

THE CRASH OF THE LIBERATOR NEAR RZYMKOWICE

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Introduction

The events that took place on December 17, 1944, above the village of Ringwitz, now Rzymkowice in the municipality of Korfantów, have already been described and presented to interested parties several times. The air crash of American Consolidated B-24J Liberator bombers taking part in the so-called “Battle of Silesian Gasoline”¹ was addressed in 2005 by Franciszek Dendewicz, president of the Szybowice Village Renewal Association and the School and Preschool Principal in Szybowice, Prudnik municipality². Dendewicz presented the course of events by illustrating his article with photos, including fragments of the American bomber from Rzymkowice, which are now stored in the Aviation and Military Memorabilia Museum in Mańkowice. This heritage facility is run by Piotr Witek, an explorer and military aviation enthusiast, well-known in the area.

Dendewicz’s article would probably not have been written if it hadn’t been for Ludwik Uryga from the Central Museum of Prisoners of War in Łambinowice³. In December 1978, Uryga conducted research as part of the preparation of the “Lamsdorf camp chronology”. During his research, he came across the memoirs of Andrzej Smoleński, a young Warsaw Uprising fighter and prisoner

¹ The name of the air campaign conducted during World War II by the United States Army Air Force against fuel factories in Germany and other countries of occupied Europe currently takes various forms, e.g. the battle for “Silesian Fuel”, see <https://bombowce.pl/bitwa-o-slaskie-paliwo/> (accessed: 10 II 2025); the Silesian “battle for petrol”, see www.bitwaobenzynie.eu (accessed: 10 II 2025); “Silesian battle for fuel”, see www.blechhammer1944.pl (accessed: 10 II 2025).

² Franciszek D e n d e w i c z, *Tragiczna kolizja amerykańskich bombowców nad Rzymkowicami*, „Tygodnik Prudnicki”, No. 29 from 20 VII 2005, p. 11.

³ Centralne Muzeum Jeńców Wojennych (further: CMJW), Unpublished, sygn. 392, Ludwik U r y g a, *Katastrofa amerykańskiego samolotu bojowego Consolidated B 24 Liberator w rejonie Rzymkowic*.

of the Lamsdorf camp⁴. On December 17th, 1944, Smoleński noted down "how one plane went down towards Lamsdorf". This note, and later (July 23, 1991) the visit of Milos Podzimek from Lomnica nad Popelkou, who was looking for information about the Liberator crash in Łambinowice, prompted Uryga to conduct some kind of investigation⁵. It allowed for the reconstruction of the circumstances and course of the crash and the determination of the probable crash site and burial site of the crew members. This description was in line with the state of knowledge at the time. Back then this was determined by the limited availability of American archival materials, including in particular the lack of *Missing Air Crew Reports* (MACR). Two MACRs directly related to the plane crash near Rzymkowice were made available by the National Archives and Records Administration only at the beginning of the 21st century⁶. Uryga, like Podzimek, was probably also unaware of the findings of the American writer Manuel F. van Eyck⁷. In the summer of 1991, on the pages of "Ad-Lib"⁸ the author presented the results of the search for the burial sites of the crew of one bomber, based on

⁴ CMJW, Relacje i Wspomnienia, sygn. 1205, Andrzej Smoleński.

⁵ The result of the research was a press article, see Ludwik Uryga, *Katastrofa*, „Trybuna Opolska” from 19.-20 XII 1992.

⁶ National Archives and Records Administration (further: NARA), Missing Air Crew Report number 9713 [10681] (further: MACR 10681), sygn. 91096387 and Missing Air Crew Report number 10682 (further: MACR 10682), sygn. 91096413.

⁷ Manuel F. van Eyck, born in 1947 in Ostrava, is an American writer of Czech origin. In 1968, he emigrated to the United States, where he joined the army. He took part in the Vietnam War, then in the fighting in Rhodesia. Since 1976, he has been involved in the search for American soldiers missing in Vietnam, as well as the history of Czechoslovak airmen in Great Britain. He is the author of the autobiographical book *The Pawn in Vietnam*. See: <https://www.databazeknih.cz/zivotopis/manuel-f-van-eyck-26263> (accessed: 1 XI 2024).

⁸ „Ad-Lib” – 451st Bomb Group, bulletin printed 1978 – 2012 by former nose gunner Bob Karstensen, see: <https://451st.org/Ad%20Lib/ad%20lib.html> (access: 3 I 2025).

witness accounts collected by the American Graves Registration Teams in 1947 and 1948⁹.

I mentioned the crash near Rzymkowice in my book *U źródeł. Historia wsi Wierzbie*¹⁰, citing, among other things, the fact that the wreckage of the plane from Rzymkowice was transported to the airport in Wierzbie (Weidengut) in December 1944. At the end of 2024, on the 80th anniversary of the event, Robert Hellfeier recalled the disaster in an article *Upadek Liberatora pod Rzymkowicami w grudniu 1944 r*¹¹. The author relies on the memories of local residents, for example from Smolarnia and Raclawiczki, who often recall how they “widzieli tyn flieger” [they saw that flieger, that plane – said with local silesian accent].

Although the articles and studies mentioned above allow us to reconstruct the course of the crash in more or less detail, none of them actually provide any further information about the crew of the bomber with the serial number 42-51941, referred to as “White 47”. Although both Dendewicz and Hellfeier mention the crew members, apart from their rank and name, the American airmen remain anonymous. Because of its scale—10 out of 11 crew members of the ‘White 47’ perished in the crash—and its dramatic nature, the event remains deeply ingrained in the memories of the residents of Rzymkowice, Chrzelice, and the surrounding area. And yet the fallen airmen have not been commemorated to this day. Moreover, the location of their burial site has not been confirmed yet. According to all assumptions, the crew members were buried in one of the sections of the Old Prisoner of War Cemetery

⁹ Manuel F. van Eyck, *Search for mid-collision gravesites*, „Ad-Lib”, No. 20 summer 1991, p. 32-34.

¹⁰ Daniel Podobiński, *U źródeł. Historia wsi Wierzbie*, Wierzbie 2017, p. 237-239, 244.

¹¹ Robert Hellfeier, *Upadek Liberatora pod Rzymkowicami w grudniu 1944 roku*, „Tygodnik Prudnicki”, No. 51-52 from 17 XII 2024, p. 34.

in Łambinowice (German: Lamsdorf). According to L. Uryga, the graves of the American airmen may be located “at the western edge of the old-World War I cemetery”¹². The exhumations of Italian prisoners of war carried out here in 2023–2024 serve as proof of how much there is still to discover about the WWII-related burials in the German camp Lamsdorf¹³. The crash site of the American aircraft, which is now partially overgrown by forest, is also fading into oblivion and the anonymous reality of forest management.

On one hand, this article has a commemorative purpose – to commemorate the fate of the American crew of the Liberator B-24 J with the number serial No. 42-51941. On the other hand, this text explores how historical memory functions within public spaces – not as a firsthand account from direct witnesses (as Hellfeier relied on), but as a record embedded in the environment itself. A record originally shaped by the sheer impact of a four-engine, heavy long-range bomber – unladen at over 16 tons – that has since vanished, largely due to changes in vegetation and terrain. In the broader context of historical transmission, its disappearance is also tied to the absence of any lasting “marker of remembrance”. In a way, this article serves as both a reflection on forgetting and a contemplation of the necessity – or lack thereof – of commemoration.

¹² D e n d e w i c z, *Tragiczna kolizja*, p. 11. Research in this area is conducted by Marek Michalski, an expert in photointerpretation of aerial photographs, participating, i.a., in determining the location of graves of Italian prisoners of war at the Old POW Cemetery in Łambinowice in 2023–2024.

¹³ More about it in Marek M i c h a ł s k i, Rita R a t t i, Dawid K o b i a ł k a, Valter M a r c h e t t o, Gian Luca C h i e r i c a t i, *Sprawa pochówków jeńców włoskich na Starym Cmentarzu Jenieckim w Łambinowicach* [in:] *Szkice z dziejów obozów w Lamsdorf/Łambinowicach. Historia i współczesność*, part 7, Opole 2024, p. 100–128.

What happened over Ringwitz

The Fifteenth United States Army Air Force (15th USAAF) was formed on January 1, 1943. Even before the Allied occupation of Sicily in August 1943, plans were being explored to use the Mediterranean as a base for air operations in Central Europe. This became increasingly urgent as the range of Allied air forces operating from the UK proved insufficient. When the British occupied Bari (with its strategically important seaport) and later Foggia with its nearby airfields at the end of September 1943, the idea of creating a new US air force could finally be implemented. By the spring of 1944, the 15th USAAF had reached its full operational strength, and by early summer, on June 8, 1944, its main targets had been defined.

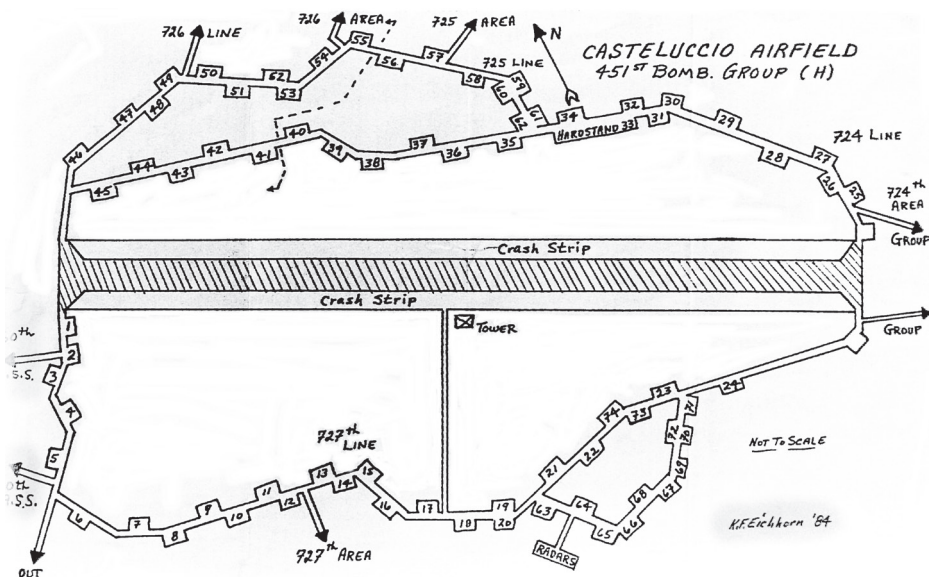
The 15th Air Force is to be assigned [for bombing] the oil refineries at Ploesti [Ploeszti], Vienna and Budapest, as well as synthetic fuel production facilities in Silesia, Poland and the Sudetenland, such as Brůx, Oświęcim, Blachownia-North [OHV Blechhammer], Blachownia-South [IG Farben Heydebreck] and Zdzieszowice [Oder-tal]¹⁴.

During its 18-month operation, the 15th USAAF dropped over 303,000 tons of bombs¹⁵.

The first offensive against the German synthetic gasoline plants in Blechhammer, Heydebreck and Odertal began on July 7, 1944.

¹⁴ Piotr M l e c z k o, *15th United States Army Air Force – geneza powstania, struktura, opis działań wojennych*, from 15 XI 2016, <https://www.infolotnicze.pl/2016/11/15/15th-united-states-army-air-force-geneza-powstania-struktura-opis-dzialan-wojennych/> (access: 10 II 2025).

¹⁵ M l e c z k o, *15th United States Army*; Facebook Profile Muzeum Śląskiej Bitwy o Paliwo Blechhammer 1944, post dated 31 VIII 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/search/top?q=museum%20C5%9B%C4%85skiej%20bitwy%20o%20paliwo%20blechhammer%201944> (access: 10 I 2025).



† Diagram of the airfield at Castelluccio, south of Foggia, with the numbering of the positions of the aircraft of the various squadrons of the 451st Bomb Group; position 54 - aircraft piloted by W. Shelton, position 47 - aircraft piloted by T. King. Source: Hill Mike, *The 451st Bomb Group in World War II. A Pictorial History*, Atglen 2001, p. 75

The last air raid took place on December 26, 1944.¹⁶ The operation on December 17, 1944, which included the bombing of the Blechhammer, Odertal, and Moravska Ostrava plants and the railway targets in Gross Strehlitz, Villach, Saak, Salzburg, and Wels, involved at least 550 bombers from the 15th USAAF¹⁷. From this

¹⁶ Waldemar Ociepski, *Obozy wokół Kędzierzyna, Blachowni i Zdzeszowic podczas II wojny światowej*, <http://www.blechhammer1944.pl/artykuly/45/Obozy-wokol-Kedzierzyna-Blachowni-i-Zdzeszowic-po> (access: 5 II 2025); Donald Caldwell, *Day Fighters in Defence of the Reich: A War Diary, 1942-45*, [South Yorkshire] 2011, p. 328-408. The first bombing mission on Blechhammer was planned for 30 June 1944. However, the operation was cancelled due to bad weather conditions. U.S. bombers dropped cargo in Austria, Hungary, and Yugoslavia. See. Caldwell, *Day Fighters*, p. 321.

