

This is a two-part story, with a request for assistance at the end. The first part is the story of the incident when it happened, told by Lynn Cotterman. The second part is a modern update, related by Don Magness, brother of John Magness, one of the airmen who was killed that day.

## **A Tragic Accident**

by  
Lynn Cotterman

I was the Navigator on Homer Cotton's crew in the 485<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group, 831<sup>st</sup> Squadron. On March 2, 1945 I flew my first combat mission. The target was the Marshalling Yards in the city of Linz, Austria. Linz is located on the Danube River on the main rail line across Austria and was heavily defended. I was prepared to see Flak and wondered if the Luftwaffe would appear, but I wasn't prepared for what happened before we reached the target.

We were traveling up the Adriatic Sea in a large formation of B-24 bombers, climbing slowly because our planes were loaded to the hilt with fuel and bombs. We crossed into enemy territory and started over the Alps mountains. The snowy mountains are beautiful, but desolate. There was not a visible sign of life anywhere.

We passed over the high peaks and were approaching the foothills. It was a little before 1:00 PM and we were pretty much on time. Lt. Carl Langley's plane was in the box ahead and above our box. (A box is a formation of seven or less planes that are usually from the same squadron). He was in #7 position, the last plane in the box, "Tail End Charlie". He was having trouble keeping up and was drifting back. He jettisoned two 500 pound bombs to lighten the load and moved back up into position.

Suddenly he lost a supercharger and feathered number 4 engine. Then the plane stalled and drifted back into the box to the left of us and rested piggyback just above the Deputy Lead plane flown by Lt. Earl W Pooley. I watched the two planes, one on top of the other, flying so close together that it looked like they were almost touching. I wondered what they were going to do to get separated because they couldn't fly this close very long. After a few seconds, which seemed like ages it happened. I saw the wings of the two planes collide and the propellers of one were chewing up the wing of other. Then both planes fell off on their right wings and went tumbling down behind us. I anxiously waited for parachutes to open. From my position, I saw three chutes pop open, but the gunners said they saw two more making a total of only five chutes out of 20 crewmen.

There was a fire in bomb bay of Pooley's plane and the plane broke up right after the collision. Parts of the nose, the mid-section and the tail stayed together until they hit the ground. Then a fire broke out on the tree-covered slope below.

Langley's plane broke off just behind the waist window and went into a slow flat spin at about 10,000 feet. A chute popped out, but then both the plane and chute disappeared into a cloud.

Our formation of B-24's continued on to the target. It happened so fast and there was no wreckage or visible evidence of an accident like in an automobile accident. Two B-24 aircraft with 20 men had just disappeared and only six chutes were seen. I had no idea if I would ever see any of them again or know what happened to them. I wondered how they would survive in the snowy Alps. It was the first time that I had seen a B-24 go down and I was still numb.

## **The Crash Scene**

The planes crashed about 80 miles northeast of Innsbruck, Austria. Pieces of the two planes crashed about one half mile apart in Habersauer, an Alpine valley, about 15 miles south of the towns of Walchsee and Kossen. Within 40 minutes a group of German soldiers arrived near the place where Langley's plane went down. It was snowing heavily and it was assumed that the lack of visibility was the cause of the crash. Three bodies were found there and one was still alive! It was Lt. Langley who had miraculously survived. While his plane was in a flat spin he was blown out through the windshield and lost consciousness; however, he regained his senses in time to pull the rip cord. He suffered a broken vertebra in the neck. The other two bodies were members of his crew, Cpl. Doyle Sumner and T/Sgt. Legrand Koller. Because of the snow storm and the mass of snow accumulating, it was not possible to search for the other crewmen in the rugged terrain until the snow had partly melted. None of the other 20 crewmen survived. The German soldiers left and took Langley with them to the infirmary at Bad Aibling Airbase for treatment. After a couple weeks Langley was moved to a POW Camp. He was liberated in April by General Patton's 3<sup>rd</sup> Army.

German records show that Sumner and Koller were buried March 6<sup>th</sup>. During the next several weeks the bodies of the other flyers were uncovered and buried by the local Mountain Recovery Team. Then the US Search and Recovery Team moved them to a military cemetery after the war ended, awaiting the burial wishes of the next of kin.

## **60 YEARS LATER**

(A follow-up story by Don Magness)

Don Magness is the brother of John Newton Magness, who was the top turret gunner on Pooley's crew on that fatal day. Don was not satisfied with the amount of information that the family had received from the military about the accident. After a tour in the Air Force during the Korean War and retiring from General Electric after 25 years, Don started an intensive search to find more details.

