einertbrücke. There was not much to see from this vantage point. Of course, rumors ran rampant. "Shot down" was the overwhelming opinion. Even Hitler's "wonder weapon" which was capable of downing an enemy airplane from 30,000 feet was mentioned.

At this point, the question arose, how did these two crashes really happen?

To answer this question, Klaus Schumann got in touch with his helpful contacts in the USA. Horst Ries, in the meantime, searched the internet. Neither obtained concrete results – causes unknown. For now...

- The Impact -

We found out that a crewmember of 43-38801, which crash-landed near the Einertbrücke, was able to save himself with a parachute. This man supposedly lived somewhere in the USA.

We are talking about Sergeant Marlyn Bonacker. But, how could we locate him in that huge country? In Germany, we relied on the telephone-directory CD. Is there anything like this in the USA because of the many telephone companies?

Thanks to the American historian, Mr. Dirk Burgdorf of Maryland, who helped us tirelessly, we were able to find him in Florida. At the age of 86 he is still fit as a fiddle. [2014 update: having moved to Tennessee in 2011, he remains "fit as a fiddle."]

Without Mr. Burgdorf we would not have achieved such outstanding results: we would not have found Mr. Marlyn Bonacker.

Mr. Burgdorf interviewed Marlyn Bonacker by telephone and met him personally in the Washington, D.C. area. From the video, we know how animated Mr. Marlyn Bonacker was in telling his story. This was a treat even though we could not understand all of it.

Luckily, Mr. Burgdorf also sent us a translation of the interview. Although we had been able to search through many English language documents, translating a full one-hour interview in English would have been a great challenge for us.

Thanks to Mr. Marlyn Bonacker's knowledge we learned many details of what happened that day. He reported comprehensively and graphically about his war experiences. He was 19 years old. We quote here some excerpts of his experience from this interview:

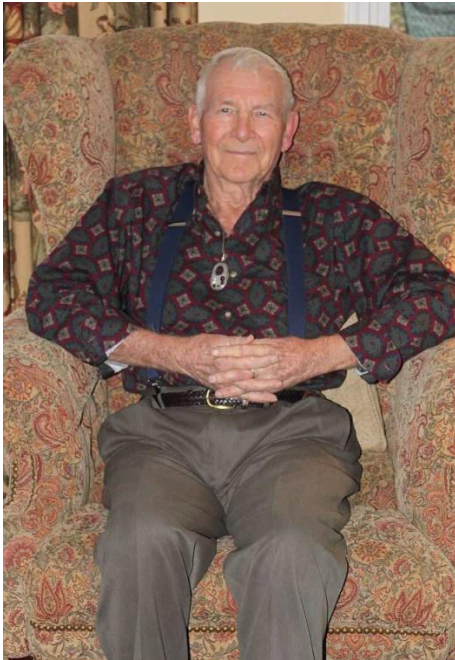


Photo: Marlyn Bonacker

"It was a bright, cloudless day when we were above Leipzig. Our flight position in the formation was called "coffin corner" because those who were flying the left side in the back of the squadron were most vulnerable to enemy attack.

"After the bombing, we turned right to go back to our home base. I noticed that we could not keep pace with the rest of the group. At that moment, I felt a bump and someone screamed over the intercom. I responded over the intercom and wanted to know what was going on, but got no response. I attached my mask to a portable oxygen bottle and crawled toward the front to see if someone was injured. I came far enough to see the radio compartment and the cockpit, everything looked normal. So, I went back to my duty station and connected to the normal aircraft oxygen supply.

"At about 26,900 feet altitude, the outside temperature is minus 45 degrees Fahrenheit. I felt faint and I knew this is it. At this moment, I wished that I had written my mother the evening before one more time.

"I only have fragments of what happened in my memory. Things flew around me like in slow motion. Then I felt nothing. I don't know how I got out of the plane. At about 7,200 feet I came to and pulled the parachute cord. Parts of silver wreckage flew around me. Then I saw the tail section of the B-17 pass by me. It fluttered like a tree leaf.

"I took inventory and I noticed that my helmet, oxygen mask, my gloves and my right sheepskin boot, including my electrical slippers were missing. The inner lining of my wool jacket was on my right arm. The zipper of my pants was ripped open from the groin to the foot. I also noticed blood on my left hand and chest area. I felt no pain. It was completely quiet.

"In the meantime, I figured out where I might be possibly landing. So I thought of what I needed to do.

"It was in the country not far from a village, and without any cover. As I got closer to the ground, I realized I was near a farm house. I knew I would land about 100 yards from 3 men and 2 women who were working in the field.

"The younger man of the group ran to the farmhouse and I knew immediately what was going on. I began to separate myself from my arms: a .45-caliber pistol and a knife.

"I hit the ground a few feet from a manure pile. I then hid the weapons under the manure pile. I had no intention to shoot anyone.

"The man who had run into the house came back with a beautiful hunting rifle on his shoulder, but did not aim it at me. Then others came and saw that I was bleeding and offered help. They took me to the farmhouse and turned me over to two old men (presumably Volkssturm) who made me march along the road about 2 miles out of town.

"When we were about a half hour on the way, an officer told us that a bomber had crashed behind a hill. He did not allow me to go there, but he led me a bit further to the piece of aft fuselage that I had seen flying by: it was missing the elevator and the vertical stabilizer."

This was the first part of the vivid description related by Tail Gunner Marlyn Bonacker.

Two "Flying Fortresses" collided at high altitude. What was the cause of this collision, which ejected Bonacker from the airplane, and caused both aircraft to crash?

While imprisoned in Hartmannsdorf, Marlyn Bonacker learned all about the tragic events from Lt. Strang, the Copilot of the other aircraft.

We could not find any mention of that incident: neither in the confidential interviews of the survivors by the U.S. Army Air Forces, nor other U.S. Documents. All remained silent.

However, we can now unravel the mystery and come to the truth, or at least, pretty close. We will explain this in detail in a later section of this report.

- POW – Prisoners of War -

According to US Government documents, four crewmembers of the two airplanes were able to escape by parachute. They then became prisoners of war (POW) in Germany. Mr. Marlyn Bonacker's authentic description showed us how long this captivity could be. Only with his help we were able to follow this path – from a jump with a parachute and into imprisonment.

