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BLACK THURSDAY

NOTE TO READERS



A painting of Frederick Zumpf hangs in the home of his brother, Edward Zumpf, 86, of Washington Depot.

Memorial Association historian Sue Fox Moyer, and recollections from residents of the Dutch down of Beek.

Details of the final moments behind the escape hatch door on the B-17 carrying right waist gunner Sgt. Frederick Zumpf and nine others were unknown until now. Left waist gunner Adrien Wright left no written documentation after returning to the Maine coast to regain a sense of normalcy with his wife and a son born in his absence.

Adrien and William opened Wright's Bat Shop. Adrien didn't take part in reunions and didn't have an email address, but he was remembered as a great story-teller before he died in 1998. This article is a compilation of the story Adrien told William, as well as historical data provided by Second Schweinfurt Memorial Association historian Sue Fox Moyer, and recollections from residents of the Dutch down of Beek.

DEADLY: Damaged door sealed their fate

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Germany lost 186 planes. Zumpf's 10-man flight crew, led by pilot Lt. Vernon Cole, was part of the 423rd squadron of the 306th Bomber Group. Their bomber, one of 293 that departed from air fields across England that morning on Mission 115, was one of 51 shot down before and after bombing the heavily guarded ball bearing factories in Schweinfurt, Germany.

The concussion and shrapnel from the missile that struck Cole's bomber instantly killed the ball turret gunner, Sgt. Donald Richardson.

An explosion, touched off by the smoldering rocket that was one of Germany's most advanced weapons, impacted the right wing and ignited fuel.

Trapped near the center of the flying fortress were radioman Sgt. Robah C. Shields Jr., left waist gunner Adrien H. Wright, 20, of Maine, and right waist gunner Zumpf, 19, of Washington, Conn. Zumpf and tail gunner Sgt. Irving Mills were substitutes that day in a crew that already had survived a brutal air fight in another B-17 so shot up after its maiden flight that it had to be scrapped.

Engineer Sgt. Robert D. Folk went to check on the damage, but was unable to reach the rear of the plane and passed out from lack of oxygen. Bombardier Lt. Joseph Columbus pulled Folk's parachute cord after checking his straps and pushed him through the nose hatch before pulling himself out against G-forces in the flaming fuselage.

Cole remained at the controls for as long as he could, aware that crew members he was unable to communicate with were trying to escape the burning plane. The co-pilot, Lt. Robert Partridge, and navigator, Lt. Charles Kuehn, bailed out through the front section.

Blown out last, Cole was found hanging from his parachute in a wooded area, mortally wounded or dead. The Indiana man was given last rights by a local priest in the Dutch town of Geleen.

Mills parachuted from the tail section when the plane broke apart and survived.

Zumpf, Wright and Shields reached for chest pack parachutes they hadn't been wearing in combat, but couldn't open an escape door. The German rocket was lodged in the right wing's strut and seemed to smolder before spreading fire. Metal was melting. The fuselage was spiraling downward. The focus was on the door. It wouldn't open.

Flames blew in through the gunners' open windows. Trapped, Shields and Zumpf crashed in Beek, Holland, with the remains of a bomber so new it was known by its serial number, 42-29971, not a name.

Wright miraculously was blown through one of the openings — seared by flames that burned his wrists and ankles, and blew off some of his clothing.

"The plane was burning. They were all shouldering the door," said Adrien's son William. "Everything was moving around, ammunition boxes from the fire-fight, and parachutes. They were trying to get the door open. It's what they were



Unopened letters, postmarked October 1943 and written to Sgt. Frederick Zumpf, were returned undelivered to his family.

trained to do. Dad had one of the two harness snaps shut when he was blown out. The rip cord caught on the side of the plane and it opened. He woke up upside down in a watery pasture with a broken wrist, thinking he would survive the crash only to drown."

But he didn't. Wright, seen by another parachuting crew member as he dropped fast in his damaged parachute, somehow ended up swinging from his parachute over a boggy pasture. He was taken to a local church, where nurses gave him tea and then turned him over to the Germans, who had been searching for survivors.

The four who were killed — including Zumpf, who was burned beyond recognition — were buried beneath simple, stark white crosses at Margraten in Holland. The graves of Zumpf and Shields today continue to have assigned caretakers, including school children taking part in the designing of a memorial to honor the crew. The bodies of Cole and Richardson were repatriated in 1948 and 1949, respectively.

Wright was taken as a prisoner of war and housed with other American fliers at Stalag 17-B in Austria. There, they were able to make a radio out of spare parts that enabled them to keep abreast of Allied advances before being liberated by Gen. George Patton's army 18 months later.

Wright returned home to Maine, where he was reunited with two brothers, Ralph and Ellsworth, who also served in the service on bombers. He opened a bait shop, and got a license to fly a small plane and return to the sky.

Zumpf's final mission was his seventh in less than three weeks, but far short of the 25 he needed to return home.



Fred Zumpf, front row, second from left, is pictured with his B-17 bomber crew in Turleigh, England.

PHOTOS BY JIM SHANNON REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

FLIER: Washington Depot teenager killed on 'Black Thursday' in 1943

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Zumpf had been eager, his younger brother Edward recalled, to do his part for the war effort, though all who departed from England on Mission 115 to bomb Germany's industrial ball bearing factories in Schweinfurt knew the risks. Fifty-one of 293 U.S. planes did not return on Oct. 14, 1943 — a day that later became known as Black Thursday.