¹⁷ The number differs in sources. The amount of „+550” is taken from: Jack McKillop, *USAAF Worldwide Operations Chronology*, <https://aircrewremembered.com/USAAFCombatOperations/Dec.44.html> (access: 5 II 2025). And „464 bombers B-24s + 194 B-17s” from Caldwell, *Day Fighters*, p. 405.

location to Schaffgotsch Benzin Werke GmbH Odertal¹⁸ 231 machines were sent¹⁹, including 28 bombers from the 724th, 725th, 726th and 727th Bomber Squadrons, which were part of the 451st Bomber Group. This was the 168th mission of this group²⁰. The aircrafts of the four squadrons already mentioned were divided into four tactical subunits referred to as Flight²¹: Able, Baker, Fox, Dog²². Each flight consisted of seven bombers.

Flight A [Able] flew straight and level; Flight B [Baker] just right and slightly above; Flight C [Fox] just left, slightly below; and Flight D [Dog] just behind Flight A and slightly below. [...] the aim was to fly in a tight formation because [German] fighters were less likely to attack a tight formation²³.

We are particularly interested in the “Baker Flight” with the lead bomber, a B-24 J Liberator (with the number 42-52045, no name, marked “54”) piloted by Lieutenant William Shelton of the 726th Squadron. Behind him, in order, were the bombers piloted by Lieutenant Theodore King (B-24 J, no name, “White 47”, number 42-51941), Lieutenant Edward Nall, Lieutenant Doyle Kizzire,

¹⁸ The factory belonged to the large industrial Schaffgotsch family, who were also the owners of numerous coal mines and estates in Silesia.

¹⁹ Petr B a r t o š í k, *80 let od největší letecké bitvy nad územím tehdejšího Protektorátu Čechy a Morava*, z 7 XII 2024, <https://www.leteckemuzeum.eu/news/80/> (access: 11 II 2025); D e n d e w i c z, *Tragiczna kolizja*, p. 11.

²⁰ Mike H i l l, *The 451st Bomb Group in World War II. A Pictorial History*, Atglen 2001, p. 113.

²¹ Flight - Squadron subunit, consisting of a few planes, in German known as „Schwarm“, in Russian as „zveno“. I use the original „Flight“, when referring to it in Polish.

²² Mission Flimsies, 441217 [Flight plan, 17 XII 1944], <https://451st.org/Missions/Mission%20Flimsies/451st%20BG%20Pilot%20Flimsies/441217.JPG> (access: 10 II 2025).

²³ The David and Barbara Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History (further DBPC), University of Arkansas, Interview with Bill Shelton [William T. Shelton], 23 II 2000 (conducted by Ernest D u m a s), p. 8, <https://pryorcenter.uark.edu/projects/Arkansas%20Gazette/SHELTON-Bill/transcripts/BShelton.pdf> (access: 5 II 2025).

PLAN ABLE

* Denotes Camera Ships
724th-Smallthumb
725th-Today
726th-Wishwell
727th-Judith

S E C R E T

ABLE FLIGHT

18-Z-Fenton-Col Hoppeck-Salt
42-S-Robinson-Prouty-Simone
15-K-Spreha
16-L-Garforth
7-I-Strosky
* 13-R-Blain
* 11-M-Compton

17 December 1944

BAKER FLIGHT

* 54-A-Shelton-Sullivan
* 47-O-King
41-K-Nell
46-I-Kizziro
14-H-R.E.Smith
6-M-Pohl
5-C-Thomas

DOG FLIGHT

49-M-Mattes-Col Stefanowicz-Green
59-V-Fish-Johnson
62-R-Pearson
56-Z-Thorne
* 60-A-Lee
* 36-I-Pones
33-T-Lydecker

START ENGINES: 0755
TAXI: 0805
TAKE-OFF: 0815

DEPART BASE: 0908 at 10,000 ft.

FOX FLIGHT

* 28-G-Burkett-Miller
74-Q-Vernon
21-S-Domers
27-D-McKenny
* 31-L-Dunsmoor
25-B-Wood
9-F-Fyhrie

RENDZVOUS: 451st and 461st will line rendezvous behind the 484th when 484th -

↑ Aircrafts of 724, 725, 726 and 727 squadrons "Flights" (Able, Baker, Fox, Dog) scheduled for mission on December 17, 1944. Lieutenant King's and Shelton's aircrafts are part of Baker Flight
Source: www.451st.org

R[obert?] E. Smith, [Philip?] Pohl, and [Charles?] Thomas²⁴. After 8 a.m., the aircrafts took off from Castelluccio airport, located less than 15 km south of Foggia in Italy. After a 3.5-4 hour flight, they crossed the Eastern Sudetenland line, entering Silesia from the direction of Olomouc (Czech: Olomouc, German: Olmütz) and Zlaté Hory (German: Zuckmantel). Then, continuing north and northeast, they reached the Oder River between Koźle (Kosel) and Krapkowice (Krappitz). The weather conditions on that day, including visibility, were very good. There was a slight frost of a few degrees and the

²⁴ Daily Operations Reports, 441217.1, <https://www.451st.org/Daily%20Ops%20Reports/Ops%20Reports/441217.1.JPG> (access: 11 II 2025).

whole area was covered with snow²⁵. After reaching their target and bombing the Odertal between 12:15 and 13:04, the planes remaining in the formation began their turn towards the northwest over Prószków, a forested area of the Niemodlin Forest, and then over Krapkowice, continuing the turn to the left, south towards Olomouc and on to the airport in Italy. During the maneuver, the Americans faced a fierce attack from German fighters and anti-aircraft defense. "The anti-aircraft artillery opened furious fire..." – Dendewicz writes, recalling the words of Czech researcher Zbyněk Valka²⁶. Ludwik Uryga reports that the attackers also included two Messerschmitt fighters from the field base in Wierzbie²⁷. Lieutenant Shelton also mentions two German Messerschmitts Me-109. According to him, the fighters shot down three bombers lagging behind the entire formation, "behind where they should be", just before executing a turning maneuver²⁸. The German defense was so active that it took the American pilots completely by surprise. Santo Magliocca was a Ball Turret Gunner on a Liberator (ship no. 44-41008) flying in formation as part of the 727th Squadron. His memories of the mission were recorded in the 2000s by Bob Podurgiel, a journalist from the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette:

The Germans were well prepared and ready to fiercely defend themselves with all means available. Santo recalled German Me-109s and Fw-190s breaking through the [American] bomber formations in daring, close-range attacks; their cannon and machine gun fire ripping into the bombers²⁹.

²⁵ NARA, MACR 10681.

²⁶ D e n d e w i c z, *Tragiczna kolizja*, p. 11.

²⁷ U r y g a, *Katastrofa*, p. 5.

²⁸ DBPC, Interview with Bill Shelton p. 8.

²⁹ Bob P o d u r g i e l, *Life of a Ball Turret Gunner*, „V[eteran] B[reakfast] C[lub] Magazine”, Special edition: „Masters of the air”, Summer 2024, p. 17.



Excerpt from the plan of the U.S. bombing mission to Odertal, Dec. 17, 1944, specifying the bombing target, area of the turn and return route. Source: Halyard Mission Foundation collections

Gerald R. Smith of the 461st Bomb Group, due to the losses on the American side, refers to the mission day as “Black Sunday”³⁰. Shortly after shooting down three bombers, the power system of W. Shelton’s plane (ship no. 42-52045) flying the “Baker Flight” failed.

Something went wrong with my plane – Shelton recalls. The electrical system went out. All the indicators on our dashboard were just going like this, and we were losing speed slightly. The flight commander [Lieutenant Charles Atterholt] was there in the co-pilot’s seat. We talked it over. Should we drop out now? We’re already on the final run. The final run lasts five or six minutes, so we decided that we’d stay in and, as soon as the bombs were gone, then we’d get out³¹.

In order to avoid being fired upon, Shelton began the maneuver of leaving “Baker Flight” and changing the formation, descending to a height about 2,000-3,000 feet (approx. 600-914 meters) lower by making a sharp, diving turn to the right. This maneuver was signaled to other members of the flight by the characteristic “rocking wings violently”. The five bombers forming the “Baker Flight” most likely continued the turnaround maneuver with the rest of the formation. Only plane no. 42-51941 (“White 47”), piloted by Lieutenant Theodore King, was to follow Shelton’s plane for unknown reasons. “The one beyond my left wing followed me. Tried to. Of course, I couldn’t see him. I can’t see back...” Shelton recalled more than 50 years later³². Another position occupied by Lieutenant King’s plane at that time was mentioned in his testimony

³⁰ Gerald R. Smith, [Memories], https://461st.org/Kriegsgefangenen/gerald_r_smith.htm (access: 12 II 2025).

³¹ DBPC, Interview with Bill Shelton, p. 9.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 10.

by Lieutenant Lawrence E. Robertson of the 727th Bombardment Squadron, a first-hand witness:

Lieutenant King was acting as second-in-command when the formation flew over the target [Odertal]. After passing the target, the formation concentrated to avoid further anti-aircraft fire. During the turn, the lead plane [of Lieutenant Shelton] seemed to fall out of formation and Lieutenant King took the lead position³³.

It should be noted that Lieutenant Shelton did not see the plane piloted by King, so his account cannot be treated as an eyewitness testimony. At the same time, it should be remembered that a single liberator flying outside the formation was an easy target for German fighters, hence American bombers always formed a tight, safer formation. Taking both aspects into account, it is highly probable that King's plane remained in the original formation, taking the position of the leader of the "Baker Flight". According to all reports, T. King's plane was flying above Shelton's plane. It is most likely that the electrical system failure was fixed on the plane 42-52045, because shortly after leaving Flight Shelton began to return to his original position. "At the same time, [Shelton's] lead plane returned to formation..." - L. Robertson testified. Sergeant Kenje Ogata also confirmed that aircraft 42-52045 returned to its original position in the formation³⁴. During this maneuver, at an altitude of approximately 25,000 feet (7,600 meters), the propellers of the left outer engine of the Shelton's bomber struck the "White 47", tearing its fuselage in two at the height of the gunner's stations³⁵ (most likely hitting the right side of the plane where Sergeant Linn

³³ NARA, MACR 10682, Statement of circumstances [Lawrence E. Robertson], 18 XII 1944. Also see NARA, MACR 10681, Eye-witness statement [Thomas E. McHalle], 18 XII 1944.

³⁴ NARA, MACR 10682, Eye-witness statement [Kenje Ogata], 18 XII 1944.

³⁵ DBPC, Interview with Bill Shelton, p. 10.

Arbogast was) and “cutting off” its tail³⁶. Corporal William Fry, who was the tail gunner, managed to leave the damaged machine. This is confirmed by the words of Senior Sergeant Henry F. Chepulis from liberator no. 42-05359, nicknamed “Babe”³⁷, flying in the “Fox Flight” to the left of the “Baker Flight”. In his diary, under the date of December 17, 1944, Chepulis wrote:

We had a mid-air collision (not me). One [plane] chewed off the tail of another ship. The ship with the tail knocked off went down like a rock. The tail section flew right by my waist window. Saw a chute open from the remains of that tail³⁸.

The crashed plane entered a spin at around 12:45–12:55 p.m., and fell to the ground in the vicinity of Rzymkowice. According to witnesses, the nose of the plane hit the ground, and the plane itself was on fire³⁹. Once again let us recall the memories of S. Magliocca from “Sloppy But Safe”, who also saw this air crash:

Two bombers ahead of “Sloppy But Safe” collided and exploded in mid-air, sending debris and the mangled bodies of crew members hurtling into the air beside their bomber. Another nearby B-24 exploded from a direct hit by German 88mm anti-aircraft cannons⁴⁰.

The 11-man crew of the “White 47” consisted of: Lieutenant Theodore King (pilot), Lieutenant Bernard Schams (co-pilot), Lieutenant Sindey Grapey (navigator), Lieutenant William Navins (bom-

³⁶ NARA, MACR 10682. L. Uryga writes about the damage to the “middle part of the fuselage”, see: Uryga, *Katastrofa*, p. 5.

³⁷ Plane was piloted by Lieutenant Raymond W. Fyhrie.

³⁸ [Henry F. Chepulis], *A page out of S/Sgt Chepulis' diary*, „Ad-Lib”, No.35 Summer 2002, p. 11.

³⁹ Jadwiga Wójcik, *Tropem Liberatorów, Sprawozdanie z wizyty Jamesa Powersa w Wierzbii, Wierzbie*, 23 XII 2009, typewritten document from the archives of Stowarzyszenie Przyrodniczo-Kulturowe Panorama Wierzbia.

