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Sacrifices of WWII airmen not forgotten

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First Lt. Bill R. Dewey was a 21-year-old B-24 bomber pilot when his U.S. Army Air Force bomber group left its base in Tibenham, England, headed for Germany on Sept. 27, 1944.

The group was ordered to bomb the city of Kassel, an important transportation and communications area for central Germany.

The 35 planes of the 445th bomber group joined a stream of more than 1,000 bombers and, for reasons that remain mysterious, became separated from the rest of the group. Without their fighter escort, they were flying above cloud cover and dropped their bombs off target.

While turning to return to base, 150 German fighter planes appeared from behind and engaged them in an air battle. Twenty-five B-24s and 29 German planes were lost, and 118 Americans died.

It was over in a matter of minutes, but the repercussions of the battle led to the creation of the Kassel Mission Memorial Association, the Kassel Mission Historical Society and the German-American Airmen Memorial in Ludwigsau, Germany. It became a catalyst for peace through understanding between two enemies who became friends. Of the 10 planes that survived the battle, four made it safely back to base. Dewey and another pilot made emergency landings at Manston, England. His B-24 had a 3-foot hole in it and wounded crew members.

Dewey, of Auburn Hills, founded the Kassel Mission Memorial Association in 1989 as a nonprofit veterans-only organization to honor the men who lost their lives, as well as the survivors.

"I'd like people to know that it happened," said Dewey's daughter, Linda Alice Dewey of Glen Arbor. "At the time, it was covered up for Ômorale' reasons.

"It's the largest loss by any bomb group in any single day in any single battle in history. It should be in the history books right there next to Custer's Last Stand. ... These men need to be honored and not forgotten."

Preserving history

Walter Hassenpflug, who at 12 was a member of the Hitler Youth, was haunted by memories of the bombings. In a quest to find as much information as he could about the people involved, he placed an ad in the Eighth Air Force Newsletter in 1983. Frank Bertram, a navigator who had bailed out over Germany during the battle and was turned over to the authorities by Hassenpflug, read the ad and contacted Hassenpflug.



Bill Dewey mans the controls of a bomber in 1945 in a photo taken by his bombardier, Bill Mitchell. Dewey later started the Kassel Mission Memorial Association to ensure that airmen who died in the devastating 1944 bombing raid are not forgotten.

They met, and so began a new quest for answers.

Linda's parents, Bill and Marilyn Dewey, met Bertram at a 2nd Air Division reunion in England in 1987 and heard about Hassenpflug. They got in touch with him and together started researching the 445th bomber group. John Woolnough, the editor of the Eighth Air Force Newsletter, helped, providing information that Dewey used in starting the Kassel Mission Memorial Association.

In August 1990, a German-American Airmen Memorial was dedicated in the forest where the lead B-24 crashed in Ludwigsau, Germany. A ceremony is held at the site every year on Sept. 27.

The Kassel Mission Historical Society was created in 1996 as a heritage organization for the next of kin, friends and interested people. In 2004, the Kassel Mission Memorial Association was permanently incorporated into the Historical Society as it shifted to a new generation.

"My dad felt that if he had been born in Germany he would have flown for the Luftwaffe, and that he was blessed to have been born in the United States," Linda Alice Dewey said. "There's a great sense of honor among airmen, and he respected the men who flew against them, not their cause. He also felt very strongly that there should be a memorial to everyone who died on that day."

Growing interest

There reportedly has been interest expressed in making a movie of the event. And although he did not fly in the mission, the story does have an actor in it. Jimmy Stewart was a member of the 445th bomber group, but he was transferred to the 453rd before the time of the Kassel mission.

Those keeping the memory alive continue to share new information, and the growing organization welcomed 30 new members in the last year.

In August 2006, Bill Dewey led a group of 43 to Tibenham, England, and Germany to rededicate the memorial. Another group plans to go next year.

Dewey died in March at age 84. His daughter, Linda, is president of the society, and his wife, Marilyn, of Auburn Hills is where the organization is now based and is treasurer. His son, Bill Dewey Jr. of Birmingham, and daughter, Diane Nichols, of DeWitt also have taken turns promoting the organization.

"It was his life's purpose to get this battle known," Linda Alice Dewey said of her father. "I feel that I owe it to him to continue his work. It's my feeling that no military person who loses their life or the event surrounding those circumstances should be forgotten.

"I feel that what happened in 1944 has extreme relevancy to what's happening today," she added. "These men did not give their lives for nothing. They are to be honored. They're heroes, and this needs to be known and recognized."

FYI

Linda Alice Dewey will speak about the Kassel Mission at noon Nov. 20 at the Rochester Hills Rotary Club and at noon Nov. 26 at the Birmingham Rotary Club. For more information, e-mail her

at kmhs@kasselmission.com, or visit www.kasselmission.com for historical interviews, audio recordings and a video, "Pride of the Nation."