He collected information including military records for each aircraft, the mission report, Missing Air Crew Reports, etc. He bought a computer and, while surfing the internet, ran across a reference to Mr. Roland Domanig, an Austrian citizen who helps people seeking information about bomber crashes. They quickly became E-Mail friends and Roland gave Don a great deal of information about the country surrounding the crash site and even visited the site and sent

back pictures. Don longed to visit the crash site, but it was beyond his reach. Don tells the rest of the story:

Sue (Don's daughter), her husband Tim and their daughter, Shannon, came to visit over the Christmas holiday of 2004. While they were here they asked if I really wanted to visit the crash site in Austria as they had worked out a way so it might be possible for Tim and me to make the trip. I recall not getting too excited as it was a trip that I had always considered impossible and it still seemed impossible to me. But eventually the details were worked out and we departed on our very exciting trip on September 8, 2005. Roland wrote that the two towns of Kossen and Walchsee were sponsoring a memorial to the two fallen crews and now that they knew when we would be there they would schedule the dedication during our visit. He also told us that the two towns would pick up the tab for our hotel and breakfast for the three nights we would be in the area. This was totally unexpected, but a greatly appreciated gesture by the towns.

Arriving in Frankfurt, Germany, we took a train to Munich and then rented a car to Kossen, Austria. We arrived in the early evening and saw Roland standing outside the hotel. It was certainly a pleasure to meet him after all the correspondence we had together. He advised us to wash up as we were having dinner with him and his wife, Elisabeth, and the mayor of Kossen and his wife. After dinner, we had some great conversation that was somewhat hampered by the language differences (all four of them spoke better English than we did German), but if we all spoke slowly enough we got along fine. They understandingly let us retire for the night. I can't imagine what we looked like as at this point we were going on 30 hours with very limited sleep on the plane. We agreed to meet for breakfast and then about 9:30 we would depart for the memorial site. This we did and after breakfast the mayor of Kossen showed us his office in City Hall and gave us a book on the history of Kossen that he signed for us.

Enroute to the memorial site we drove through some beautiful countryside and wooded lanes. We came to a spot where the road was blocked off and from there on it was what we call a hiking trail. We drove through the gate as we were in company with the Mayor and he had a key. We parked just a short distance from the memorial site and walked up to the site where a crowd had started to gather. The memorial was covered with a cloth and wrapped with a red ribbon. We waited until the scheduled start time and during that time more people arrived. We were very interested to note that there were musicians in Tyrolean Costume, old soldiers in black suits and Tyrolean hats and carrying their town banners. Also present were reporters and mayors of the two nearby towns. I had expected the mayors and perhaps a small group of people and was very surprised at the turnout. It was quite a sizable crowd and even included a man and his son from the United States who had read about the memorial dedication in the paper. I had the opportunity to meet Dr. Jakob Mayer with whom I had an E-Mail correspondence and who is also very active in investigating WWII crashes. He and Roland worked together on a number of these projects.

The band played to open the ceremony and the two mayors and I took part in the actual unveiling. The memorial consisted of, as do all such memorials that I was told about, a piece of the wreckage, which in this case was a large circular ring (about 2½ feet), a picture of a B-24, a

list of each crew with names, rank and crew positions. In addition, there were two descriptions of the accident, one in German and one in English. The memorial was attached to a large rock and was decorated with flowers. The memorial was so much more than I had expected that I have to admit to very strong emotion and even some tearing. I think the Mayor of Walchsee sensed the feelings I was having as he put his hand on my shoulder in moral support that was greatly appreciated. Short speeches by both mayors, Roland Domanig and Jakob Mayer followed. These of course were in German, but Roland's wife, Elisabeth, very kindly stood next to me and whispered into me ear what each was saying. Her action meant a great deal to me. The speeches were followed by more music and then the memorial was blessed by the local priest.

The blessing closed the dedication and then Tim presented each of the two mayors with a Florida state flag and I gave B-24 hats to Roland, Jakob, the two Mayors and to Keith Bullock's wife (Keith Bullock started the crash investigations in the area, but was too ill to attend). Small American flags were given to the crowd as far as they would go and the rest were given the fire service items (shoulder patches) that my son Scott had given me. I think that almost everyone got something. Then, and this was totally unexpected, there was a feed of sausage, bread and beer that was greatly enjoyed by all. The band played several times during the festivities and the party was going strong when we departed.

A smaller group of us including the Kossen Mayor, Roland, Jakob, Elisabeth, Mrs. Bullock, Tim and several old timers left the party and went to Stefan's mountain summer place which is really the center of what can be considered to be the crash site. (I am not sure of the spelling of "Stefan" and also, I failed to get his last name which I regret very much). Aircraft parts have been found on the hillside both above and below the house. Tim and Roland went off into the woods looking for aircraft parts while Elisabeth and I went in another direction. We were unsuccessful in finding parts and quit after a short time as a leg problem was bothering me considerably. Tim was delighted to have found some parts and posed for a picture with them. He carried them all the way home and after arriving he gave them to me and they are now in my den.

After everyone was rested from a long day, Stefan brought out more beer and sausage and soon the old soldiers (Austrians conscripted into the German army during WWII) started singing songs and while Tim did not know the words he joined in. He remarked later that singing with the old soldiers was one of the highlights of the trip for him. I enjoyed visiting with Stefan and he seemed to enjoy me. We spent considerable time together which was somewhat unusual when you realize that neither of us could understand a word that the other spoke.