Unfortunately we could not get all the details. We were unable to pinpoint the exact location of every parachutist's landing clearly and accurately. Of course, the only exceptions as already described were copilot Lt. Strang, Flight Engineer John McCullough, and Radio Operator Michael Kustra, who had struck the ground in an open field about 300 meters from Mrs. Herta Kretzschmar's present property in Hetzdorf, next to the Kirschallee.

Mr. Kurt Pönitz from Naundorf gave us an account of what was happening in the field behind his parent's house. One parachutist fell hard on the ground; he was obviously injured and was unconscious.

It was certainly Tail Gunner Joe W. Bull, who broke three ribs while landing. Joe Bull said literally: *"I came down like a sack of stones."*

He could not walk and his [Kurt Pönitz'] father and other helpers placed him on an open wagon. In Naundorf, he was placed on a horse-drawn wagon loaded with hay.

Navigator David F. Merriam was also lifted onto the cart.

Merriam had landed between Naundorf and Altenhof. Marlyn Bonacker reported what he had told him.

"As he floated down and landed, a young man fired at him repeatedly with a small caliber weapon. He assumed that it was a .22 caliber. He ducked and ran and ducked and ran to avoid the bullets. Finally the 'Volkssturm' arrived and took this boy's 'toy' away and took him into custody."

Our American friend and translator remarked:

"Every brave, enthusiastic Hitler Youth member, at that time, would have probably acted the same way. It would have been a golden opportunity for him to directly destroy the enemy who devastated his country."

There is another version from Mr. Kurt Pönitz from Naundorf, who was informed by Mr. Herrmann Ludwig of Altenhof:

"A Volkssturm man threatened the parachutist with a weapon and wanted to shoot him. The Hitler Youth leader from Leisnig, Eberhard Schlorke, who lived in Altenhof, came running and held the Volkssturm man in check with his small caliber gun. He prevented the man from being shot. In the meantime, the jumper got rid of his parachute and ran toward the woods. They did not catch him and he escaped."

Mr. Pönitz could not tell us what happened to him later.

A similar version was also told by Mr. Schlorke in an interview shortly before his death in October, 2010.

We may never know which of the two versions is really true.

Unfortunately, we could not determine Mr. Marlyn Bonacker's exact landing place. It must have been within about one and one half miles of Naundorf. Despite his detailed description, we could not find it.

To the reader: just imagine, you land with a parachute in a foreign country and unknown region. Then you have to explain exactly 65 years later, at the age of 86, where it was?

Therefore, we pay tribute to Mr. Bonacker, who continued his story of his landing:

"We went to a different house, where I saw a horse-drawn hay wagon. On top of it were two American Officers and an NCO. All three, Lt. Strang, Lt. Merriam and Sgt. Bull survived from the other airplane that exploded above Hetzdorf.

"We nodded to each other, but never said a word. There were also six armed German soldiers and also a German officer in charge. He told me to sit on the steps of the house.

"I noticed that it was not a farm house. Some stairs led to the top. He then ordered me to stand next to the house with my back turned to him and my hands in the air. I looked anxiously for bullet holes in the wall, luckily he only frisked me.

"Then a man in a black uniform drove up on a motorcycle. I thought it was an SS-Officer. He argued with the other officer. Apparently, he wanted a transfer of the prisoners. The officer with us declined. The SS man got really angry and left in a hurry with his motorcycle. He almost tipped over and the three on the horse-drawn wagon laughed.

"The hay wagon drove by and I wanted to get on it but I was ordered to walk closely behind it. On one foot I had a fleece-lined flying boot, but on the other only a stocking. Since I had to walk

directly behind the cart, I could not see what the horses were doing in the front. So, when the horses would do what horses do, I would not see the manure on the road until the last minute, and I had to jump back and forth so as not to step into it. The soldiers were very amused by it.

"Then, we crossed a bridge above a river. I could not recognize the area because I had to walk behind the cart and had no view. At the end of the river bridge, a man came and talked to me in fluent English. He was, I estimated, about 25 years old. He told me that he was an American and was raised in Germany. He came here for a vacation but, because of the war, he could not leave Germany. Someone told me not to speak with him again and he left. By his accent, he could have been from Chicago.

"When I was led to the village, the inhabitants threw sticks and stones at me." Marlyn laughed a little bit, and then he went on with his story. "How could I be mad at the people? Along with my crew, we just tried to bombard these people!

"When we arrived at the jail, it was still daylight. The walk to the prison had lasted about 2 hours. It was a local jail.

"In the evening, two high ranking German officers took one of my identification tags. [American Soldiers, as opposed to German Soldiers, wore two identification tags]. One said, with perfect English, what a good German name I had. He even pronounced it right.

"Even though we were in separate cells, I was able to talk with my comrades. They told me what happened after the bombing. These men were in the same bomber formation.

"After a time, approximately 1 to 2 days, we were brought to another place. First to a gym and after that we went by train to a German Air-Base: probably the air-base Oschatz, see page 39.

"There, I was interrogated by a German major. He was very quiet and never yelled at me, but I knew it was a serious matter for him. It was impressed on us (in the military) to only give name, rank and serial number. Without directly threatening to shoot me, he made it absolutely clear

that nothing good would happen to me if I did not answer his questions. At that moment, everything goes through your head: 'Do they shoot me tomorrow because of my secrecy?'

"Luckily it was not so!

"After that, we went by train to the POW camp, STALAG IV-F located in Hartmannsdorf, near Chemnitz."

According to our research, we concluded that Bonacker must have been held in the state's prison at the castle Mildenstein, in Leisnig. Unfortunately, we were not able to confirm this in any documents, even though this prison was still in existence some years after the war.

We were surprised to find no documentation in German archives about the air crash. We assume that this was because of the approaching enemy troops. Also, the imminent end of the war may have been a cause as to why they did not duplicate documents, or why they were destroyed.

- KIA - Killed in Action. -

As we explained before, of the 8 airman in each plane, only four of them, in all, were able to save their lives via parachute: three of airplane 43-39164, which exploded above Hetzdorf, and one out of airplane 43-38801, which crashed near the Einertbrücke. The other 12 were killed during the collision, or in the ensuing crash.

A very tragic fate befell flight engineer Sgt. John McCullough. We will tell his story later in our report.

In our investigations, we could not exactly determine the locations of all the flight crewmembers who lost their lives, and where they were found. There are no more witnesses who were present at the recovery. Our storytellers today were youths or children at that time and they have no recollection.

