

# Thunder in Heaven

14 October 1943: The second air raid on Schweinfurt  
The experiences of the Cole crew

By Roy H.M.Göttgens, June 2016



(Courtesy of Clifford Deets)

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## Introduction

As a 66 years “young” citizen of Holland, I belong to the happy “after 2<sup>nd</sup> world war” generation, who is enjoying a free and prosperous life. I do not know what a war is, except from what I read or see on TV. This means that Europe and my country are at peace during almost 75 years now. There is no generation in Europe like mine, who has experienced such a long period without a major internal conflict.

How different was the situation in May 1940. My country was taken by the German army in only 4 days. We were not able to resist the massive and effective war machine of Nazi Germany. Consequently we were occupied for 5 years. Forced labor in Germany, extermination of the Jews, no freedom of speech, no free education or voting and German or collaborative Dutch police everywhere around. I can hardly imagine what that means. As I take freedom not for granted, I started developing a growing interest in the WW2 history, in particular related to the area where I was born and raised: the province of (Dutch) Limburg, in the southern part of my country.

## Purpose of this paper

By coincidence, I learned that a B-17 crashed in my home town Beek on 14 October 1943. This appears to be a unique opportunity to “dig in” into the history of the brave crew members, who risked and gave their lives for my freedom. After almost 75 years, I had a chance to bring our liberators back to my town and to give them a face again. They deserve to be recognized and honored, so nobody will ever forget that freedom does not come for free. For that reason, I am in the process of erecting a marker at the location of the crash. In order to gain some background for this marker, I started a research effort, not knowing that this effort would result in a fantastic story.

This paper is a compilation of available historical data from many sources (see last section: “Sources used”). Although much information is not new, I have tried to bring together all available information of the crashed B-17 and its crew in one paper. To my knowledge that has not been done before to this extent. In addition, this paper contains summaries of personal stories of various crew members, which were not publicly disclosed so far.

## Acknowledgement and Dedication

In collecting all historical data, I owe many thanks to many involved people, especially Thea Demandt, Harry Rouvroye and the enthusiastic “research crew” of the 306<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group Historical Association: Clifford Deets, Sue Moyer and Barbara Neal. They provided me with a lot of valuable information and introduced me to several surviving family members: Allan Columbus, Edward and Tim Zumpf and Susan Mills-Waldron. They as well provided valuable

personal information. Only thanks to them, I was able to construct a detailed story line of the crew of Lt. Cole on the catastrophic day of 14 October 1943.

An additional special thanks to Clifford Deets, who was so kind to provide the drawing of the B-17 and crew names on the cover of this paper. I hope to incorporate this drawing in a new marker in Beek.

I also like to thank my wife for her patience, as I spend many hours at my computer, during which she was on her own.

I like to dedicate this paper to Lt. Cole's crew and their still living family members in order to express the gratitude of my country for the sacrifices of their relatives, enabling us to make our own choices in life.

## 1. The beginning - US Army Air Field Thurleigh, England

The story line in this paper starts with the arrival of Lt. Cole's crew in August 1943 at Thurleigh, near Bedford, Bedfordshire, England. This Air Field is a former RAF base, but transferred in September 1942 to 8<sup>th</sup> USAAF European Bomber Command (by then known as Army Air Force or AAF station 111). As of 1942, this base is growing and accommodates finally 4 squadrons of the 306<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group (Heavy), with the nickname "Reich Wreckers", equipped with 14-16 B-17's per squadron, so in total over 60 B-17s (Flying Fortress). Cole's crew belongs to the 423<sup>rd</sup> Bomb Squadron, with their nickname: "the Fiery Phantoms".



Insignia of 8<sup>th</sup> USAAF Bomber Command, 306<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group and 423<sup>rd</sup> Bomb Squadron

### The B-17 "Flying Fortress"

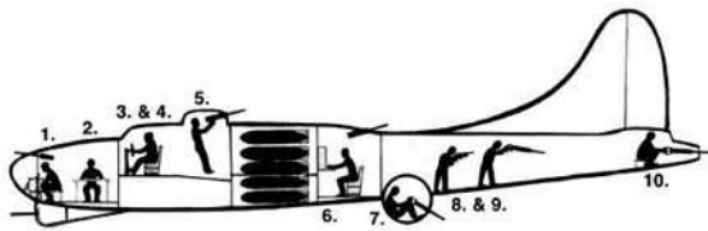
The B-17 is a four engine heavy bomber, carrying up to 8,000 lbs. bomb load and 13 heavy caliber machine guns for defense against enemy fighter attacks. The crew consists of 10 members, each having a specific role and position within the aircraft.

The B-17F of Lt. Cole has registration number: 42-29971



B-17F	
<b>Wing span:</b>	103 ft. 9 in (31.6 m)
<b>Length:</b>	74 ft. 8.9 in (22.8 m)
<b>Height:</b>	19 ft. 2.4 in (5.9 m)
<b>Wing Area:</b>	1,420 sq ft (132 sq m)
<b>Empty:</b>	35,728 lb (16,205 kg)
<b>Loaded:</b>	40,260 lb (18,261 kg)
<b>Maximum Take-off:</b>	48,720 lb (22,099 kg)
<b>Maximum Speed:</b>	325 mph (523 km/h) at 25,000 ft (7,625 m)
<b>Cruise Speed:</b>	160 mph (257 km/h)
<b>Service Ceiling:</b>	30,000 ft (9,144 m)
<b>Normal Range:</b>	2,000 miles (3,219 km) with 6,000 lb (2,722 kg) bomb load @ 220 mph (352 km/h) @ 25,000 ft (7,625 m)
<b>Powerplant:</b>	Four 1,200 hp (895 kW) Wright R-1820-97 Cyclones 9 cyl. air-cooled single-row radial engines with GE Type B-2 turbo-superchargers.
<b>Armament:</b>	Thirteen 50-cal. machine-guns plus a maximum of 17,600 lb (7,983 kg) of bombs. Normal bomb load 6,000 lbs (2,724 kg). Largest bomb type carried was 2,000 lb (908 kg).

