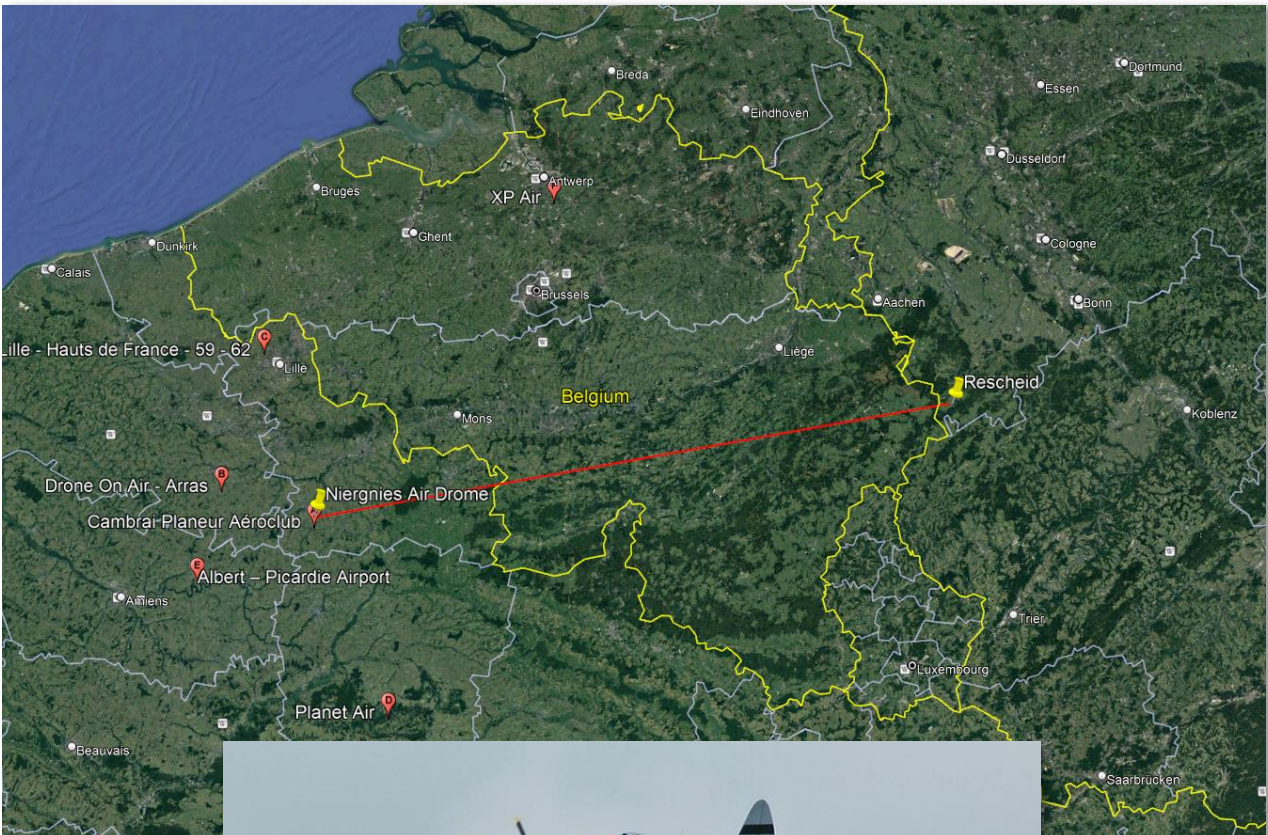


## The Final Mission – September 27, 1944

Army Air Force strip # 74 – Airdrome at Niergnies, France – Dawn: A flight of P-47D Thunderbolts took off on an armed reconnaissance flight bearing 78 degrees True toward the German Base at Rescheid, 142 miles to the east and just 3 miles over the German Border. These reconnaissance missions were collecting information for a planned assault on Koblenz, an additional 51 miles due east over enemy territory. Captain James M. Updike was flying the lead position in the Yellow Flight providing top cover for eight bombers flying at a lower altitude collecting reconnaissance data and dropping leaflets. 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. James W. Harrison was in number two position and 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. George R. Knittle in number four. It was just past 8AM. This would be Lt. Harrison's 25<sup>th</sup> mission.



