



Richard Ritter, in his flight uniform. Photo courtesy of Harry Ritter

British letter clears up WWII mystery

A letter from a British man, hoping to raise money for a monument in England to honor Allied serviceman who died in a 'friendly fire' incident during World War II, has helped to clear up a nearly 50-year-old mystery for a Bellville man whose brother died in the crash.

In a letter of inquiry to Bellville Mayor Carolyn Studenmund last November, Alan C. Jasper, of Wickford, England, provided illuminating details surrounding the death of World War II airman Sgt. Richard Ritter, brother of Bellville's Harry Ritter.

The Ritter family had always understood that Richard, one of nine children, had been shot down as his crew's B-17 Flying Fortress returned from a bombing mission with the 379th Bombing Group over Nazi-occupied France.

What Jasper revealed was that, in fact, the plane collided with another Allied aircraft over the Thames River in England, killing all those aboard. (See letter)

"We were always under the impression that they were shot up bad, and couldn't make it back," said Harry, 72, one of four Ritter boys to serve during World War II.

Harry recalled that fateful day in 1944 when he and his family received the telegram at their Markey Street home in Bellville notifying them of Richard's death.

Art Spain was the telegraph operator at the old depot, near the site of the Main Street bridge, who had the painful task of delivering the news to Harry, who was home on leave.

"As soon as he handed me the telegram, I

knew what it was," he recalled. "That was a hard day."

"It was just one of those things," said Harry, now retired as a self-employed landscaper. "It wasn't a whole lot you could do about it. It's just taken for granted that some weren't going to come back."

Harry had just taken a train into Mansfield from Lido Beach, Long Island, and still had a few more weeks left in Bellville before reporting to Norfolk, Virginia, for a trip to Galveston, Texas, and then through the Panama Canal for an 8-month stint at a repair base in Brazil.

The first telegram had said Richard was missing, and a later one made it definite that he had died in action, although not how.

"We had had a lot of hope, because he might have parachuted over Europe," said Harry.

With his folks home in Bellville, his sisters working in civilian jobs and his two other brothers all in the service, Harry's family faced the choice of whether to bring Richard's casket back to Bellville, or to bury him in England.

"We figured the thing to do was to leave him with his buddies," said Harry. "They did a heck of a sacrifice."

So his brother was buried in Cambridge American Cemetery and Memorial in Cambridge.

Since then, he and his sisters - Gladys, Rosanna, Arlene and Jean - have taken turns sending the British funds to cover the cost of decorating Richard's cross, with the family receiving a pho-