

Mission To Bremen- A Trip Into The Past

By Allen Crosson

I made a trip to Germany last month. A pilgrimage, some might say, to a quiet, rural place in the countryside northwest of Bremen; near the villages of Albstedt and Finna. A place where, on a December day in 1943, the life of my father, and the lives of nine other young American flyers, changed forever.

I stood on ground little changed over the past 58 years, ground that held nightmarish memories for a German woman and man who were very young people in December of 1943. And I listened to eyewitness descriptions of the final airborne moments of a B-17 Flying Fortress; and the death of a young American co-pilot seeking escape from a dying bomber.

My journey started over two years ago through a chance encounter on the Internet, that great high tech information superhighway which has opened an amazing global doorway for people seeking information on any subject. I answered a question for a German man seeking information about an American bomb group which had bombed a bridge near his home in southern Germany during the last months of WW2. A part of my response was a question as to whether he might have any contacts in northern Germany regarding a bombing raid on Bremen in December 1943. In a matter of days this individual had contacted the mayor of Albstedt, Germany and provided information regarding the specific details I had requested. Thus began a correspondence which culminated in the visit to Germany and the opportunity to experience something I had previously believed impossible.

The event which led me to Germany, 58 years after the fact, was the premature end to an 8th Air Force raid against the docks and submarine pens at Bremen. The city of Bremen is some 25 kilometers inland from the North Sea, on the Weser River, and was a high priority target. The submarine pen stands today just as it did in 1943, except that it is now an abandoned, fenced in concrete structure inaccessible from the river. A haunting reminder of the fruits of slave labor and the dreams of a madman.

The raid started out routinely with formation assembly completed in the clear, cold, unlimited visibility skies over England. The co-pilot in Lt. Crosson's crew was 2nd Lt. Jim Opitz, a replacement who had lost his original crew in early December and who was taking over for the regular co-pilot, Gayle Messenger, who had trouble with his ears. Today's mission would be the final one for Jim, as well as for gunners Robert Eloie and Norman Klima, this side of eternity.

The mission proceeded as briefed from take-off until the initial point of the bomb run. As the formation turned at the IP vicious, concentrated fighter attacks began on the low group of the lead formation.

Lt. Crosson's plane, "The Rebel", was heavily hit by Me-109 fighters and flak and began to trail behind the formation with an engine on fire and crewmen wounded. "The Rebel" was kept under control with the auto-pilot, a factor which would affect the plane's eventual fate, and successfully bombed the target. After "bombs away" Lt. Crosson cut short the turn to the rally point and came back under the formation for about 30 seconds. "The Rebel" was on fire, losing altitude and still under attack by Me-109 fighters. The formation course was to the northwest of Bremen and soon the lives of some young German civilians would meld with those of Lt. Crosson's crew.

Seven of "The Rebel" crewmen were wounded and the order was given to bail out of the stricken bomber. Eight of the crew were able to bail out between Bremen and the village of Finna.

The ground was frozen in December of 1943 and Lt. Crosson was knocked unconscious when he hit the ground. Waist gunner Jesse Glawson broke an ankle but the remaining crewmen, with the exception of Jim Opitz, Norman Klima and Robert Eloie, survived their parachute jumps.

Standing in a misting rain, on a country road near Albstedt, Germany, I try to picture in my mind the last moments of a cohesive bomber crew. The first fighter attack at the IP inflicted severe damage to the B-17 and some of the men were wounded. The bomber was on fire, none of the gunners were sure what was happening. Do they jump or stay with the plane?

Robert Eloie, tail gunner, was probably one of the first gunners to be wounded. The tail gun position was one of the first gun positions to be silenced if a successful fighter attack was to be made on a Fortress. He bailed out, only to die later on the ground.

The waist, ball turret and radio operator positions were hit badly in the second fighter attack after "bombs away". The left waist gunner, Norman Klima, was mortally wounded in a hail of 20mm cannon fire and fell against the ball turret. Robert McFarlane, radio operator, Steve Bulsok, ball turret gunner and Jesse Glawson, right waist gunner, were all wounded but managed to escape the crippled bomber.

In the forward section of the plane the officers and flight engineer were having their own problems. Both pilots were badly wounded, the cockpit blasted by cannon and machine gun fire and, as "The Rebel" lagged behind the formation, the order was given to bail out.

