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CONTEMPORARY HISTORY Bomber pilot

FATE OF A B-17 CREW

“A horrible bloodbath”

On July 18, 1944, the 483rd Bomb Group took off from its airfield near Foggia, Italy. Its target: the German military airfield near Memmingen. Among them, the bomber pilot John Mahlon Hommel and his crew. For them, it was not to be a mission like every other one... By Ludwig Hauber

Caption for black-and-white photo: During their attack on the military airfield near Memmingen, B-17 bombers left a trail of devastation behind. The large spots with a dot in the middle come from aerial bombs, the countless small, bright spots from fragmentation bombs. Circled in red is the bombed-out swimming pool. Of course, the attackers also had to pay a high price...

Photo 483rd Bomb Group

Firmly determined, John Hommel holds the yoke of his B-17. The wings on the left and right are already ablaze with flames, but he doesn't let himself be flustered; after all, he promised his comrades! He holds the machine steady until his comrades have jumped out of the hit plane. He goes through the names of his crew members in his head: Davis and Mills are already dead, the damned Krauts got them. Rooney, Fitz-Gibbon, Witherspoon, Leblanc and Leukering are further back and about to bail out.

But wait! Where the hell is Trevor anyway? Hommel hastily switches to autopilot and storms out of the cockpit. Moments later he finds the wheezing and bleeding radar navigator lying in the radio room. At just that moment, Leukering joins them. "Did the others jump?" "Yes." "Good. We have to help Trevor."

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Caption for color illustration at top: Emblem of the 816th Bomb Squadron.
Photo 483rd Bomb Group

Caption for black-and-white photo at top right: B-17 bomber, serial number 42-107172. During the mission against the airfield of Memmingen on July 18, 1944, the machine flown by Richard Combs was the first to be shot down. Photo 483rd Bomb Group

Chart on tan background:

The Hommel Crew of the B-17G of the 483rd Bomb Group/816th Bomb Squadron

Pilot	John M. Hommel	1 st Lt.	KIA*	
Copilot	Garden C. Ball	2 nd Lt.	POW**	died 2006
Navigator	Martin F. Rooney	2 nd Lt.	POW**	died 1973
Bombardier	Herbert P. Leblanc	2 nd Lt.	POW**	
Ball turret gunner	Eugene M. Peterson	Staff Sgt.	POW**	died 1995
Radio operator	William L. Leukering	Tech. Sgt.	KIA*	
Left gunner	Marcus M. Davis	Tech. Sgt.	KIA*	
Right gunner	Edgar L. Mills	Tech. Sgt.	KIA*	
Tail gunner	Howell R. Witherspoon	Staff Sgt.	POW**	
Radar navigator	Thomas A. Trevor	2 nd Lt.	KIA*	

(specially trained bombardier for radar bombing procedure of the PFF – Pathfinder Force)

Observer	John P. Fitz-Gibbon	1 st Lt.	POW**	died 1976
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*KIA – died during the mission; **POW – taken prisoner of war

Caption for black-and-white photo at bottom right: Group photo of the Hommel crew (from left to right): Edgar L. Mills, Robert N. Giard, Marcus M. Davis, Howell R. Witherspoon, William L. Leukering, Eugene M. Peterson. Back row (from left to right): Herbert P. Leblanc, John M. Hommel, Garden C. Ball. Photo 483rd Bomb Group

Vertical text in lower left margin: Photos, unless otherwise stated, from the collection of Ludwig Hauber

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Together, they try to put a chest parachute on the injured man, when a loud crash resounds and both lose their footing...

What had happened? Did the crew survive? Before one can even answer these questions, one has to know who Hommel was and how he and his crew got into this situation.

John Mahlon Hommel graduated from West Point Military Academy in 1943. As a pilot, he joined the 483rd Bomb Group in November of the same year, which then shipped to Italy to take part in the fighting over Europe. He was the nephew of Nathan F. Twining, the commanding general of the 15th U.S. Army Air Force. Hommel regularly saw his uncle at the base of the 483rd Bomb Group in Sterparone near Foggia.