What is certain is that the dead were buried in the graveyards of Altenhof and Tragnitz. The reason for having them in different places depended on the place of death. At that time, the church congregations and graveyards were divided. The road to Döbeln was the boundary, with the area of Hetzdorf belonging to Tragnitz, and the other side of the road to Altenhof.

Four of the dead crewmembers were buried in Tragnitz and the other eight in Altenhof.

The details about the four who were buried in the graveyard of Tragnitz are interesting.



We thank Pastor (retired) Johannes Magirius, from Böhlen, who allowed us access to the church records which finally showed us who of the dead flyers were buried in Tragnitz.

The church records were from 1947.

The exhumation of the bodies was done by the US Military. The interment had been done without coffins. The deceased were dressed only in their flight uniforms.

Knowing about this, we turned to the appropriate American authorities and to the USA historian Dr. Craig Luther.

We learned from Mayor Wendt in Tragnitz and Pastor Wächter that on 1 October 1947, a Graves Registration Unit of the US Army, under leadership of Sgt. Alexander Altman, appeared with many military vehicles. They were led to the graves. After looking at the exterior and drawing a site plan, (see Appendix), they immediately began the exhumation.

They found the dogtags of all the buried. Because of the dogtags, they were able to positively identify the four.

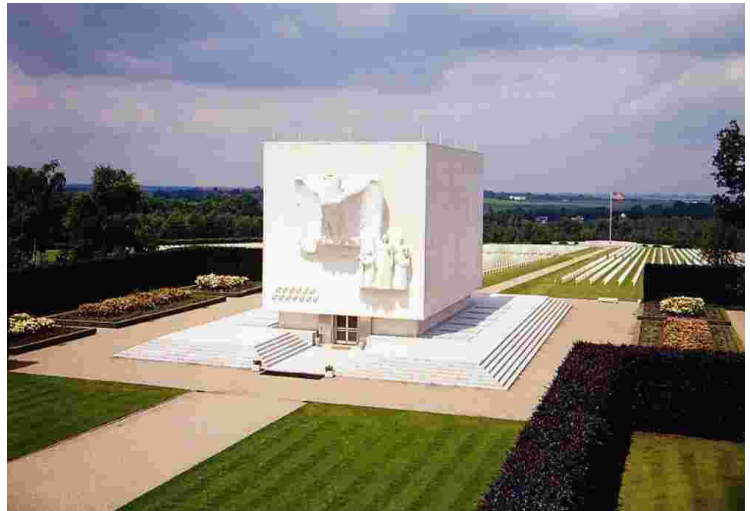
Buried there were:

1. 1Lt. Fred P. Gray
2. S./Sgt. Leonard I. Poulsen
3. Sgt. John R. McCullough
4. Sgt. Michael Kustra

The exhumed were then reinterred at the US Military Cemetery, Neuville-en-Condroy, near Liege, Belgium.

The family of Lt. Fred Gray had their son repatriated and reinterred on 22 June 1949, at Arlington National Cemetery, Fort Myer, Virginia, Section 34, grave number 4003, close to Washington, D.C. There he found his final resting place. Arlington is the central US cemetery for all the USA fallen soldiers. Former US President John F. Kennedy and other famous Americans are buried here.

While researching the graves in Tragnitz, the question arose about how the Americans knew about the burial sites.



We were able to clarify that thanks to American documents: in Zennewitz, close to Bockelwitz, lived Mr. Schramm, who worked there after the war as a teacher. Mr. Schramm had served during the war in the German Air Force.

His wife died in 1945 and was buried at Tragnitz cemetery. Before the war, he had an American pen-pal, Jean Motter from San Francisco. After the war, he contacted her again. He wrote to his American friend about said grave sites, which were close to his wife's grave. He often placed flowers on these graves and wished that the surviving relatives in America would know about them.

Ms. Motter contacted the American Red Cross and the ball began to roll. Since Mr. Schramm is deceased, we were unable to find out whether he been present during the exhumation.

The aircraft (43-38801) that Bonacker bailed out of to save his life had crashed behind the Einertbrücke. In the plane, seven of his fellow crewmembers were found – all seven dead. Mrs. Schlorke, the Mortician from Altenhof, took care of them. Her son, 17 years old at that time, helped her. He remembered:

"It was a terrible sight. One of the soldiers was torn to pieces. Body parts were everywhere"

Mr. Eberhard Schlorke died in the latter part of 2010, shortly after our interview in October.

Mr. Wilhelm Wolf from Naundorf stated that the seven bodies from this plane were loaded on a horse drawn wagon driven by his father and were taken to Altenhof cemetery. There, gravedigger Hänsel buried them in a communal grave. Also, buried there was a man whose body was found in a field in Tautendorf without a parachute. We later found out his identity: Joseph Donini, Ball Turret Gunner, from the other plane, 43-39164.

Our search for the identity of the interred in Altenhof encountered obstacles. The church records from Altenhof did not have any information about the dogtags. We were rather stumped. Even though it was logically understandable after the identification of the dead and who were lying there in Tragnitz, we wanted proof.

Fortunately, the USA sent us exhumation data from Altenhof. However, at that time, only two crewmembers could be identified.

1. Pilot Lt. David S. Hastings
2. Sgt. Frank D. May

According to the American documents, Mayor Keller and Pastor Meyer in Altenhof informed the US Army about the graves.

We quote from the exhumation report:

"All bodies were interred in caskets in a community grave. On the grave site stood a white cross with the inscription:

"Zum Gedenken der 8 amerikanischen Piloten, gefallen 6.4.45"

("In memory of the 8 American pilots, who died on 6 April 1945")

[Note: the German word "Piloten" – pilots – was used on the inscription: a more precise term would have been "Flieger" – airmen.]

From the cemetery records, the American report quoted:

"Died in Naundorf April 6, 1945, buried at Altenhof without religious services."

The records also mentioned that the burial was ordered by the police. A detailed record was kept regarding the belongings of the dead soldiers. The record of pilot Hastings personal belongings, which we found in his exhumation report, is included here, as an example.

This German record could only have been given to the US Army by Pastor Meyer or Mayor Keller.

This document, according to Bonacker, could point to the fact that the air base to which the prisoners were transferred to could have been Oschatz.

The record regarding the exhumation in Altenhof shows the date 24th of September 1947 and is signed by Lt. Eric E. Unagar.