## 2. Meet the air crew of 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Vernon Cole



Waist gunner

1 = Bombardier/Front Gunner: O-735276 - 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Joseph M. Columbus, age 22  
Born: 15 February 1921, Bakerton, Pennsylvania. He was enlisted 11 April 1942 in US Army Air Corps

Number of missions before 14 October: 11

2 = Navigator: O-676077 - 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Charles R. Kuehn, age 22

Born: 6 April 1921, Staten Island/New York. He voluntarily enlisted 24 March 1942

Number of missions before 14 October: 13

3 = 1<sup>st</sup> Pilot: O-796309 - 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant Vernon K. Cole, age 24

Born: 25 September 1919, Marion, Indiana. He was enlisted 11 April 1941

Number of missions before 14 October: 6-7

4 = Co-Pilot: O-765280 - 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Robert E. Partridge, age 25

Born: 19 November 1918, Tacoma, Pierce County, Washington State. He voluntarily enlisted 30 October 1941

Number of missions before 14 October: at least 10

5 = Top Turret Gunner/Engineer: 36181410 - Technical Sergeant Robert D. Folk, age 22

Born: 18 June 1921, Homer, Calhoun County, Michigan. He was enlisted 2 June 1942

Number of missions before 14 October: at least 10

6 = Radio Operator/Gunner: 14105271 - Technical Sergeant Robah C. Shields Jr. age 24  
Born: 9 April 1919, Forsyth County, North Carolina. He voluntarily enlisted 5 August 1942

Number of missions before 14 October: 8

7 = Ball Turret Gunner: 37228846 - Staff Sergeant Donald Richardson, age 22  
Born: 20 November 1921, Topeka, Kansas. He was enlisted in 1942 (assumption)

Number of missions before 14 October: at least 10

8 = Right Waist Gunner: 11066589 - Staff Sergeant Frederick W. Zumpf, age 19  
Born: 1924, Litchfield County, Connecticut. He voluntarily enlisted 13 May 1942

Number of missions before 14 October: at least 5

9 = Left Waist Gunner/Ass. Engineer: 11068477 - Staff Sergeant Adrien H. Wright, age 20  
Born: 2 March 1923, Woolwich, Sagadahoc County, Maine. He voluntarily enlisted 20 August 1942

Number of missions before 14 October: at least 5

10 = Tail Gunner: 31248306 - Staff Sergeant Irving J. Mills, age 23  
Born: 17 April 1920, Bridgeport, Connecticut. He was enlisted 6 November 1942

Number of missions before 14 October: 1 (aborted)

Half of the crew voluntarily enlisted to serve in the military.

All report on 8 August 1943 to the 306<sup>th</sup> BG-423<sup>rd</sup> Squadron at Thurleigh, England, except for Frederick Zumpf, who reports 1 August 1943 and Irving Mills, who reports 14 September 1943.

Except for Irving Mills, they are all rather experienced airmen, as they have survived at least 5 missions with other crews and planes by 14 October 1943. Sgt. Mills joins the team to gain experience, before he is assigned to another permanent crew: "the Mothers Carey's Chickens" of Lt. Daniel Carey.

### 3. Black Thursday 14 October 1943

#### The start and crossing the North Sea

06:15: Breakfast for all airmen at the air field.

07:15: Briefing as to the mission of the day, mission VIII BC-115: second (precision) bombing raid on the ball bearing factories of Schweinfurt, 70 miles east of Frankfurt am Main (finishing the bombing job of 17 August 1943).

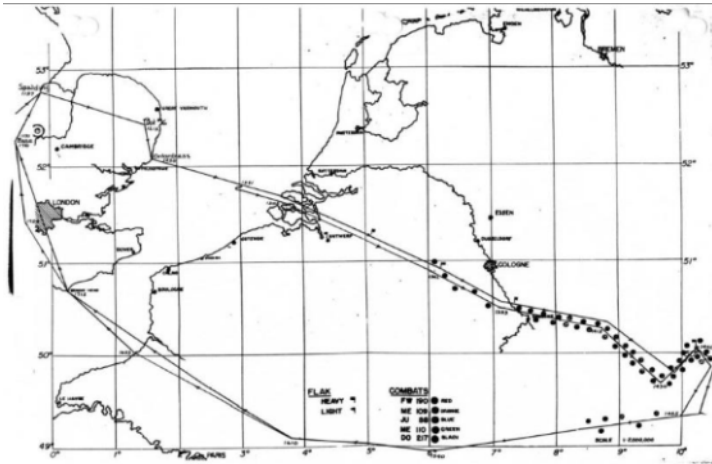
Note: The 4 Schweinfurt factories represent over 50% of the total German ball bearing production capacity, which is quite crucial for the tank and aircraft production.

Weather conditions: Thick fog and rain over England; bright skies over the continent

Cruising altitude: 24,000 feet.

Planned bombing time at Schweinfurt: 14:20-14:40

Planned return time at base in England: 17:45



(Source: "First over Germany")

09:00: The B-17's are waiting for permission to take off.

10:00: A British reconnaissance plane radios home: All of central Germany is in the clear.

10:15: A flare at Thurleigh Air Field indicates that there is a "go" for the attack. The 18 assigned planes of 306<sup>th</sup> BG are lined up and start taking off at one minute intervals. Lower level visibility is down to a quarter of a mile. Cole's plane takes off at 10:44.



B-17, s taxiing for take off

10:45: All aircraft from Thurleigh are airborne and heading for joining the other planes of the 40<sup>th</sup> Combat Wing, who took off from different airfields. Lt. Cole's aircraft is positioned in the 40<sup>th</sup> Combat Wing, tacked on the end of Taskforce South.

12:15: All 291 American B-17's and British 60 B-24 Liberators, assigned to the mission are heading for the continent and try to build the "combat box" formations. Due to the bad weather conditions the B-24's have so much difficulty in assembling, that they are forced to cancel their participation in the mission. They are either diverted to a secondary target or return to the bases. 37 B-17's abort as well for various reasons. To make the start even worse, various fighters, which are supposed to protect the bombers above enemy territory, are not able to find their assigned formations, which creates some gaps in the defense structure. Moreover, at that time, the fighters are not equipped with extra fuel tanks,



limiting their range, once they have crossed the Channel. This means, that 56 remaining P-47 Thunderbolt fighters are only able to take care of the protection for a relatively short time. At 6,500 feet, all formations break into bright sunlight above the clouds.



