

Fighter Crash 1945 on the Estates of Castle Hohenstein 70 Years ago

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Introduction and reasons for the research

Older Dietinger residents still recall stories their parents told them about a military plane crash that occurred in the spring of 1945, shortly before the end of World War II in a field on the way to Hohenstein.

For a long time the Plexiglas canopy of the cockpit of the plane that crashed was used by Karl Maier, a farmer, in his garden as a Chicken coop. Pius Graf, a farmer and tailor, found a leather aviator cap in his fields and took it home. Last year [2014] Graf's son presented the aviator cap to local historian, Hubert Burkard as a donation to the Community Museum's collection of artifacts. Hubert Burkard was driven to discover the history behind the artifact.

The previous year [2013] he received a copy of the diaries of the Count of Bissingen and Nippenburg and his wife which described the last years of the war on Hohenstein. He consulted these to see if they contained any mention of a possible plane crash. There were entries by Count Cajetan and Countess Elisabeth (nee Reim von Aretin) about the events at the Castle and surrounding estate as well as those at the Neckarburg estates. The primary danger at the time was posed by American air raids on the rail lines, freight trains and the nearby train stations of Talhausen, Rottweil, and Oberndorf.

Von der Nr. 0-719266 zur Person COOPER JR.



It was nearly impossible, to determine the history of the events at the time and the only remaining clue was a still legible entry inside the aviator cap. The inscription read: COOPER JR. along with the number 0-719266. Written correspondence as well as e-mail traffic involving the

American Embassy in Berlin and Munich, the US Consulate General in Frankfurt, and the US Army Europe in Kaiserslautern, via US Army Wiesbaden ultimately led to U.S. Air Force historian Silvano Wueschner at Ramstein. Dr. Wueschner put in a special effort to reply to the Dietinger request for further information about Lt COOPER JR. and the crash of the craft he supposedly piloted. Our heartfelt thanks go to him.

Through Internet research on various sites and posted records of the US Army, as well as personal connections in the U.S. Dr. Wueschner was able to, in conjunction with the inscription in the Aviator Cap, discover further information about the pilot:

Priesley P. (Paul) COOPER JR.
Second Lieutenant, US. ARMY Air Forces
5th Fighter Squadron, 52nd Fighter Group
geboren 2.11.1924 in Roby, Texas



Crashed 22 February 1945, Internment Ardennes Military Cemetery in Belgium

The inscription at the Ardennes Military Cemetery reads: Killed in Action 22 February 1945. Presented the Purple Heart and Air Medal. In a number of registers the location of the crash is simply cited as Germany. His remains were moved by the U.S. Army from the original grave site to the military cemetery at Saint-Avold near Metz, and ultimately lain to rest in the Ardennes Military cemetery in Neupre Belgium, located approximately 12.4 miles SW of Lüttich. 5328 U.S. service members who died in action are interred at this location. In addition to other commemorative inscriptions, on one wall there is a short prayer attributed to American Cardinal Newman: "O Lord help us. Fill us with grace and give them everlasting peace."

In the "Abilene Reporter" the following notice dated 11 March 1945 is found on page 1.

Roby, 10 March 1945

Priesley P. Cooper of Roby dies in War

2nd Lt Priesley P. Cooper Jr. Mustangfighter Pilot, was killed in action over Germany on 22 .2. His father, Prisley P. Cooper of Houston, formerly of Roby, was informed Saturday by the War Department.

The Family Cooper of Texas

His Parents were:

Priesley Paul Cooper (1899-1970)

Susie Virginia Simmons Cooper (1898-1933)

the deceased was survived by a Sister

Pauline Cooper Warton (1921 -2012), known as, Polly"

She died on 29.5.2012 in Austin, Texas.

She had two sons, Ben William Warton who lives on the Colorado River in Marble Falls, Texas, and Freddy Paul Warton who lives in Austin, Tx. Both nephews reside with their families in the State of Texas. Ben, a therapist/clinician, is 68 and is in private practice as a counselor. Freddy, an entrepreneur, is 64. He and his wife have a daughter, Tamara, and reside in Austin.

Army-Air Corps Base in Italy

We were not satisfied with the official details we discovered. We compared the entries in the Count's diaries with the official records of 22 February 1945. Through Army Air Corps records we were able to determine the mission, the number of planes, and targets tasked on this day. Through the history entry on 22 February 1945 we found that 57 planes, including the 22 in Lt Cooper's 5th Squadron flew that day. We were also able to determine that the 2nd and 4th FG as well as Lt Cooper's 5th Squadron, were based in Madena near Termoli, Italy along the Adriatic coast approximately 528 miles from southern Germany. The 5th Squadron was nicknamed the "Spitting Kittens." The aircraft had red noses and yellow tails.

The 52 Fighter Group flew the legendary Mustang fighter plane "with the type designation: Flight North American P 51 D Mustang," of which 15,000 were produced. It was a single-engine, single-seat, all-metal fighter with 6 automatic 12.7 mm machine guns in the wings. If they did not carry two bombs underneath the wings they could be equipped with two external fuel tanks which would give them a range of 1865 miles. The top speed was 466 miles per hour. Maximum elevation was 7.5 miles. The aircraft was equipped with a 1650 hp 12-cylinder engine. As long-range Fighter escorts they escorted the four-engine B-17 bomber to southern Germany. The objectives of the 52nd Fighter Wing were to destroy German transportation and railway systems.