Übernahme Kommando
O s c h a t z / Sa. 9. 4. 45

Verzeichnis über beschlagnahmte Gegenstände des
Toten 2nd Lt. H a s t i n g s , Davids
Erk. Marke O - 836778 T 43-44 A
Abschuß: B 17 G , 6.4.45, 10.15 Uhr, Flur Naundorf,
b/Leisnig, 10 km südl. Oschatz

8 1-Pfundnoten	1 10-Schillingnote
2 Briefe	16 Zettel
1 Bild	1 Ausweis
5 Silbermünzen	5 Kupfermünzen
1 Bleistifte (zerbr.)	1 Kette
1 Zahnbürste	1 Taschentuch

7. A.

283 Hastings, David S.
O - 836778

File 1947
31 Mar 1947
1947

Photo: Ries

The exhumation entries show that the two identified, Hastings and May, and also the dead in the graves in Tragnitz, were transferred to the US Military Cemetery Neuville-en-Condroz, Belgium.

Even though we only had the identification records of the two, one can almost be sure that the other six of the eight buried in Altenhof were also transferred there and further identification tests were done. The identification, at that time, was done by dental records - DNA analysis did not yet exist.

The records give comprehensive descriptions of the injuries. We refrain, out of sensibility, to publish these details.

Additionally, at the military cemetery in Belgium we also found the grave sites of:

3. Lt. Dominick T. Martino,
4. Lt. Thorston J. Johnson, and
5. T/Sgt. Stephen L. Gatto.

The remains of

6. Lt. Raymond Crawford,
7. S/Sgt. Thomas C. Weeks, and
8. Sgt. Joseph Donini.

could most likely not be individually identified and were probably buried as "unknown."

All the information regarding the exhumations in Tragnitz and Altenhof would not have been possible without the tireless efforts and generous support of the two American historians, Mr. Dan Lee and Dr. Craig Luther.

- STALAG IV-F in Prison Camp -

As already mentioned, we were unable to trace the actual path of the four prisoners to the POW camp at Hartmannsdorf. We could not find any documentation. Marlyn Bonacker reported that they went by train and then had to march a long way. During that march, they took turns carrying a severely injured prisoner from another unit. He was afraid to be left behind.



Photo: Local Historian Junghans

The Reh Dye Factory during the war.

Hartmannsdorf was a small village with about 6,000 residents located only a few miles north of the outskirts of Chemnitz on Reichstrasse 95 (today Bundesautobahn - 95) in the direction of Leipzig. One can call it a real industrial village. There was the typical "Erzgebirge" (Ore Mountains) textile industry, mechanical engineering plants, and also a brewery.

The Dye Factory in Ziegelstrasse, for this region a typically large industrial building, was seized by the Nazis and turned it into prison camp, Stammlager IV-F.

Here, POWs from all occupied countries and from all the front-lines were confined. Many of them were British. In a certain sense, it

could be considered an open camp. Some of the prisoners were housed privately, especially when used for agricultural labor. The prisoners at the Reh Dye Factory were forced to work in the surrounding industries, all the way to Plauen, Weissenfels, and even in the ore-mines in the Erzgebirgen. There were deaths, mostly work related, or executions after attempted escapes.

The four American POWs from Leisnig possibly arrived sometime during 9-11 April 1945. They were not made to do forced labor. The American troops were already approaching Chemnitz so the guards were obviously preparing for the camp's closure.

Suspicion spread among the prisoners that transfer into a different camp was imminent. Escape plans were hatched.

The four American "Leisnigers" hid under their beds so that they were not transported to the east. A few hours later the invading US Army liberated them. The troops from the US Army reached STALAG IV-F on 16 April 1945.

During the short time in the camp, they had time to exchange details about the crashes. Marlyn Bonacker now found out why the two aircraft had collided.

Walter Strang told him that Fred Gray had established the practice of exchanging seats as the return trip home began, and the Copilot took over for the return flight. This happened after the target, in other words, after dropping the bombs.

We should mention that during a bombing run, the Bombardier/Togglier had control of the plane. The collision happened about 10 minutes after bombs-away. There are reports criticizing the bombardier, saying that the mission was futile because all the bombs missed their target. Had there been disagreements and/or misunderstanding, when they transferred the controls?

Obviously, Copilot Strang did not pilot the aircraft.

Strang told Bonacker:

"I saw that Gray was trying to free himself from his flak suit."

This suit was a rigid heavy armor that was supposed to protect the flyer from machine gun bullets and artillery shrapnel. It was customary to wear it when there was danger of enemy airplane attacks or flak. Afterwards, one would take it off.

We assume that Strang and pilot Lt. Fred Grey got entangled in the narrow cockpit of aircraft 43-39164 while changing pilot seats. The airplane lost control. The pilots jumped to the controls and may have overcompensated. The aircraft reeled and collided with 43-38801 piloted by David Hastings – *"he came in from below"* - in the vicinity of the rear stabilizer.

Both planes were severely damaged. Eyewitnesses from other planes described the damage to 43-38801 during the debriefing as *"Tail destroyed, a hole in right trailing edge of wing. Held control momentarily then went into a steep dive."* A parachute was seen. – and this was Marlyn Bonacker.

The same three witnesses described the fate of 43-39164: fire in the #4 engine, and the #3 engine fell completely off of the aircraft.

The airplane went into a flat spin and broke up. Six parachutes were reported (but only three crewmembers survived).

This is the reality of how the crashes of the two B-17G bombers came to happen. No flak and no "Wonder-Weapon" hit the planes. Just a mishap which cost 12 crewmembers their lives. Lt. Strang must have carried this with him for life. Double so, when we think about the fate of his flight engineer, John McCullough.

- The Tragic Death of Sgt. John McCullough -

Marlyn Bonacker learned this truly dramatic story from Walter Strang during their captivity.

It is the story of the most tragic death of the Flight Engineer Sgt. John McCullough, a crewmember of Strang's aircraft. Strang told Bonacker that after their aircraft exploded, he and the Flight Engineer found themselves falling on a small piece of wreckage. Neither were wearing a parachute, but the Flight Engineer saw one leaning up against a fire extinguisher on the piece of wreckage they were on. He told the copilot to put it on and he would hang on to the copilot's legs when he jumped.

They were quite close to the ground, and when Strang got one hook of the parachute attached, McCullough grabbed his legs and they jumped. Strang pulled his ripcord immediately and the parachute opened with a jerk, a scant few hundred feet above the ground. McCullough, however, could not hold on and he was literally torn from Strang. One can only imagine Strang's mental shock when he watched helplessly as his comrade fell while he was secure and glided to a safe landing. McCullough fell to his death, landing in the courtyard of the home upon whose roof Strang landed, in clear view of Strang.