Heading for Schweinfurt in "Combat box" formation

12:30: The planes leave the English coast and start crossing the North Sea.

12:50: The B-17's enter the continent over the Dutch shore of the Province of Zeeland, to continue flying over middle Belgium. The planes encounter meager, inaccurate flack above Domburg (Province of Zeeland, the Netherlands) and Antwerp (Belgium).

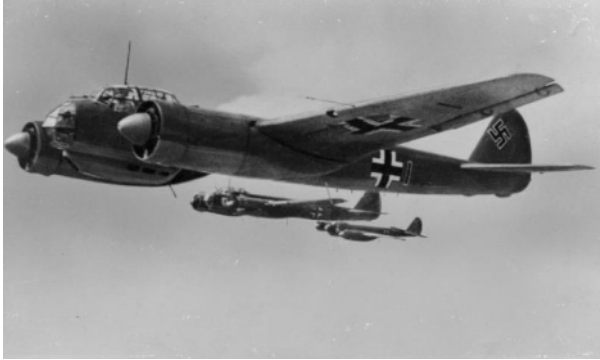
### German fighter attack and bail out

13:11: The planes are approaching the border river Maas. Northeast of the Belgium city of Hasselt, close to the Dutch/Belgian border, a German JU-88 heavy fighter is able to break through the defense of the machine gun rounds of the B-17, and protecting US fighters and attacks Cole's aircraft, which is hit by a rocket in the bomb rack at 25,000 feet altitude. Sgt. Richardson is killed by fire/fragments upon impact of the rocket. The plane is set afire and is getting out of control. Lt. Cole has to abandon the formation. He orders to bail out immediately, while he is trying to keep the plane in the air as long as possible.

The air fights are observed by many people in nearby Dutch towns, who see that two B-17's are shot down.



Location where Lt. Cole's plane is attacked by the German fighter (Red star: N.E. of Hasselt, Belgium)



A Junker JU-88C heavy fighter (Zerstörer)



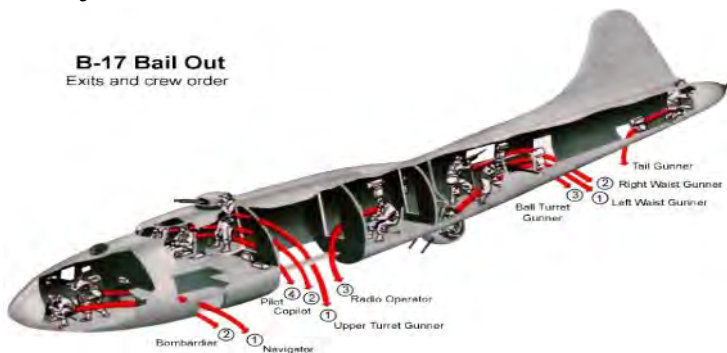
Hit by a rocket.....

Notes:

- The B-17 of Lt. Cole is the first plane of 306BG to be shot down, during this mission. Soon thereafter a second B-17 is shot down more south east (McCallum crew).
- Lt. Cole's plane is attacked by a long range heavy fighter JU-88-C6a. A multi-functional twin engine aircraft with 4 crew members. Max. speed 400 miles and range 1,900 miles. In addition to 3 heavy machine guns and a 20mm canon, this plane is equipped with rocket launchers
- This plane has his home base at far away Bordeaux, France and belongs to the 8<sup>th</sup> Staffel (squadron), Gruppe III (3<sup>rd</sup> Group) of the 1st Zerstörergeschwader "Walter Oesau" (fighter wing). Initially assigned to protect the German U-boats in the Bay of Biscay, but later used as defense against the allied air attacks on Germany. The pilot is Sgt. Walter Budde. Although his home base is at 540 miles distance from the attack location, the pilot could land on numerous nearby German airfields to refuel.

13:12: Bail out of crew members. Sgt. Folk passes out from lack of oxygen and is pushed out by Lt. Columbus, who together with Lt. Kuehn get out safely via the front escape hatch. They land near the small Belgian border town of Eidsen, east of Hasselt.

In the meantime Sgt. Shields is helping Sgt. Wright with his chute harness inside the plane. The B-17 takes a nosedive, but Lt. Cole is able to stabilize the aircraft, so it does not hit the nearby Dutch town of Sittard, which would have disastrous consequences.



13:15: The left wing of the bomber flies off and then the plane explodes in the air south of Sittard at the Dutch side of the border. Sgt. Shields is killed by the blast. Sgts. Wright, Mills

and Lt. Partridge are “fortunate”. They are blown out of the plane and are able to land safely, although Sgt. Wright landed unconscious. They land in the city of Geleen, south of Sittard. Unfortunately Sgt. Zumpf is not able to escape, as the escape hatch is blocked by the impact of the rocket.

Meanwhile Lt. Cole is trying to get out of the pilot seat, but is blown out of the plane as well. He does not survive the blast and lands with a (partly) open chute in a tree in Geleen. A local eyewitness reports that Lt. Cole was still alive. He asked for a priest before he died.

Due to the explosion, the bombs toss out of the plane and hit the ground between Geleen and Beek. The farm house of the Stassen family is hit by one of these bombs, which pierces through the roof and the floors, but does not explode. Fortunately, the other bombs cause little/no damage.

An air map is found in the yard of a nearby city hall. Empty machine gun shells are found everywhere and taken away by the locals as “souvenirs”.

Due to the heavy fighting in the air and the presence of unexploded and time registered bombs, local train and road traffic are held up for quite a while.

## The crash

13:30: After the explosion various parts (such as the tail, the wings with motors, fuel tanks and the fuselage) of the B-17 crash at the north side of the village of Beek, 5 miles south of Geleen. The fuselage is broken into three parts.

