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The Airmen Murder At Ottmannshausen

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Aerial photographs still show faintly where the runways of US Army Air Force (USAAF) Station 139 used to be. But it isn't more than a difference in the colour shades of the soil. Over the past seventy years, agriculture has reclaimed the land that was given to the USAAF during the Second World War. Only the restored control tower still stands which houses the museum of the "Bloody Hundredth", so called for its heavy losses.

This refers to the 100th Bombardment Group (BG) of the 8th US Air Force, which was stationed at Thorpe Abbots, a village of a few hundred souls, about 4 miles east of Diss in Norfolk, England from June 1943 until December 1945 with four squadrons of the heavy four-engine B-17 bombers.

On July 29, 1944 a huge armada of over 1200 bombers took off to bomb airfields in France and oil installations in Germany. Just less than half of them, 569 B-17 bombers, took on the factories in Leuna and Merseburg. The four squadrons from Thorpe Abbots were among them. When the 100th returned that evening, eight aircraft were missing, including three from the 349th squadron.

The fate of one of these three aircraft is the subject here: that of the "Liberty Belle" and her crew. Officially, she was listed on the inventory as B-17G-35-DL, (DL=Douglas built B-17) serial number 42-107211, squadron code XR, code letter N, however, crews usually did not treat their ships so prosaically and they gave them names. In this case even a name with a wink. Every American knows from school the story of the "Liberty Bell", which was rung in 1776 during the public reading of the American Declaration of Independence and still hangs in Philadelphia. But in the name of this airplane, adding an "e" made it a "Belle", a female beauty. Consequently a painting on the nose of the plane, painted with dedication by the ground crew, featured the Liberty Bell and next to it a shapely blonde.

The "Liberty Belle" was still relatively new; she had come off the assembly line at the end of March 1944 and, after arrival at Thorpe Abbots a month later, had only been in service for three months.

The B-17 aircraft type was originally designed for a crew of ten: four officers in the functions of pilot, co-pilot, navigator and bombardier, and six non-commissioned officer (NCO) airmen in the functions of flight engineer/top turret gunner, radio operator, ball turret gunner, left and right waist gunner and tail gunner.

From June 7, 1944, one of the two waist gunners was omitted, and from February 23, 1945 even both. One may assume that this had to do with the decreasing strength of the German fighters. However, this did not happen on a cut-off date in the entire USAAF, but as and when directed.

In late 1943 the 8th US Air Force decided that in future all 36 aircraft of a squadron should release their bombs simultaneously. Basically, only the bombardier in a lead aircraft aimed and dropped his bombs; the other aircraft simply released their bombs as soon as they saw or heard over the radio that the lead aircraft was dropping its bombs. If trained bombardiers were scarce, it was now possible to place an NCO trained as gunner in the nose of the aircraft; he was then responsible for the twin machine gun in the "chin" of the aircraft and, as far as bombing was concerned, only had to be able to toggle the right switches. His role was then no longer bombardier, but togglier.

Since June 6, 1944 Staff Sergeant Marccena F. Dottoviano (*1921) flew along as this "togglier". Originally he did not belong to the flying staff at all; he had arrived in England as a member of the ground crew and had flown several missions as a waist gunner.

The navigator was Flight Officer Victor Irvin Kinkade (22), nicknamed Vic. Until the beginning of June he had flown as bombardier, but now he was assigned as navigator. His position was in the nose of the aircraft, in front and below the two pilot seats. He also had to operate two machine guns, if necessary, which were mounted on the right and left side of the nose.

The rank of Flight Officer existed in the USAAF for barely three years during the war, ranking below the officers but above the NCOs. (Equated to the lowest echelon of US Army Warrant Officer of the time). Kinkade in any case was satisfied with his rank. He once wrote home that he could apply for a "real" commission in three months' time, but that he would only lose money; he was already drawing as much pay as a 1st Lieutenant. Including the flight allowance, his salary was \$240 a month. Kinkade was a frugal soldier but even offered to lend money to two of his siblings. He dreamed of buying a farm after the war with the money he had saved.

The pilot was First Lieutenant Carl C. Gustafson Jr. (22). The "Liberty Belle" had not always been "his" plane, but at least during the last missions he had been at the controls. This was his 22nd mission.

To his right was the co-pilot, Flight Officer Michael J. "Mike" Nemerowski (*1924).

The flight engineer and top turret gunner was Technical Sergeant Robert E. "Bob" Fife (21). He had participated in the first eight of the Gustafson crew's missions, had been wounded and after his recovery he had only been back on board for about two weeks.

The radio operator was Technical Sergeant Anthony G. "Tony" Trebnik (20); his position was in a small radio room behind the bomb bay.

Staff Sergeant Jack C. Kromer (21) operated the two machine guns in the rotating ball turret under the belly of the aircraft. This was a job for short optimists who did not suffer from claustrophobia, because the ball turret was small with a diameter of 42 inches, closed on all sides and, if damaged, could only be moved with difficulty, if at all, into a position that allowed climbing out.

Staff Sergeant Frank A. Caldwell (*1922) was the waist gunner, i.e. he operated the two machine guns that were mounted on the right and left flank of the fuselage. Until the previous day he had only manned one machine gun; the other was manned by Staff Sergeant Sigmund A. Kazmierski.

But Kazmierski was not on this mission. The "save gunners" campaign had now reached the "Liberty Belle".

In the tail turret, Staff Sergeant William R. "Bill" Ewing sat behind the twin machine guns. At 24 years of age, he was the oldest on board.