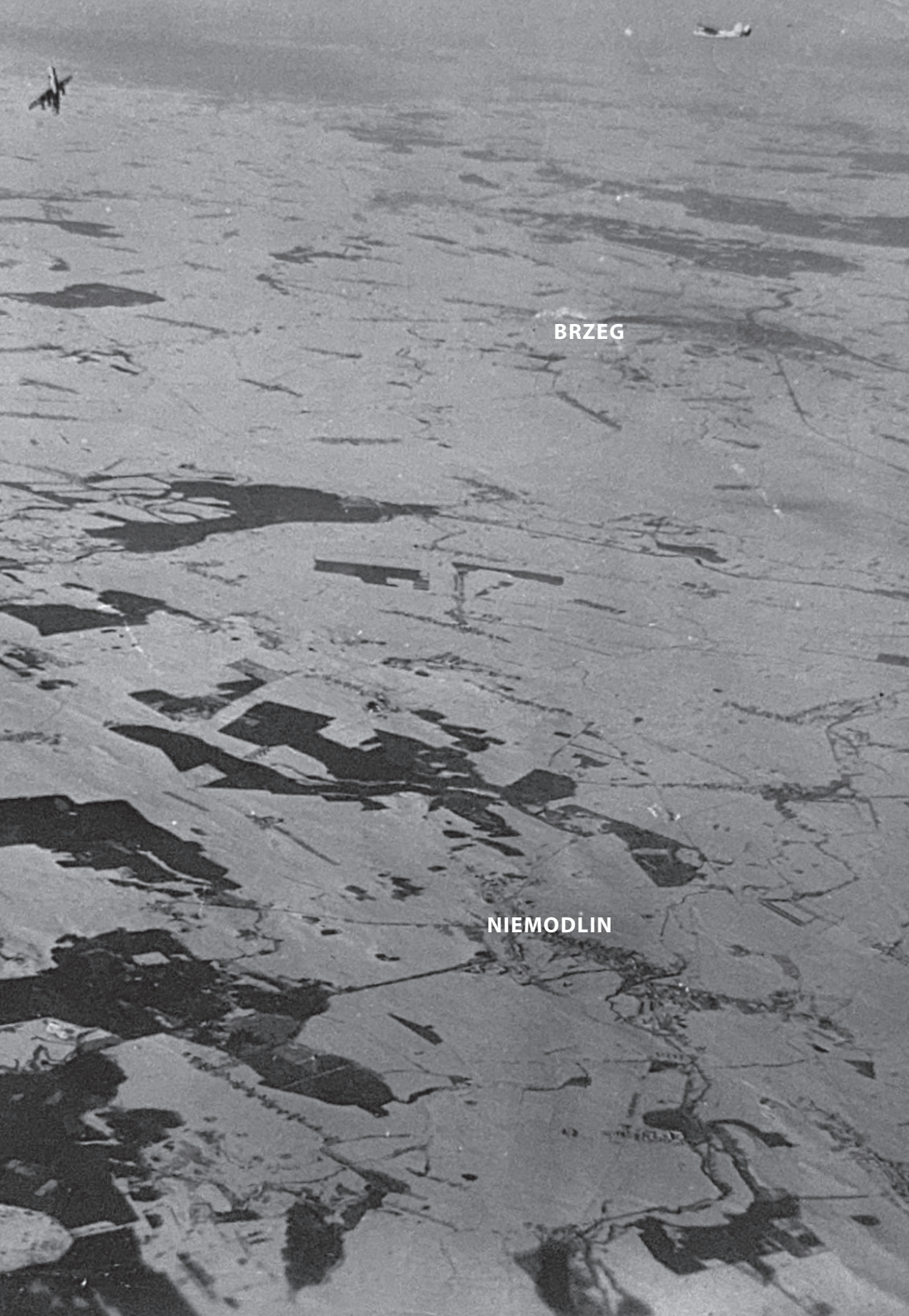
⁴⁰ Podurgiel, *Life of a Ball Turret Gunner*.

The turn of liberator formation over Bory Niemodlińskie on Dec. 17, 1944, in the background spinning aircraft
"White 47" - Liberator no. 42-51941 piloted by Lieutenant Theodore King.
Photo from the collection of Carol (née Weisler)

GRODKÓW

KLUCZNIK

STAW
PUSTELNIK



BRZEG

NIEMODŁIN

Source: National Archives and Records Administration, ref. 204899999



bardier), Sergeant Paul Banis (top-turret gunner), Sergeant James Wood (bottom ball-turret gunner), Sergeant Linn Arbogast (right-waist gunner), Sergeant Frank Anderson (left-waist gunner), Corporal William D. Fry (tail-turret gunner), Sergeant Howard G. Miller (nose gunner) and Sergeant Joseph Weisler (photographer). Most likely 10 of them died as a result of a fall. From the bomber crew only sergeant Weisler survived. After parachuting to the ground, he was taken prisoner and then transferred to Dulag-Luft West (Durchgangslager der Luftwaffe) in Oberursel⁴¹.

I was flying as a photo-man. We lost our tail [...]. During the fall I threw 2 men [most likely Sgt. Anderson and Sgt. Arbogast] from the waist section of the plane. I didn't know any of the men so I couldn't name them⁴². I also saw one man chat in his chute as he descended. [...] The German who captured me, told me all were dead⁴³.

Lieutenant Shelton's plane lost its left outboard engine, which damaged the left tail stabilizer when it broke off. Panic probably broke out on board, or at least in the nose section of the plane. Three of Shelton's crew members left the plane by parachute. They were bombardier John Sullivan, navigator Eugene Becker and nose gunner Edward Anderman, all from the nose section of the plane.

All three men bailed out from the nose escape doors almost simultaneously after hearing the signal to abandon ship. 2nd Lt. Sullivan opened the nose escape doors and bailed out, after noting all others were ready to go. The nose gunner, S/Sgt Anderman, from his

⁴¹ NARA, MACR 10682.

⁴² Weisler was not a permanent member of Lt. King's crew. On December 17, 1944, he replaced a sick cameraman in "White 47".

⁴³ The excerpt is a quote from Joseph Weisler given in a letter from Gertrude Miller (Howard Miller's widow) to Mr. and Mrs. Fry (William Fry's parents) of 19 IV 1946. From the collection of Marvin Fry (William's brother).

turret position, hollered over the intercom: “Get me the hell out of here!” Navigator 2nd Lt Becker, opened the turret, handed him oxygen and helped him out of the turret. He then bailed out after S/Sgt Anderman patted him on the shoulder. S/Sgt Anderman put on his chute and bailed out. During his descent he passed out from lack of oxygen and when he came to a Luftwaffe fighter was circling him and he thought that he was going to shoot him, however the enemy fighter tipped his wings and left.

S/Sgt Anderman landed in snow 4-5” deep. Strong wind scooped him up and he fell on his right side injuring his right side and right foot⁴⁴.

We all bailed out [later over Yugoslavia] — all but three. The nose gunner, the bombardier, and the navigator, all of whom were in that little nose section, saw what was going to happen and bailed out just like that. They didn’t take time to say a word or unhook anything. When we first tried to call on the navigator, to help us guide the plane no answer. One of the crew went down there, and all the wires that were connected to their flying uniforms⁴⁵, just trailed out the open nose wheel door. They were gone⁴⁶.

Interestingly, Sullivan and Becker were not permanent members of Shelton’s crew. They were originally part of Lieutenant Charles Atterholt’s crew. On December 17, 1944, Atterholt himself was also part of Shelton’s crew, where he served as co-pilot.

Lieutenant Sullivan was killed near Rzymkowice, and his body fell into the backyard of Carolina Przybyla (*Przybilla*)⁴⁷. The death

⁴⁴ E y c k, *Search for mid-collision*, p. 33.

⁴⁵ Due to the low temperatures at the altitudes at which the Liberators flew, the crew members used special electrically heated suits. See E d N o r e d, *WWII Uniforms and Flight Gear*, <http://www.303rdbg.com/uniforms-gear3.html> (access: 10 I 2025).

⁴⁶ DBPC, Interview with Bill Shelton, p.12

⁴⁷ E y c k, *Search for mid-air*, p. 34; Testimony, Augustyn Koczula, 7.04.1948 r. from the collection of Marvin Fry (William’s brother)

of the bombardier was confirmed “on the ground” (after his fall), although he may have been killed earlier, already in the air during the anti-aircraft fire⁴⁸. Becker landed near Włostowa (Floste), and Anderman near Korfantów (Friedland)⁴⁹. “When I was coming down, a woman was hanging clothes in her backyard...” – Anderman later recalled⁵⁰. Both Becker and Anderman were arrested and taken to the Wierzbie airfield, and then transferred to the Dulag-Luft West camp in Oberursel.

He [Anderman] was captured and taken by motorcycle to an unknown place where he was tortured for six days and nights. I believe that place was at the airport [in Wierzbie], where other members of the crew were kept⁵¹.

Almost all American airmen captured by the Germans were sent to Dulag in Oberursel. This camp, considered the largest interrogation center, was a place where Allied prisoners of war were detained for the duration of the investigation and then transferred to permanent camps. Ultimately, Andermann, Becker, and Weisler from Oberursel were sent to Stalag Luft I in Barth⁵² (Mecklenburg-Vorpommern).

Lieutenant Shelton, along with seven⁵³ crew members remained in the damaged airplane. Believing that the damaged aircraft would not withstand a longer flight, the pilot decided to continue the

⁴⁸ NARA, MACR 10681.

⁴⁹ NARA, Downed Allied Aircraft Reports number ME-2546 sygn. 143488187, Angaben über die Gefangennahme von feindlichen Luftwaffenangehörigen.

⁵⁰ Stacy V. Sullivan, *Ex-POWs honored for sacrifice, courage*, „Alexandria Daily Town Talk”, No. 105-No.185, 17 IX 1988, p. D-1.

⁵¹ E y c k, *Search for mid-air*, p. 34.

⁵² Listing by Rooms of the POWs at Stalag Luft I, North 1, <http://www.merkki.com/north1.htm>; North 3, <http://www.merkki.com/north3.htm> (access: 10 II 2025).

⁵³ In an interview Shelton gave in 2000, he talks about seven airmen who jumped out of a plane over Yugoslavia, see DBPC, Interview with Bill Shelton, p. According to MACR 10681, the



←

Second Lieutenant John Sullivan (b. 1919, d. 1944), the only one of Lieutenant William Shelton's crew to die in a plane crash over Rzymkowice, Dec. 17, 1944. Bombardier, Second Lieutenant Sullivan jumped out of plane no. 42-52045 and then fell on one of the Rzymkowice yards.

Source: "The Boston Globe", 17 II 1945

course in an eastern direction, i.e. already outside the borders of Germany.

We turned to ninety degrees due east and tried to call on the radio, but all our aerials were gone. We couldn't rouse anybody. No radio. We flew four or five minutes, and I looked at the commander and he looked at me, and I said, "Why are we going this direction? Let's go south," which was back to our base. We turned south. This happened about ten minutes until one in the afternoon. And we flew that plane till it was running out of gasoline. It just kept on flying. We flew until (in December, I guess it's dark around 4:00 or 4:15) it was about to get dark.⁵⁴

crew of Shelton's aircraft consisted of 11 people. Three people jumped out of the plane when Lieutenant King's plane collided, so most likely 8 crew members arrived in Yugoslavia.

⁵⁴ DBPC, Interview with Bill Shelton, p. 10.

→
Lieutenant William Shelton (b. 1920,
d. 2005), pilot of the liberator no. 42-
52045, leading "Baker Flight".
Source: www.findagrave.com



Lieutenant William Shelton, Lieutenant Charles Atterholt, Sergeant Homer Pierce, Sergeant Albert Deoar, Sergeant Joseph Hatterslay, Sergeant William Ershler, Sergeant George Kelly and Robert Bolger all flew to the vicinity of the town of Plevlje⁵⁵ in Yugoslavia⁵⁶. They all managed to parachute out of the plane just before it crashed into the mountains. The crew was taken in by Yugoslavian guerrillas and later returned to the American base in Italy⁵⁷.

The remains of the liberator which crashed near Rzymkowice were transported to the airport in Wierzbie. According to reports from the local Fliegerhorstkommandantur, the bodies of

⁵⁵ Today it is Pljevlja, a city in northern Montenegro.

⁵⁶ NARA, MACR 10681.

⁵⁷ Judy Banton L a m b, *William Thomas Shelton*, entry No. 10932387 from 9 V 2005, https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/10932387/william-thomas-shelton?fbclid=IwY2xjawliaM-FleHRuA2FlbQIxMAABHWfKp-Io99U1sfNxoTA8EFTu38dypshUPh2gzQzQ3kCeRXsfYD-p3Drbw_aem_IDA-AHrP8ijQaxJ-52NCow (access: 2 II 2025).

King, Anderson, Miller, two unidentified deceased and Sullivan were also secured here⁵⁸. Becker later testified that after being transported to the airport, he met Sergeant Weisler from "White 47". Weisler was supposed to identify the body of Lieutenant Schams⁵⁹, who was probably one of the two previously unidentified crew members of Lieutenant King. Airport reports therefore explain the fate of the six crew members of the crashed plane (five dead and one taken prisoner). It has not been possible to determine what happened to the other five, although it is generally accepted that they also died during the crash in the forest near Rzymkowice.

⁵⁸ NARA, Downed Allied Aircraft Reports number ME-2557, sygn. 143488334, Meldung über den Abschluß eines US-amerikanischen Flugzeuges.

⁵⁹ NARA, MACR 10681, Casualty questionnaire [Eugen F. Becker].

The crew of Lieutenant Theodore King

We now know the circumstances and course of the plane crash in which a total of 11 crew members died. They were young men aged 19 to 28 from different states in the USA. "Surrounded by glory on a daily basis, their lives often ended in a cruel death in their own planes, turned into a small hell..." as Piotr Mleczko⁶⁰ wrote about the 15 USAAF airmen. Most of them were bachelors who had joined the army on average 1.5–2 years before the disaster. The exception is Corporal Fry, who is the youngest of the entire crew and joined the army in January 1944.