13:45: The crash site is near the back yard of the dwelling of a local doctor on Bourgogne street. The site is found by several locals and German search party. The major parts are spread over an area of 400 feet. Due to heavy fire and exploding ammunition, the securing of the 3 bodies inside the fuselage is delayed some time. Sgts. Richardson and Shields can be identified immediately by their dog tag and are reported killed in action. Sgt. Zumpf’s body is severely burned and identification on short term is not possible.

Later a local young citizen is able to recover some small parts of the plane - such as the landing light, Astro compass and motor parts - in spite of the presence of a German guard. These parts are displayed now in a local history museum.



Crash site 1-2-3 in Beek, the Netherlands (C=house of Dr. Becker’s) (Photo: R.Göttgens)



Astro compass, landing light and some unidentified parts of the crashed B-17(Photos: H. Rouvroye)

15 October: French POW's have to cut the aircraft parts into smaller pieces. The scrap is transported to the nearby railway station and loaded on open trailers. The parts of the wings with the American star are put on top, so everybody can see, that an American plane has been shot down. So much for propaganda! The train leaves for Utrecht, where a scrap company takes care for recycling and transport to Germany. Here ends the life of Lt. Cole's B-17F, registration number 42-29971.

#### 4. Killed in action - buried in sacred soil

14-15 October: After their recovery, the 4 bodies of the killed crew members are taken to the General Cemetery of nearby Maastricht, where they are buried in sacred soil, with German military honor. Sgt. Zumpf is put in a nameless grave, as he is not yet identified. Their remains will stay in Maastricht until after the liberation of Holland in early May 1945. Lt. Cole is reported missing in action on 27 October 1943 (13 days after his death) and reported killed in action on 16 January 1944.

11 July 1945: The bodies are reinterred with military honor at the American War Cemetery at Margraten, the Netherlands.

Mid 1949: The remains of both Lt. Cole and Sgt. Richardson are repatriated to their home towns. The bodies of Sgts. Zumpf and Shields are still at the Margraten Cemetery.



Graves of Sgt. Zumpf and Sgt. Shields at Margraten War Cemetery, the Netherlands (May 2016)  
(Photos: R. Göttgens)

#### 5. The survivors become prisoners of war

## The landings

14 October: The three crew members, who bailed out first (Sgt. Folk and Lts. Columbus and Kuehn) are taken prisoner immediately at the location of their landings in Eisden, except Sgt. Folk, who manages to avoid captivity for three days, before he is taken prisoner by the Germans as well. Lt. Columbus carries a sizable amount of money with him, which he has won with poker the previous day at Thurleigh Air Field. He is able to render this money to a group of catholic nuns, just prior to his capture. Lt. Kuehn is treated by a nun for his wounds on hand and ankle. In a brief moment, when the German guard is not looking, he manages to hide his "escape kit" (concentrated food, silk maps, money) in the medicine chest of the nun, hoping she could find use for it. Together with other crew members - who are captured that day in the neighborhood - they are assembled at the town square and subsequently transported by truck to Hasselt. From there they travel by train in captivity to Germany. The crew members who landed in Geleen (Sgts. Wright, Mills and Lt. Partridge) are welcomed by the local population and receive warm applause. They become quite popular, thanks to the chocolate and cigarettes they distribute among the local people. One crew member lands in a private backyard and is taken away by a policeman on a motor cycle, while making the "V" sign. At one place in Geleen, local people are engaged in a hand fight with the police to prevent the airmen being captured. However upon arrival of German soldiers, the local people cannot do any more to prevent imprisonment of the airmen. Unfortunately, the witnesses do not know the names of these airmen.

Sgt. Mills - who suffers severe burns from the explosion - is transferred to the "Calvariënberg Hospital" in Maastricht, where he stays 10 days. Sgt. Wright, who has landed unconscious, is taken to the same hospital, where he will stay until sometime in December.

Although they do not accomplish their mission, for the local people these airmen are the first life encounters with their liberators to be.

The crew members are initially reported missing in action. It takes two months before the American Red Cross learns of their whereabouts. Lt. Columbus is reported prisoner of war only at 20 December 1943 and Sgt. Mills on 23 January 1944, which is announced in their hometown newspapers the next day.

**Bakerton Bombardier Missing In Fierce Fortress Raid on Germany**

**Bakerton Bombardier Missing In Raid Over Germany October 24**

**Joseph M. Columbus Participates in Attack When 60 Fortresses Fail to Return to Their Base**

Lt. Joseph M. Columbus, 25, a resident of 22 Forest street in Danbury, is reported missing in action since October 14, when sixty Flying Fortress failed to return from a nighttime mission over Germany. Word was received from the War Department by his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Michael Columbus of Danbury on October 22 that their son was reported missing.

Lt. Columbus was a graduate of the Connecticut High School, class of 1940. He entered the service April 11, 1942, and received his orders, pending at State Ave. Civil Lane in Danbury, to Howard Field, New Mexico, where he completed his training as a bombardier.

The Bakerton bombardier received his silver wings December 28, 1942, and after graduation he was transferred to Wain Wain, Wash., as an instructor.

Upon returning to his base after a three-day tour with his parents in early June, he was sent to England where he had since been participating in bombing missions. His crew was known as "Witch's Whiskers."

Lt. Columbus has two sisters, known to his friends as—Gail, Leah, Columbus, V. M. P. and Mary in Danbury, and three brothers, who is a pilot instructor at Clark, Pa.

## Five Connecticut Men Are Reported Missing In Action

Washington, Jan. 24—(UP)—The Navy department announces Chief Motor Machinist's Mate Chester R. Phillips of 15 School street, Jewett City, is missing in action.

