

455BG, 741BS - B-24J 42-51912

Operation: Odertal, Germany

Date: 14th October 1944 (Saturday)

Unit: 741st Bomber Squadron (455th Bombardment Group (H)), 15th Air Force

Type: B-24J

Serial No: 42-51912

Code: ?

Location: Lettenstätten about 2½ miles NW of Bleiburg, Austria

Base: San Giovanni field, Italy

Pilot: 1st.Lt. John Noske Jr. O-713874 AAF Age 22. Survived (1)

Co Pilot: 2nd.Lt. Walter Shostack O-711256 AAF Age 22. PoW *

Navigator: 2nd.Lt. Elijah 'Joe' Ostrander Jr. O-2057992 AAF Age 22. PoW *

Bombardier: 2nd.Lt. Edward William Ruyter O-776804 AAF Age 22. Killed

Radio/Op: Cpl. Alexander Dubetz 35231661 AAF Age 19. PoW **

Engineer: Cpl. Jack Richard Keopple 37657027 AAF Age 20. PoW **

Engineer: Cpl. Robert E. Spicer 16081722 AAF Age 20. Survived (1)

Waist Gunner: Cpl. Charles T. Shropshire 20234092 AAF Age 23. Survived (1)

Waist Gunner: Cpl. John J. Stella 31325818 AAF Age 27. Killed

Tail Gunner: Cpl. Robert Edward Brewer 18184521 AAF Age 19. Killed

The B-24 had 10 crew positions. Crew complements evolved during the war and generally comprised 9 personnel who were typically, but not always, Pilot, Co-Pilot, Bombardier, Navigator, Flight Engineer/Top Turret Gunner, Radio Operator/Waist Gunner, Nose Gunner, Ball Turret Gunner/Radar Operator, Waist Gunner, Tail Gunner.

* Stalag Luft 3 Sagan-Silesia, Germany, now Żagań in Poland. (Moved to Nuremberg-Langwasser, Bavaria)

** Stalag Luft 4 Gross-Tychow, Pomerania, Prussia now Poland (Moved from Stalag Luft 6 Heydekrug. Moved to Wöbbelin near Ludwigslust and then to Usedom near Swinemünde)

REASON FOR LOSS:

On the morning of the 14th October 1944 42-51912 took off from the San Giovanni field, located approximately 5 miles WSW of Cerignola in Apulia in Italy, on a mission to bomb the oil refinery facilities at or near Odertal in Germany.

An after action statement reported that the 42-51912 was hit by flak in the nose area causing severe damage just as the bombs were released whilst flying at 20,000 ft at about 1233 hours. Immediately after being hit the aircraft began to lose altitude, gliding down in a spiral and apparently under control. No parachutes were observed before the aircraft descended through the undercast and was lost from sight. 42-51912 was one of two aircraft lost from the 455th Bombardment Group on this mission.

2nd.Lt. Ostrander Jr. heard 2nd.Lt. Ruyter call "bombs away" over the intercom just before the flak shell exploded in the nose area. The front turret of the aircraft was obliterated and a portion of the forward fuselage was blown away. Cpl. Stella, who was in the front turret was killed instantly with little of his body remaining. 2nd.Lt. Ruyter, who was in Bombardier's position, was also killed and it was originally thought by the crew that he had suffered the same fate as Cpl. Stella. However, 2nd.Lt. Ruyter's body was found near Kojetin, South of Olmütz (Olomouc in the now Czech Republic) in Czechoslovakia, some 270 miles from Odertal, which means that the pilots had managed to regain control of the aircraft and were heading for home when 2nd.Lt. Ruyter's remains fell from the aircraft. The aircraft flew on for a further 175 miles before the remainder of the crew had to abandon the aircraft because fuel could not be transferred between the tanks. The aircraft crashed near Lettenstätten in Austria.



Cpl. Brewer's parachute appears either to have been lost overboard or damaged when the aircraft was hit by the flak. He bailed out piggy-backed with Cpl. Spicer whose parachute was seen to open with them both together. Neither of the two were seen again.