The son of farmer Kreyser in Hetzdorf (his farm was expropriated in 1945 due to "land reform") was at that time 13 years old:

"We had a farm-hand who had picked up the dead with a wheelbarrow. The dead person must have looked very bad. He was then buried in Tragnitz with three of his comrades."

Walter Strang never spoke of this tragedy after the war. His son learned about it in 2010 in a telephone conversation with our historian Dirk Burgdorf (USA). Mr. Burgdorf first heard about it from Marlyn Bonacker during an interview for us.

Strang's son was totally shocked. His father had spoken little about his war experience. The events must have depressed him all his life.

- Sgt. Bonacker's Short War -

Sgt. Marlyn Bonacker's military combat duty, apart from captivity, lasted exactly two days. For him, 6 April 1945 is a twofold memorable day.

His 544th Squadron launched an attack on Germany the previous day, 5 April 1945. While flying across the Channel to France, his aircraft experienced engine trouble and had to return. This would have been his first combat mission.

So, Sergeant Marlyn Bonacker's actual first and last war mission that ended in Leisnig took place on 6 April 1945. He was the only survivor from his aircraft.

Summary

- Unsettled Questions -

We have examined and evaluated hundreds of documents, letters and records – mostly in English. We interviewed Marlyn Bonacker, interpreted by Dirk Burgdorf, for an hour. The findings of all of this were, for our story, the most informative.

Unfortunately, many questions remain unanswered and cannot be clarified. This is understandable after the passing of 65 years. In the text, we have already pointed out some inconsistencies. We will have to leave them at that.

We were also unsuccessful in clarifying or disentangling three more, credibly described, parachute jumps.

This also concerns a parachute jump in Leipnitz and in Kreiselwitz. Three witnesses, who were undoubtedly credible, described comprehensively, detailed, and independent of each other, how two American parachutists landed and were captured.

Mr. Weichert from Leipnitz told us that one parachutist landed in a garden on to an apple tree and one large branch broke off. The carpenter angrily hit him with a board (or a slat) across the back. Approaching people took away his board.

Mr. Andrä from Kreiselwitz is sure that he had seen four arriving parachutists. He was also present when one parachutist in Kreiselwitz was captured not far from his parents' mill. He also was able to show us the location. He then accompanied the man, who crashed next to the mill, to the mayor of Leipnitz. There, SS man Kühn is said to have prevented the abuse of the two prisoners.

Then, he saw that "his" prisoner and the other parachutist captured in Leipnitz were transported to Leisnig by way of a hay covered wagon. This was initiated by SS man Kühn. He does not know who else was there. Both prisoners were alive and not injured.

Who were they? We were able to trail, without gaps, all survivors and their fate of both of the airplanes. A prisoner from Kreiselwitz or Leipnitz is not among them.

We found out: Mr. Kurt Kühn, a member of the Waffen SS, was on home leave in Leipnitz on Easter 1945. His wife told Klaus Schumann in a telephone conversation:

"Yes, at that time she was married to Waffen-SS man Kühn. She saw the prisoners herself. Her husband, Kurt Kühn, prevented the two parachutists from being lynched. For this, he received 2 days special leave. How the prisoners got to Leisnig, Mrs. Kühn did not know. He then went back to his unit at the front."

In an American report, we found the following statement of an aviator named Hope:

"Hope saw one chute, and we were later to find out that four men got out. They were captured by civilians who killed two of them. The other two were rescued by German soldiers and taken to a POW camp, from which they later escaped."

"They were captured by civilians who killed two of them" - two of them were slain by civilians? Who gave Hope this information?

This may lead one to think about the testimony of eyewitness from other aircraft at their debriefing: *"Six chutes seen to emerge"* -- but only three crewmembers survived.

Naturally, one can speculate about these cases. Especially since, of the men buried in Tragnitz, we only know exactly where Michael Kustra and John McCullough were found.

Furthermore, there is information from Mrs. Hannelore Richter (maiden name Beuschold) about a parachute found on the roof of a property at the "Donnersberg" in Leisnig. Residents of the house had heard a loud rumbling on their roof. Later, after their fear subsided, they looked and found a rolled-up parachute hidden on the flat roof behind the chimney.

Unfortunately, Mrs. Richter cannot date this event exactly – after all she was 6 years old at that time.

These cases may also have nothing to do with the two planes that crashed above Leisnig. What's more, there is another report from Mr. Andrä, about an abandoned parachute found in Thümmlitzwald (see overview map in the appendix).

Apparently, on that day, an aerial combat occurred above Muschau, and a German fighter pilot made an emergency landing near Kieselbach.

We found no mention of aerial combat in this area at the time in question in any American documents.

We tried very hard, but unfortunately some events will remain unclear.

- What Remained? -

The wreckage which rained down on the villages was recovered by the inhabitants. On a farm, eventually, everything has a beneficial use.

The aircraft near the Einertbrücke was dismantled piece by piece. A year later nothing was left.

Herr Herbert Grunert, now living in Cologne, was then living at the railroad station in Leisnig. He told us:

"The fuel tank opening was just large enough so that you could let down a beer bottle on a string. This way we extracted the fuel little by little, but you could not even use it for a tractor. A great part we burned..."

1,450 gallons? Another use was probably found for it – such as heating. Coal or other heating fuels were scarce after the war.

Mr. Pohle told us, that the tanks were made out of thick rubber.

"That was such a piece of devilry that it could not be processed by any tool, not even shoe soles could be made out of it."

Somewhere, someone still has big pieces of it lying around but we were not able to get to the bottom of it.

Mr. Wilhelm Wolf remembers that a farmer from Naundorf - he cannot remember the name - got the tires for his tractor.

"But he could not use them, because the rubber was too soft."

Horst Ries remembers:

"An airplane engine was still, months or even years later, in Leisnig's freight yard where the Russians had their coal dumps."

Perhaps, from there, some items went in the direction of the Soviet Union.

"The little amp-meter, which I secretly broke out of the cockpit, unfortunately also disappeared in the passing of time."

Some airplane parts, probably bigger ones, were stored for a long time at the Starke Locksmith Shop at the Kinoberg.