Lt. Crosson, who had been flying with the auto-pilot, set "The Rebel" into a slightly nose down left hand turn. This gave the crew a chance to get away from the plane as they bailed out.

The pilot, bombardier, navigator and flight engineer managed to jump. Lt. Opitz, badly wounded, weak from loss of blood and in shock, probably passed out on the flight deck.

With eight of the crew free of the ship, "The Rebel" continued to descend in a left hand turn, northwest of the target.

At some point, two Me-109 fighters picked up "The Rebel" and continued to pursue it. Possibly thinking that the B-17 was still under control, even though two engines were by now on fire, the German pilots continued to make firing passes on the descending Fortress.

As the plane continues its auto-pilot controlled descent Jim Opitz finally regains consciousness on the floor of the flight deck. He must have realized that "The Rebel" was very near the ground and knew that his only chance for survival was to get out of the plane. With some last reserve of strength he was able to attach his chest pack parachute and reach either the forward escape hatch or the open bomb bay. He fell free from the plane.

Harry Ahrens was a 14 year old German boy in December of 1943. He lived, as he does now, in the village of Finna, 12 miles northwest of Bremen. He is the only living witness to see Jim Opitz jump from "The Rebel".

Harry is standing near his home, about noon, on 20 December 1943. He hears the noise of aircraft engines approaching, from the direction of Bremen, at what seems to be a very low altitude. Suddenly, through the trees, he sees an American Flying Fortress pursued by two Me-109 fighters. Two of the bomber's engines are on fire and the German fighters are shooting at the bomber. As the bomber passes the village, turning in the direction of Albstedt, Harry sees a man drop from the B-17 at an altitude of 300 to 400 meters. The airman falls to earth about 300 meters from where Harry is standing.

Crashing through a line of trees, along a dirt road, the airman strikes the frozen ground head first, his parachute never opening. Jim Opitz' valiant struggle for survival ends at the base of a tree, on a foot path, in the village of Finna, Germany.

Harry runs to the airman's body and notes the bullet wounds in his chest, the head injuries from the fall and the airman's name on his flight jacket. He remembers the scene today, 58 years later, as if it happened yesterday.

Jim's body was covered with his parachute, left where it had fallen, until the following day about noon. His body was then moved to the fire house in Finna where it was picked up, about 4 pm on 21 December, and taken to the Garrison Cemetery, at Bremerhaven, for burial.

The bomber, with Norman Klima's body still in the waist, continued to fly on its ever descending, turning course.

A 21 year old German farm girl is near her home outside the village of Albstedt. She also hears approaching aircraft engines and sees a B-17, very close to the ground now, just

above the trees, circling down as if attempting to land in the corn field adjacent to the house. At least one Me-109 is still shooting at the bomber and the girl is very afraid that the Fortress is going to hit her home. As if by intent, the plane strikes the ground almost in the center of the corn field, about 50 meters from her house, and disintegrates in a massive fireball as the aviation fuel ignites. Pieces of the bomber fly in every direction and one of the engines is thrown over a quarter of a mile distant. The fire burns for several hours and exploding machine gun ammunition and oxygen tanks force the woman, and her mother, to abandon the farm, until the next day, in fear of their lives.

The next morning the woman returned to the field and took three photos of the wreckage. This was a very serious offense as taking of pictures, or any contact with enemy soldiers, was forbidden. A section of what may have been the bottom portion of the flight deck and the ball turret are the only large pieces of wreckage in the field. Everything else is twisted and scattered debris.

Sometime that morning the body of Norman Klima is discovered, over 150 meters from the center of the crash, where it had been thrown by the force of the explosion. The young woman goes to see Norman's body and observes that he has been shot in the chest and side. Other than the bullet wounds, his body is unmarked by the explosion and she thinks, "he is only sleeping".

Norman's body was picked up about noon that day and taken to the firehouse in Finna. Here it was placed with Jim Opitz' body, and the bodies of six other airmen, to be taken to Bremerhaven later that day for burial.

So the mission ends; and there are the quick and the dead. The survivors go to hospitals and prison camps; the young German civilians go about their lives in a war torn country, burying the memories of what they have witnessed. However, those memories do not fade. Frau Cordes, the young German woman of long ago, today still living next to the corn field, thinks of the exploding bomber, and the aftermath of the crash, every day

Allen Crosson - August, 2001