

Swabian Newspaper [*Schwäbische Zeitung*], Saturday, December 15, 2018:

The “Hildreth Bomber” near Friesenhofen

Gerhard Schmaus identifies a crash site of the 1944 air battle over the Allgäu previously unknown to him

By Tobias Schumacher

FRIESENHOFEN – Not in his wildest dreams did he imagine the consequences, says Gerhard Schmaus, when he, as voluntary archivist of his hometown of Aichstetten, became involved in the redesign of the war memorial in 2011. Today, he speaks of his “life’s work in retirement” that he found at that time: meticulous research into the last major air battle of the Second World War in southern German airspace, on July 18, 1944, over the Allgäu.

The “Swabian Newspaper” has reported on Schmaus and his work many times. He made headlines in 2012 when he dug up the engine of an American B-17 bomber in Gschwend by Isny. He emerged unscathed from the subsequent legal wrangling because, at that time, he could already convince the opposing side of his noble, historical intentions with an unbelievable amount of detailed and specialized knowledge. Schmaus was actually planning to publish his research as a book as early as 2015. Today, he is happy that he has not yet implemented his ambitious plan, which is only to be realized in 2019 on the 75th anniversary of the air battle.

The reason is that, along with many depressions and confirmations, yet another sensational find was brought to light in the year 2018: the near certainty of the whereabouts of a bomber, concerning which even the Americans did not know where it had crashed on July 18, 1944. For 74 years, only “Ravensburg” was noted in the US records. That puzzled Gerhard Schmaus for a long time, because this information did not match with the flight route that the total of 112 American warplanes had taken. In the meantime, the local historian has learned that the district [of Ravensburg] was meant and the crash site is found east of Friesenhofen.

Having taken off in Foggia, Italy, the US air fleet crossed the Alps and entered the pre-Alpine region near the Zugspitze. The target was the Memmingen Air Field, which they approached along the Ammergau, Tannheim and Allgäu Alps before they were engaged by the German *Luftwaffe* in an air battle, lasting just under a half-hour, between Sulzberg, Martinszell and Buchenberg as well as over the Adelegg between Isny and Aichstetten.

Schmaus has identified 63 crash sites, German as well as American, from this air battle in the Allgäu, but also near Oberammergau. In the meantime, he has been able to assign the corresponding aircraft to each individual site – and not only that: After his years of detective work, he knows by name which American pilots and crew members sat in which B-17 bomber.

Built by the Boeing Company, they went down in history as “Flying Fortresses” – the German *Luftwaffe* shot down 14 of them over the Allgäu, as well as seven escort fighters. Gerhard Schmaus has named them after their pilots. However, he knew nothing of the “Hildreth Bomber” until the end of 2017, because its eleven-member crew survived, fled from the crash site and were arrested by the Nazis. Pilot Matthes Hildreth and his crew were forced to recover the mangled remains of US soldiers near Buchenberg. They had not documented their own crash site.

In the meantime, Schmaus has determined almost completely where the American soldiers crashed, died, were wounded, arrested or executed – or who survived: One of them tried to flee into Switzerland on foot and with a stolen bicycle as well as clothes that he appropriated from a clothesline on a farm. He was arrested near Konstanz. The soldier had gotten caught up in a tree with his parachute, presumably near Winterstetten; he was able to free himself and hid his pistol

under a tree – where it probably remains to this day. He is the last surviving American eyewitness to the air battle; Schmaus is in contact with him, from whom he heard the foregoing account.

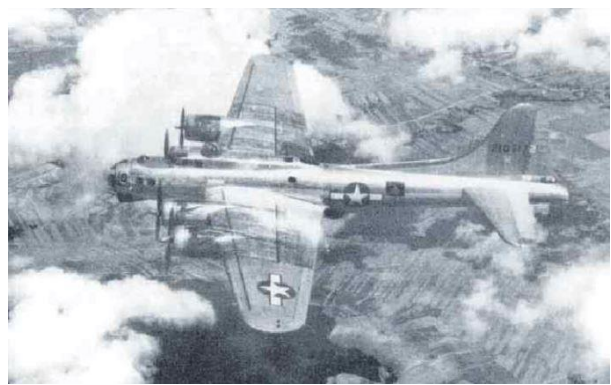
The discovery of the crash site of the “Hildreth Bomber” dates back to the year 2016, when Schmaus met Hans Kämmerer. “He lives near Flensburg and was taking a cure in Neutrauchburg.” In his spare time, he asked people about downed airplanes. Ten years ago, Kämmerer got into a conversation with Ottmar Schäffeler in Friesenhofen, who showed him a bomb crater in the forest east of the village. “They had also dug there and found small parts, but there was no part with a number on it, with which one could identify a bomber – so everything continued to remain in the dark,” Schmaus recalls.

When Kämmerer returned to the Allgäu for a cure in 2016 and visited Schäffeler again, the latter showed him a report about Schmaus in the “Swabian Newspaper.” He went to Aichstetten and told of the downed airplane in the Friesenhofen forest: “Just a day later, I was at Schäffeler’s and had everything shown to me,” Schmaus reports.

“The express permission of Prince Erich von Waldburg-Zeil” brought about the breakthrough of being allowed to search in his forest. A forester delivered it and [...] from his father, who as a child had found a compass in the wreckage at the Friesenhofen train station, which he still possessed. Schmaus purchased the compass. In its housing, the initials “M H” are scratched by hand: Matthes Hildreth, Schmaus concluded. “That provided absolutely certain proof: This crash site was that of the Hildreth Bomber, which up to that point was completely unknown to me – quiet jubilation spread over my face. I am very pleased that so much trust has been placed in me and, as a result, more and more becomes known about a horrible air battle on July 18, 1944.”



Gerhard Schmaus at the hole, which a 250-kilogram bomb ripped into the forest floor by Friesenhofen after the crash of the “Hildreth Bomber” 74 years ago.
PHOTO: STS



“Flying Fortress”: The B-17 “Combs Bomber,” which also crashed in the Allgäu, named by Gerhard Schmaus after the pilot. He also researched the fate of the killed crew.
REPRO: GERHARD SCHMAUS

Identified places where wreckage
of the B-17 bomber of US pilot Major Paul Hildreth was found



Richtung Leutkirch = direction of Leutkirch
Richtung Isny = direction of Isny
Bombe = bomb
Fahrwerk = landing gear
Kanzel = nose compartment; nose turret
Rumpf = fuselage
Kompass = compass
Tragfläche = wing

maps4news.com/©HERE Layout by Alexis Albrecht