As there is no confirmation of the burial place of the crew members of "White 47", they were commemorated at the Henri-Chapelle American Cemetery and Memorial, which was built together with the cemetery for those who died in the Battle of the Bulge and other battles. The location was not chosen by chance. The bombing of synthetic gasoline plants in Central Europe was intended to weaken the Nazi army, which was fighting on the Western Front. The memorial is located 3 km north of Henri-Chapelle, a district of the municipality of Welkenraedt in Belgium. The names of Lieutenant King's crew are engraved on the pillars that form the so-called Wall of Missing.

Bombardier Sullivan, who was part of Lieutenant Shelton's crew, was symbolically commemorated with an inscription on the Court of Honor of the Epinal American Cemetery and Memorial in Dinozé, about 80 km south of Nancy in eastern France.

⁶⁰ Mleczko, *15th United States Army*.

It should be added that the first American search for those reported missing⁶¹, of King's and Shelton's crew were conducted on November 6, 1947, and then on April 7, 1948.⁶² Later, the "time of the iron curtain" began, and the potential burial site of the crew was located within the boundaries of the military training ground in Łąbinowice. This made it impossible to conduct search operations until the 1990s. Field searches were resumed in 2009 and 2012, when the Office of Prisoners of War and Missing in Action Affairs of the US Department of Defense announced its desire to "bring home with dignity the living or deceased members of the US military personnel". An appeal for help in the case of the graves of American airmen was sent to municipalities not only in the Opole Voivodeship, but also in the Lower Silesian, West Pomeranian, Lubusz and Subcarpathian Voivodeships. In 2012, the Municipal Office in Korfantów, which is responsible for the Rzymkowice village, replied that it "does not have documents confirming the presence of graves of American airmen on its territory"⁶³. Edward Haduch, from the Blechhammer Association – 1944 estimates that around 130 Americans who took part in bombing raids in 1944 could have been buried in the Opole Voivodeship alone.⁶⁴

⁶¹ MIA (Missing in action,) a soldier who died in a field, but his death hasn't been confirmed by finding the body)

⁶² E y c k, *Search for mid-collision*, p. 33–34.

⁶³ Urszula Ma ł e c k a, *Amerykanie będą szukać w Polsce swoich żołnierzy z II wojny światowej*, 4 IX 2012, update: 14 VII 2016, <https://dzieje.pl/aktualnosci/amerykanie-beda-szukac-w-polsce-swoich-zolnierzy-z-ii-wojny-swiatowej> (access: 10 XII 2024).

⁶⁴ *Nastąpił przełom w poszukiwaniach amerykańskich lotników*, „Nowa Gazeta Lokalna”, 26 XII 2022, <https://www.lokalna24.pl/arttykul/14003,nastapil-przelom-w-poszukiwaniach-amerykanskich-lotnikow-film> (access: 19 II 2025).

Below, I present brief biographies of the crew members from Lieutenant King's and Lieutenant Shelton's planes who died in the crash⁶⁵.

Crew of the B-24J, "White 47", no. 42-51941:

Pilot, First Lieutenant (1st Lt.) **Theodore C. King** – born November 10, 1919 in New York. He was blond with blue eyes and around 186 cm tall. Son of Ada King. He attended college for one year and then worked as a paymaster. He joined the U.S. Army Reserve on February 26, 1943, as a private in Nashville Air Corps Facilities, Tennessee. He was a bachelor. His last residence was in Niagara County, New York. He died near Rzymkowice at the age of 25. At the crash site, the following items were found next to the lieutenant's body: his military ID, 910 Italian liras, a wrist watch, and later a silver fountain pen and a wallet containing 42 dollars⁶⁶.

Co-pilot Lieutenant **Bernard William Schams** – born on November 22, 1922, son of Charles and Susan Helen (née Kemp). He had three brothers (David, Walter, and Charles) and two sisters (Catherine and Evelyn). In 1941, he graduated from Aquinas High School. In the 1941 yearbook, a brief profile appears next to his name:

"A case of quality, not quantity" ...Red thinks freckles are beauty spots ... delights in annoying girls... ambition is to be a game warden⁶⁷.

⁶⁵ I have prepared the biographies of the crew members on the basis of: Fields of Honor – Database, www.fieldsofhonor-database.com; World War 2 investigation Fam. Scott, www.ww2investigation-fam-scott.nl

⁶⁶ NARA, Downed Allied Aircraft Reports number ME-2557, sygn. 143488334, Verzeichnis über abgenommene Gegenstände des Sekond [sic!] Leutnant Theodore C. King (tot), 21 XII 1944.

⁶⁷ *The 1941 Trumpet*, [year book], vol. 13, Aquinas High School, La Crosse, 1941, p. 36, <https://www.myheritage.pl/research/collection-10568/roczniki-ameryka%C5%84skie-1890-1979?it>

The crew of liberator bomber B-24 J no. 42-51941, known as "White 47,"
 piloted by Lieutenant Theodore King. Crew as of December 17, 1944.
 Own elaboration. The photo of the aircraft is from the public domain

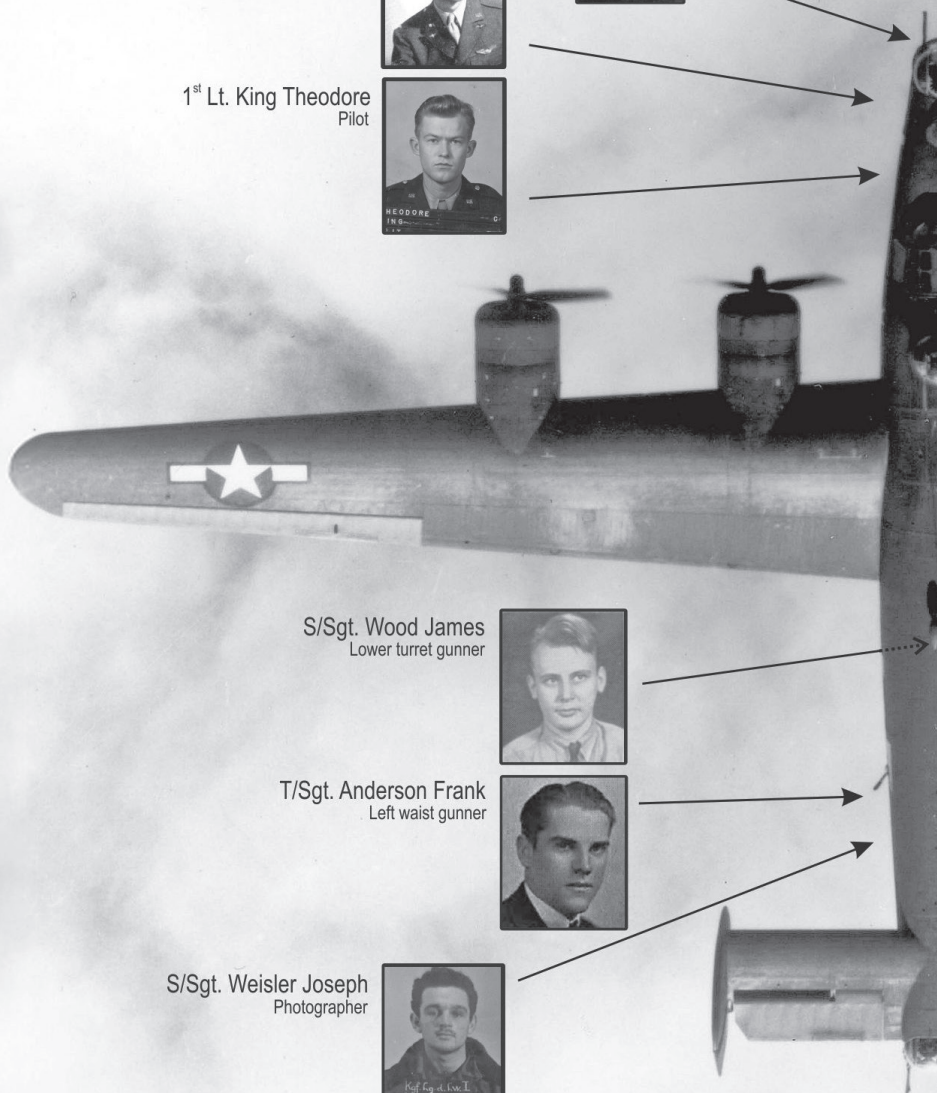
1st Lt. Grapey Sidney
 Navigator



1st Lt. King Theodore
 Pilot



S/Sgt. Miller Howard
 Nose gunner



S/Sgt. Wood James
 Lower turret gunner



T/Sgt. Anderson Frank
 Left waist gunner



S/Sgt. Weisler Joseph
 Photographer





1st Lt. Navins William
Bombardier



1st Lt. Schams Bernard
Co-pilot



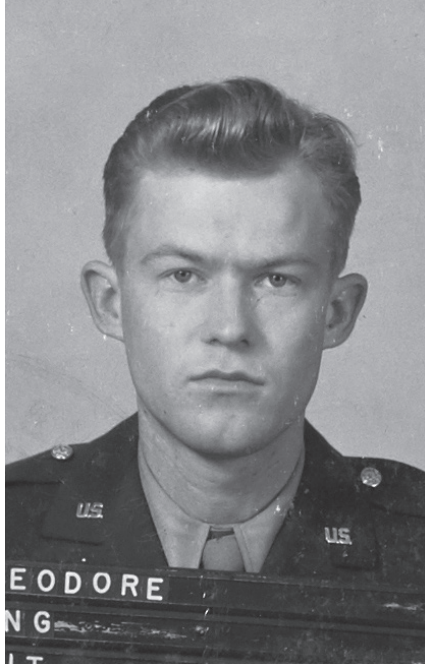
T/Sgt. Banis Paul
Top turret gunner



Sgt. Arbogast Linn
Right waist gunner



Cpl. Fry William
Tail gunner



←

Lieutenant Theodore King (b. 1919, d. 1944), pilot of liberator no. 42-51941. He died near Rzymkowice at the age of 25.

Source: National Archives and Records Administration, Downed Allied Aircraft Reports number ME-2557, ref. 143488334

He joined the Air Corps of the U.S. Army Reserve in his hometown of La Crosse on October 26, 1942. He trained in Arcadia, Florida, Gunter Field in Alabama, and Blytheville, Arkansas. He was commissioned as an officer on March 12, 1944, in Blytheville. In July 1944, Schams was sent to Europe on a military mission. Shortly before his departure on May 30, 1944, he married Wanda Reahart. His last place of residence was La Crosse, Wisconsin. He was killed near Rzymkowice less than a month after his 22nd birthday.

Navigator Lieutenant **Sidney Stanford Grapey** - born in 1921 in the Panama Canal Zone⁶⁸. Son of Lithuanian immigrants who came to the USA in 1912, Jacob and Edith (née Horweitz). He had a sister, Shirley, and a brother, Charles (both children of Edith

emId=246799237&snippet=2e381b4e23e011fb6869aa892c0d6183&action=showRecord &recordTitle=Aquinas+High+School (access: 10 II 2025).

⁶⁸ The Panama Canal Zone is a strip of land along the Panama Canal leased by Panama to the United States in 1903. The area remained under U.S. administration until 1999.

→
 Lieutenant Sidney Stanford Grapey (b. 1921,
 d. 1944), navigator on the crew of Lieutenant T. King.
 Pictured (center) as secretary of the Phi Eta Sigma
 fraternity at Northwestern University.
 Source: Northwestern University Chicago, Illinois-
 Yearbooks



from her first marriage). He attended Northwestern University for three years. As an outstanding student, he was, among other things, secretary of the university fraternity Phi Eta Sigma, which brought together “men of high ideals and scientific knowledge”⁶⁹. Later, he became an actor. On July 13, 1942, he joined the Air Corps of the U.S. Army Reserve in Chicago. His last place of residence was Evanston, near Chicago. He was killed near Rzymkowice at the age of 23.

Bombardier⁷⁰, Lieutenant **William G. Navins** – born on April 19, 1922, in New York. Son of Robert and Mary (née Smith). He had a brother, Robert, who later became a pastor at St. Margaret Mary’s parish on Staten Island in New York. He attended college for two years and later worked as an actor. On August 15, 1942,

⁶⁹ Northwestern University Chicago, Illinois, Yearbooks, p. 50, email from Chicago Public Library, dated 20 II 2025 (author’s collection).

⁷⁰ Bombardier – a member of the crew of a military aircraft, usually a bomber, who is responsible for the load of bombs on board, as well as its drop on the designated target.

he joined the Air Corps of the U.S. Army Reserve. He was killed near Rzymkowice at the age of 22.

Top Turret Gunner, Staff Sergeant **Paul Peter Casimir Banis** – born on July 30, 1921, in Worcester County, Massachusetts. Son of Lithuanian immigrants Casimir and Petronella, née Lukosius⁷¹. He had four brothers (Walter, Anthony, John and Joseph⁷²) and four sisters (Emily, Adelle⁷³, Leona, Patricia). Attended St. John's High School in Worcester for four years, where he was one of the top students. He was involved in the local parish of St. Casimir and the student association of St. Casimir. After graduating from school, he worked as a grinder, among other things, and later also at Einar Hanson's screw machine manufacturing plant⁷⁴. On July 3, 1942, he joined the Air Corps of the U.S. Army Reserve at Fort Dens in Massachusetts. He was killed near Rzymkowice at the age of 23.

In Worcester, Paul's hometown, there is Banis Square (Dorchester St. & Houghton St.) commemorating the brothers Paul and Joseph Banis⁷⁵. The memorial site was opened in September 1950.