On February 22, 1945, 8,000 Allied planes participated in a joint operation to deliver a "mighty blow" to Germany. Bombing targets included the freight yards between Lindau and Memmingen, and their surrounding areas. Once the bombers arrived over their targets, the escort

fighters left the high-flying bombers and started to attack ground targets at low altitude. They tended to fly under flak and radar at low altitudes to take advantage of ground cover.

The Fateful Day of 22.2.1945 for the 5 Fighter Squadron over Dietingen

On a wintry Thursday, 22/02/1945 at 10:40, two and one half hours after they departed the base at Madna 57 Mustangs left the Bomber formation and began attacking ground targets at low altitude. Lt. Cooper's 52nd Fighter Group which had left their base with 22 aircraft at Verona and Mestre near Venice, some 217 miles away, attacked a factory in Donaueschingen, barracks, rail repair yard, freight wagons, locomotives, tank wagons, radio and radar towers. The railway line serving Rottweil - Horb was also impacted by the raid. In addition to the railway station and factories in Rottweil and Oberndorf, the nearby Station Talhausen in the Neckar Valley along with bridges, tunnels and stationary freight trains were targeted by the attacking American low-flying aircraft.

Of the 22 Fighters of the 5th Squadron 20 managed to return over the Alps to their Airfield in Italy. Robert "Rocky" Rhodes' aircraft was damaged by flak. He was able to make an emergency landing on the shallow shoreline of the Rhine in the vicinity of Lichtenstein/Switzerland and exit his aircraft safely. Lt Priesley Cooper ran into strong anti-aircraft fire. He was unable to control his plane which had been severely damaged by flak and it plummeted to the ground.

After comparing the reports from fighter pilot Robert F. Rhodes, the Records of the earl's family of Bissingen, the daily report of the 52nd Fighter Group, and the personal accounts of the nephew of Lieutenant Cooper, one can conclude that his plane was most likely hit by flak on the Stettener heights and crashed into a field near the castle Hohenstein. Cooper attempted to parachute from a height of 490 ft. To do this he separated the Plexiglas Canopy from the cockpit. As he jumped from the plane the leather aviator cap separated from his head. Both the canopy and aviator cap were later recovered from the crash site by two Dietinger farmers, Pius Graf and Karl Maier. In true Swabian fashion, which holds that something whole is always useful, the Plexiglass canopy became a shelter for chickens and the aviator cap a warm hat for winter."

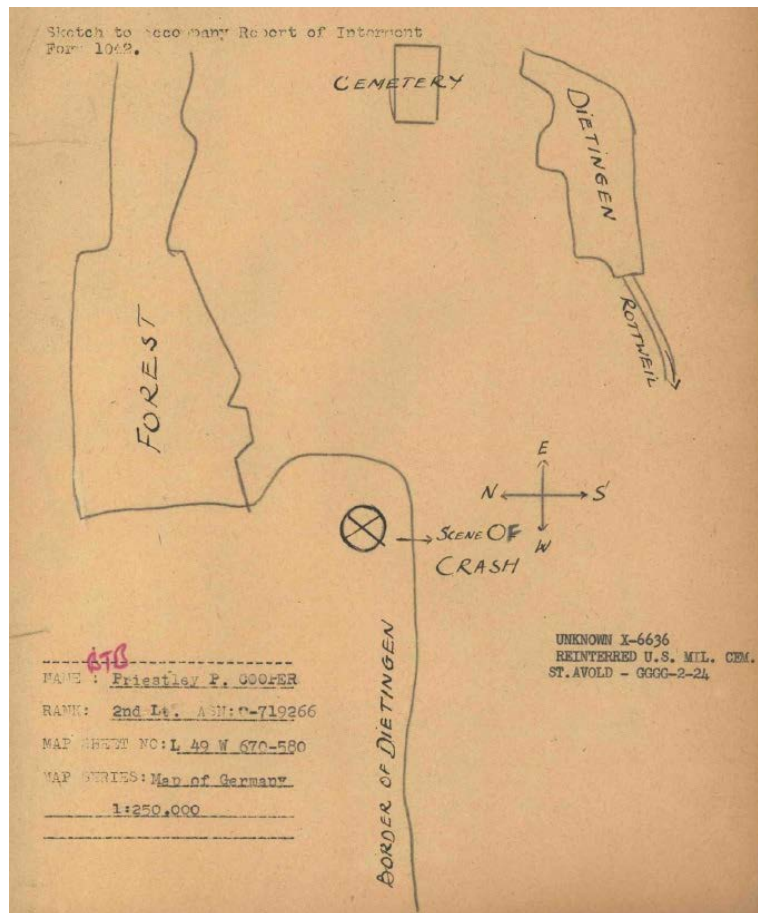
When Lt Copper jumped from the plane his parachute became entangled with the wing and was unable to free himself. He was dragged down along with his aircraft. The plane exploded on impact and burned as did the fallen unrecognizable pilot. German authorities identified him based on the ID tags and a bracelet bearing his name which was found on the remains. In addition the Mayor, Franz Ohnmacht found a picture of a woman and a child next to the pilot.