All in all the aircraft mounted 12 machine guns of .50 inch calibre. One understands in view of this enormous firepower why the B-17 was also called "Flying Fortress". The German fighters had to think carefully from which direction an attack was least dangerous.

Despite the armament and the armour plating, everyone on board was aware that they too were vulnerable. Their machine guns did not help against the dreaded German flak which could be very strong especially around industrial targets.

Some of them therefore had a special ritual with which they tried to conjure up luck. For example flight engineer, Bob Fife, handed the ground crew chief, B.G. Cannon a special silver dollar every time before take off and said "Keep this until I come back." Coming back had worked every time till now...

Same as yesterday but different

This mission was a repetition of the previous day when the 100th had been over Merseburg. The route led them over enemy territory practically along its entire length. They flew in over northern Germany; at some point their comrades who flew to Bremen today turned North, and they continued over the Harz Mountains into Thuringia...

The most nerve-racking part was, as always, the final approach to the target. No matter how many flak shells exploded all around, no matter whether a German fighter was breathing down your neck: there could be no more evasive manoeuvres. The pilots who could not see the target due to the huge aircraft nose kept a sharp eye for the lead ship, keeping position as best they could. The toggler, at the bombardier's position in the nose, opened the bomb bay doors and, hand on toggle, awaited the drop from the lead aircraft.

According to the sole survivor Bob Fife, they had already dropped their bombs on Merseburg when they were hit themselves. However, it must have been an approximate drop, because the lead aircraft, whose action should have been the signal for them, had already been shot out of the formation by flak before reaching the target. The formation fell apart and the carefully thought out protection was lost which would have provided cover to the others in the formation. After they had already turned towards home, with Merseburg 15 miles behind them, the German fighters attacked over the area of Laucha on the Unstrut. From 10:20 to 10:40 hrs, for twenty infernal minutes, they were under fire. All around, one Flying Fortress after the other fell. Then the "Liberty Belle" was also hit.

A 20mm cannon shell of a Bf-109 pierced the left wing tank and set it on fire. Fife saw this from his place in the top turret and alerted the pilot via the intercom. The pilot sounded the bail out bell and gave the evacuation order: "Bale out, everybody!" The altitude at this time was 20,000 feet.

Their parachute training was more or less theoretically with ground exercises. Nevertheless, this basic training was important: They had to understand that and why they should free-fall as fast as possible to below 10,000 feet, otherwise they would lose consciousness due to lack of oxygen. "*Don't pull the ripcord until you can tell a cow on the ground from a horse*" was the mnemonic. But no one had ever actually jumped; that had not been part of the training. They also had to clip on their parachutes first because they didn't wear them during the flight, and the gunners in the tail and ball turrets had to work their way out of their confined positions first. All this took longer than a few seconds, despite the hurry. At a cruise speed of about 170 knots, the "Liberty Belle" must have covered the approximately 15 miles from the position of the fighter attack to the impact at Mannstedt in about four minutes. The Germans registered the crash at 10:40 hrs.

Fife reported after the war that all others except himself landed quite close together and were captured by 11 to 14-year-old armed Hitler Youth. However, he was not there and never saw his comrades again after the jump. Fife himself landed in a grain field in a group of working women. They beat him with their hoes. Then the Hitler Youth arrested him.

His capture was recorded by the Germans without any location, only "at noon". An old man with a rifle led Fife a mile away to a camp of Russian forced labourers. After a few hours he continued on to a nearby town, where he was put into a prison cell. Two German officers visited him there and tried to interrogate him. On a chair, Fife saw a cardboard box with several billfolds in it, which he recognized as the property of his crewmates. One of the officers noticed his look and commented in English, "This is the rest of them. Kapoot!" What had happened to his crewmates, Fife never knew for sure. He only got to see their billfolds, and after a few months in captivity, he said later, he also knew that it meant they were dead.

At 14:00 hrs a ten-man Luftwaffe Salvage Team arrived at the crash site which was 300 yards south of Mannstedt. Here they found a lot of wreckage scattered over a radius of 300 yards, most of it burnt. Apparently the plane had broken up in mid-air. The report of the salvage team was later captured and translated by the Americans. About the crew this report recorded:

2 men captured by rural guards and transferred to Airbase Headquarters A(e)33/III, Weimar, on 31 July 1944;

2 dead, handed over to community Buttstaedt and Guthmannshausen for burial. Time and date of interment and location of graves will be reported later;

It is not confirmed whether more members of the crew are at large or not. Search for them has been taken up;

2 parachutes have been found.

This note raises questions. Firstly, who were the prisoners and where were they taken prisoner? who were the dead and where were they found? In other instances, a salvage report provides at least partial answers to such questions but not here. Secondly, in such cases it was customary to

take the dead to the nearest cemetery. Buttstädt and Guthmannshausen had cemeteries, Mannstedt had not.

Our sources

At this point it becomes necessary to make a few remarks about the current source materials used. Every time an aircraft did not return, the USAAF created a file called the "Missing Air Crew Report" (MACR). At the end of the war, the Americans captured a lot of German reports about downing aircraft, salvage reports, casualty reports, etc. and set about translating all these files and assigning them to the appropriate MACR file. These files are now readily available on the internet and allow researchers to make the connection between the American and German perspective on a crash. However, it turns out that some of the German files were misplaced by the Americans. And sometimes, as in the crashes of July 29, the Germans themselves had already completely lost track of the situation and admitted it. For example:

...since on 29/7/1944 at the same time 3 aircraft of the same type Boeing B-17G crashed within a small area, ... it was not possible to determine who belonged to the crews of the respective ships.