Visiting the memorial and dedication was an unbelievable experience. Summing it up the most important feeling I got from the trip was that the people of Austria really appreciated what the American forces did for them and it was obvious that the people of today still have that feeling. Many people thanked me for what the others did well over 60 years ago. It was a wonderful feeling to know that the people still care."

## MYSTERY RING



A few days after the memorial ceremony up in the Tyrolean mountains an anonymous envelope mysteriously appeared on the desk in the municipal Office of Walchsee. Inside the envelope was a fine 14 Karat gold ring. Also inside the envelope was a little piece of paper with the words, "This ring is from the wreckage of the Habersau" (Habersauer, the place of the crash), The next words, "Please deliver ..."

Then the ring was given to the mayor of Kossen who brought it to Dr. Jakob Mayer in Innsbruck. Jakob had the ring cleaned and polished by a jeweler. The inscription on the sides of the ring is 1941. The setting is metal with what looks like a logo engraved into it. Someone suggested it looked like hornet. Inside is the inscription "HJ ULTRA" indicating it was

manufactured by the Herf Jones Company, but Herf Jones has no records before the war. It could have belonged to one of the crewman who graduated from high school in 1941 before entering the Air Force.

We are trying to locate the family of crewman that wore the ring. This precious memento would mean so much to them. If you have any knowledge of whom this ring might have belonged to or information about the Logo or setting, please contact the 485<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group Historian at [Info@485BG.org](mailto:Info@485BG.org).

## SOURCES AND REMARKS:

One of the main sources of information came from the research papers of Mr. Keith Bullock. Mr. Bullock flew with the RAF during WWII and moved to Tirol in the 1960's. About 1990 he began to investigate the crashes of the Allied that went down in Tirol. He gathered a vast amount of information and located the crash sites of all the planes that went down in Tirol. He became friends with many of the crewmen. In 2001 he suffered a stroke and is unable to continue the research. Mr. Bullock's wife, Helen, Dr. Jakob Mayer and Roland Domanig are continuing his work. Jakob and Roland are responsible for building the Memorial Monument honoring the crews of the March 2 crashes. Other sources are:

1. Army Air Force Mission Report dated 3 March 1945 reporting on Mission 2 Mach 1945 signed by Major Walter Ladner, 485<sup>th</sup> Group G-2 Officer
2. Missing Air Crew Report (MACR) #12755. Aircraft s/n 42-52644

LT. CARL W LANGLEY, Pilot; Lt. Richard V Miller, Co-pilot; F/O William J. Hafemeister, Navigator; Cpl. Paul E. Schultz, RW Gunner; Cpl. Henry Koprowski, LW Gunner; Cpl. William S. Kankas, Nose Turret Gunner; Cpl. Doyle G Sumner, Ball Turret Gunner; Sgt. Lee Grand Koller, Tail Gunner and Cpl. George L Taylor, Upper Turret Gunner. (Lt. Thomas Roemer, the regular Co-pilot, did not fly that day)

It has been noted that a bombardier was not on board. Since all the planes in the group dropped their bombs at the same time a bombardier was not necessary for every crew. The bombs were released by an assigned crew member when he saw the lead plane release its bombs.

3. Missing Air Crew Report (MACR) #12748 Aircraft s/n 42-52064

LT. EARL W POOLEY, Pilot; Lt. James Michalaros, Co-pilot; Lt. George A Fuccillo, Navigator; Lt. Albert C Griffen, Navigator; Lt. Adam L Welgar, Bombardier; T/Sgt. Charles W. Jones, LW Gunner; T/Sgt. LaVern R. Krueger, RW Gunner; S/SGT. JOHN N. MAGNESS, Upper Turret Gunner; S/Sgt. Walter J Kuszler, Ball Turret Gunner; S/Sgt. Walter L Broker, Nose Turret Gunner; S/Sgt. Peter D Lambros, Tail Turret Gunner.

The question was asked, "Why two navigators?" Pooley was flying Deputy Lead and would take over lead if necessary. The Lead planes carried three navigators; the Lead Navigator, a pilotage Navigator and the radar Navigator (also called Mickey operator and Path Finder). It might have been because there was a limited amount of radar equipment and so didn't carry a Mickey Operator.

4. Statements of crewmen who witnessed the collision: Lt. Delmar L. Brinkman, T/Sgt. Gilbert E. Thomson, S/Sgt. George R. Dickinson and Lt. Lynn Cotterman

5. Handwritten letter from survivor, Lt. Carl W. Langley, to Keith Bullock May 25, 1998. Carl's memory was a little fuzzy and doesn't agree entirely with the MACR and German reports.

6. "Reports on the Capture of members of Enemy Forces" Report is of German origin and translated into English.

7. "Reports taken from the Police Station At Kossen, Austria" dated March 3, 1945, March 22 and 29, April 5 and 13, 1945.

8. 502 Parachute Infantry, US Army reports 23 May & 24 May 1945 A Tragic Accident.