Mrs. Gisela Stephan, granddaughter of Mr. Starke and wife of Leisnig's "old" mayor, described to us by phone the whereabouts of the parts.

"One day grandfather fell into the parts while he was picking fruit – then he got rid of the scrap material."

After 65 years, we could not expect to discover any important details about the airplanes. We learned that not even photos existed.

As stated in our report, only a few items – fragments – have been preserved to this day.

The disaster remains mainly in the memory of a few. They were, at that time, children or teenagers and today are advanced in years.

With our report, we wanted to capture the memories of a plane disaster, almost a catastrophe for Leisnig, for future generations.

- A Few Necessary Remarks -

In our report, we have strictly stated facts that had become known to us and were important for our intended purpose – the way we understood the occurrences from historical documents or how they were described to us by surviving witnesses. We have avoided any embellishment and refrain from any assessment of the historical events.

Of course, in our investigation we have not overlooked that about 360 inhabitants of Leipzig died during the bombing of Leipzig on 6 April 1945. In the described attack, not all the bombs hit the marshaling yard in Engelsdorf, but also hit the Leipzig Central Station and the city itself. Reports of the bomb victims, however, are already described in detail by other historians.

We wanted to track one fateful day of the war which affected our hometown Leisnig directly: one fateful day in a long, terrible war.

One will perhaps question why we have given so much attention to the bomber crews, who laid our cities in ruins. We think, after 65 years, it should be possible to contemplate historical events without prejudice.

It was war!

In the bombers were young men in their twenties who had a father and mother at home and maybe a girlfriend. Did they ever think about the grief that their bombs caused far below? No one knows. They did their patriotic duty to defend the homeland and freedom. The same goes, of course, for the German soldiers, even if that does not sound "politically correct" today.

The criminals are the ones that trigger war and encourage young people to kill.

We wanted to describe who the anonymous bomber soldiers were. What fate befell those aviators from America? What feelings and thoughts did they have when their "Flying Fortresses" no longer protected them and when they had to inevitably surrender in enemy territory?

It was also our goal to keep in mind what might have happened if only one of these heavy bombers had crashed directly onto Leisnig or the surrounding communities. What a devastating disaster the villages and people narrowly escaped.

We wanted to record this event of the last days of war for future generations before no one can remember it anymore.

We hope that we have, to some extent, succeeded in this endeavor.

- Thanks -

Our report would not have been possible without the frank oral interviews of many Leisnig, Hetzdorf, Naundorf, Altenhof and Leipnitz inhabitants and their descendants. They have our sincere thanks.

In addition to the persons named in the text of our report, we are also indebted to the following supporters:

Mr. Dirk Burgdorf, USA
Mr. Dr. Craig Luther, Military Historian, USA
Mr. Daniel Lee, Military Historian, USA

Our special thanks to Mr. Marlyn Bonacker, who, at age 86, was always friendly and willing to answer our questions.

For the friendly and helpful support with information for our research we also thank:

Mr. Jürgen Möller, Military Historian	Mr. Gert Junghans, Hartmannsdorf
Mr. John Magirius, Pastor (retired)	Mr. Günter Hänsel, Döbeln
Mrs. Beyer, Pastor, Grossweitzschen	Gerhard Haupt, Leisnig
Mrs. Fritzsche, e.v. Church Office, Leisnig	Mrs. Inge Ellefson, USA
Mrs. Müller, Leisnig City Archive	Mrs. Monika Holmes, USA
Mrs. Monika Hönigsmid, Church Records	Mr. Fred Preller, USA

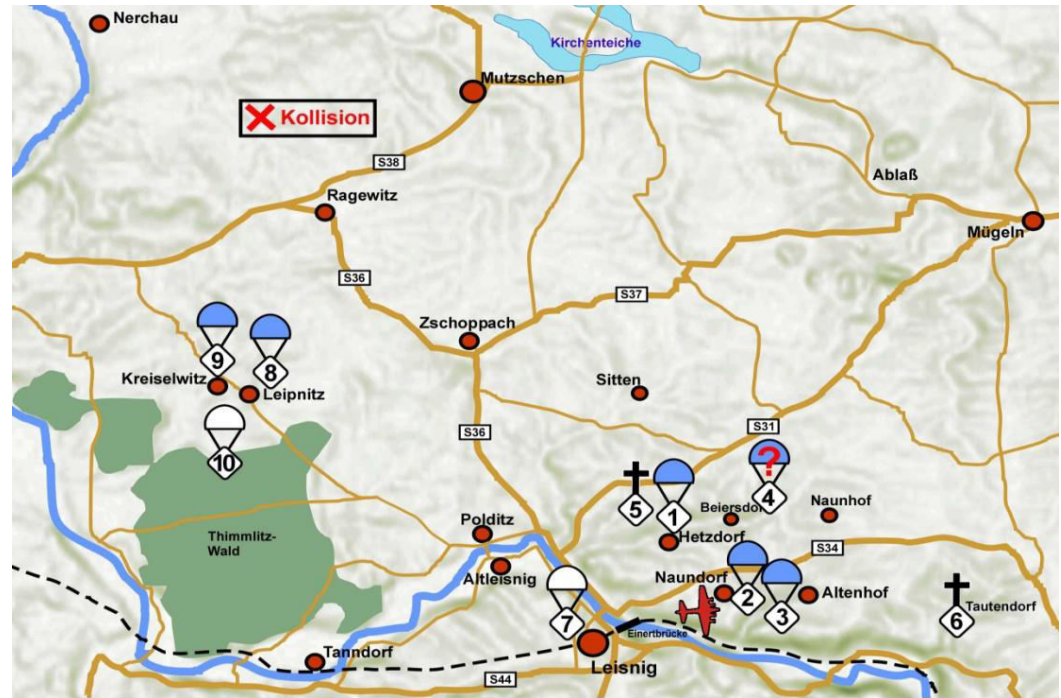
Our thanks also to the Leisniger Geschichts- und Heimatverein, e.V.

We also obtained very good information from Birget Horn regarding "Target Haddock."

Appendix

Locations where the parachutists landed or the places where the dead airmen were found.

1. Walter D. Strang & John McCullough
2. Joe W. Bull
3. David F. Merriam
4. Marlyn Bonacker
5. Michael Kustra
6. Joseph Donini
7. empty parachute
8. unknown
9. unknown
10. empty parachute



Location where B-17G 43-38801 crashed; seven crewmembers died in the crash.