However, in following the traces of *all* the aircraft that crashed in Thuringia on that day, it becomes clear that the "Liberty Belle" must be the one that crashed south of Mannstedt and it is from this salvage report that the above quotes are taken.

However, in the MACR for the "Liberty Belle" there are also "faulty filings" i.e. documents about crew members of another aircraft, namely "Regal Eagle" from the 350th squadron. This plane allegedly crashed near Mannstedt, too, and in the MACR of the "Regal Eagle" you can find the same salvage report as in the MACR of the "Liberty Belle", although it can of course only have referred to one of the two wreckages.

However, the crew members of the "Regal Eagle" all survived (this does not match the report of two dead) and were, according to German documents, captured in Leubingen, 6 km east of Weißensee (district Sömmerda). Weißensee lies 12 miles west-northwest of Mannstedt. It is not imaginable how, given the flight course of the bombers, from Merseburg homeward (i.e. southwest), parachutists could have landed more westward than the plane from which they jumped. And it is even more absurd that if the aircraft was flying in a more southerly direction, they should have landed *north-westerly* of the place where their plane crashed. The rule "*free-fall till below 10,000*" also prevented a parachutist from being blown away by the wind for long distances.

In short: "Regal Eagle" cannot have crashed at Mannstedt. There is a crash at ½ miles west of Weißensee, i.e. a little east of the village of Ottenhausen, as a German captured document, although found in the MACR for the "Liberty Belle", indicates. The place of capture in Leubingen fits perfectly with this.

What had become of the crew members of the "Liberty Belle" is known today, and also that the salvage report leads to a wrong track with its statement that two dead bodies were found on site

and "handed over to the communities of Buttstädt and Guthmannshausen for burial", because the fallen crew members buried in these two places must have come from other aircraft.

Robert Fife survived in German captivity and died on September 27, 2019 at the age of 96 in Waverly, Kansas. The other eight were buried on June 20, 1950 in a common grave at the American National Cemetery in Louisville, Kentucky – at least all eight of their names are written on the gravestone: Plot I, grave numbers 177 to 180.

The files make it possible to trace the place from which they were transferred to America, namely the Ardennes American Cemetery, located south-west of Liège, between Neupré and Neuville-en-Condroz. There they had been buried in four separate graves: three single graves and one grave of five. Further research uncovered that the five had been buried at Ottmannshausen Cemetery and the other two at Daasdorf. Where the eighth had been buried in Germany is not known and is still to be determined.

The story of the crash is not just about the deaths of the eight but also that at least seven of those deaths were murders which were only partially atoned for.

Investigation and Trial

Soon after Allied troops reached Thuringia, rumours about a murder of American airmen in Ottmannshausen reached the ears of the occupying forces, who then took up investigations. On February 20 and 21, 1947, after being extradited to the Americans by the Soviets, Karl Grosch and Albert Hendrich from Ottmannshausen and Fritz Erich Hähnert from Ettersburg stood trial before an American General Military Government Court, assembled in Dachau on the premises of the former concentration camp. This trial endeavoured to clear up what had actually happened before the burials in Ottmannshausen.

But this trial did not clarify who the dead of Ottmannshausen were. Neither were the dead of Daasdorf ever the subject matter of a trial.

What neither American nor Soviet nor German authorities and courts completely cleared up, can be told now after careful evaluation of the files.

The earliest written account comes from Rudolf Allner, woodcutter and camp leader of the Eastern Labourers' Camp at the forestry office in Ettersburg, living in Ottmannshausen, house no. 75, i.e. on the road to Berlstedt and 50 yards from the spot where a dirt road running behind the village properties joins this road. On April 26, 1945, he put his story to paper in his own old-fashioned Gothic handwriting.

[Note: Allner was sentenced to death by the Soviets, and was executed in April 1946 for his role and behaviour in that camp. He therefore was not available for the Dachau trial.]

A woodcutter is not a writer, and the language is correspondingly clumsy. Perhaps this is why someone at the "Prüfstelle Buchenwald" took the trouble the next day to type out Allner's statement, making a fair copy. Unfortunately, this is also a stylistic adaptation; it changes wording

and punctuation and rearranges parts of sentences without informing the reader. Here however, the preference is to quote from the handwritten original with minor additions to clarify the narrative.

On this Saturday Allner had finished work at 12:30 pm and was home for lunch at 1:15 pm. He had already heard in Ettersburg that Frieda Hochstein, a resident of Ottmannshausen, had been killed in the morning during an aerial fight by a bullet that entered through the window. Now his daughter told him the same thing. In order to show her father the place where she, too, had almost been hit by impacts in the street, she walked in front of the house once more. Suddenly she shouted: "Daddy, come out here, there is a car with police and civilians with guns near Schröpfer's garden."

Where is "Schröpfer's garden"? According to the 1939-40 resident's register, there were two villagers of that name; one lived in house no. 10 and one in house no. 52, and the long, narrow plot of land on which house no. 52 stands has its rear boundary just at the aforementioned junction. So that is where the car stood.

Allner goes to look and realizes that there are prisoners on the car. At that moment, the "Kreisleiter" (Nazi Party district leader) and District Administrator Franz Hofmann and "the police captain Knipsch" pass by in a car. Allner goes to the car with the prisoners and is hissed at by one of the armed civilians who act as guards, what is to be seen here and where the village inn is.