Lower Turret Gunner, Staff Sergeant **James N. Wood** – born on October 21, 1921, in Fairport Harbor, Ohio. Son of Nelson and Ida (née Aho). He had two sisters (Florence and Marion). He was a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. He attended Fairport Harding High School and was employed as a mechanic in the chlorine department of the Diamond Alkali Company chemical plant in Fairport Harbor before enlisting in the army. He joined the army on August 15, 1942, in Cleveland, Ohio. He completed basic

⁷¹ Banis's father was born in Klaipėda, while his mother was born in Kaunas.

⁷² Joseph was born in Lithuania and died on 7 July 1944 in Normandy.

⁷³ Later, Sister M. Corona of St. Casimir in Shenandoah.

⁷⁴ E-mail correspondence with Worcester Public Library from 20 February 2025 (in the author's collection).

⁷⁵ City of Worcester Veterans Square Project, <http://www.worcvs.org/banis-square---dorchester-st.---houghton-st..html> (accessed: 4 II 2025).

military training at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, and was assigned to the Lincoln Park Technical School on October 13, 1942. During his time at Camp Chaffee in Arkansas, he decided to transfer to the US Air Force. He initially trained at the airfields in Kessler (Mississippi), Tyndal (Florida) and Westover (Massachusetts). In August 1944, he was sent to Europe as a ball turret gunner and engineering assistant on B-24 Liberator bombers. He was awarded the Medal for Merit in Aviation twice "for conscientious performance of duties during armed conflict" during the bombing operations on August 29 and September 11, 1944.⁷⁶ His last place of residence was Fairport Harbor, Painesville Township, Ohio. He died near Rzymkowice at the age of 23.

Right - Waist Gunner, Sgt. **Linn Stanford Arbogast** - born on October 30, 1916, in Decorah, Iowa. Son of Clayton and Martha. Brother of Virinda. Husband of Norma Jean. Attended Hutchinson High School. Around 1933, he worked at J. S. Dillon & Sons Stores in Hutchinson, and before 1937, he was a taxi driver at Hutchinson Cab&Bge. L. Arbogast's last place of residence was Hutchinson, Kansas. He was killed near Rzymkowice at the age of 28.

Left - Waist Gunner, staff sergeant (T/Sgt.) **Frank Alexander Anderson** - born on October 18, 1919 in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, Canada. Son of Peter and Lilian (née McDonald), who moved to the USA in 1922. He had two sisters (Marjory and Doris). He was married to Alma E.[leonore?] and the father of Lynne Carol. He attended Hollywood High School for four years and later worked as a photo editor. On August 5, 1942, he enlisted in the Air Corps of the U.S. Army Reserve in Los Angeles. His last place of residence was the city of El Monte near Los Angeles, California. He died near

⁷⁶ *Staff Sgt. Wood Is Missing In Action In Reich*, „Painesville Telegraph", dated 1 VI 1945, p. 1, 10.

Rzymkowice at the age of 25. A military booklet, pilot's license, pocket manual for gas attacks, 3 photos (or films) and 50 Turkish liras were found on Sergeant Anderson's body⁷⁷.

Tail Gunner, Corporal (Cpl.) **William Dean Fry** – born on December 3, 1925, in Vandergrift, Pennsylvania. Son of Clarence and Thelma (née Broski). He had a brother, Louis, and two sisters, Marcia and Marvin. He attended Greensburg Community High School for three years. This is how he was described in the year-book (1943) published at the end of his school years:

Dean... amiability shines by its own as this happy-go-lucky fellow goes dashing around⁷⁸...his ability in shop and loyalty to Mr. Herr will not be forgotten... for a career he selects pattern-making⁷⁹.

After school, he worked as a chauffeur. He enlisted in the army on January 28, 1944, in Greensburg, Pennsylvania. He completed basic military training in Greensboro, North Carolina. He was then sent to Fort Myers, Florida, where he graduated from the Flexible Gunnery School and received the Silver Wings and the Sharp Shooters Medal. After a two-week home leave, he returned to Westover Field in Massachusetts, where he was assigned to a 10-men crew for special flight training. He completed this training at Chatham Field in Georgia. He was sent to Europe in October 1944. Fry's last residence was Greensburg, Pennsylvania.

⁷⁷ NARA, Downed Allied Aircraft Reports number ME-2557, sygn. 143488334, Verzeichnis über beschlagnahmte Gegenstände des Sergeant Anderson Frank, 21 XII 1944.

⁷⁸ In Polish we would say "living silver" and "fills the space".

⁷⁹ 1943. *Brown and white*, [year book], Greensburg High School, 1943, p. 36, <https://www.myheritage.pl/research/collection-10569/indeks-nazwisk-ameryka%C5%84s-kich-ksi%C4%85g-rocznikowych-1890-1979?itemId=319082213&groupId=b65fe798ad1ae4b2d40fe7a9bdc0298&action=showRecord&recordTitle=William+Dean+Fry> (access: 15 II 2025).

→
Tail gunner, Corporal William Dean Fry (b. 1925, d. 1944) of Lieutenant T. King's crew. In the Fry family photo, back row from left: Luise (William's sister), William Dean, Thelma (mother), Clarence (father); front, from left: Marcia (sister) and Marvin (brother).
Source: from the Fry family collection



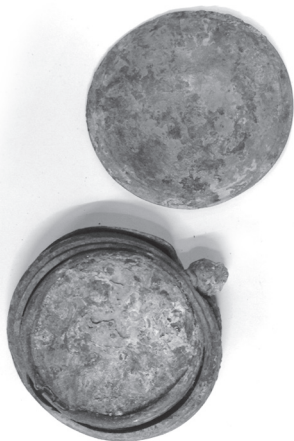
He died near Rzymkowice at the age of 19. His brother Marvin Fry was five years old at the time. Despite his young age, Marvin clearly remembers the day a telegram arrived at their family home informing them of William's death. "Mother [Thelma] never really got over [this] loss," Marvin Fry recalled in an interview with Prof. Todd DePastino, head of the Veterans Breakfast Club⁸⁰.

Nose Gunner, Staff Sergeant **Howard Guy Miller** - born on September 17, 1919 in Chillicothe, Missouri. Son of Lorenzo and Dowe. Brother of Harold and Darell. Husband of Gertrude, née Flick, with whom he had a son around 2 years old. Last place of residence Chillcothe, Missouri. Died near Rzymkowice at the age of 25. The following items were found next to his body: a compass (damaged), a photo of a woman with a child, a horseshoe (which the German airport staff in Wierzbie classified as a lucky charm),

⁸⁰ Todd DePastino, *B-24 Liberators Collide Over the German-Polish Border, December 17, 1944*, <https://veteransbreakfastclub.org/b-24-liberators-collide-over-poland-december-17-1944/> (access: 14 II 2025).



↑ Soldier's tag of Lieutenant William G. Navins (b. 1922, d. 1944), found at the site of the crash of liberator 42-51941, in the forest between Rzymkowice and Jeleni Dwór. Currently in the collection of the Blechhammer - 1944 Association of Kędzierzyn-Koźle. Photo: D. Podobiński



↑ A damaged pocket watch with a flap found at the site of the crash of liberator 42-51941, in the forest between Rzymkowice and Jeleni Dwór. Currently in the collection of the Blechhammer - 1944 Association of Kędzierzyn-Koźle. Photo: D. Podobiński

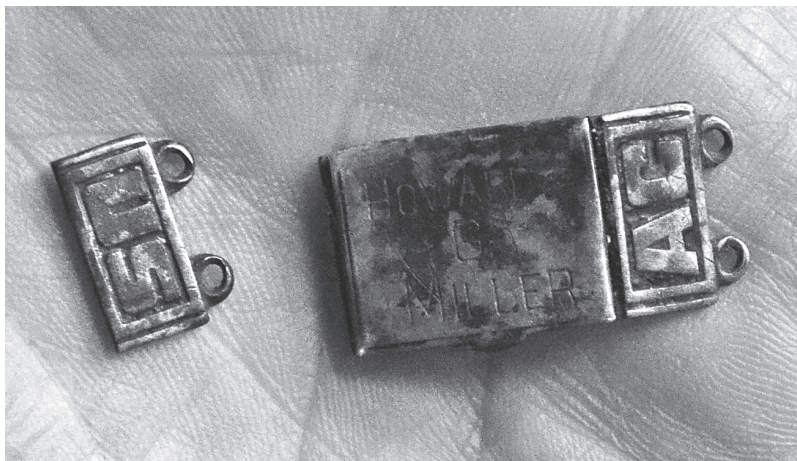
one pin (insignia)⁸¹. About 4 months after Miller's death, his second son was born⁸².

Photographer, Staff Sergeant **Joseph Weisler**, nickname Rocky, Rocky Jojo, Joe – born on April 26, 1923 in New York City, son of Ely and Chischa, née Goldman, Jewish immigrants⁸³. He had two older brothers: Irving and Frank. In January 1942, he graduated from Alexander Hamilton High School in Brooklyn, New York. He joined the army on October 15, 1942. Initially he served as

⁸¹ NARA, Downed Allied Aircraft Reports number ME-2557, sygn. 143488334, Verzeichnis über abgenommene Gegenstände des Howard G. Miller (tot), 21 XII 1944.

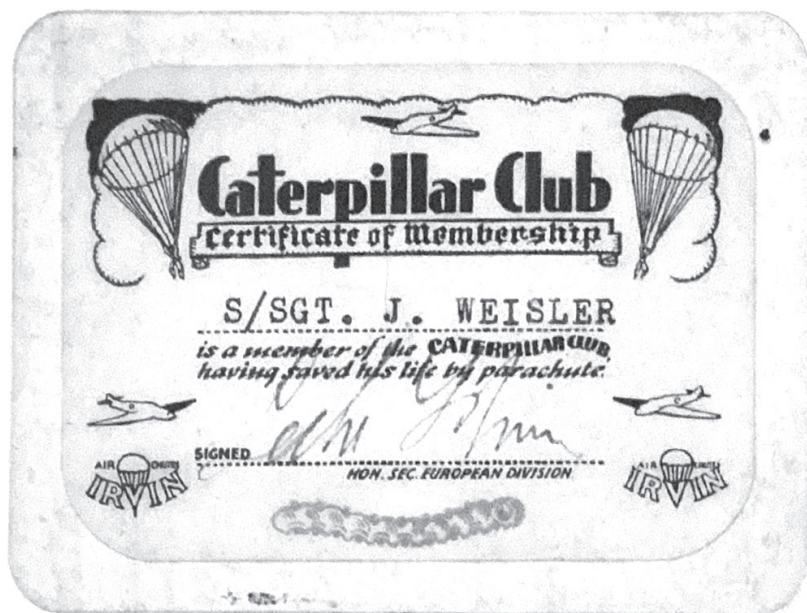
⁸² Letter from Gertrude Miller (Howard Miller's widow) to Mr. and Mrs. Fry (William Fry's parents) of April 19, 1946. From the collection of Marvin Fry (William's brother).

⁸³ Joseph's father was born after 1889 in Palestine, while his mother was born around 1893.



↑ Probably a fragment of a buckle or wrist bracelet with an engraved name: Howard G. Miller (b. 1919, d. 1944). Miller was a nose gunner in the crew of Lt. T. King. Item found at the site of the crash of liberator 42-51941, in the forest between Rzymkowice and Jeleni Dwór. Currently in the collection of the Blechhammer - 1944 Association of Kędzierzyn-Koźle. Photo: D. Podobiński

a gunner. After losing part of his thumb, he took on the duties of a cameraman. He was the only one of the “White 47” who survived the disaster near Rzymkowice. He was 21 years old at the time. He was sent to the Lamsdorf camp, next to Stalag Luft West Oberursel and then to Stalag Luft I in Barth. His stay in the camp had a serious impact on his health. After returning to the USA, he married Sydell Galland (June 29, 1946). They had 3 children: Francine, William and Carol. He worked at various jobs including ushering at the Brooklyn Paramount, working in produce, and at the same time he was in school learning to be a watchmaker. He became an expert in this and became the principal of a watchmaking school. After the school became defunct he started his own business in watchmaking. Later he moved on to selling retail jewelry in the



1 Caterpillar Club membership card belonging to Sergeant J. Weisler. The Caterpillar Club is an informal organization of aviators who saved their lives by jumping out of a damaged aircraft by parachute. The club's badge refers to the silkworm caterpillar because the first parachutes were made of silk. The club's motto is "Life depends on a silk thread". The silkworm symbolism also refers to the insect's ability to leave its cocoon on a silk thread, which is metaphorically meant to resemble a parachute jump.

From the collection of Carol (née Weisler)

diamond district in Manhattan. He received a certificate from The Gemological Institute of America for Diamond grading and Evaluation on January 24, 1965 and worked as an appraiser of diamonds. He died of a sudden heart attack in March, 1967, a month before his 44th birthday⁸⁴.

⁸⁴ Correspondence of Carol, née Weisler, with Jadwiga Wójciak from May 19 and 27, 2025. From the collection of J. Wójciak.