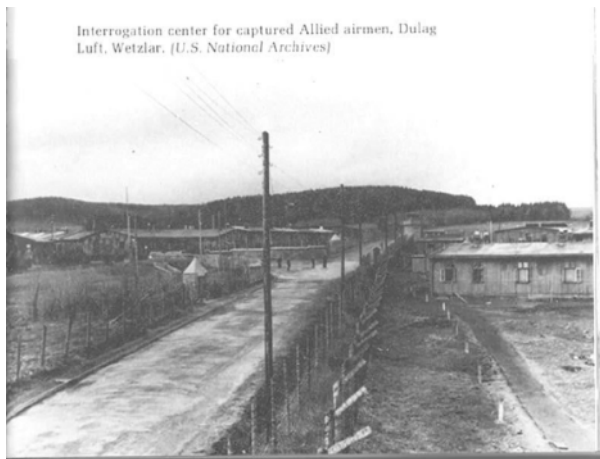
And the War department reports five Connecticut men held prisoners of war in Germany are:

First Lieutenant John T. Adams, Jr., of 120 Wakefield street, Hamden; Staff Sergeant Guy P. Cheney of 76 Arnold street, Hartford; Technical Sergeant Emilio W. Colangelo, of 72 Sperry street, Waterbury; Technical Sergeant George O. Holloway, Jr., of 43 Central avenue, Waterbury; and Staff Sergeant Irving J. Mills of 33 Coleman street, Bridgeport.

(Source: Allan Columbus and Susan Waldron)

## First stop: Interrogation In Frankfurt and Amsterdam

15 - 31 October: Basically all allied airmen are transported as soon as possible after capture to Dulag Luft (Durchgangslager Luftwaffe or Luftwaffe transfer camp) at Wetzlar near Frankfurt on the Main. This camp is a central Luftwaffe interrogation center for Western Allies. New prisoners are kept in solitary confinement while under skillful interrogation and then moved into a collecting camp. After a week or ten days, they are sent in groups to a permanent camp, mostly in the eastern part of the Reich.



Dulag Luft Wetzlar near Frankfurt in 1944

Lt. Partridge testified that he was sent to an Amsterdam prison first, while Sgt. Mills testified that he last saw Lt. Partridge in Amsterdam, going to Frankfurt by train. So Sgt. Mills is transported to Amsterdam first as well, after his stay at the Maastricht hospital. The interrogation center in Amsterdam is in the massive building (still existing) of the Dutch Trading Company, serving as headquarters of the German Luftwaffe in Holland. After a 10 day stay in Amsterdam, they are transported to Frankfurt and subsequently reallocated to a permanent camp.



The Dutch Trading Company building in Amsterdam in 2012, called: "de Bazel"

Mid December: As Sgt. Wright spent 2 months in the Maastricht hospital, it is not clear whether he is sent to Amsterdam as well, or directly taken to Frankfurt or the permanent prison camp.

## Reallocation to permanent POW camps

November 1943: After a short stay in the camp in Frankfurt our crew members are reallocated to permanent airmen camps (Stalag: Stammlager or permanent camp). The Stalag Luft camps are managed by Luftwaffe personnel. Compared to the SS or even the Wehrmacht, they maintain a less harsh prison regime (with exceptions). In general officers are held in dedicated camps or separate parts of the camps and are treated within the boundaries of the Geneva Convention. Enlisted soldiers are often assigned forced labor duties. Food supply and housing is rather poor. It should be noted, that the German treatment of East European prisoners is far more brutal, compared with their Western prisoners.

Our three Lieutenants Columbus, Kuehn and Partridge ended up in Stalag Luft 3 at Sagan in Silesia, Poland, 100 miles south east of Berlin, at that time situated in the eastern part of the Reich.

Sgts. Folk and Mills are transferred to Stalag 17B at Krems, Austria (at that time part of the Reich as well).

Sgt. Wright is taken to Stalag 6G at Bonn-Duisdorf (Rhineland, Germany). As he is sent to prison two months later, he is not part of the Folk/Mills group.



Locations of Dulag Luft, Stalag Luft 3 and Stalag 17B

## Stalag Luft 3 at Sagan (Silesia) and evacuation

This camp holds 11,000, mainly British and US airmen prisoners and is reserved for officers only. Compared to other prisoner of war camps throughout the Axis world, it was a model of civilized internment. The Geneva Convention of 1929 on the treatment of prisoners of war was complied with as much as possible, but it was still war, still prison, and still grim. The camp is guarded by mean German Shepard and Doberman Pincher dogs. With a madman on top, there was the ever-present threat that authority above the Luftwaffe could change things on a whim. The prisoners ("Kriegies" as they call themselves) always knew that they were living on the razor's edge.



Stalag Luft 3

Personalkarte I: Persönliche Angaben		Bezeichnung des Dienstverwalters	
Kriegsgefangenen-Nummer: Stalag Luft 3		Lager: TANG 1213	
Name: COLUMBUS	Staatsangehörigkeit: USA	Dienstgrad: 4-Lt.	
Vorname: ...	Truppendienst: 42447	Einheit: ...	
Geburtsort und -zeit: ...	Merkmal Nr. (ausgegeben am ...): C-732275		
Belgien: ...	Geburtsdatum (ggü. ...): ...		
Vorname des Vaters: ...	Ob genannt, krank, verwechselt eingetragelt:		
Familienname der Mutter: ...		Ultime Personalbezeichnung:	
Lichtbild		Gefangenen-Karteikarte:	
[Portrait of Lt. Columbus]		[ID Card]	
Name des Gefangenen: ...			
Merkmal Nr. (ausgegeben am ...): ...			
[Handwritten notes and stamps]			

Prison ID of Lt. Columbus (Source: Allan Columbus)

Lt. Columbus and fellow POW's are able to hide a radio in a loaf of bread. Unfortunately, it is not known how they got this radio.

27 January 1945: At his 16:30 staff meeting in Berlin that very afternoon, Adolf Hitler has issued the order to evacuate Stalag Luft 3. He is fearful that the 11,000 Allied airmen in the camp will be liberated by the Russians. Hitler wants to keep them as hostages. A spearhead of the Soviet Army has already pierced to within 15 miles of the camp.

Just before midnight and just before the approach of the Red Army, the prisoners of the camp are evacuated and have to march to Spremberg, 50 miles to the south west.



Evacuation of the camps in Sagan (Stalag Luft 3), 27 January 1945

29 January: After 35 miles they arrive at Bad Muskau, where they rest for 30 hours, before taking the last 16 miles to Spremberg.