[Note: Allner did not know the police captain; he heard his name later and may have misheard and consequently misspelled it. He may be possibly referring to "Fritz Gniebsch" who is on record as being the "Kreis-Gendarmerieführer" at the time, i.e. the leader of the rural police in the county north of Weimar to which Ottmannshausen belonged and of which Hofmann was the Kreisleiter/Landrat.]

The car stopped there for about an hour and a half, Allner writes. Around 4:00 pm, he had business in Ettersburg, and just as he was about to leave (which may have been at about half past three) – the car and its occupants were no longer there – the municipal servant came with the news that, at the order of the District Administrator, all members of the Land Guard were to come to the house of Karl Hochstein, the husband of the killed woman. According to the residents' register, this must be house no. 30: "Hochstein, Karl, farmer".

Allner goes into the village together with his work colleague Hermann Pabst "...there we see the district leader, the police captain, the Ortsgruppenleiter of Ettersburg, of course all carrying pistol holsters, in front of Dittmann's inn".

[Note: Pabst is Allner's neighbour, living at no. 77.]

District leader and police captain have already been mentioned; the Ortsgruppenleiter (=Party local group leader) of Ettersburg (at the same time the mayor there) was Fritz Hähmert. "Dittmann's inn" was probably located in house no. 34, because according to the residents' register "Dittmann, Reinhold, innkeeper" lived there. (Now one also gathers why Allner had been asked about the inn by the gruff civilian: It was there that the leading figures of the now following events apparently wanted to set up their headquarters).

These functionaries now go to what Allner called the "ordered place": the house of the Hochsteins. "Arriving in front of the Hochstein house, I saw only 3 prisoners. Two of them had been sent by [someone,] I don't know [who] into the house. Before that, as I saw, on the left side there was the captain, Ortsgruppenleiter, and probably another one from the Gestapo... [...] ... and on the right side between the inhabitants a little to the front the district leader, one from the Gestapo and a police officer. As I come to the window where the shot went in I hear screaming in the house[,] looked in for a moment[,] the daughter-in-law is crying[,] and [then I] see a strapping prisoner[,] go to the courtyard door[,] there the prisoner already comes in pace and the seen last [=the one I had seen last] also like this.

While the two of them wanted to pass by me[,] there was already a bang to my left. Look over there[,] the last almost runs me over. The escape from the courtyard door[,] comes to the left a small tree[,] wants to squeeze through[,] someone has a stick[, I] took it [and] hit [the prisoner] over his arm while meanwhile the 4th was shot by whom I cannot indicate."

These authors intentionally did not change the original, only trying to help the understanding by adding something in square brackets, in order to leave the original tone, especially the impression of being hunted, in Allner's description. To be noted: the statement "there was a bang *to my left*", i.e., on the side where "the captain, the Ortsgruppenleiter, and probably another one from the Gestapo" stood.

Allner's statement "I saw 3 prisoners – two of them had been sent into the house by someone (I don't know who)" must be understood as: "I saw 3 prisoners; two of the (sc. altogether five) prisoners had been sent into the house." For that there were five prisoners we hear again and again in all the testimonies.

Who fired the shots? Hähnert, from his first interrogation by the Soviets to his testimony in the U.S. trial, always confessed that he had shot two of the airmen. According to Allner's written statement, the second shooter who can be identified is the district leader Franz Hofmann: "The district leader shouted get away and shot past my skull, then he said: that's what is happening to everyone in his district..."

Allner estimates that the events he describes took place in five to eight minutes and explicitly notes: "None of the residents took part in the shooting". He himself probably soon afterwards set off in the direction of Ettersburg. In any case, he was no longer in the village when the murder victims were later taken to the cemetery.

In January 1997, Rudi Pabst, then a 16-year-old from Ottmannshausen, wrote down what Allner either did not see or is concealing: Hardly any of the first shots were fatal. One of the prisoners "tried to escape up the village with serious injuries. He breathed his last in the ditch between the Albin Weber and Paul Hupel properties. Before my very eyes, an elderly Ottmannshausen resident (he is long dead; peace to his ashes!) had finished him off with a pickaxe."

Another witness, also still a youth, is quoted by Florian Wichert: "The then 15-year-old Horst Jähnert, son of the community baker, could see from a distance how, at the end of this massacre,

they were all given a mercy shot from a pistol, so that the already lifeless bodies jerked once more.“

There are still more eyewitness reports. Some of them were given to officers of the Soviet military authorities and thus have the advantage of being recorded within less than a year after the incident. On the other hand, undue pressure was apparently exerted by the Soviets, especially on suspects. However, if we find such details in the records as the statement that the American airmen "were all taken prisoner in the village of Mannstedt by officers of the Weimar criminal police" – then this is a rather irrelevant statement for the interrogation interests of the Soviets at that time and therefore credible, confirming the location of "Liberty Belle"'s crash site for the present researcher.

In this context it is interesting to note that the defendant Hähnert was also questioned about the crash site during the trial. He said: "There was a good deal of talk about that amongst the population later. I don't know exactly where it was supposed to have come down, but I heard it may have come down in one or two villages slightly removed from Ottmannshausen, Maunstedt – I don't know the exact name, it was Willerstedt, probably.“

[Note: There is no location called Maunstedt.]

On the whole, it cannot be doubted according to the available testimonies that the five Americans, on incitement by the county leader Hofmann and under active co-operation of the Ettersburg local group leader Hähnert were first beaten up and then shot in Ottmannshausen. Details of the sequence of events are presented differently in different statements – it is left to today's reader of the minutes to make up their own mind with regard to the contradictions.