The bombardier, Second Lieutenant (2nd Lt.) **John Sullivan**, did not survive the mission in B-24 J aircraft no. 42-52045. He was born on December 15, 1919, in Massachusetts, son of John and Mary. He had two brothers (James and Francis) and five sisters (Katherine, Geraldine, Mary, Marjorie, and Constance). In 1936 he graduated from Quincy High School and was employed by a telephone company. His last place of residence was Norfolk County, Massachusetts. He died near Rzymkowice at the age of 25. A wallet was found next to his body, containing 19 dollars and a map-printed cloth (an escape map⁸⁵), 8 wooden pins with flags, 2 religious pictures, a letter (photostat), a commemorative card of the Catholic Fliers Society, a patent key and a flier's helmet⁸⁶.

⁸⁵ Most likely, the described item is an escape map. Allied airmen used maps with the mission area printed on silk, canvas, or rice paper. Such a map was easy to store and hide, and at the same time durable. Maps were also smuggled into POW camps to facilitate POWs' escapes.

⁸⁶ NARA, Downed Allied Aircraft Reports number ME-2557, sygn. 143488334, Verzeichnis über abgenommene Gegenstände des Leutnant John L. Sullivan, 21 XII 1944.

Place of the crash

The last sighting of the plane piloted by Lieutenant King was on December 17, 1944, at around 12:55 p.m. The last known position of the aircraft was determined in the MACR at coordinates 50°28' N 18°04' E. They indicate the area of today's biogas plant in Gogolin, between the villages of Obrowiec and Jasiona, less than 7 km northwest of Zdzeszowice. Airport records in Wierzbie indicate that King's plane crashed near Rzymkowice, five kilometers northeast of Korfantów. The Germans reporting system called Gradnetzmeldeverfahren or Gradnetz⁸⁷ reports that the crash occurred in the square marked 71 487/15 Ost⁸⁸. This system, which was used to facilitate the reporting of locations by Luftwaffe pilots, is based on the division of a map into squares. At the crash site in Rzymkowice, the last digit of the number (before the slash), which is 7, indicates the so-called Meldetrapez. It marks a rectangle on the map with a sides length of 3x4 km. Therefore, the accuracy of the location of Lieutenant King's plane crash, as stated in German reports, is a maximum of three kilometers. Nevertheless, the 12 km² area is located near the village of Rzymkowice, so it is where the Liberator crash was reported.

Ludwik Uryga undertook to determine the exact location of the crash of the "White 47" in July 1991. The historian based his

⁸⁷ The Luftwaffe location and reporting system was based on dividing the map into a system of squares, the largest of which is the Planquadrat (in the case of the location of the disaster in Rzymkowice, the Planquadrat is marked with the number 15 Ost), which is divided into the Großtrapez (a rectangle with a side of 70x111 km, in the case of Rzymkowice it is number 71). Großtrapez is divided into eight Mitteltrapezz (each is a rectangle with a side of 35x28 km; in the case of Rzymkowice, Mitteltrapez is number 4). Mitteltrapez is divided into nine Kleintrapez (rectangles with the sides of 9x11 km, in the case of Rzymkowice Kleintrapez is number 8). Kleintrapez is divided into nine Meldetrapezes (with the sides of 3x4 km; in the case of Rzymkowice number 7). For more information on the system, see: *Gradnetzmeldeverfahren der Luftwaffe*, „Flugzeug“, 4/92, p. 22-24.

⁸⁸ NARA, Downed Allied Aircraft Reports, 1943-1945, ME-2557, sygn. 143488334.

research on the accounts of the inhabitants of Rzymkowice, among whom he considered the memories of Augustyn Koczula, Paweł Kirschmeier and Henryk Kisiel to be the most important⁸⁹. Importantly, on the back of the photo taken “at the scene of the disaster”, showing Uryga with two witnesses, there are other names of witnesses different than those mentioned earlier. They are Erhard and Klöser. It should be noted that both the photo and the description were made by M. Podzimek. “An amateur historian or a professional hobbyist” – as Uryga later tried to describe him. Ludwik Uryga attached a fragment of a map to the report summarizing the search, with the place where the plane crashed marked with a red ‘cross’ and the ‘area [where] the described catastrophe took place’ marked with a red dot. The historian also drew the azimuth of the return flight on the map. The locations were plotted on a black and white photocopy of a section of the map, which in the original must have been a simplified map. Many forest roads are missing from the map, and the black and white format of the copy, which was the basis for the drawing, meant that some watercourses could be read as forest roads. This undoubtedly made it difficult to search for the places marked by the Łambinowice historian in the field. Therefore, in my attempts to map the exact location, I deemed it appropriate to narrow the area of investigation to the boundaries of the marshy meadows called Suchy Ług in the west, the Jeleni Dwór forester’s lodge in the east, the “Jeleni Dwór” reserve in the north, and the edge of the forest in the south. In the designated area, two watercourses remain, which are most characteristic and, importantly, identical to the Uryga plan, forming a characteristic triangular arrangement on the maps. Its base is a straight ditch, a watercourse called Ugowej or Ugowa from the southwest. Further

⁸⁹ CMJW, U r y g a, *Katastrofa*, p. 11. Uryga relies on accounts from the years 1947-48.

determinations of the places from the Uryga map focused on the northeast corner of this "triangle". Although the Uryga map lacks a drawn road to the marked places, which is actually the main drawback of the drawing, in reality a well-maintained forest road, today referred to as "fire access 4", leads to it. By superimposing the Uryga map and a modern topographic map, it was possible to determine the location on the ground. I made the determination on site in February 2025. The coordinates of the crash site are 50°30'25.0"N 17°43'08.6" E. It is currently the southern corner of forest division 355 of the Jeleni Dwór forestry (Prószków Forest District). The Uryga record - "the described catastrophe occurred in this area" should, it seems, be interpreted as an area where parts of the plane were scattered shortly after the crash. The crash site itself is currently (early 2025) a logging area, with soil preparation for renewal (planting) having been carried out. To the east, it is bordered by a small watercourse (ditch), about two meters wide. The site where the airplane parts were scattered is a forested area, in some places very marshy and even peat bog, especially in section 374 b, d (this is where the photo attached to the Uryga report was most likely taken) and in section 356.

The habitat conditions at the crash site make it very difficult to search for the plane wreckage, which could clearly confirm the crash site. Such a search has been conducted before. The wreckage of the Liberator, i.e. the casing of a Browning rifle, shell casings and a stabilizer, was found by P. Witek⁹⁰. The finder came across them about 700 meters southwest of the place indicated by L. Uryga, in forest division number 357a of the Prószków Forest District (50°30'16.2"N 17°42'26.1"E). The collection of the Blechhammer - 1944 association, on the other hand, includes Lieutenant Navin's

⁹⁰ W ó j c i a k, *Tropem Liberatorów*.



A hard-to-reach, swampy forest east of the "Suchy Lug" protected ecological area - this is where the American bomber No. 42-51941, "White 47," fell on December 17, 1944. Photo: D. Podobiński

dog tag, a watch, a buckle (possibly from a wrist bracelet) with an engraving and the military number (on the back) of Sergeant Howard G. Miller and many small technical components from Lieutenant King's plane. All of them, according to the association's representatives, come from the crash site. However, they did not disclose the location of the finds, although they also ruled out the findings of Uryga⁹¹.

The results of the work planned for 2025 by the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) based in Washington, D.C., certainly would have been helpful in determining the exact location of the crash site. The agency intended to conduct a search "to recover the remains of American soldiers" in the area indicated by Piotr Witek (and not Ludwik Uryga)⁹². Eventually, the works have been canceled. Initial fieldwork by the DPAA in the second half of 2024 confirmed the concentration of the plane wreckage fragments at a depth of about 40 cm underground, about 150 meters northeast of Witek's location⁹³ (**50°30'19.6"N 17°42'32.4"E**). This place should be considered a real area of the crash of the American plane. Therefore, the indication made by L. Uryga most likely refers to a different airplane, although it should be noted that the area of dispersion of the Liberator's remains is significant. The site determined by Witek and later by the DPAA is a small peat bog with many pools of water and large windthrow areas. A forest road, which was already partially disintegrated, leads to it. At the end of

⁹¹ Author's visit to Muzeum Śląskiej Bitwy o Paliwo w Kędzierzynie-Koźlu, 20 II 2025.

⁹² A letter from Marek Bocianowski, The head of Prószków Forestry Administration, to Partnerstwo Borów Niemodlińskich dated 21 II 2025 (Partnerstwo Borów Niemodlińskich collection).

⁹³ *Zakres pracy na Działalność terenowa DPAA 2025-1PL. Aktywność związana z odyskaniem*, Agencja Księgowa ds. Obronności POW/MIA (DPAA), Dyrekcja Regionalna ds. Europy i Regionu Morza Śródziemnego (EM), Zespół Multidyscyplinarny ds. Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej (MDT-3), 16 October 2024 - Annex to the letter from the Provincial Office for the Protection of Monuments in Opole, addressed to the Partnerstwo Borów Niemodlińskich Association, dated March 17, 2025 (in the association's archives).

the 1960s, this road was a well-maintained forest trail. In addition to the findings of the DPAA and Witek's discoveries, the reports collected by R. Hellfeier attest to the fact that the plane crashed in the area of forest division 357 of the Prószków Forest District. In an interview given to me, he mentions that his grandfather, a resident of Smolarnia in the municipality of Strzeleczy, told him about the crash at the so-called "Pogorskie Wrota"⁹⁴. According to Hellfeier's account, this is where the grandfather found 60 casings from a Browning M2 machine gun (12.7 mm caliber)⁹⁵. In an article from 2024, Hellfeier himself refers to witnesses of the incident in Chrzelice and Smolarnia. The first of them states that the plane crashed "in Krzelice, on Rejchów". The second witness states that the plane "slecieł zaręcz na Drėbkā" [fell on "Drėbka"]⁹⁶. Rejchow is the German name for Försterei Rehhof, phonetically spelled as "reihouf"⁹⁷ which is Jeleni Dwór forestry. The forestry settlement of the same name is located just over 1 km southeast of the crash site, twice as close as the village of Rzymkowice. However, Rzymkowice is the largest village in Planquadrat 71 487/15 OST Blat. Therefore, the German reports refer to Ringwitz and not Rehhof.

⁹⁴ Pogorskie Wrota – dialect name of the place where you enter the forest (Niemodlin Forests) from the side of Rzymkowice and Pogórze. The place is located on the extension of the field road from Rzymkowice, which then turns into a forest road in the forest district no. 358 of the Jeleni Dwór Forest Range, Prószków Forest District.

⁹⁵ Robert Hellfeier, *Znaleziska z upadku amerykańskiego Liberatora*, from 24 IX 2010, <https://www.smolarnia.org/aktualnosci/znaleziska-z-upadku-amerykanskiego-liberatora/> (access: 15 XII 2024).

⁹⁶ Hellfeier, *Upadek Liberatora*.

⁹⁷ Herder-Institut für historische Ostmitteleuropaforschung – Institut der Leibniz-Gemeinschaft, Arthut Zobel, *Flurnamensammlung der Historischen Kommission für Schlesien*, [Kreis] Neustadt O/S, sign. DSHI 100 Zobel 067.

The need to commemorate

Without a doubt, the crash site is the first and natural destination for those interested in the fate of the plane's crew and the course of events. Hellfeier already proved this by collecting a number of oral accounts concerning December 17, 1944, including both those of direct witnesses of the event and those who collected certain fragments of the plane from the crash site. These parts were later used for various purposes, e.g. the cut-up plane doors served as coasters⁹⁸. Some parts of the equipment have been preserved (and in good condition) and later donated to the Museum of the Silesian Battle for Fuel Blechhammer-1944 in Kędzierzyn-Koźle, for example. Other parts of the Liberator from Rzymkowice are part of private collections of aviation enthusiasts (e.g. in Mańkowice). Hellfeier's finding from September 2010 looks exceptional in this context. In one of the now uninhabited houses in his home-village Smolarnia, this avid local history enthusiast found "several school notebooks from the 1940s. One of them belonged to Gertruda Apostel, born in 1932, and it contained short essays and notes on grammar". As it quickly turned out, one of the essays, dated October 22, 1944, describes observations of American planes that "shone like silver" on August 22, 1944⁹⁹. The second is a homework

⁹⁸ Karol Spyra from Piechocice commenting the post about the crash near Rzymkowice posted by Robert Hellfeier 25 VIII 2024 on facebook „Geudka – dwugłoska „eu” w dialekcie glogówcekim”, <https://www.facebook.com/geudka> (access: 10 I 2025): „Jeszcze nie dawno na podworku wellauy sie dwierzi łod tego fligra co speud w Rzynkowicach. Zabrali jy do muzeum... do fortu Nysa... ojciec przycinał kawałki tej blachy do reparacji i na podkładki” [in local Silesian dialect: “Not long ago, the door from that plane that crashed near Rzymkowice were lying around the yard. They took them to the museum... to Fort Nysa... father used to cut pieces of that metal for repairs and to use as washers”].

⁹⁹ Robert Hellfeier, *80 lat temu w Smolarni zrzucono aliancką bombę*, from 24 VIII 2024 r. <https://www.smolarnia.org/aktualnosci/80-lat-temu-w-smolarni-zrzucono-aliancka-bombe/> (access: 10 II 2025). The described event is connected with the air raid carried by 15 USAAF who aimed to bomb the synthetic oil factory in Blechhammer, Odertal and Vienna 22 VIII 1944 – see. Caldwell, *Day Fighters*, p. 356–357.

assignment from December 18, 1944, and describes the events of the previous day concerning the disaster that is the theme of this article¹⁰⁰.

