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## Team seeking fate of WWII bomber crew digs through history

By Kevin Dougherty, Stars and Stripes "Stripes Sunday" magazine, October 19, 2003

They were known as the "tough-luck crew."

Dogged by Messerschmitts and misfortune, the aircrew skirted death in Normandy, only to vanish from the heavens three weeks later.

Now, nearly 60 years after its disappearance, 1st Lt. David P. McMurray's B-24 bomber crew appears to have been located in a small farm field southwest of Berlin.

"They did not perish in the North Sea, as some people believe," said Enrico Schwartz, a German man who alerted U.S. authorities to the site.

While much work remains, the case could be one of the more intriguing of its kind in recent years, at least from a historical sense.

A former 492nd Bombardment Group squadron commander, a man who knew McMurray, wrote in his memoirs that the crew "had the dubious distinction of being the first plane shot down over the Normandy beachhead."

"McMurray assembled what was left of his crew and hitched a ride across the (English) Channel on a LST (Landing Ship, Tank)," James J. Mahoney wrote in "Reluctant Witness: Memoirs of the Last Year of the European Air War 1944-45."

"We picked them up at the English port and brought them home," he wrote.

Six decades later, a different kind of homecoming is awaiting them.

Earlier this month, a team from the U.S. Army Central Identification Laboratory, Hawaii, finished excavating a portion of a farm field near the town of Westeregeln in eastern Germany. The recovery team found pieces of a U.S. aircraft — none much bigger than the palm of a hand — as well as personal effects, bone fragments and dog tags that place six of the nine missing airmen at the site.

Tests and further analysis of the remains and other evidence could take a year or more. But by all indications, Westeregeln is where McMurray's crew perished while returning to England from a massive Allied bombing raid on the morning of July 7, 1944.

At the time, some Army investigators thought the plane might have crashed into the North Sea as the crew tried to fly its battered plane back to England.

"We won't make any definitive claim that it's human (remains) until we get it back to the lab," said Marine Capt. Zeke Zukowsky, the team leader.

While the Army Air Corps, the forerunner to the Air Force, lost more than 3,600 aircraft in Europe and North Africa, there was — and still is — something endearing about this crew. An ethnically mixed squad, they persevered despite a seemingly never-ending run of bad luck that would push them to the brink, but never far enough to break them — until that last sortie.

Mahoney, who died a few years ago, said the crew was special for a variety of reasons.

"A superstitious belief prevalent in ours and other groups was that there was such a thing as a tough-luck crew," Mahoney wrote. "Periodically, a crew would come along that would run through a series of incidents — having its plane shot up, crewmen injured, etc., before being wiped out in one lethal blow.

"Of our original crews, several exhibited tough-luck tendencies early in their tours which qualified them for this unenviable category. One such crew was that of Lt. Dave McMurray."

Although the crew was assigned to a different squadron, the 856th Bombardment Squadron, Mahoney knew them well, describing McMurray's men as "a motley collection of (characters from different) ethnic backgrounds," including Scottish, Irish, Italian, Spanish and German.

"They were a happy lot," Mahoney wrote. "Experienced and able, they had great respect for Dave. On most of their first few missions they came home with a variety of minor plane and crew problems, but nothing fatal.

"Shortly after D-Day they had the dubious distinction of being the first plane shot down over the Normandy beachhead," Mahoney recalled. "When the crew bailed out over the irregular and nebulous 'frontline,' some landed on our side, some in the hotly contested area between Allied and German troops, and one on the German side who became a POW."

### BRING THEM HOME

For Zukowsky and others at the Army's identification lab — now part of the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command — locating Americans missing in action from past wars and conflicts is what their work is all about.

"Our motto is to bring them home — and we do," Zukowsky said at the site one day last month as he stood near the rim of a large, shallow pit. Just a few feet behind him is where most of the suspected remains of the McMurray crew were found.

In late August, the 15-member team, later augmented by a second identification lab crew, began excavating where Schwartz and his team had earlier found bones, dog tags and other personal effects.

Under the direction of Dennis R. Danielson, an archaeologist, the team spent six weeks at the site.

Deciding when to cease work "is a constant topic of conversation," Zukowsky said, adding it's the on-site anthropologist's call. "You look around and wonder what might have been pushed around by plowing."