Here by example:

On July 29, Max Schöpfer from Ettersburg had been ordered to Ottmannshausen by Hähnert who did not give any reasons. When he arrived there half an hour after Hähnert, two of the airmen were already dead. About the further events he says:

“Q What did they do to the 3 fliers that were still alive?

A One got hit. The other 2 probably wanted to run away. They ran after them and shot them.

Q Did they run?

A They ran a little piece down the street. Two ran down a little bit. The one got hit down and was shot right away on the house.

Q Who shot him?

A I believe that Landrat Hofmann shot that one and I think Hähnert shot the 2 others which ran a little bit down the street.

Q Did anyone else besides Hofmann and Hähnert do any shooting?

A I have not seen. I do not know who shot the 2 which were dead already when I came.“

Hähnert however, who otherwise largely confessed, denied under oath that the airmen had tried to escape by running down the street. Why he denied this is not evident; it did not constitute an incriminating circumstance for him. On the whole, his account of the course of events is detailed

and probably in essence also credible. He states that he had been informed by the district leader by telephone call about the upcoming lynching, and ordered to Ottmannshausen. Hähnert continues:

“As I was entering the village and going down the street, there were already some men standing by the house of the woman who had been shot. I passed by there and reported to the kreisleiter. He was standing a bit further up the street talking to the mayor.

[*Note: Probably referring to the mayor of Ottmannshausen, Oskar Voigt.*]

As I came up to him he asked me to give him the names of some of the men who were homeguard members and also lived in the village, and it was at this time that I noticed that some plan was being made. I again told him that one could not beat these people to death. He had already given the order or was giving the order that these men were to be shot to death. He said they were war criminals and that they had killed women and children. ... The captured fliers weren't there as yet, I did not see them. Together with the kreisleiter and, I think, the mayor and some other men, we then went down the street and I put my bicycle which I still had with me at that time into a house. When I came out of the house again I saw the fliers had been taken there in the meantime. The kreisleiter told me that I should participate in the shooting ... I had never shot anybody in my life before nor had I done anybody any harm. The kreisleiter noticed this and he told me this was an order and he in turn had received his orders from up above, although he did not tell me from whom he received his orders. He then addressed the prisoners with a few words which I did not understand and then he told the men who were standing about that the fliers would be taken inside to the room to view the body, and some were taken inside into the room where the dead body was. There was some considerable excitement inside the house. The man had a wooden leg and the kreisleiter said that the first son had been killed in action on the Eastern front and that there had been no news received from the second son for quite some time so he was supposed to be missing. I was standing in the corridor next to the door leading to the room in which the dead woman was and then the fliers were taken by the kreisleiter into the kitchen to see the man of this woman. As I was standing in the corridor I heard that the kreisleiter was pointing out to the fliers the bullets which had entered through the windows and I could also see from where I was standing that one of the bullets had hit the wall. The lethal shot had entered through the window, had torn away the back part of the skull of this woman, had hit the edge of the table and had entered some part of the wall and had been found inside the kitchen. The kreisleiter did some more talking, I cannot remember any of the details, but, substantially he pointed out to them how great the misery was that they had created and that this poor fellow had a wooden leg and similar things. The fliers were then taken back out in front and I remained inside the house for a few more moments to talk to the husband of the dead woman. When I came out of the house, the fliers were standing at the side and the kreisleiter gave the order „Go ahead and fire“ and he pointed out to me that I should shoot on the left side. He had also said previously that on that particular day several other persons had been killed by fliers and that persons working out in the fields had been strafed by planes. Because of the entire situation and the aspect of the body, and also because of the influence exerted by the kreisleiter, I had become so excited that out there I obeyed the order of the kreisleiter and shot them.

Q How many pilots did you kill?

A Two.“

I have my orders

Referring back to two sentences from Hähnert's statement: "He said they were war criminals ... he in turn had received his orders from up above".

Since May 1944, a Berlin-led campaign had been underway which propagated the lynching of shot down Allied airmen on the grounds that their bombing of civilian facilities and low level attacks on passenger trains violated international laws of war, and that they thus had forfeited the protection of the Geneva Convention.

Franz Hofmann must have known about this campaign; he was certainly aware of Martin Bormann's notorious letter from the Party chancellery dated May 30, 1944, because the district leaders were explicitly in the distribution list. From June 1944 onward, as research today knows, the numbers of airman lynchings increased significantly. And just as in this case, party functionaries almost always had a hand in it as instigators and/or perpetrators. The "people's rage" or "righteous indignation of the people" as the alleged driving force of "people's justice" was a myth. But when, as was the case here, a tragic case invited it, the party functionaries did not hesitate to exploit the existing emotions.

Of course it was a downright lie when Hofmann suggested that Frieda Hochstein was shot by exactly these American aviators. None of these men had come within 15 miles of the woman that was killed, and the gunners of a B-17 do not fire at ground targets anyway. But the district leader had said so, then it must be true, because "if you can't even believe authority it has come to a bad pass." (Which was what Grosch replied when asked why he had believed Hofmann's absurd statement.)

Secondary characters

It should be noted that the shootings were also preceded by beatings. Among those who were accused of participating in these maltreatments were not only Allner, but also Grosch and Hendrich, the accused in Dachau.

As further participants in the shooting, various witnesses named "a member of the district leadership, Kampfrath, and Löcklein of the Gestapo" as well as two men of the Weimar Criminal Investigation Department in plain clothes and the Weimar area leader of the Hitler Youth, Theo Schulte. Grosch reports in his testimony at the trial, referring to the first shots: "... at that moment I heard shots fall behind me. I turned around and I noticed the man from the Gestapo placed his machine pistol underneath his arm..."