2nd.Lt. Ostrander Jr. saw Cpl. Dubetz bail out of the aircraft. Both were captured the next day near Bleiburg and handed over to the Gendarmerie (State rural police) (Ref. 1 page 283). Cpl. Keopple was captured some 12 days later on the 26th October and 2nd.Lt. Shostack was captured in the hills of Laibech (Ljubljana (capital of Slovenia)) on the 27th October at around noon.

1st.Lt. Noske Jr., Cpl. Shropshire, Cpl. Spicer were seen to bail out of the aircraft and it was speculated that they had been killed by German civilians as none of the three were seen again by any of the airmen who became PoWs.

(1) The fates of 1st.Lt. Noske Jr., Cpl. Shropshire and Cpl. Spicer were unknown until a Military Commission was convened in Salzburg, Austria between the 8th July and 15th July 1947.

One German national was charged that he did, at or near Bleiburg, Austria, on or about the 14th October 1944, wrongfully encourage, aid, abet, and participate in the killing of three members of the United States Army, who were then and there unarmed and surrendered PoWs in the custody of the then German Reich.

The accused was an Erich Wandrey, who was a former Zugwachtmeister (Sgt) in the Reserve Constabulary Police in the SS (Schutzstaffel)-Polizei-Regiment 13 (13th SS-Police Regiment)

The court heard that on or about the 14th October 1944, sometime in the afternoon, at least three airmen were seen to parachute from a four-engine American bomber which crashed near Lettenstätten, about 2½ miles NW of Bleiburg.

Two of the airmen were apprehended by personnel from the SS-Polizei-Regiment 13 and taken to the orderly room of their unit, which was located in the old school house in Bleiburg. The third airman had been apprehended by the Gendarmerie in Aich, some 3½ miles NNE of Bleiburg.

When Wandrey returned from a patrol he was ordered by Hauptwachtmeister (M/Sgt) Rudolf Schwieger to collect the third airman from Aich. At about 1730 hours Wandrey returned with the airman and was met by Schwieger and Oberleutnant (1st.Lt.) Wilhelm Rüniger the Company Commander of the Schutzpolizei.

After the three airmen were interrogated they were given food and coffee and then taken to the Regiment's orderly room where they remained until night fall. Either Rüniger or Schwieger then went to Wandrey's quarters where he was told that the airmen were to be taken away and shot. He was then ordered to report to the orderly room and when he arrived two of the airmen had already had their hands tied behind their backs and the third airman was in the process of having his hands secured.

Rüniger, Schwieger and Wandrey, armed with machine pistols, then proceeded to escort the three airmen out of the building. Shortly after leaving the building Rüniger who was leading, repositioned himself with the other two guards and followed the airmen. They had proceeded about 100 yards or so along a path when Rüniger, Schwieger and Wandrey, without any warning, opened fire with their machine pistols and killed the three airmen.

Later that night Rüniger reported to Major der Polizei (Maj.) Richard Dröge, the commanding officer of the Gendarmerie, that the airmen had been shot whilst trying to escape. There was a dispute between the two which may have been instrumental in no further airmen being handed over to the SS-Polizei-Regiment 13 (*Ref. 1 page 283*).

Early on the next morning, on the 15th October 1944, at 0430 hours the three airmen were buried in an unmarked common grave near the entrance of the Bleiburg cemetery with the intention of concealing the deaths from the local populace.

On the 21st June 1945 the three airmen were exhumed and were identified from their 'dog tags' as 1st.Lt. Noske Jr., Cpl. Shropshire and Cpl. Spicer. An Austrian doctor examined the three bodies and certified that all three had sustained numerous bullet wounds, mainly to their backs and heads (*Ref. 1 page 283*).