- The B-17G -

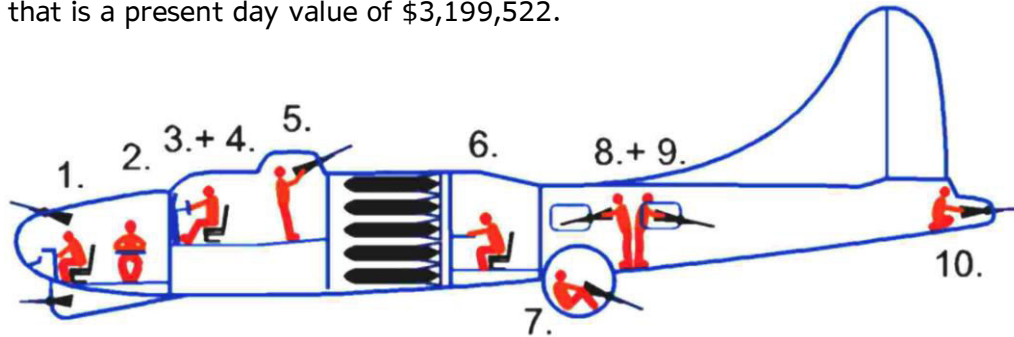
To give the reader an idea of "what" crashed near Leisnig, here is a list of specifications of the B-17G "Flying Fortress":

Length: 75 feet
Height: 19 feet three inches
Wingspan: 103 feet 9 inches
Wing Area: 1,527 square feet
Empty Weight: 32,750 pounds
Takeoff Weight: 65,500 pounds
 maximum
Engines: Four Curtis-Wright
 Cyclone, R-1820-97 nine cylinder
 radial engines, rated at 1,200
 horsepower@2300 RPM
Maximum Speed: 301 miles per hour
Cruising Speed 184 miles per hour
Maximum Range: 3,750 miles without
 bombs
Range: 1,800 miles with normal payload
 1,094 miles with maximum payload

Service Ceiling: 39,100 feet
Crew: Ten on a normal combat
 crew; minimum crew of 6
Armament: Thirteen .50 caliber
 Browning machine guns – two each
 in the front chin turret, the Top
 Turret, the Ball Turret and the Tail
 Gunner position, and a single
 machine gun at the cheek windows
 in the nose, in the roof of the radio
 compartment, and at each waist
 window.
Normal Bomb Load: 6,000 pounds
Maximum Bomb Load: 12,786 pounds

The B-17 was manufactured in several successive versions. May 21, 1943 marked the first flight of the final production version of the U.S. heavy bomber – the B-17G.

The model was produced up to the middle of 1945. A total of 8,680 B-17Gs were built. At peak rate, 16 planes a day were completed. The cost per plane was approximately \$250,000. Taking inflation into account that is a present day value of \$3,199,522.



1. Bombardier/Toggier operated the chin turret guns.
2. Navigator
3. Pilot in the left hand seat in the cockpit.
4. Copilot in the right hand seat in the cockpit.
5. Engineer monitored the engine gauges and operated the Top Turret guns.

6. Radio Operator
7. Ball Turret Gunner
8. Right Waist Gunner
9. Left Waist Gunner – Toward the end of the war, it was decided that the waist gunners were not needed.
10. Tail Gunner

- The Crew and Their Duties -



B-17G Exterior View of Navigator's and Bombardier's Stations

The Navigator and the Bombardier entered the nose compartment by crawling through a hatch that was below the pilots. In the nose compartment, there was a chair and a fold down table used by the Navigator. The Bombardier sat by the bombsight located at the front of the Plexiglas nose. He controlled opening and closing the bomb bay doors and releasing the bombs at the right time.

The bombsight was only used by the lead plane in a squadron and the Bombardiers in all the other planes dropped their bomb loads on a signal from the lead ship.

The Bombardier also handled the twin machine guns in the electrically operated chin turret.

The Navigator was responsible for operating the single machine guns in the side blister windows in the nose compartment.

The Pilot and Copilot were seated in the cockpit. The forward view from these seats is limited by the long nose of the aircraft so that the Pilot only had an unobstructed view straight ahead and to the sides. Especially on takeoff and landing, the Pilot had to rely on the help of the crewmembers in the nose compartment.

During missions, the Flight Engineer was on a platform at the rear of the cockpit. He also had the duty of operating the top gun turret. As Flight Engineer, he helped the Pilot solve technical problems which occurred during the mission. The rotating top turret had twin machine guns that he used to defend the airspace above the plane.



B-17G Cockpit: Pilot seat at left, Copilot seat at right

The bomb bay is separated from the cockpit by a passageway at the rear of the cockpit. A catwalk is in the center of the bomb bay. The shackles that hold the bombs are on the right and left side of the catwalk.

The bomb bay doors, which open outward, are below the catwalk. The Bombardier opened the bomb bay doors shortly before bombs away. The oxygen bottles for the breathing equipment are located in the bomb bay.



B-17G Waist Gun Positions; Ball Turret is visible below yellow oxygen canister and Radio Room is just beyond the first open door

In the background of the picture, the ball turret can be seen in the bottom of the fuselage. The ball turret protected the aircraft in all horizontal directions as well as downward. It protruded under the belly of the airplane.

The radio room is directly behind the bomb bay. Early series B-17s had a ceiling window where a machine gun was mounted. The machine gun was able to fire toward the rear of the airplane. Beginning with the "G" series, the machine gun was removed to save weight.

Continuing toward the middle of the fuselage, you find the waist gunner positions on the right and left side. Each of the waist gunners had a mounted machine gun which fired through a sealed Plexiglas side window. They defended the airplane from a side attack.

Toward the end of the war, it was decided that the waist gunners were not needed and the B-17G flew with a crew of eight.

The ball turret gunner had the duty to report the opening and closing of the bomb bay doors and to verify that the bombs came out. The ball turret is moved around its horizontal and vertical axis by an electric motor and is equipped with twin machine guns. The gunner lay on his back and looked through many small windows and aimed between his legs. The space in the turret was very small, so only small men were chosen for the ball turret.

This position was very dangerous: Even with outside help it took about a minute to get out of the turret. In a B-17 that was in danger of crashing, that was not enough time for

the gunner to escape his prison. Added to this, the turret gunner could not wear a parachute because of the confined space. He was able to wear his parachute harness, and attach the chute to it by snap-shackles. Also, in case of a belly landing, the chances of survival were zero.