Of all these named – apart from Allner, who was convicted of atrocities against Eastern workers – to our knowledge, only the three defendants in the Dachau trial were prosecuted in connection with the Ottmannshausen murders. This does not necessarily indicate inadequate investigative work. Especially hard-boiled National Socialists often committed suicide after the surrender because they could not bear the end of the Third Reich. And whoever wanted to go into hiding under a false name could do so in the chaos of the post-war years without major difficulties and was then hardly

to be found. The tensions between the Soviets and the Americans, which soon began to build up, also increased the difficulties to prosecute.

Franz Hofmann, school councillor, district leader (since 1933) and district administrator (since 1935) died on March 30, 1945 at 1:35 am at the Sophienhaus in Weimar from severe blood loss after being shot in the stomach and left knee.

Under not entirely clear circumstances a sentry had opened fire on Hofmann's car at a roadblock on Belvederer Allee, near Falkenburg. On April 1, 1945, the THÜRINGER GAUZEITUNG reported his death with the wording "victim of a tragic accident"; on April 4, 1945, he was cremated. The sentence with which Hofmann took leave from Ottmannshausen on July 29, 1944 says enough about him:

"After the shooting was over" – Grosch narrates in his trial evidence – "the kreisleiter had all the people who were standing about gather around and he said something like the following: *should he hear of anybody making a derogatory remark about the shooting of the fliers he would see to it that that person would suffer the same fate – he would have him placed against the wall in cold blood.*"

Burial

The dead were placed on a cart padded with rape straw and driven to the cemetery at the church. There they were laid on rape straw next to the church tower, all five next to each other, and guarded by land guards. A grave was dug on the east side of the church. In the evening around eight o'clock, Mayor Voigt took Karl Grosch to the cemetery as a witness, "and we took all the dog tags and also the valuables that the airmen had with them. ... All these items were immediately put into individual envelopes by the mayor, and after the mayor had returned home, he wrote the name of the flier on the appropriate envelope; and the mayor sealed all the envelopes, and I went home."

According to other information, Voigt had his typist Anida or Anita Schröpfer record the personal data.

The bodies were buried at six o'clock the next morning.

From captured German files it is known today who the five murder victims buried in Ottmannshausen were: Staff Sergeant Dottoviano, Flight Officer Kinkade, Technical Sergeant Trebnik, Staff Sergeant Kromer and Staff Sergeant Caldwell.

But shortly thereafter the bodies had to be dug up again on the orders of the district administrator and district leader; they were taken to the Weimar crematorium for cremation. The cremation book there shows that on August 2, 1944, five American soldiers not mentioned by name were cremated under the cremation numbers 14683 to 14687, whose ashes were then delivered to Ottmannshausen on September 22, 1944.

The Ottmannshausen worker Willy Engelbrecht told Russian First Lieutenant Maslov on June 10, 1946, that about 20 days (!) after the bodies had been exhumed, he had received an order from Mayor Oskar Voigt to bury five tin cans with the ashes of the five airmen in the same place where the bodies had previously been buried. He had done so.

According to the Russian exhumation minutes, these urns were then duly found and excavated on June 10, 1946, "2 meters from the church wall and 20 cm from the fence."

The Dachau Sentence, executed at Landsberg

The Dachau trial came to the only possible conclusion: that the defendants had indeed been involved, in different ways, in the lynching here described. Hähnert received the death penalty: He had killed two airmen. Grosch was sentenced to life imprisonment and Hendrich to twenty years, although it is not quite clear why they were punished with different severity: both had beaten the prisoners.

At the time, many Germans regarded such sentences as proof of unrestrained victors' justice, having nothing to do with real justice. Decades in prison for a few blows with a stick? That was simply not understood.

The American position was: "We are not speaking of a bar fight that could be dealt with under German or American national penal law, according to the motto: 'Five cane blows: equals so many months in jail with probation'. Anyone who assaults prisoners of war is not violating national but international law; he is committing a war crime. And all war crimes can in principle be punished by death as lawyers of all nations agree. Seen in this light, it is a sign of careful consideration of punishment when a mere maltreatment of prisoners of war is not punished by death, but by long imprisonment."

The sentence was passed on February 21, 1947. There was no appeal, but all sentences of the military government courts were subject to an automatic review. The "Review and Recommendations" paper of Lieutenant Ronald Dadamio of the Post Trial Section is dated April 14, 1947. It contains the recommendation to confirm all sentences. His superior, Colonel C.E. Straight, Deputy Judge Advocate, agreed.

On June 12, 1947, Judge Advocate Colonel J.L. Harbaugh (again one level higher) recommended that the sentences of Hähnert and Hendrich be confirmed and that the sentence of Grosch be reduced to 25 years in prison. But he, too, could only recommend.

The decision was made by the commanding general. Five days later General Lucius D. Clay signed the confirmations of sentence, following Harbaugh's recommendation.

On Tuesday, July 15, 1947, on the gallows of Landsberg, four executions of airman murderers took place:

A policeman named Eduard Curdts had shot and killed a US airman near Seesen. This was most likely on June 29, 1944, and the victim was Captain Richard C. Smith, pilot of a P-51 Mustang.

Land Guard Alwin Reinke, on 22.05.1944 at Ascheberg, had shot dead Sergeant Robert A. Hildebrand.