31 January: Arrival at Spremberg, where they are jammed into boxcars, recently used for livestock. With 50 to 60 men in a rail car designed to hold 40, the only way one can sit is in a line with others. In this way they travel to the new destination. Lt. Kuehn has to stay in the boxcar for almost three days.

31 January – 7 February: Depending on the block where they were held prison in Stalag Luft 3, our three officers are transferred to either Stalag 7a at Moosburg, Southern (Upper) Bavaria, or Stalag 13D at Nürnberg-Langwasser, Northern Bavaria.

Lt. Kuehn is taken to the camp in Moosburg. This camp is one of Germany's largest POW camps, originally built to hold 13,000 French prisoners, but actually includes at its peak up to 130,000 prisoners of various nationalities. The men are lodged in overcrowded barracks and tents.



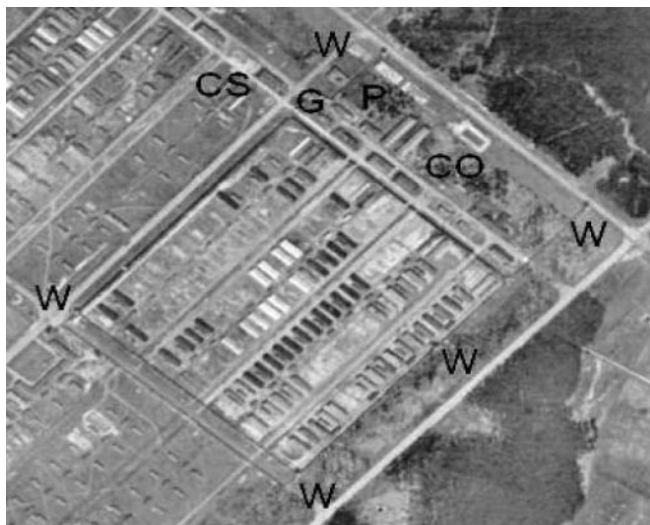


Evacuation route from Stalag Luft 3 to Nürnberg (Stalag 13D) and Moosburg (Stalag 7a)

### Camp Nürnberg-Langwasser

Early February: Lts. Columbus and Partridge are taken to Nürnberg-Langwasser (Stalag 13D/Oflag 73).

The "Offizierslager" (Oflag) or officers camp 73 is established in mid-1944. The total camp holds 29,500 inmates, mainly Russians and French and some Italians, Belgians, Poles, Serbs and British. There are only 45 Americans. (All figures as per 1 December 1944). After the evacuation of Stalag Luft 3 at the end of January, 6,000 British and US airmen enter into the already overcrowded Nürnberg camp.



Aerial photo of Nürnberg-Langwasser camp.  
 CS = Commanding German officer  
 W = Watchtowers  
 G = Main gate  
 CO = Commanding prison officers  
 7<sup>th</sup> block to the southeast of the camp =  
 Officers barracks of Lts. Columbus and Partridge

### Evacuation to Camp Moosburg

As of 12 April: 17,000 prisoners from Camp Nürnberg-Langwasser are evacuated to Camp Stalag 7a in Moosburg as allied forces are closing in. It is likely that Lts. Columbus and Partridge are among them. The rest remain quarantined in the camp for typhoid fever and are liberated on April 16<sup>th</sup> by the US Army.

20 April: After a long march, they arrive in camp Moosburg, where Lt. Kuehn has been since February.



Camp Moosburg: liberated airmen (one of the first color pictures)

29 April: Camp Moosburg is liberated by the US 14<sup>th</sup> Armored Division

### Stalag 17B Gneixendorf at Krems and evacuation

Sgts. Folk and Mills are held in a camp near Krems, Austria, until Russian forces threatened the area. This camp was originally intended as a military camp.

At its peak in March 1945, this camp holds about 75,000 prisoners of war, of which 4,235 are Americans. The main nationalities are Russians, French, Italians and Serbs.

In general the German treatment is fair, but harsh. Health and food conditions are deplorable. Camp life is long, predictable and monotonous.



Stalag 17B



*This is an example of how we lived.*



Camp life in Stalag17B: drawings of a fellow prisoner of Sgt. Irving Mills (Source: Susan Waldron)

Sgt. Mills is interrogated two or three times a day in a huge room, with a single spotlight hanging over a chair. It is all part of the intimidation. He only responds with his name, rank and serial number, which infuriates the German soldiers.

When he isn't being interrogated, he and the other soldiers do what they could to keep busy. In February 1944 Sgt. Mills begins teaching an American History class to other prisoners, using a textbook that he smuggled into the camp.



Irving Mills, teaching (drawing of a fellow prisoner of Sgt. Irving Mills) (Source: Susan Waldron)

8 April 1945: Most POWs at Stalag 17B begin an 18-day march of 200 miles to Braunau, Austria. The remaining men are too ill to make the march and are left behind in the hospitals. These men are liberated on 9 May 1945 by the Russians.

Sgt. Mills leaves at 8:15 in the morning, together with a group of 500 men and 39 German guards (Army, Luftwaffe, Stormtroopers and Volkssturmers).

During the 18-day ordeal, this group marches 8-22 miles each day, with a few layover days. At the end of the day, they are forced to bivouac in open fields, regardless of the often wet and cold weather. On three occasions the men are quartered in cow barns. The only food furnished to POWs by the German authorities is barley soup, beans and bread. Trading with the German and Austrian civilians becomes the main source of sustenance. In the mountains the Austrian locals are quite friendly and helpful, but in the urban areas they are less friendly. In some cases the hunger is so severe, that food is stolen in farm houses, with the German guards and even with the GI's (Sgt. Mills refuses to do that). Only a few times, Red Cross parcels become available. One time there is a formal Protecting Power inspection and all of a sudden, there is enough food available, even meat!

On 13 April, they learn that President Roosevelt has died the day before.

During the march, the group is unintentionally attacked 6 times by allied air forces, especially in the region of Linz. No Americans are hit, but there are 40 casualties with the French in the group.

During the march, Sgt. Mills celebrates his 25<sup>th</sup> birthday at 17 April.

Sgt. Mills is witness of an event, he will never forget. He encounters for the first time the Nazi treatment of the Jews. Moving in the opposite direction he meets a convoy of 300 Jews in extremely deplorable condition. Some Jews are dropping from exhaustion and are beaten to death.