B-17G Ball Turret



B-17G Tail Gun

The tail gunner position is at the extreme rear of the fuselage. In this extremely tight and uncomfortable space the tail gunner sat in front of twin Browning M2 .50-caliber machine guns. This was the most dangerous position in the plane. The bomber formation was often attacked by fighter aircraft from the rear and underneath.

Of the two machines which crashed by Leisnig, both tail gunners survived. However, they were not shot down.

Tail gunners Marlyn Bonacker and Joe W. Bull were able to survive by parachute.

- Strang's Letter -

Here is a copy of the original letter from Lt. Walter P. Strang, Copilot of the B-17 that exploded over Hetzdorf, to the person who saved him, Mrs. Pohle in Hetzdorf. It was found among official U.S. Army records in the National Archives.

If the woman and children who saved my life, by arguing for my life with the angry farmers, is interregated I would like to know the name and location.

At the risk of her own life pushed aside guns that were being pointed at me and helped me into her house. She fed me tended my wounds and I therefore am forever indebted. If possible her name and location would be valuable to me as a personal remembrance

Thank you

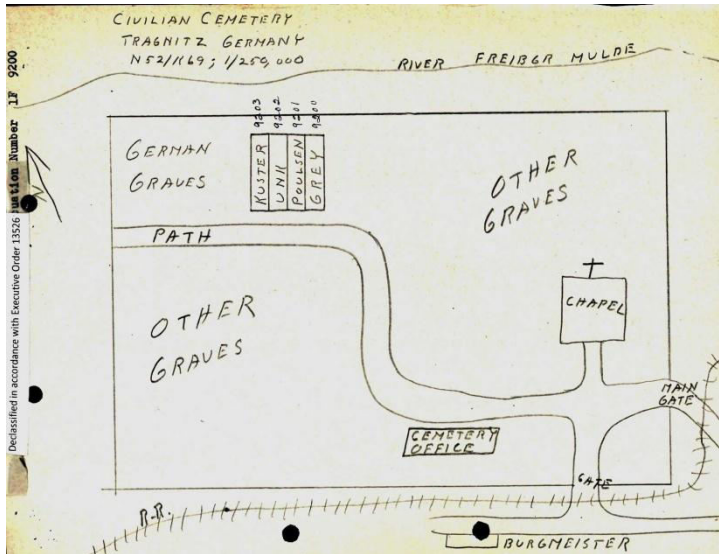
*Sincerely and
Respectfully*

Lt. Walter P. Strang (Res.)

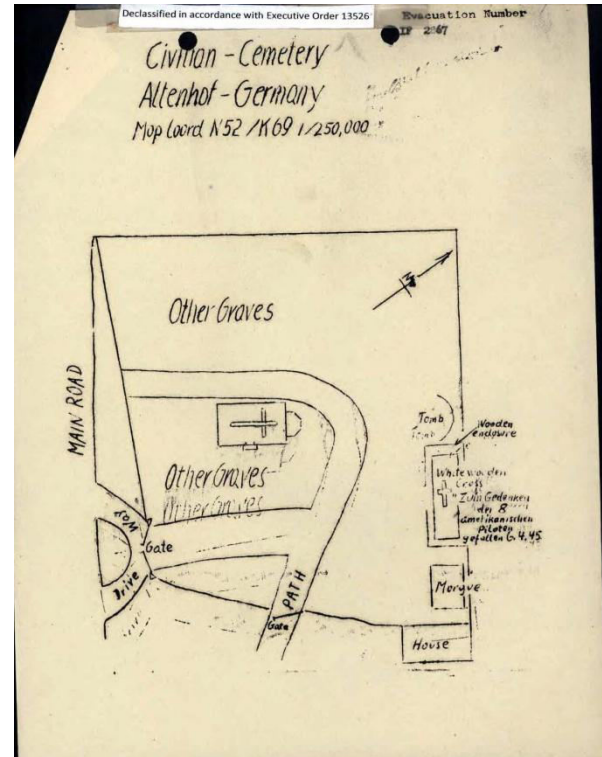
P.S. I hope my statements are complete enough and prove useful.

- Grave Location Maps -

The grave location sketches in Tragnitz and Altenhof, which were made in 1947 by the U.S. Graves Registration unit.



Grave Locations in Tragnitz



Grave Locations in Altenhof

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Klaus Schumann

Klaus Schumann and Horst Ries were born in 1939 in the small garrison town of Leisnig near the exhibition city of Leipzig in the German province of Saxony. They attended school together starting in 1945 and occasionally even sat at the same desk.

After school they went their separate ways, and did not meet again until 1996. In the meantime, Horst became a highly skilled master goldsmith.

Klaus studied and served many years as an officer in the criminal investigation department in Leipzig. He now uses his investigative skills in his hobby of searching for people involved in episodes of WWII history.

Horst continues to work as a master goldsmith, and works with computers as a hobby. He produced the graphic design of the original book.

As children, they experienced the crash of the two American B-17 bombers dangerously close to Leisnig shortly before the end of the war. Recalling that long ago event, they resolved to investigate the circumstances of the crash, and to learn the fate of the two crews.



Horst Ries

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The authors relate an event from their childhood that happened right in their hometown of LEISNIG, Germany. On 6 April 1945, as the war in Europe drew to a close, two B-17 bombers collided overhead, raining debris from one B-17 over the area, and leaving the pilot of the other B-17 fighting desperately to save his barely flyable airplane and its crew. Narrowly avoiding a catastrophic crash into the populated area of the city, he nursed the crippled bomber past the city and across the river Mulde before his airspeed, altitude, and luck ran out. All seven remaining aboard his airplane perished in the ensuing crash into the side of a hill, leaving a solitary crewman who survived by parachuting to tell their tale.

The other B-17 exploded in midair, flinging most of the crew to their doom. The survivors' unlikely escapes are described by the authors, as well as their fates at the hands of the local populace. This book follows the crews on their final bombing mission, through the circumstances of the accident, and describes how the Germans, into whose midst they were thrust, treated them with humanity.

Follow the trail of their research as they discover and interview eyewitnesses and survivors. Learn how a widening circle of contacts with researchers and archivists on two continents finally lead to a full picture of the events of that day, when catastrophe passed close by LEISNIG.

Einertbrücke

B-17G
#43-38801

Leisnig

Official USAAF Photo, 8 April 1945