Paul Rübsamen was hanged at 10:11 am. On September 27, 1944, at Nentershausen/Rhön, he had killed an unknown bomber crew member.

At 10.30 am it was Fritz Hähnert's turn. Apart from the two times, details of the executions are not known. Hähnert's body was transferred to Munich for burial.

Hendrich was released in January 1954. Grosch, whose sentence had meanwhile been reduced to 22 years, was paroled in February 1954.

Daasdorf: Two More Murders

Anyone who has followed this report attentively up to this point will probably have been asking themselves for some time: And what about the two who were buried in Daasdorf?

There are documents on this, too – but none that have ever been presented to a judge.

After the war, the Americans found German documents showing that co-pilot Mike Nemerowski and rear gunner Bill Ewing were buried in Daasdorf near Buttstedt (5 miles SSW of Mannstedt). Why Daasdorf, and how had they met their deaths?

Graves and everything that had to do with it, were in the US Army in the realm of the Quartermaster and his troops. Consequently, soldiers of the 95th Quartermaster Battalion took care of the question in Daasdorf. They found two urns in the Daasdorf cemetery, which – just like the five in Ottmannshausen – only had numbered metal plaques, no names. Lt.Col. Metz of the Quartermaster Corps writes in a case report that interrogations among the Daasdorf residents yielded the following result:

“Approximately at the beginning of August 1944, the undersigned was present at the imprisonment of American Flyers. After they were questioned at the inn, they should have been brought to Buchenwald. On the way to Buchenwald we went ahead, then the prisoners and finally the police. Suddenly we heard two shots and when we turned around the two Americans lay shot on the ground (shot in the head). The two policemen were named Scharf and Weis from Buttstedt and Buttstädt.” This statement was signed by Paul Hartmann and Franz Mixa (the latter probably being the innkeeper).

[*Note: “Imprisonment” is probably a faulty translation, standing for “Gefangennahme” = capture, arrest.*]

The Daasdorf farmer and local leader of the farmers' association, Fritz Franke, had this to say: “I, Fritz FRANKE, was Burgermeister of the community of DAASDORF in the year of 1944. In August of this year, two American planes were found in this district. I heard of this case late in the evening through the police station in Buttstedt. The police squad came to me and informed me that two (2) American fliers were shot while escaping approximately 300 meters outside the town of Daasdorf. The bodies were to be taken in immediately. When I reached the street, a vehicle came already and brought the bodies. They were laid in the fire house since there is no morgue in this

town. The next day an official of the Landratsamt of Weimar came with the police guard of Buttelstedt and inspected the assets of both bodies. The things were put in envelopes, the names written on them and taken along by the Weimar officials. As Bürgermeister I got the order to bury the bodies.

The next day the order was revoked. A truck came from Weimar, brought two coffins and took the bodies away in them. Approximately 4 – 5 weeks later, two urns were sent from the cemetery office of Weimar with the ashes of the two soldiers, which were buried in the cemetery of DAASDORF." This statement, too, bears a signature: The one of Fritz Franke.

The facts of the case are beyond doubt: Nemerowski and Ewing were murdered in Daasdorf. German captured documents state: They were buried on August 1, 1944 at 6:30 pm on the south side of the village cemetery. Whoever at the Weimar Air Base Command brought to paper this "follow-up report on the burial of enemy air force members" had apparently not heard of the counter-order that Franke mentions.

In any case, completely in accordance with Franke's statement, the cremation book of Weimar, p. 181/182, lists, under the numbers 14680 and -82, two American soldiers, unnamed, cremated on August 2, 1944, coming from Daasdorf, returned as urns on September 22, 1944.

Thanks to a newspaper article published 20 years ago, we also have an idea of how Nemerowski and Ewing came to be in the Daasdorf inn:

Horst Becher - then 14 years old - confirmed "that on July 29, 1944, farmer Oswald Holle checked sheaves of grain in the field to see if they had dried out for driving in. He reached into the pile and an American airman appeared. Then a second one.

The farmer ran to the community and reported. The search began. On the road to Großobringen they were finally apprehended, brought to the inn at Daasdorf and guarded by party members and the Volkssturm. After the gendarme from Buttelstedt arrived, they were interrogated as well as possible. He then ordered them to be led in the direction of Großobringen. Just behind Daasdorf, where the willows stood, a field path turned off, and here the two were shot in the neck by the gendarme."

It remains unclear, however, why the gendarmes known by name were never (as far as it is known) called to account.

And what about Gustafson?

One fate remains to be cleared up, that of pilot Carl C. Gustafson.

However, the trail goes cold. The Americans had only seven containers of ashes for eight missing persons. The "conclusion" of the multi-page case history signed by Lt. Col. Metz contains the sentence: "Therefore, it is believed beyond a reasonable doubt, that the ashes sealed in the seven urns constitute the only recoverable remains of ..." - and then eight names follow, including, for the

first time in this paper, the name "Gustafson". That looks like the embarrassed confession: "There were no remains of him that we could recover." So the questions remain:

Where did he die?

How did he die?

Where was he originally buried?

Silence. At least in this document of the American Graves Service.

There are two captured German documents, in which Gustafson's name appears. One names one "Lieutenant K.C. Gustafsohn", Army Serial Number (ASN) O-757381, crew member of a "Fortress", and carries a painted ink cross, behind it: "7/29/44, 10:30 Weissensee /Thür.", underneath a stamp "buried".

In fact this ASN belongs to the pilot of the "Liberty Belle" so whoever filled out this form must have had his identity tag on the desk in front of them. But Weißensee? As was explained above, this is the crash site of another plane, not of "Liberty Belle", and Gustafson could not have arrived there via parachute either.