The catastrophe near Rzymkowice, or rather near Jeleni Dwór, as it should be referred to in the light of current findings, aroused the interest of the inhabitants of the surrounding villages – direct witnesses. It also arouses it among contemporary history enthusiasts. For the latter, the remains of the American machine gain the value of a witness to history. From a utilitarian, purely material element (sheet metal for coasters) they become a museum exhibit. They are displayed, described, and talked about. Finally, they are protected from destruction and passed on to others according to their historical (to a museum) rather than utilitarian (as waste) properties. We are therefore dealing with an extension of memory, or at least with its metaphorical transfer from witnesses (most of whom are no longer alive) to an object. Of course, the object would remain silent without the history behind it and without those who can tell this story. But at the same time, it is the object (here the

¹⁰⁰ As written in German: Gestern um die Mittagsstunden von 11:30 bis 13:30 Uhr war hier Fliegerangriff. Es flogen viele Wellen. Auf einmal da hörten wir die Bombenabwürfe. Da liefen wir schnell in den Stahl. Als wir aus dem Stahl heraus gingen sahen (sehen) wir einen schwarm Flugzeuge. Von diesen ist einer niedrig gefahren. Das fing nun an zu wackeln. Da flog der Schwanz ab. Aus dem Flugzeuge kamen zwei Fallschirmjäger heraus. Das Flugzeug drehte sich und in paar Sekunden war das Flugzeug unten. Dann sind noch paar Wellen gefahren. Um 13:30 Uhr war Entwarnung. Nach dem Fliegeralarm waren alle Leute auf der Straße und erzählten über das Flugzeug. Es ist nicht nur ein Flugzeugabgestürzt sondern viere. Viele Männer und Kinder gingen das Flugzeug ansehen. Translation: Yesterday at noon between 11:30 and 13:30 there was a bombing raid here. There were a lot of waves [lit. Wellen] of planes. We heard the sounds of bombing. Then we went quickly to the barn. When we got out of there, we saw a swarm of planes. One of them was flying low. Then he began to wobble. His tail fell off. Two paratroopers jumped out of the plane. The plane turned [went into a spin?] and after a few seconds it fell. Then several more waves of planes flew by. At 1:30 p.m. everything was clear. After the bomb alarm, people went out into the street and talked about this plane. This is not the only fall of the plane, there were four of them. Many people and children went in the direction where the plane fell." See. *Liberator B-24 – description from the school notebook*, published on July 20, 2011 in My virtual Museum in the collection of Robert Hellfeier, <https://myvimu.com/exhibition/9965218-liberator-b-24-rzymkowice#exid=0> (accessed: 10 II 2025).

remains) that was and is able to trigger a historical narrative, or at least arouse enough interest to reconstruct this historical narrative.

Particularly interesting is that no commemoration (if any) has been preserved at the site of the disaster. There is no symbolic obelisk, boulder, commemorative plaque or even a cross. Even determining the exact location of the crash site in the field is problematic today, although it is probably possible based on archival documents and found artifacts. When pointing out the crash site of the American bomber, local residents use more general terms ("in Dreбка", "in Rejchów") than specific ones. In terms of detail, they are closer to the scale of German military maps. However, this should not come as a surprise considering the fact that most of the direct witnesses of the Rzymkowice disaster are no longer alive. The level of detail of the location therefore reflects the degree of memory. The further the generation is from the event itself, the more the memories of it are localized in a wider space.

It seems that attempts to commemorate the victims of the tragedy in space took place – albeit in a limited and impermanent form – immediately after World War II. R. Hellfeier talks about the plaque commemorating the disaster, mounted on a tree, in the form of a post-testimony:

It is said that there once was such [a commemoration]. In the sense that a plaque with a list of pilots or just information about the crash was supposed to be hanging on a tree somewhere. My grandfather once told me something like that. But it could have been a long time ago. The resident of Kolonia Pogórska, with whom I talked about it, also mentioned a plaque. So there must be something to it¹⁰¹.

¹⁰¹ From the testimony of Robert Hellfeier, 14 II 2025 r. (author's collection).

In turn, P. Witek mentioned a small “wooden post driven into the ground at the site of the plane crash”. Nevertheless, at virtually no stage of my findings did I notice any major initiatives to commemorate the tragic death of 11 people in the field. At the same time, there are well-preserved forest graves of German soldiers in the vicinity or commemorations of a forester shot by poachers (Gerlach monument)¹⁰². We also have various commemorations in form and content that are quite contemporary, such as two boulders dedicated to the memory of foresters from Prószków (the boulder of Jerzy Różycka and forester Franciszek Wąs)¹⁰³ or the cross and several boulders placed on the road from Przechód to Rzymkowice in memory of John Paul II. While the lack of initiative to commemorate the catastrophe near Jeleni Dwór among the contemporary population may be due to a lack of knowledge about this event, the explanation for this state of affairs among the post-war inhabitants of the area should be sought elsewhere. It is possible that this has something to do with the fact that a large part of the population of Chrzelice, Rzymkowice, Pogórze and Przechód are autochthones who passed the so-called nationality verification immediately after the war and were not displaced (when the German-Polish borders changed after the war). Perhaps the living memory of the crash of American “White 47” was stronger than the need for its material commemoration. Perhaps the post-war autochthonous inhabitants also perpetuated the wartime division between those who bombed (Americans) and those who defended themselves (Germans). Let us return for a moment to G. Apostel’s homework from Smolarnia.

¹⁰² Mirosław Leśniewski, *Utracone dziedzictwo*, [in:] *Rocznik Borów Niemodlińskich 2018-2019*, Niemodlin, 2018, p. 184.

¹⁰³ *Bory Niemodlińskie*, the map, scale 1: 55 000, red. Studio Plan, edition V 2024 r.

In her essay dated August 22, 1944, shortly after the 15th USAAF raid, she wrote:

The planes [Liberators] were shining like silver. Many people were standing in the street and watching them, and they dropped a bomb. This [bomb] fell in the middle of the street in the village [in Smolarnia] and formed a big crater. Stones and bomb fragments were flying around. More bombs fell in the area that day, creating even bigger craters like the one we saw. One stone injured an elderly woman. [...] The bomb damaged houses in the area where it hit. Roof tiles fell from the houses and window panes were shattered. The force of the blast blew all the apples from the nearby trees and the curtain in one house was blown off the window [...]. We must always be ready for air defense. Things on the floor of the house must be cleared away and old things must be taken down. There were several more air raids after August 22nd. It was a warning to people that they should hide in the basement during the [air raid] alert. Hopefully, they [the air raids or the Americans] won't come back¹⁰⁴.

The quoted passage clearly focuses on the description of the damage caused by the air raid, or rather by the dropping of bombs near the village that had not been used that day in the raid on Blechhammer and Odertal. The second motive that stands out in the statement is the need for "defensive readiness". "We must always be ready...", "Things must be cleaned up...", "[residents] should hide in the basement..." – states the underage G. Apostel. At the end of the essay, the student expresses the hope that the raids will not happen again.

¹⁰⁴ Hellfeier, 80 *lat temu*. Translation from German to Polish R. Hellfeier.

The American air raids on the refineries are commemorated as part of the heroic struggle of the Allies against Nazi Germany. However, in the described situation, for the inhabitants of Silesia, the military activity of the Allies was associated with destruction, uncertainty and fears for their own fate. This may explain the lack of commemoration of those who died in the crash of December 17, 1944. The "righteous anger of the people" and even cases of vigilante justice sometimes meted out to Allied airmen who were trying to save themselves have already been written about by Andrzej Wanderer, a local historian and resident of Prudnik, in a polemical column about the crash of the Liberator aircraft from Wierzch in the municipality of Głogówek¹⁰⁵. In Wierzch, just over 20 km south of Rzymkowice, a Liberator also crashed. In the memoirs of Charles Diedling, one of the crew members of the aircraft from Wierzch, there is a passage about insults and stones thrown by the locals¹⁰⁶.

Regardless of the speculations about the reasons for the lack of commemoration in the Jeleni Dwór forest, there are a number of existing commemorations in Poland and elsewhere in Europe of the Allied pilots who died while on missions in Liberator aircrafts. Some are commemorative plaques with the names of the crew. Others are boulders, often with parts of destroyed planes (propeller, part of the fuselage) mounted on them. Still others are elaborate spatial arrangements with a marked trail dedicated to the history of the plane.

¹⁰⁵ Andrzej W a n d e r e r, „Liberator” znad Wierzchu. Dwa grosze uzupełnień, „Tygodnik Prudnicki”, No. 35 (613) dated 28 VIII 2002, p. 15.

¹⁰⁶ Franciszek D e n d e w i c z, *Tragedia znad Wierzchu z 1944 roku we wspomnieniach amerykańskiego lotnika*, „Tygodnik Prudnicki”, No. 33 (611) dated 14 VIII 2002, p. 14.

Table 1. Selected Polish commemorations of the Allied Liberator aircraft crashes of 1944-45

No.	Names used	Commemorative events	Place	Form of commemoration
1	Łysa Góra, monument to the crew of the downed Liberator	The monument is placed at the site of the fall of the Liberator EW-161 aircraft from the 31. Squadron of the South African Air Force (SAAF). The machine was shot down by a German fighter on the night of 16 to 17 August 1944 on the way back from an airdrop of gifts for the Warsaw insurgents.	Łysa Góra cadastral precinct, Dębno commune, Brzesko district, Małopolska voivodeship	A symbolic grave with a steel cross, at the foot of which a boulder with a commemorative plaque containing the names of the fallen was placed.
2	Monument to Allied Airmen on the Aviators' Hill in Wawer, also „Airmen Hill” in Michalin	The commemorated events concern the crash of the Liberator plane from the 31. SAAF Bomber Squadron. The plane participated in an aid operation for the Warsaw insurgents.	On the border of Warsaw's Wawer, Józefowa and Michalina districts, Mazowieckie Voivodeship	A commemorative boulder placed on a high pedestal, with a model of a propeller installed. Fenced facility.
3	Wilderness of remembrance	The crash of an American B-24 bomber named „California Rocket”. The plane crashed on December 18, 1944. The machine was flying from a base in Italy on a mission to bomb the German synthetic gasoline plant in Auschwitz. Damaged by anti-aircraft artillery, the bomber fell in the Gorce Mountains. Out of a crew of ten, nine airmen survived.	Pańska Przehybka - a pass in the Gorce Mountains between Jaworzyna Kamienicka and Magurki, Ochotnica Górna, Małopolska Voivodeship	Field installation assembled using original aircraft components, including a fragment of the fuselage. A wooden hut was built next to it, in which a plaque with a description of the event was installed.

No.	Names used	Commemorative events	Place	Form of commemoration
4	Allied Airmen Primary School in Ostrów	On the night of August 17, 1944, near the forest between Kazimierza Wielka and Proszowice, a Liberator with the crew of the 31. Bomber Squadron R.A.F. The crew airdropped medicines and dressings for the Warsaw insurgents. On the way back to the base in Italy, the bomber was shot down by German anti-aircraft artillery.	Ostrów, Proszowice commune, Małopolska voivodeship	The name of the school and a commemorative plaque mounted on the external wall of the Primary School in Ostrów. On June 2, 2024, a monument was unveiled in the center of Ostrów.
5	Allied Airmen Boulevard	On the Allied Aviators Boulevard in Krakow (at the exit of Przemysłowa Street) an obelisk was erected to remind of the crash site of the Liberator from the 2. RAF Bomber Wing returning from an airdrop mission to the „Nida 504” outpost, and shot down on August 17, 1944. The obelisk is a temporary commemoration, because a monument has been planned in this place for many years.	Allied Aviators Boulevard, Przemysłowa Street, Kraków	A boulder with a plaque. The name of the city boulevard. An additional plaque is placed on the building of Schindler's Factory at 4 Lipowa Street, and a thematic mural was also unveiled at 14 Dąbrowskiego Street.
6	Monument to American pilots	On February 9, 1945, an American B-17 plane crashed near Jaraczew, which was bombing a synthetic gasoline factory near Leipzig (Germany). Five airmen were killed in action.	Jaraczewo, Czereśniowa Street, Wielkopolska Voivodeship	The monument in the form of a brick obelisk with a plaque with the names of the fallen pilots, next to it a cross made of elements of an airplane and an aircraft propeller.
7	Memorial commemorating the crash of the American plane	On October 13, 1944, a Liberator belonging to the 781st Squadron of the 465th Bomb Group of the 15th USAAF fell in the village of Trzemesna in the Tuchów commune. The crew's task was, m.in, to bomb German synthetic gasoline refineries in Oświęcim and Blachownia.	Trzemesna, Tuchów commune, Małopolska voivodeship	In 2017, a commemorative boulder with a plaque (without names) was unveiled, an information board next to it, and original fragments of the aircraft's equipment.

No.	Names used	Commemorative events	Place	Form of commemoration
8	Memorial to the Memory of American Airmen of the Second World War	On September 13, 1944, a Liberator named „Dinah Might” was hit by German anti-aircraft defenses. The aircraft was carrying out a mission to bomb the IG Farben Industrie AG Auschwitz plant in Oświęcim. 2 airmen were killed in the action, while 8 were taken prisoner.	Jeleśnia, near the Jeleśnia Commune Office near Żywiec	Unveiled in 2009, the monument is a stone (made of black material) composition designed by Krzysztof Rojek and Arkadiusz Sordyl. It depicts a squadron of aircraft, including one of larger size. The founder of the monument is Jan Suchoń-Pogórka, a witness to the shooting down of the bomber.