Objects "not of the earth" get sifted from the piles and piles of soil and rock that are painstakingly removed and combed over by members of the team. Standing under a wooden frame that resembles a swing set, members of the search team shake shallow, rectangular-shaped screen boxes suspended from the top beam.

One of those on the detail is Sgt. 1st Class Habibah Prevost.

"From time to time," Prevost said, gripping her sifter, "you wonder what these guys went through, what they may have said or done that day."

### FIGHTING A STORM

On that Friday in July, McMurray's B-24 bomber and more than 1,100 other aircraft set out to strike deep inside Germany near Leipzig. McMurray was piloting one of the 23 Liberators that left RAF North Pickenham in eastern England just before daybreak.

Despite significant losses, the Army considered the mission a success. Seven strategic sites, ranging from bomber assembly plants to synthetic oil facilities, sustained heavy damage.

But the 492nd Bomb Group — in particular the 856th Bomb Squadron, which lost five of six planes that day — had the misfortune of being the first unit to encounter the Sturmgruppe, or storm group. This new German tactic emphasized power, brevity and overwhelming force.

In short, it was like getting caught in a hornet's nest.

"One B-24 combat wing was attacked by more than 100 German fighters," Stars and Stripes reported in a front-page article the next day, "and other Liberator formations reported savage attacks by up to 75 interceptors."

Gerhard Horn, who was 17 at the time, was picking peas with his father and other villagers when the air battle unfolded. It was a beautiful summer morning, he recalled. Then the heavenly hue went from blue to black.

"In seconds, many burning bombers were falling from heaven — and we were right in the middle of it," Horn said last month as he sat outside his farmhouse near Westeregeln.

Horn escaped injury, but many of the men above him that day didn't. At least seven U.S. bombers crashed in the vicinity of Westeregeln.

"The fields were strewn with aircraft parts," Horn recalled.

In all, the bombing mission cost the Eighth Air Force 37 heavy bombers and six fighter aircraft. More than 360 men were either killed or captured.

The 492nd Bombardment Group lost a dozen aircraft that day, five of which belonged to the 856th Bombardment Squadron — McMurray's unit.

"It was not just a hard-luck crew, but a hard-luck squadron," said Dan Harrington, a U.S. Air Forces in Europe historian.

The same could be said for the entire group.

While the 492nd lost 12 planes in the July 7 raid, other bomber groups ended the day only a plane or two short, if that. But it wasn't just that day. Over a three-month period, the 492nd Bomb Group lost more planes than any other B-24 group.

Just four weeks after the air battle, the Army Air Corps effectively disbanded the unit, with assets and crews reassigned to other organizations.

The 492nd Bombardment Group had been the last to join the 14th Combat Wing — and the first to leave its ranks.

"Usually you get replacements and things just continue," Harrington said. "Here, we have an organization that is pretty much wiped out."

Members of the McMurray crew probably didn't have long to contemplate their fate.

Witnesses recall seeing the plane plow into the earth, triggering an explosion that engulfed crew and craft. There were reports that either the German army or some local residents buried some of the remains, possibly in a nearby cemetery, something Zukowsky and his team are checking on.

"The much-wounded crew received its coup de grace from the Luftwaffe," Mahoney wrote in his memoirs. "All were killed on the Bemburg mission. ... It was, for us, the least dramatic of the several episodes the McMurray crew provided."

One of Mahoney's favorite members of that crew was 1st Lt. Raymond Pascual, a handsome, young bombardier from Brooklyn, N.Y. Mahoney referred to him as the crew comedian.

When his crew bailed out over Normandy, Pascual and his parachute landed in some rose bushes near a French farmhouse. Pascual later received a Purple Heart for his "war injuries," something that became a running joke between him and his buddies.

But Mahoney wrote that as Pascual worked his way back to friendly territory, apparently with the help of French partisans, he had a heck of a time convincing front-line GIs he was legit.

Eventually, Mahoney wrote, "his Brooklyn accent and knowledge of the Dodgers' lineup assured the GIs that he couldn't be a German," and he was welcomed with open arms.

#### Sources:

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That article contains a rather interesting sidebar entitled "Much work remains" about the ongoing effort to find still-missing WWII crash sites and the 78,000 still-missing WWII servicemen. It's definitely worth reading.