

George Eifel Letter



In March 1993, George Eifel (left) wrote a letter to Harold Armstrong, flight engineer on Crew 25, of which Otto Hammersmith was bombardier. Harold had apparently been in contact with Otto's brother John Hammersmith, and was asking George for information on their final mission.

Hi Harold,

I received your most interesting piece of mail a few weeks ago, and, after much deliberation, figured it was about time I responded to it. I can well sympathize with Otto's brother in trying to learn the true facts as to what actually happened on July 11, 1944, to cause the death of his brother. Along with that, to know for sure where his body is actually laid to rest. Regarding the copy of the information document you sent me, I found it to be very interesting reading, not to mention, puzzling in some respects. I have some copies of reports stating that the nose gunner's (Stenard) body was found burned in the wreckage of the aircraft, and that the body was buried in a local cemetery in Breskens, Holland.

I also have copies of some of the interrogation reports of some of my crew mates. These are all stateside reports of the interviews taken long after the actual date of the crash. These interviews occurred in 1945. It's amazing how different the same story or happening is observed by different individuals in the same location. At this point, I will try to put into words, my version of the story; then you can possibly see for yourself why some of the end results are still a mystery to me, and why some of the answers will continue to elude me.

We were getting very low on fuel, Jake Lucero, the engineer was transferring fuel to separate tanks in order to keep the supply somewhat balanced. We were all warned by the pilot that our situation was getting grim, and that we should prepare to bail out at any time. Shortly thereafter, one of the engines had to be feathered, and then we started to lose altitude and fall behind the rest of the group in the formation. We were now flying in a heavy overcast when a couple more engines started to act up, it was then when we heard the bailout signal. Just prior to hearing the signal, Hammersmith had come up to the flight deck with a "spilled" parachute rolled up in his arms. He was closely followed by Charles Stenard, the nose gunner. Stenard was telling Hammersmith, "You've got my 'chute, you spilled my

'chute."

This is going on right behind me, while I'm sending out the SOS on the radio. Jake is getting ready to open up the bomb bay doors, and the navigator, Phil Cole, is nearby. Now is when the situation starts getting hectic. The bailout signal has now been heard. Jake opens the doors, steps out on the catwalk, sits down on the catwalk and rolls out. Phil Cole follows him immediately. I had already snapped on my chute, so, after locking down the radio key, I followed them out close behind. In the interim, Hammersmith and Stenard had gone back down to the nose section to find the other chute. Prior to my bailing out, I had taken a quick look towards the waist section, and I can remember seeing nobody back there. To my knowledge, the only ones still on board were the pilot and co-pilot, Jones and Joyce, trying to keep the plane level for the bailout. And then Hammersmith and Stenard were still up in the nose. These are the only four who I can swear were still on board.



The sad part of the whole story revolves around the "spilled" chute. Apparently Hammersmith (right) had a different hookup system than our crew did. Some chutes had rings on them and some had snaps. The opposite, of course, would be on the harness. Therefore, when Stenard's chute was spilled, Otto's chute was of no use to him. Consequently, he was doomed to go down with the plane, Hammersmith could have possibly had time enough to retrieve his own chute from the nose area and then bail out by the nose wheel, but I can't say that that is what actually occurred, as I was already gone. When I jumped, we were in the heavy overcast yet, so I could not actually see the ground, not that I wanted to anyway. I did not wait too long before I pulled the ripcord, I could not tell how close to the ground I was. When I finally dropped below the overcast, I was still a few thousand feet in the air. I remember hearing the plane overhead for a while, but I did not see any other chutes. After a short while, I heard the plane crash, but due to the haze in the area, I did not see where the plane crashed. I was captured immediately upon hitting the ground, although I did come close to landing on a cow before he finally moved out of the way. Shortly after capture, I rejoined the three officers who survived, Jones, Joyce and Cole. Jake had managed to escape capture by hiding out, got picked up by the underground, and returned to the base.

Over the years it has remained a mystery to me as to whatever actually happened to the three gunners in the back, in the waist section? Again, from what I have gathered only one body was found in the wreckage. Assuming the three fellows bailed out in the back; why would they all die as a result of it? Maybe they all bailed out over water and drowned? Upon recovery of the bodies, would they then be unidentifiable? According to the report of John Hammersmith, Otto was buried in a mass grave along with others who were unidentifiable. Many of the bits of information he gathered seem to be very questionable to me. By the way, you didn't say in your letter, when you

visited the grave site in the Zachary Taylor Cemetery, how many names, if any, were on the headstone, or whatever? Are there four or five bodies buried there? Are the names available? If you have that information, I'd appreciate it if you would pass it on to me.



Zachary Taylor National Cemetery Plot I, 42

Louisville - Kentucky USA