Source:

1. Konrad D u d e k, *Pomniki poległych lotników z Liberatora w Łysej Górze*, 24 VI 2018, <https://mojamalopolska.pl/koscioly-cmentarze/pomniki-lotnikow-liberator-lysa-gora/> (access 4 II 2025).
2. „Góra Lotnika” (Airmen Hill) w Michalinie, <http://armiakrajowa.home.pl/szzak/tabliczki/267.html> (access 4 II 2025)
3. *Kurnytowa Koliba i miejsce katastrofy bombowca Liberator w Gorcach*, <https://gorydlaciebie.pl/wyprawy/kurnytowa-koliba/> (access 4 II 2025)
4. *Historia szkoły i patroni*, https://spostrow.proszowice.pl/strona-3569-historia_szkoly_i_patroni.html (access 4 II 2025)
5. Paweł K u b i s z t a l, *Obelisk pamięci liberatora*, z 10 XII 20218, <https://podgorze.pl/obelisk-pamieci-liberatora/>
6. *Pomnik w miejscu katastrofy B-17 (Jaraczewo Wielkopolska)*, dated 19 XI 2013, <http://zapomniane-miejsca.blogspot.com/2013/11/pomnik-w-miejscu-katastrofy-b-17.html> (access: 5 II 2025); Wykaz Miejsc Pamięci na terenie Gminy Jaraczewo, www.jaraczewo.pl/miejsca-pamieci.html, (access: 5 II 2025).
7. Paweł C h w a ł, *Przypomnieli historię amerykańskiego bombowca, który rozbił się koło Tuchowa. W Trzemesnej wciąż są pozostałości zestrzelonego liberatora*, z 15 X 2024, <https://tarnow.naszemiasto.pl/przypomnieli-historie-amerykanskiego-bombowca-ktory-rozbił/ar/c1-9815583> (access: 5 II 2025).
8. Adam G a s i o r, *Jelesnia. Pomnik amerykańskich lotników*, 11 I 2010, <https://www.krajoznawcy.info.pl/pomnik-amerykanskich-lotnikow-9068> (access: 16 II 2025); *B-24J Liberator 42 51409 „Dinah Might”*, [in:] *Nieznani bohaterowie niebios. Pamięci lotników poległych pod polskim niebem*, red. Katarzyna C u r y ł o, b.r.w., p. 19.

Is it possible to commemorate the victims of the Second World War American bomber crash near Jeleni Dwór in this or any other way? Perhaps the discussion on this topic will arise after the findings and the scientific work carried out by Marek Michalski on the American burials.

There is also the previously mentioned issue of the public perception of a potential initiative to commemorate the victims of the December 17, 1944, crash. In 2011, the idea of building a five-meter monument "with bars imitating an airplane wing with a metal star and with the names of 135 American airmen who died during the bombing of Kędzierzyn-Koźle" sparked a wide public debate¹⁰⁷. The monument was to be erected in the Blachownia housing estate in Kędzierzyn, where synthetic gasoline plants were located, which were bombed 16 times by the 15th USAAF. The initiative of the Association Blechhammer - 1944 aroused extreme emotions. The arguments of the initiators were mainly based on the need to commemorate "very young people [who] gave their lives in the fight against fascism". The narrative also referred to the need to remember that "the purpose of the [American] bombings was to target factories producing fuel for the Nazi army, not toy factories¹⁰⁸". On the other hand, opponents of the idea, among whom the

¹⁰⁷ Piotr Zapotoczny, *Pomnik za zbombardowanie?*, 26 VII 2011, <https://nto.pl/kontrowersje-wokol-pomnika-amerykanskich-zolnierzy/ar/4435063> (access: 18 I 2025). See also the response by Karol Sydziewicz, *Te bomby były na mnie – list do redakcji*, 28 VII 2011, <https://wyborcza.pl/7,95891,10019931,te-bomby-byly-na-mnie-list-do-redakcji.html> (access: 18 I 2025).

¹⁰⁸ James Althoff, *Kontrowersje wokół pomnika amerykańskich żołnierzy*, 24 VI 2011, <https://nto.pl/kontrowersje-wokol-pomnika-amerykanskich-zolnierzy/ar/4435063> (access: 18 I 2025); Agnieszka Niewińska, *Spór o pomnik ku czci amerykańskich lotników*, 27 VII 2011, <https://historia.rp.pl/historia/art14361291-spor-o-pomnik-ku-czci-amerykanskich-lotnikow> (access: 18 I 2025); Adam Tyniec, *Amerykańscy piloci zasługują na pomnik*, 28 VII 2011, <https://www.rp.pl/wydarzenia/art14360251-amerykanscy-piloci-zaslugaja-na-pomnik> (access: 18 I 2025).

local press most often quoted people of indigenous origin, argued that the bombing meant danger and destruction for their families.

In 1944 I was 6 years old. When the American bombers came, I would run away from the house into the potato field and pray to God that the bomb would not hit the place where I was hiding. For me, the Americans were the enemy at the hands of whom my loved ones died when they did not flee from the house destroyed by the bomb. I've already heard about this monument and I don't know if it's a good idea to put it up¹⁰⁹. [Walter from the Blachownia estate]

For the indigenous inhabitants of Blachownia, Zdzeszowice, Sławęcice and many other local towns, these air raids brought nothing but conflagration and death. Innocent inhabitants were killed, whose only sin (apart from being citizens of the thousand-year-old Reich) was living in the area of Anglo-Saxon air force operations. No one will convince them that as a result of these long-lasting, carpet bombings, the completely accidental death of their loved ones (mother, brother or wife) was caused by the necessity of waging war in this way¹¹⁰. [Internet user with the nick 'o.tisk']

*Pomnik za zbombardowanie?*¹¹¹ is an article that appeared in the largest Opole daily "Nowa Trybuna Opolska" (in the online version) and under which 176 comments appeared. The online discussion lasted almost a year and ended in July 2012, after the operator of the online edition of the newspaper disabled the possibility of further comments. Paradoxically, a significant part of them did not concern the initiative to build the monument itself, but focused on national issues in the Opole Voivodeship (including references to

¹⁰⁹ *Z a p o t o c z n y, Pomnik.*

¹¹⁰ *A l t h o f f, Kontrowersje.*

¹¹¹ *Z a p o t o c z n y, Pomnik.*

the Silesian Uprisings) and on the responsibility of the Germans (as a nation) for the crimes committed during World War II. One of the comments left by a user with the nickname Marek points to the specificity of the area where the monument to the American bomber crews was planned:

Personally, I think that in these lands [the eastern part of the Opole Voivodeship inhabited mostly by indigenous people] one should be very restrained when it comes to erecting any new monuments dedicated to the period of World War II. Maybe just let the ones that are there stay and that's it. We'd better leave these ghosts of the past alone and do something more useful¹¹². [Marek, 26 VI 2011]

In the end, the monument to American airmen in Kędzierzyn-Koźle was not erected. Nevertheless, American soldiers from the 15th US-AAF were commemorated here by the launch of the Silesian Battle for Fuel Museum run by the Blechhammer Association, a plaque unveiled in September 2009 and the Park of the Airmen from 15th United States Air Force. It is also worth noting that four years after the Kędzierzyn initiative, a symbolic monument was founded (as part of a local society initiative) at the cemetery at the church of St. John of Nepomuk in Stare Koźle – a tombstone, commemorating 136 inhabitants of the villages of Stare Koźle and Brzeźce, who died during American air raids on 7 July and 7 August 1944. In addition to the names of the residents, the plaque also bears what seems to be a factual inscription: “The [American] airmen were supposed to bomb the nitrogen plant, but the protective smoke caused the bombs to fall on the villages by mistake and cause a huge tragedy”¹¹³.

¹¹² *Ibidem*.

¹¹³ Author's site visit, 20 II 2025. A photographic report from the ceremony of unveiling the monument is posted on the website of the parish of St. John of Nepomuk in Stare Koźle, see <https://www.parafia-nepomucena.pl/pomnik.html?fbclid=IwY2xjawIuldVleHRuA2FlbQIX->

The case of Kędzierzyn-Koźle shows the importance and specificity of local communities, as well as the need for special sensitivity on the part of local activists and historians popularizing history or undertaking the commemoration of the events and the people.

The events that took place on December 17, 1944 near the forester's lodge Jeleni Dwór in the Prószków Forest District are the largest air disaster of the end of World War II over the forested area of the Niemodlin Forests. 11 American airmen who took part in the bombing of German synthetic gasoline plants were killed in it. Attempts to determine the course of the catastrophe, the place where the bomber fell, as well as the location of the place (or places) of burial of the bodies have been carried out for many decades. The crash is also remembered by many residents, direct witnesses of the event, and at the same time is the subject of wide interest of aviation and local history enthusiasts. In the USA, on the other hand, the families of the crew of Lieutenant King and Lieutenant Shelton are still alive. For many of them, it seems important to determine the place of burial of their loved ones and the place where they died. Carol, Joseph Weisler's daughter, reacted as follows to the letter sent to her by Jadwiga Wójciak in connection with the ongoing search for the crew members of "White 47":

You can only imagine how much all of what you are doing means to me (...). I am honored that you are honoring these good men, more than you will ever know¹¹⁴.

In view of the inevitable passing of the last witnesses of the crash and the natural blurring of traces and places related to

MAABHY-HM-oySF3dhhVhlbjpZkl_sjeiu1Vxjjwekrsw_schrzTDIZlr0Hnw_aem_7e9jC2zvX-UaXoi3rUr1LLg (access: 20 II 2025).

¹¹⁴ Correspondence of Carol, née Weisler, with Jadwiga Wójciak from May 19 and 27, 2025. From the collection of J. Wójciak.

the crash, all initiatives aimed at reconstructing the events and preserving the memory of their participants seem to be particularly valuable. This applies both to activities using oral history methods (such as R. Hellfeier's recordings) or those related to the permanent commemoration of the place and people who died in the plane crash.

A form of commemoration can be the forest itself – a place, a piece of land where the American bomber and its crew ended. Today, it is an anonymous place, barely found, difficult to access, and empty in terms of meaning for the average passer-by, wild mushroom picker, lost wanderer. And yet “in a way full (of traces, evidence, practices, nature), they do not so much demand to be filled as rather to be made visible and surrounded by care [...]”¹¹⁵. A manifestation of this concern would certainly be the exclusion of a part of the forest division 357a, in which the American Liberator fell, from forestry work (especially felling). Through this commemoration, it would be organized automatically, according to the laws governing nature. With the elapse of time, this separation would be distinguished in the commercial forest by old (and consequently dying) trees. This approach to nature conservation and the “Jeleni Dwór” and “Blok” nature reserves already existing in the vicinity of Rzymkowice are close to it. However, the green commemoration of the victims of the plane crash would not be about a “reserve” fence, closure and extraction from the socially living reality. It would not be about creating a strict “memory reserve”. On the contrary... The idea

¹¹⁵ Aleksandra Janus, *Troska w stronę nowego języka i nowych strategii upamiętniania*, [w:] *Zielone Upamiętniania. W stronę nowych strategii pamiętania w przestrzeni publicznej*, red. Katarzyna Grybowska, Aleksandra Kumała, [Kraków] 2022, p. 18. Ebook: https://ngfp.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/95405862_e-book_zielone_upamietnianie_publickacja_2022.pdf (access: 14 XI 2024).

would be to create such a forest space that, while standing out from the other parts, would itself demand active attention and memory (by visiting) and engage passers-by reaching this place. “The space of the forest can, like a collection of sentences, be a carrier of memory and moods”, says Natalia Budnik and Aleksandra Janus in an essay on green commemorations¹¹⁶. And it is impossible not to agree with the authors, all the more so because the swampy habitat type of the forest in which the Liberator fell fundamentally imposes the perception of this space.

[Swamp] is a place [...] most often presented as an area that is difficult to access, wet, boggy [...]. In traditional cultures, the swamp was considered an untamed space – *orbis exterior* [...], so it was attributed symbolic meanings, associated with the boundary sphere between the terrestrial and extraterrestrial order [...] and associated with the ends of the world¹¹⁷.

However, such a green commemoration would require constant care, or at least “practicing memory”. At the same time, through its natural form, it would reconcile many points of view.

¹¹⁶Natalia Budnik, Aleksandra Janus, *Zielone Upamiętnienia miejsc pochówku ofiar Zagłady*, [in:] *Zielone Upamiętniania. W stronę nowych strategii pamiętania w przestrzeni publicznej*, red. Katarzyna Grzybowska, Aleksandra Kumala, [Kraków] 2022, p. 50. Ebook: https://ngfp.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/95405862_e-book_zielone_upamietnianie_publiczna_2022.pdf (access: 14 XI 2024).

¹¹⁷Robert Piotrowski, *Bagno*, [in:] *Słownik polskiej bajki ludowej*, red. Violetta Wróblewska, 12 XI 2020, <https://bajka.umk.pl/slownik/lista-hasel/haslo/?id=321> (access: 18 III 2025).

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