26 April: In the evening the group arrives exhausted at the destination - a clearing in a forest 10 miles southeast of Braunau. There are no barracks, tents or hospital. Upon arrival, the

POWs cut down pine trees and made small huts. Much cold and wet weather. Red Cross parcels are coming in again and the prisoners enjoy a certain level of freedom. Roaming guards patrol the area and the woods surrounding the area, but no escape attempts are made, because it is apparent that the liberation forces are in the immediate vicinity. Munich falls on 30 April, followed by nearby Braunau on 1 May.

2 May: At 3:00 pm the German officers surrender to the Americans and the camp is actually liberated at 6:25 pm, when tanks of the 13<sup>th</sup> US Armored Division arrive. The remaining guards, who numbered 205, surrender quite easily.

6 May: Other units of the 13<sup>th</sup> Armored follow shortly and organize the evacuation of the POWs by C-47 Dakota to the "cigarettes camps" in France. It is about time, because the camp situation has not been improved since 2 May.

### Stalag 6G at Bonn-Duisdorf (Southwest of Bonn)

This camp holds mainly Russian, Polish, French and Italian soldiers and only relatively few Americans (468, of which 30 died in the camp). Total number of prisoners in the camp: 7,000. In addition, 46,000 POW's are held in numerous smaller labor squads across the Rhineland, but are "managed" from the Stalag 6G camp.



Eingangstor vom Stammlager VI G Bonn-Duisdorf



Main entrance and location of Camp Bonn-Duisdorf (south of Cologne)

Sgt. Wright is registered in this camp as of November 1943. It is not known whether he stayed in the main camp in Duisdorf or in one of the smaller labor squads.

This camp provides forced labor to the local textile and retail industry, farms and housekeeping. There is no heavy (war) industry in Bonn at that time. The extension of the duties for the allied prisoners depends on the type of labor. Conditions are harsher in industrial locations, compared to the private sector, such as farms and households, where enough food is available. After a job is done, one moves to another location for another assignment.

Whether Sgt. Wright is forced into any labor, is not known. It is likely though, that he has to move around to conduct various jobs, like many of his fellow prisoners.

19 April 1945: American troops are getting closer and by 19 April 1945 the camp is virtually run by the prisoners. The US 78th Division Army Infantry arrives at 14:00 by which time the guards have already handed over rifles and guns. Fried chicken and real coffee is greatly appreciated.

22 April: A few days of medical checks and administrative procedures follow, before being taken to Giesen by truck and then to Paris by C-47 Dakota aircraft.



Liberation from prison

## 6. Recovery in “cigarette camps” of the American Red Cross

Eventually all American former POWs are moved out to nearby German airfields and transported by C-47 Dakota aircraft to the vast - but now empty - Combat Personnel Replacement Depots on the French Channel Coast (within the triangle between Le Havre-Dieppe-Rouen). These depots are set up after the liberation of the Le Havre area as staging areas for new troops, entering or leaving the European war scene as of the fall and winter of 1944/45, the so called “cigarette camps”. There are 8 smaller and bigger camps, named after popular American cigarette brands, such as: Lucky Strike, Phillip Morris, Pall Mall and Chesterfield and hold in total up to 180,000 men. These camps are the mandatory ports of entry for nearly every US soldier to be repatriated and liberated POW. They are also used as reception areas for soldiers on leave.



### Camp Lucky Strike

According to Sgt. Mills' testimonial, he and Sgts. Folk and Wright spent their recovery time in camp Lucky Strike. This is the principal camp, holding up to 100,000 men: staff, support, repatriated soldiers and liberated POWs, housed in 11,600 tents (with 5 men each) and numerous barracks. The camp is situated in the town of Saint-Sylvain. Here our heroes

receive medical attention, are fed and given new clothes. There is also an opportunity to get psychological support. There are 6,000 daily departures by ship or plane from the port Le Havre, the only port liberated on the western coast that can handle large ships.

It is not known, in which camp the three officers recover, before they go home.

Taking the day of liberation and the date of the last Red Cross report as a basis, the 6 survivors spend between 26-84 days in these camps. These figures are to be considered as a maximum, as in most instances it took several days or even a week before the POWs were flown from the prison camp to the cigarette camp.

Lt. Columbus: 35 days      Sgt. Folk: 72 days  
 Lt. Kuehn: 26 days      Sgt. Mills: 30 days  
 Lt. Partridge: 37 days      Sgt. Wright: 84 days



Camp Lucky Strike - a vast area of tents and barracks

## 7. The end - Repatriation and dates of decease

Most soldiers are transported home by liberty ships, which depart from Le Havre, France

Name	Repatriation*	Decease	Cemetery
Lt. Vernon Cole	15-2-1949	14-10-1943	Marion, Grant Memorial Park, Grant County, Indiana
Lt. Joseph Columbus	3-6-1945	23-9-2009	Calvary Cemetery, St. Petersburg, Florida
Lt. Charles Kuehn	25-5-1945	27-9-1994	Saint Francis of Assisi Catholic Church Columbarium, Raleigh, North Carolina
Lt. Robert Partridge	5-6-1945	3-11-2005	Conroe, Texas
Sgt. Robert Folk	21-7-1945	23-10-1999	Fairview Cemetery, Homer, Calhoun Co, Michigan
Sgt. Irving Mills	8-6-1945	24-10-2008	Ashes scattered off the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, California
Sgt. Donald Richardson	Mid 1949	14-10-1943	Penwell-Gabel Cemetery, Topeka Shawnee County, Kansas
Sgt. Robah Shields	Not applicable	14-10-1943	American War Cemetery, Margraten, Holland
Sgt. Adrien Wright	12-7-1945	12-12-1998	Green Lawn Cemetery, Wiscasset, Maine
Sgt. Frederick Zumpf	Not applicable	14-10-1943	American War Cemetery, Margraten, Holland

\*Based on last day of Red Cross report. (Table: R. Göttgens)