The other document is even more mysterious. It records that the aircraft, to which the names there listed belong, was a Fortress which crashed on July 29, 1944 at 10:30 am in Weißensee/Thür. and allegedly had the air force headquarters Erfurt-Bindersleben as its target. On the list are all nine names of the crew members of the "Liberty Belle". All except Fife carry the note "dead" behind their names.

Nemerowski and Ewing have an "x" in front of their names, the meaning of which is explained in a footnote: "buried at Daasdorf cemetery".

All others, including Gustafson and Fife, have an "o" in front of their names. Meaning according to footnote: "buried at Ottmannshausen cemetery". But that can't be true because after all Fife survived! If the information about him is not correct, why should we believe the one about Gustafson? Above all: If Gustafson was one of the five murdered, that doesn't make the situation any clearer: Then one of the five above-mentioned burial reports must be wrong, and instead of Gustafson one of his comrades would be without a verifiable grave.

All in all, these researchers are convinced that these two captured German documents report wrongly about Gustafson – albeit whether erroneously (but in good faith) or intentionally to cover up murder, remains a big question.

Seen in this light, Lt. Col. Metz was right: The contents of the seven urns before him at that time and now on Zachary Taylor National Cemetery is indeed "all that can be recovered of these eight men".

Just that the two Daasdorf victims and Gustafson – apart from the headstone in Louisville – still have no memorial.

Their five comrades who died in Ottmannshausen have such a memorial already.

Memorial Stone in Ottmannshausen

The history of Thuringia's liberation from Nazi rule had of course been researched and described in the period before the reunification of Germany – but, as not a few thought, with too much emphasis on the German Résistance and on the sacrifices of the "glorious Red Army" and with a reprehensible neglect of the part played by the American armed forces. Only after the representatives of the until then dominant view of history no longer had the power to prevent dissidents from asking questions, from speaking and writing, a change occurred here. Persons interested in history, such as Florian Wichert, were now able to collect important information on local history without ideological filters and write down the stories of contemporary witnesses; his work led to the local chronicle of Ottmannshausen.

Now also e.g. crashes of American airplanes could be researched. Hans Stadelmann and others, including Bernd Schmidt, came across the Ottmannshausen events and began to follow the available traces. The newspapers ALLGEMEINER ANZEIGER and the THÜRINGER ALLGEMEINE took up the topic; thereupon contemporary witnesses with so far unknown memories and details of this and other airman murder cases reported themselves.

Two people came forward, who kept an allegedly found escape map or an alleged pilot's ring. However, a connection to this or any other airman murder case could never be proven, and the alleged pilot ring was identified as a high school ring by the American manufacturing company when Bernd Schmidt researched its origin.

In the late 1990s, the efforts of the local researchers intensified, partly together and partly alone, to set a memorial stone for the victims of the airman murder. As the newspaper reports of those years show and as we know today, one was then still far from a complete and correct overview of the events.

Nevertheless, on July 29, 2000, on the 56th anniversary of the murder, the dedication of the stone took place, organized by Hans Stadelmann. After some back and forth, a location had been agreed upon at the entrance of the Ottmannshausen cemetery, near the war memorial, but with the writing side turned by 90°. Representatives of the U.S. Embassy, the U.S. Consulate General, a delegation of the U.S. Air Force, local politicians, eyewitnesses and residents attended the ceremony. However, later research led to the conclusion that the wording of the inscription was not entirely correct:

The airmen were not "beaten to death", but were beaten and shot.

Aftermath

In the USA, Mary Kinkade Maddox, a niece of the murdered navigator Flight Officer Kinkade was traced.

After hearing about the erection of the memorial stone, she sent the following message to the residents of Ottmannshausen in April 2008:

"To the people of Ottmannshausen,

*My family and I are extremely grateful for the Memorial to the crew of the 100th Bomb Group. My uncle, Lt. Victor Kinkade, was the navigator for the plane. We are now united in our desire to never forget the airmen who died July 29, 1944.
May God bless all of you.
Mary Kinkade Maddox
April 27, 2008"*

Subsequently, the stone at the Ottmannshäuser cemetery wall was repeatedly included in commemorative events, such as when a "Liberty Convoy" made a stop there on April 11, 2015. Helen Patton, granddaughter of the American World War General George S. Patton, gave a speech, as did the then Mayor of Ottmannshausen.

Two and a half years later, on September 3, 2017, Mary Kinkade Maddox visited the place where her uncle had died.

Thuringia's Prime Minister Bodo Ramelow and other high-ranking officials were present and laid wreaths.

Mary Kinkade Maddox later wrote down her impression of that day:

*"Today's ceremony means more to me than I can express in words. The warmth of the German people will always remain in my memory. There is a saying of the American Navajo Indians: 'Even the still wind has a voice'. Today, thanks to your kindness, the crew of the Liberty Belle had a voice.
Blessings —
Mary Kinkade Maddox."*

Perhaps the most important event of that day was the encounter between Mary Kinkade Maddox and Lothar Hochstein, the grandson of Frieda Hochstein, who died on July 29, 1944.

The house in which the tragedy took place in 1944 was under construction; the plaster had been removed, laying bare the original clay/straw wall. As a result, the second bullet hole next to the window, where Frieda Hochstein had stood, was now also visible – repaired with much lighter, modern mortar.

Members of two families, who had both lost a loved one that day, joined hands in a spirit of reconciliation.