Special machine

Hommel's crew of the 816th Squadron flew as part of the Pathfinder Force (PFF). On July 15th, they and the remaining crews of the 483rd Bomb Group received the order to attack the German airfield near Memmingen. Not only had U.S. reconnaissance identified around 75 Bf 110s, Me 410s and Fw 190s there, but, apparently, the "America Bomber" Me 264 was also to be built there in the future. In the July 2020 issue of *Flugzeug Classic*, we already reported on the pilot Stanton Mike Rickey and his crew, who also took part in this attack on Memmingen. Specifically for this 30th mission, Hommel flew a so-called Mickey Boeing B-17, which had a \$60,000 H2X radar on board. Within the formation, it flew as the lead machine in the fourth box.

On July 18th, the weather was perfect, and the B-17 crews took off for their flight over the Alps. Aboard "Hommel's" Flying Fortress were eleven crew members, including Lieutenant Trevor, a trained radar navigator and bombardier. In his first mission, he was to test the new radar system in action. Uncharacteristic for a B-17 crew was the eleventh member: observer John Fitz-Gibbon from Intelligence. His job was to analyze the attack with the new technology and later present his findings.

In the chaos

The U.S. formation was approaching west of Innsbruck when the first flak fire started. At this point, the anti-aircraft guns had not yet caused any damage – the formation flew on unharmed. Shortly thereafter, the rear gunner from Combs' crew reported: "Fighters at six o'clock!" The B-17 crews were immediately on high alert – then they realized the fighters were their own North American P-51s. They were lucky! Lieutenant Richard Combs was a pilot in the 816th Squadron.

His B-17 flew as tail-end Charlie in the fourth and final box of the 483rd Bomb Group. Bombers in this unpopular position really attracted enemy fighters. The P-51s of the so-called "Red Tails" continued to fly under the formation. The 301st and 483rd Bomb Groups were just passing the next waypoint near Lermoos, Austria when air battles suddenly broke out. At 10:25, in the Bavarian area north of the Zugspitze, P-51s from the 31st and 332nd Fighter Groups encountered Bf 109s and Fw 190s from the 1st and 2nd Groups of Fighter Wing

Caption for black-and-white photo at top: This is what Hommel's B-17 might have looked like after the crash but before the explosion. Wreck of a B-17, where the lifeboat has already been stolen from the compartment at the top of the fuselage

Caption for the map/chart on tan background: Shocking results of the air battles around Memmingen: 14 downed bombers, which are marked here on the map at the place where they crashed

Map/chart on tan background:

Title: B-17 bombers shot down on July 18, 1944, near Memmingen

Legend and text at bottom left:

Sonthofen ● village

Zugspitze ▲ mountain

----- national borders 1937



Crashed American B-17 bombers.

For reasons of space, only the last three digits of the serial numbers were listed on the map.

The 483rd American Bomber Group left from the Italian military airfield of Sterparone with 28 B-17 bombers and a complement of 283 men on the 51st mission to Memmingen. Only 14 of the 28 machines and 140 men returned to the airfield. 60 men died and 83 men were taken as prisoners of war by the Germans.

Miscellaneous words on the map:

Deutscher Fliegerhorst Memmingen = German military airfield of Memmingen

DEUTSCHES REICH = GERMAN REICH

Österreich = Austria

Deutscher Flakbeschuss der amerikanischen B-17-Bomber bei Innsbruck = German flak fire on the American B-17 bombers near Innsbruck

Chart in top right corner of map:

Result of the air battles of the 483rd Bomb Group on July 18, 1944

Pilot/Co-Pilot	Serial number	Squadron	Dead	Prisoners
Combs/Blake	42-107172	816	8	2
Gussarson/Griffith	42-97671	816	10	1
Gunn/Fuehrer	42-102422	816	9	1
Maclin/Monson	42-102862	817	5	5
Jackson/Lonc	44-6174	816	9	1
Rickey/Hoss	42-102923	817	5	5
Hommel/Ball	42-97584	816	5	6
Clark/Boggs	42-4267	817	1	10
Smithers/Johnson	42-107179	816	1	9
Vandendries/Wanstrom	42-102927	815	4	6
Ward/Higgins	44-6177	815	1	9
Hildreth/Worcester	42-107008	816	0	10
Smith/Myers	42-102382	817	1	9
Haley/Moewe	42-107170	817	1	9

The 14 downed B-17 bombers are listed in this table.