Shipping out from LeHavre, France



Troop ship on the way to the States, 1945

Shipping out from Le Havre, June 1945

## 8. Awards

All of the crew members received one or more US medals for their bravery and suffering

Vernon K. Cole	Purple Heart, Air medal (posthumously)
Joseph M. Columbus	Purple Heart, Air Medal/Oak Leaf Cluster
Charles R. Kuehn	Air Medal/Oak Leaf Cluster
Robert E. Partridge	Air Medal/Oak Leaf Cluster
Robert D. Folk	Air Medal/Oak Leaf Cluster
Irving J. Mills	Purple Heart
Donald Richardson	Purple Heart, Air Medal/Oak Leaf Cluster (posthumously)
Robah C. Shields Jr.	Purple Heart, Air Medal (posthumously)
Adrien H. Wright	Purple Heart, Air Medal
Frederick W. Zumpf	Purple Heart, Air Medal (posthumously)



Air Medal



Purple Heart



Oak Leaf bronze or silver

## 9. Impact of 14 October 1943 bombing raid

8th Air Force Bombers - Heaviest Mission Losses:

Date	Mission Number	Target	Dispatched	Abort	Crossed Coast	Lost En Route	Bombed	Total Lost	Cat E	Damaged
14-Oct-43	115	Schweinfurt B-17	291	37	254	32	222	60	7	138
14-Oct-43	115	Schweinfurt (B24s Diversion)	60	31	0	0	0	0	0	0
14-Oct-43 Total			351	68	254	32	222	60	7	138

The total Allied casualties (killed, wounded, missing, prisoner) amount to 630, over 20% of the 2,900 participating crewmen.

Lt. Cole's 306<sup>th</sup> BG dispatches 18 B-17's for this raid, of which 3 abort the mission, 10 are lost and only 5 are able to complete the whole mission and return to the base in England. 35 airmen of 306<sup>th</sup> BG are killed and 65 taken prisoner.



Bombardment of Schweinfurt Destroyed ball bearing factory, Schweinfurt, October 1943

The German Luftwaffe manages to bring up to 350 fighters into the air of all kind of types, with well determined and motivated pilots, who fanatically defend their territory. This number had been underestimated by the Allied Command quite dramatically at 14 October 1943. "Only" 43 enemy fighters are lost that day and 85 damaged. This is the single most glorious day for the Luftwaffe in 1943.

Although the ball bearing factories at Schweinfurt are destroyed for the major part, the Germans manage to complete reconstruction within 6 weeks. Many POWs are forced to participate in the reconstruction process. In the meantime the German Army is supplied from other locations, such as Italy, Sweden and Switzerland (so much for neutrality!). Substantial strategic inventories are built up across Germany, from which supply can continue. In addition, other production locations are able to increase their output rates. Basically the production of tanks and planes is not substantially slowed down by these bombardments.

1,200 high explosive bombs, 1,500 fire bombs and 300 phosphor bombs came down on the city, killing 203 civilians (including prisoners).



Another consequence of the “Black Thursday” experience is that the Bomber Command decided to halt the daytime bombardments for several months in order to redesign the air defense structure for the B-17s. By then, the fighters are equipped with drop tanks, so they are able to expand their range. It will take until 24 February, 1944 before Schweinfurt is bombed again.

## 10. An amazing aftermath

When the local eyewitness of the crash site in Beek, Mr. Alphonse Demandt approaches the still burning parts of the crashed B-17, he finds the hat of Lt. Charles Kuehn with his name card in it. He assumes that Lt. Kuehn has died in the plane. In the summer of 1951, he asks his son to write a letter to “The New York Times”, in an attempt to inform Kuehn's relatives that in 1943 he found Kuehn's hat at the crash site. “The New York Times” decides to publish his letter on 13 October 1951 and forwards the letter to Charles. The very alive Lt Kuehn reads the letter and finds out about his own death!! On 29 October he writes a letter back to the Demandt family.

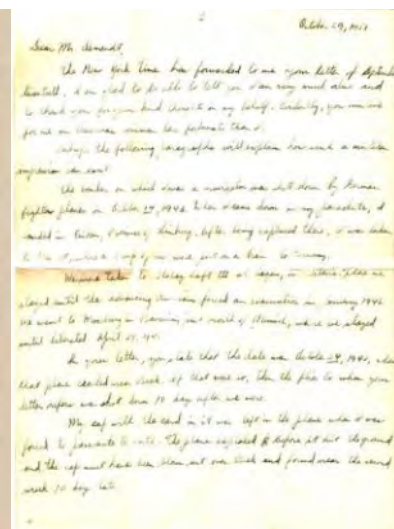
This event gets a lot of attention in the local newspaper in Beek.



Article in “The New York Times” of 1 October 1951  
(Source: Thea Demandt)



Local Dutch newspaper of 20 October 1951



Excerpt from letter Charles Kuehn to Demandt family, 29 October 1951

## 11. Remembrance

In 1969 a statue was placed in the center of Beek in order to commemorate the WW2 casualties of Beek (Jews and gypsies, other civilians and soldiers). The stepping stones at the base of the statue include the three American crew members, who crashed on Beek soil on 14 October 1943: Sgts. Richardson, Zumpf and Shields. Lt. Cole is not on the list, as he was found in the nearby city of Geleen.



Memorial at Beek, the Netherlands (Note the wrong date of the crash on the stepping stone)  
 (Photos: R. Göttgens)

### New initiative

Based on what we know now about “our” 10 crew members, a new initiative has arisen, aiming at bringing the events of the Cole crew - as described in this paper – to the attention of a broader public. Close to the site of the crash a medieval farm house is currently being restored for public purposes - an ideal location for erecting a marker and presenting a summary of the whole story. We gratefully accept the drawing of the B-17, offered by Clifford Deets and will see how we can incorporate this drawing in the marker.

The drawing includes all the names of the crew, the insignia of the 306th Bombardment Group (H) and 423<sup>rd</sup> Squadron as well as the type and registration number of the plane. It also refers to the date of the bombing raid. Finally it shows the flags of the US and the Netherlands as a token of mutual solidarity.

In addition, the Second Schweinfurt Memorial Association has offered to support the project with both money and creative suggestions.



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