The Countess of Bissingen described crash site as follows:

On the other corner of the Pines at the end of the path that leads to the barn.

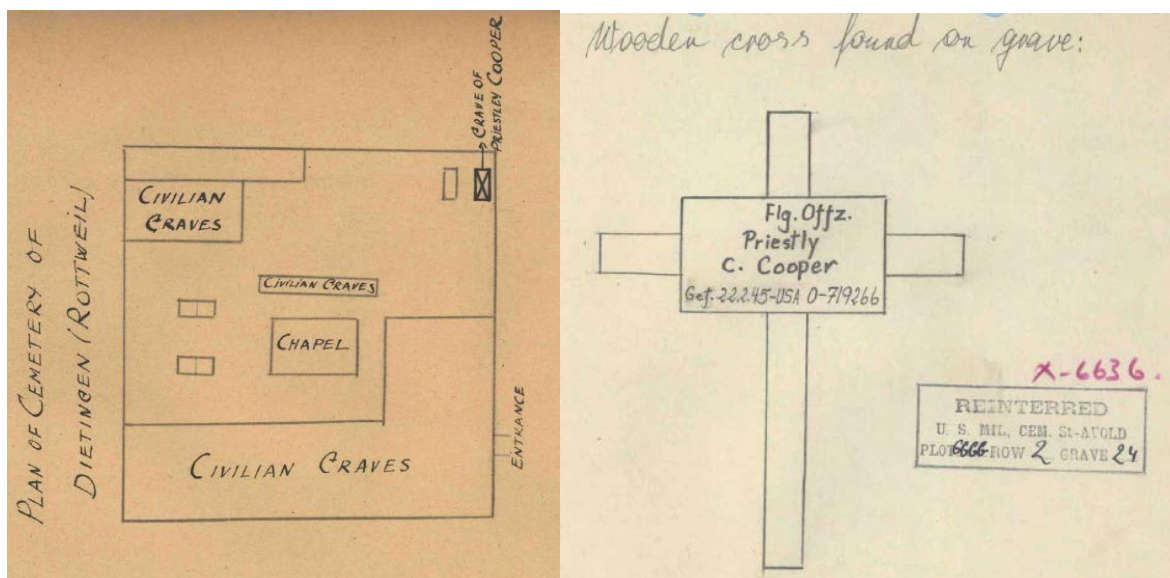
Count of Bissingen described the crash site as follows:

On the Hohenstein Midfield approximately 70 m southwest in the piece adjacent to the Roman path (Römerweg).



According to German Military records Sebastian Schürle stayed with the deceased pilot and subsequently placed his remains in the coffin. Mayor Ohnmacht's report shows that the funeral took place at 8 p.m. on 23 February, with Sebastian Schuerle, Matthäus Schmuck, Mathäus Beck and Franz Ohnmacht in attendance. Though, the old Dietingen parish cemetery burial registers state that his funeral took place at seven in the evening on February 24, 1945 in the Municipal cemetery, top right corner of the burial ground of the nursing home. According to the minutes of the council meeting held on 06.10.1945 Master Carpenter Bantle of Irslingen presented the community of Dietingen with a bill for the pine coffin of the downed American airman.

On 18 July 1946, he was reinterred in St. Avoid cemetery pending a decision from the family about where to bury him. When the military authorities were unable to make contact with his father the government decided to reinter him at the American cemetery in Belgium in May 1950.



Emotion and gratitude of the descendants

In a touching letter, the nephew [Ben Warton], who still lives in Texas USA described what emotions his mother, the sister of Lt. Cooper had to endure. Their mother died early and so she had to take her mother's place. He became the lynchpin of her life and the object of her devotion. The uncle was an iconic figure who even in death has played an important part in the nephews' lives in formative years and into later years. Their mother was never able to get over the death of her twenty-year old brother. His memory could not be expressed in words. When the nephews, 70 years after his death, thanks to the research of former Mayor Hubert Burkard from Dietingen, were informed of the exact crash site and the exact cause of death in addition to the discovery of aircraft parts and the Aviator cap, they burst into tears. A source of joy for them was finding out about the well maintained aviator cap. If there is a possibility of having something that belonged to him exists, it would be of greater significance to the Nephews than words can easily convey. Thus, closing the circle of mourning and remembrance.

Hubert Burkard is grateful to have been connected to this this particularly honorable venture. This is also true for Dr. Silvano Wueschner, Historian 86 Airlift Wing, Ramstein AB.

Death of Friend and Foe

In death enemy and friend fade. This documentation is dedicated to the memory of the American, but at the same time to the German soldiers who were forced into this excessive and unfortunate war. We should also remember the innocent men, women and children of the civilian population who died or were left to suffer. Mankind has not learned a good deal from this war. Death and suffering, as we see it now in the Ukraine, speak for themselves. May a protective hand nevertheless guide us.