"He got bored, tired of waiting for something to happen, for the invasion," Edward, 86, recalled last week in the same 19th century River Road cape where the brothers were raised. He looked up to him. "He had the kind of fearlessness the Air Corps wanted. ... He was doing what he wanted to do, what he believed he had to do."

Fred Zumpf and three others in his 10-man crew died after a German JU-88 fighter plane's missile struck his bomber above Hasselt, Belgium. The B-17 crashed just over the border in Beek, Holland. Six men survived.

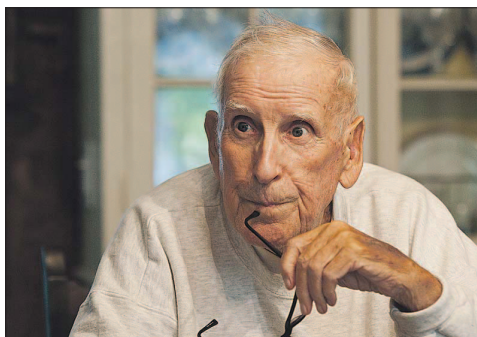
As far as Edward, his two siblings, father Clifford and mother Mary knew, Fred was listed as missing in action in the fall of 1943. Edward — five years Fred's junior, and nearly a twin to his brother's Scandinavian complexion and quiet politeness — was in school when the telegram arrived. His father was at work as a plumber and his Mary was at home. An older brother was in Puerto Rico. A sister was in the Women's Air Corps.

After Fred's death, family members, especially Mary, were never the same in the small town of Washington Depot, where the young flier's grandfather, William, had immigrated from Germany with his Swedish-born wife in the 1800s to begin a dairy farm on Church Hill.

Except for recognition at the local American Legion Hall, and a ceremony and fly-over honoring the first resident to die in the war, the Zumpf name fell into obscurity as a war casualty without details about his final flight.

MARY DIED IN 1955 at the age of 58, five years before her husband. The weight of sadness that accompanied news of her son's death — which ended hopes of a parachute signing and capture — never lifted.

Mary hadn't wanted Fred to go to war. The letters she sent postmarked three days before his death were returned and kept, but never opened, part of a tattered and yellowed spineless pile of memorabilia, newspaper clippings and photos from the war. Fred's ring, recovered from the crash site and



Edward Zumpf, 86, of Washington Depot, remembers his brother, Frederick Zumpf, who died when his B-17 bomber was struck by a German missile over the skies of Belgium during World War II on Oct. 14, 1943. Fred was 19.

repaired in Beek is there, too. Edward is now the sole keeper of the files in the historic house that seems to echo a happier, busier time. Fred's image in portraits and paintings remind of a popular teenager stuck in youth. He is remembered for his eagerness to be part of something bigger than himself, something known only by voices on the radio that nightly drew a family audience.

"I think of him all the time," said a raspy-voiced Edward, a widower retired from his estate caretaking jobs.

FLYING HAD NOT BEEN FRED ZUMPF'S first choice when he enlisted in Hartford in May 1942 after graduating from Washington High School. With experience as a sales clerk and a pin boy at the local bowling alley, he had been assigned to an infantry unit.

The call for reinforcements for bomber crews, however, found him in gunnery training at Turleigh, England, with the 306th Bomb Group. Zumpf and Sgt. Irving Mills of Bridgeport were assigned to substitute for airmen out sick in Lt. Vernon Cole's crew on Oct. 14, 1943. It was Zumpf's seventh mission in less than three weeks.

Many people in the Netherlands saw the flying fortress shot down during a fierce dogfight over boggy pastures. Zumpf, burned beyond recognition, and his three companions became legendary in the small town of Beek.

Zumpf and Sgt. Robah C. Shields Jr., remain buried at the American Cemetery in Margraten, Holland. Now, 73 years later, a memorial will rise to honor their courage for freedom near the crash

site. The bodies of Zumpf, Shields, Cole and Sgt. Donald Richardson were retrieved from the crash site and buried beneath simple, stark white crosses at Margraten, where each of the American fliers has for many years been assigned a set of caretakers. Eventually, the remains of Richardson and Cole were returned home.

It would have added to the sadness, Edward said, for his brother's body to be returned — a feeling not uncommon at the time, 306th Bomb Group historian Sue Fox Moyer said. Fred was awarded the air medal and the Purple Heart.

In a 1946 letter to the Zumpf family, one of his Dutch caretakers assured his dedication to a man as important as his own son, "who gave his life for our freedom."

SIX EYEWITNESS ACCOUNTS to the crash were documented in Beek. One of them was from M. Dohmen, who was riding his bicycle when he sought safety in a ditch as the aerial battle raged and a B-17 dropped with an ear-splitting sound toward him. A bomb twirled out of the aircraft as it fell, striking the Stassen family farmhouse, landing in the basement without exploding.

The fire was still burning when Beek resident Alphonse Demandt found an officer's cap bearing navigator Lt. Charles Kuehn's name. In 1951, Demandt's son wrote a letter to The New York Times in hopes of finding a relative. Instead, the newspaper located Kuehn himself and the cap was returned.

The six survivors were taken prisoner, though Sgt. Robert D. Folk managed to

gather the stories about each of the 10 men," said Gottgens, who lives one mile from the crash site. "The monument will bear their names. It could take the form of a fuselage emerging from the ground, a design that local school children will be involved with. We wanted the crosses to mean more than names, to try to imagine the person. Of course it is sad. They had their whole lives ahead of them. But we want to celebrate their lives, not mourn."

"Freedom," Gottgens added, "is not free."