Vertical text in lower right margin: Artwork by Schlaich Cartography and Graphics (KGS or Kartographie und Grafik Schlaich), Info by Ludwig Hauber and Gerhard Schmaus (©)

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300. The fighting between the *Luftwaffe* and the U.S. escort later even spread to Rosenheim. At 10:36 in the military airfield of Memmingen: The air-raid alarm sounded, but much later than usual. The 483rd Bomb Group reached the so-called Initial Point (I.P.), the starting point for shifting into attack formation. The 483rd Bomb Group then initiated the bombing. About ten kilometers south of Kempten, the German fighters were within firing range – a fierce air battle began.

At the latitude of the lakes of Niedersonthofen, Combs' B-17 was the first to be hit in its deadly position. The "Flying Fortress" exploded; only two men were able to parachute to safety – the other eight were killed instantly. West of Kempten, the 816th Squadron was hit even harder – none of the unit's planes were to return that day. But the German pilots also took a heavy death toll in their attacks.

The escort heard about the critical situation over the radio and hurried in a southerly direction to help the following machines of the 840th and 815th Squadrons. The Tuskegee Airmen (African-American and Caribbean-born military pilots of the U.S. Army Air Force) also provided assistance. Their motto was: Never lost a bomber. Two young pilots were fatally shot down by Fighter Wing 300 over Kempten. The 12th Squadron of Fighter Wing 3 also suffered two losses.

Oskar Bösch, pilot of Fighter Wing 3, reported afterwards: "It was planned to meet south of Lake Ammer, where Fighter Wing 300 then took over the high-altitude protection. Our 4th Storm Group of Fighter Wing 3 'Udet' was alone in the air at that time, only with a few machines of 2nd Group/Fighter Wing 51 'Mölders.' There, a bomber formation flying up from Innsbruck was sighted. Against the sun, the initially small glittering dots were difficult to see. We flew towards the enemy formations, gaining altitude all the time, and then turned right south of the Zugspitze. The pilots on both sides now had the best weather and visibility north of the Alps."

B-17 hit

Bösch continues: "On the radio, it sounded 'Leander calls Jasmin Anton' was heard. As expected, the 'high-altitude woodpeckers' of Fighter Wing 300 crossed our course at 7,500 meters. We were now following two bomber groups on a northwest course. We decided on the second combat box because the first formation – that was the 463rd Bomb Group – was very heavily protected by fighters. The B-17 gunners fired very early, so we reduced speed. I heard sounds as if pebbles were being thrown at the plane. But now, I pushed all the buttons; the tracer bursts disappeared among the bombers. The latter flew on, at first undeterred,

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Caption for color illustration at top: The B-17, serial number 42-97584, of the Hommel crew without a ball turret but with a radome on July 18, 1944

Drawing by Juanita Franzi/Info by Ludwig Hauber

Caption for black-and-white photo: Still to be seen in April of 1945: Hommel's B-17 explosion crater with a diameter of 19 meters

Photo 48rd Bomb Group

Caption for color photo: Looking west: the 2018 excavation site of Cranfield University in Shrivenham/United Kingdom

Photo by Gerhard Schmaus

Large quote, set within text: “I pushed **all the buttons**; the tracer bursts disappeared among the bombers.”

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firing from every barrel. Then it finally tore off the engine compartments and fuselage panels; even a rubber raft came towards me! Scraps of sheet metal were still flapping in the wind. Then there was a flash, and the whole area between the engines was a trail of fire. The entire sky was filled with oil smoke. With the bomb doors open, the big boat went into a tailspin. I pushed away sideways, towards the west, but always searching the all-round view for 'Indians.' With hits in the undercarriage, I landed in Freiburg at 12:05. At 18:30 (i.e. 6:30 p.m.), after the repairs: takeoff toward Memmingen."

In the burning airplane

Bombardier Herbert P. Leblanc, who took part in the mission in "Hommel's" B-17, was able to report on the fate of his crewmates:

"After the navigator had calculated the last course correction with a 345-degree attack axis to the north-northwest, the calculated time of arrival at the target was now 10:50. Bombing altitude in the target area now 23,500 feet (editor's note: around 7,163 meters). Approximately five minutes before our Initial Point of Kempten, where we initiated the bomb run, a significant number of enemy fighters rendezvoused. The attack was conducted in such a way that the fighters were outside the arc of most of our guns. At the same time, they always concentrated on the last three machines of our formation. With unimaginable firepower, which had such a concentrated effect on the bombers, the whole formation was blown open from behind. Several machines immediately exploded in the air. After the first attacks, the Fw 190s and Bf 109s dropped down in a roll, gathered behind us for another attack, and then defeated seven more bombers from the 815th and 817th Squadrons in the same way.