Wandrey was found guilty and sentenced to death by hanging. In 1951 his death sentence was commuted to life imprisonment which was then reduced to 15 years, and further reduced to 12 years after Schwieger, who had fled to the Soviet occupation zone, returned to give evidence in

Wandrey's defence (*Ref. 1 page 283*). The final disposition of Wandrey's sentence is unknown. It is not known if Schwieger was brought before a court for his involvement in the shootings.

Rünger was not before the court as it was reported that he had been killed in action in January 1945 (*Ref. 1 page 283*).

Burial Details:



(*Left: Courtesy, Lilian-FindAGrave*) 1st.Lt. John Noske Jr. Repatriated and reinterred at the Hobart Rose Cemetery, Kiowa County, Oklahoma. Born on the 6th August 1922. Son to John and Dorothy (née Morgan) Noske and husband to Betty Sue (née Cutter) Noske of Kiowa County, Oklahoma, USA.

(*Right: Courtesy, Marshall and Mary McIntyre-FindAGrave*) 2nd.Lt. Edward William Ruyter. Air Medal, Purple Heart. Lorraine American Cemetery St. Avold, France, Plot D, Row 45, Grave 21. Born on the 11th April 1922. Son of Dirk and Emma Margaret (née Heller) Ruyter of Dover, Kent County, Delaware, USA.



(*Left: Courtesy, Iced Tea-FindAGrave*) Cpl. Robert E. Spicer. Repatriated and reinterred at the Camp Butler National Cemetery, Springfield, Sangamon County, Illinois, Plot C.12. Born on the 31st May 1924. Son to Joseph Aaron and Maggie (née Carlson) Spicer and husband to Betty J. Spicer of Weatherford, Oklahoma, USA.

Cpl. Charles T. Shropshire. Air Medal, Purple Heart. Lorraine American Cemetery St. Avold, France. Plot A, Row 16, Grave 23. Born in 1921. Son to Charles T. Shropshire of Mount Vernon, New York, USA.

Cpl. Robert Edward Brewer. Repatriated and reinterred at the City of Lubbock Cemetery, Lubbock County, Texas, Section C. Born on the 16th December 1925. Son of George Walpole and Mamie C.(née Barker) Brewer of Lubbock County, Texas, USA.

Cpl. John James Stella. Repatriated in 1950 and buried at the St. Joseph's Old Catholic Cemetery, Winstead, Lichfield County, Connecticut. Born on the 17th December 1916. Son of Vincenzo James and Alfronsina (née Lovetre) Stella of Winstead, Lichfield County, Connecticut, USA.

Researched by Ralph Snape and Traugott Vitz for Aircrew Remembered and dedicated to the relatives of this crew. Thanks also to Traugott Vitz for his work on the 'VitzArchive'



Reference:

1. Fliegerlynchjustiz (Fallstudie XXIII: Der Fliegermord von Bleiburg) - Georg Hoffmann.

Acknowledgments: Sources used by us in compiling Archive Reports include: Bill Chorley - 'Bomber Command Losses Vols. 1-9, plus ongoing revisions', Dr. Theo E.W. Boiten and Mr. Roderick J. Mackenzie - 'Nightfighter War Diaries Vols. 1 and 2', Martin Middlebrook and Chris Everitt - 'Bomber Command War Diaries', Commonwealth War Graves Commission, Tom Kracker - 'Kracker Luftwaffe Archives', Michel Beckers, Major Fred Paradie (RCAF) and MWO Francois Dutil (RCAF) - 'Paradie Archive (on this site)', Jean Schadschaje, Major Jack O'Connor USAF (Retd.), Robert Gretzyngier, Wojtek Matusiak, Waldemar Wojcik and Jozef Zieliriski - 'Ku Czci Poteglygh Lotnikow 1939-1945', Anna Krzystek, Tadeusz Krzystek - 'Polskie Sity Powietrzne w Wielkiej Brytanii', Franek Grabowski, Norman L.R. Franks - 'Fighter Command Losses', Aircrew Remembered Databases and our own archives. We are grateful for the support and encouragement of CWGC, UK Imperial War Museum, Australian War Memorial, Australian National Archive.