Our B-17 with serial number 42-97584 received direct hits in the wing tanks and in the rear fuselage area. The two side gunners, Davis and Mills, were killed instantly. With both wings ablaze, Lieutenant Hommel tried to hold the bomber as long as possible so that his comrades could save themselves. This course of action had been agreed upon by the crew members. F. Rooney, John P. Fitz-Gibbon, and I were able to successfully bail out through the front escape hatch. Tailgunner Howell R. Witherspoon made it out of the rear entrance door. The Mickey operator, Thomas Trevor, lay seriously wounded in the radio room.

Pilot Hommel flew on autopilot. Together with the radio operator, Leukering, he tried in vain to put the parachute on him. During this time, both could have still saved themselves. When the empennage buckled, they no longer had a chance to leave the machine. Both were later decorated for it. The survivors of the crash were arrested in the Rhine Valley, about four kilometers southwest of the crash site near Kimratshofen."

The view from below

Eleven-year-old Kurt Huber experienced the crash in his native village as a completely uninvolved observer: "We were sent home from school at 10 o'clock. Later, I saw two fighter planes chasing about around several parachutes; the shots could clearly be heard. Then I saw a burning bomber on the horizon. I couldn't see the impact, because it was behind a hill. A few days later, I walked

three kilometers from home to the crash site south of Kimratshofen. There was a huge crater there now, so big that an entire house would fit into it. Two engines lay about 150 meters north of it. The upper rotating gun turret stuck in the hillside. Later, aircraft parts were still being collected here for weeks. Many windowpanes were broken on the farmhouses.”

A police report dated July 18, 1944, reports: “The bomber broke into two parts when it crashed. It burned from 11 o’clock to 15 o’clock (i.e. 3:00 p.m.). Then the entire bomb load exploded, scattering pieces of the aircraft and 200 cubic

Caption for color illustration at top: Focke-Wulf Fw 190 A-8/R2 of the 11th (Storm)/Fighter Wing 3 in July of 1944, flown by Oskar Bösch; paint scheme speculative.
Drawing by Herbert Ringlsetter of Aviaticus/Info by Ludwig Hauber

Caption for black-and-white photo: The Tyrolean, Oskar Bösch, on his Focke-Wulf Fw 190 in Schongau in August of 1944. He had shot down a B-17 in the air battle around Memmingen.

Large quote, set within text: “There was a huge crater there now, so big that an entire house would fit into it.”

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meters of soil within a radius of 300 meters. The four dead crew members were literally torn to pieces here, too. The body parts were buried on the spot.” Two rural auxiliary policemen (*Landwacht-Männer*) received injuries, as they were covered up to their knees with falling earth after the plane exploded. In 1946, an American detachment was on site and unsuccessfully tried to find something in the crater.

Everything was mowed down

Rudolf Fendt, 1st Aircraft Mechanic (*I. Wart*) of the Motorized Mechanics Platoon (*Motorisierter Schlosserzug*), was there and witnessed the devastating consequences of the fighting: “The 463rd Bomb Group had reached our airfield towards 10:45 and, unopposed, dropped thousands of small bombs. It then flew off in a southwesterly direction without any casualties. There were too few slit trenches for ground personnel.

In distress, they ran to the edge of the airfield, where the airplanes stood. Several news reporters, ordnancemen, and a few pilots were careless and thought themselves safe. Ten comrades were found among boxes and equipment under a communications tent; they had listened in on our pilots’ radio messages. They probably hadn’t realized that the bombers were already overhead. When they were found, they appeared to be sleeping and had small wounds. A gruesome sight. At the time, the fragmentation bombs left behind a burnt spot on the ground, about one square meter in size, with a small crater. Everything all around was mowed down by the glowing iron shrapnel, like an unimaginable shelling with the effects of millions of shrapnel fragments. Everything was mowed down; all the bushes and trees were defoliated. A horrible bloodbath, for the nearby herds of animals as well.”

An indescribable inferno

Fendt continued: “Three minutes later, the twelve remaining bombers of the 483rd Bomb Group dropped some 140 general-purpose 500-pound high-explosive bombs. At 11:09, the 301st Bomb Group bombed from the east. The 2nd Bomb Group emptied its deadly cargo at 11:34, coming from the north, as the last group. The ground gurgled beneath us; then fountains of earth rose up as high as a poplar forest. The heavy chunks fell in the area of the airfield and caused the heaviest damage there. The runway, barracks and workshop, a residential area of Memmingen and the area of the railway station near the airfield are completely destroyed.

There were direct hits in the swimming pool occupied by members of the Armed Forces (*Wehrmacht*), so that the dead were retrieved from the surrounding rooftops. In a nearby bunker, there were 18. An indescribable inferno, dark

Caption for color photo above and black-and-white photo below: The body of an American 20-pound fragmentation bomb is made from a coiled steel strip, 5.80 meters long with the cross-sectional area of one square centimeter. The TNT filler rips it apart into hundreds of deadly fragments (see above right). Below, the massive dropping of these bombs over the military airfield of Memmingen can be seen

Caption for black-and-white photo, set vertically in lower left-hand margin: Photo 483rd Bomb Group

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clouds of smoke made their way towards the city with the easterly wind. The total number of fatalities was reported to be over 170 along with 140 injured. Due to the bombardment, the airfield was now virtually unusable, so that returning machines of the Storm Group had to divert to Neu-Ulm, Bad Wörishofen and Holzkirchen. About 180 prisoners, 40 Americans among them, escaped from the POW camp in Memmingen during the air raid. On the ground, 17 aircraft were destroyed and 20 others damaged. Even the last hope, an Me 264, was burned. The airfield was moved to Neu-Ulm on July 19th.”

On the trail of the B-17

In 2005, more than 60 years after these terrible events, at the request of the President of the 483rd Bomb Group at that time, Stanton Mike Rickey (see *Flugzeug Classic* 7/2020), digging began near Memmingen for wreckage and survivors. Until then, only six crash sites with crews were known. To date, five soldiers are still missing.

In 2012, the author received a new request from Nicole Rothon of the U.S. Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC) in Hawaii. We already knew each other through reports of wreckage and bones found in 2002 and 2007. She was looking for the exact crash site of the Hommel crew, as four crew members were regarded as missing.

A stroke of luck turned the tide abruptly: in 2009, Peter Rechtsteiner found an entry in a church register. There, it was recorded that the pilot John Hommel was buried in Kimratshofen. The subsequent excavation and its finds confirmed this. Then, beginning in 2012, Gerhard Schmaus and Jörg Dietsche also contributed to clarifying the air battle. The first dig in 2013-14 was conducted by JPAC director Terry Hunter with a team of eight. In 2017, the last unknown crash site of a Boeing B-17 was identified with parts evidence. Thus, a more accurate reconstruction of the air battle is now possible. This mammoth task has been overcome!

The fates of the fighter planes in this air battle are still being researched. ■

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Title at top of section on tan background: Findings of the excavations near Kimratshofen between 2008 and 2019

Caption for color photo, top left: Findings of the first excavation of 2008, carried out by the author. Among other things, one sees: 1. Trailing aerial weight, 2. Gear mechanism of the radar unit, 3. Part of the rudder with original paint, 4. Sheet metal from the wing

Caption for color photo, top right: 2013, second excavation by JPAC of Hawaii: Director Terry Hunter (fifth from the right) with team, eyewitness Kurt Huber (third from the left), Gerhard Schmaus (fourth from the right)

Caption for the image of a plaque, middle right: Creators of the memorial plaque at Buchenberg in honor of the fallen: Erhard Ott und Willi Heuberger (deceased)

Caption for color photo, bottom left: 2018: Charlie Enright (on the left), the author (third from the left) and Marques Grant (on the right) with the forensic anthropological excavation team of Cranfield University at the crash site of Hommel's B-17

Caption for color photo, bottom right: 2019: Excavation of the University of New Orleans with archeology students and former Special Forces soldiers. The work, however, has not brought any new results to date

Large quote, set within text: "A reconstruction of the air battle is now possible. The mammoth task has been overcome!"