Just over the border, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Knittle reported Harrison's P-47 was in trouble:

*"Halfway around a shallow left turn, Lt. Harrison's plane turned sharply right and started to spin. At about 2000 feet I saw his parachute open. His plane crashed 10-15 miles east of Aachen.*

*He landed in the next field. We flew over the field and saw that he had left his parachute and taken cover.*

*It was believed the belly of Lt. Harrison's aircraft was hit by flak because it was streaming gas on its way down. The spin that the P-47 went into was a very flat spin, and Lt. Harrison could not recover as he was only 6500 feet high at the start of the spin."*

Captain Updike filed a similar report:

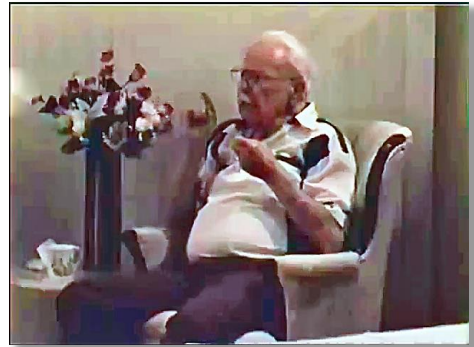
*"Although I didn't see any flak, it appeared to me, Lt. Harrison's air-craft was hit, because his plane was out of control. He pulled up steep then rolled over and went into a flat spin. His parachute was seen to open at approximately 2000 feet.*

*I believe Lt. Harrison is safe but in enemy territory."*

Sixty year later just before his death in 2010, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. James W. Harrison recorded the actual events in his memoirs:

*All of a sudden my plane wasn't flying. It just went into a spin. I don't know what happened to the plane and still don't.*

*I was in a bubble canopy so I could see the tail. I took a quick look around and could not see any damage so I started working to get it out of the spin – and I got it out of the spin!*



*I eased back on the stick, pulled back on the stick, since when you come out of a spin you are headed down. And so I pulled back on the stick and began to spin the other way [to the right] so I put the stick to the left and it fell back to the right.*

*I decided I had pulled back the stick too fast, because if you pull it back too fast it will spin out on you. And so I trimmed it out again and this time it fell in again, back to the left. About that time I was thinking, 'I don't think I want to fly this plane anymore.'*

*But I want to tell you something. Five seconds before I made that decision if you would have asked me would I have ever bailed out of this plane I would have said no! That parachute is strictly to sit on!*

*I changed my mind – and that was probably a good thing.*

*I got out of the plane by ejecting the canopy and it flies up. Then you jump out. In those airplanes, the P-47, they tell you to go out head first since they were afraid you would*

get hit by the tail. And they tell you if you go out in a spin aim right for the wing and that wing will move away and you will go just behind the wing.

Don't believe them!

The wing didn't move away and it hit me. I hit on the back of my head and my [right] shoulder and it knocked me out.

Couple of little things I forgot.. Just before I got out I remembered that I should get out on the inside of the spin. So I remember looking out over my shoulder to see that the right wing was high over the horizon and the left would be low so the inside wing is low in the spin – just to make sure I was getting out on the inside of the spin.

I  
n  
s  
t  
e  
a  
d  
  
p  
u  
t

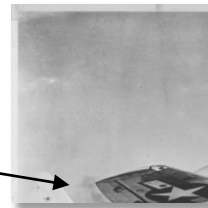


You get up on your feet in the seat and you dive head first for that wing.

I remember they said to take your right arm and reach across your chest – but don't grab the rip cord because you don't want to pull the rip cord too quickly – and I didn't!



Put your gloved hand around the [left parachute harness] strap over the rip cord. Then put your left arm across your chest over your right arm and grab the right strap with your gloved hand. And that is exactly the way I went out. And then I hit the wing.





*The last thing I remember was going slightly toward the wing tip. With the back of my head and my [right] shoulder I hit it and it stunned me.*

*I was out for seconds, a second or two, because I realized I was hanging down and looking at the ground. I was very curious as to whether the parachute would work. And I looked up. And as I looked up the canopy of my plane tumbled down between me and the ground. When the canopy went by I heard the airplane hit the ground. And I look in the direction of where the airplane hit the ground, or at least the noise, and I realize I'm about to hit the ground myself.*

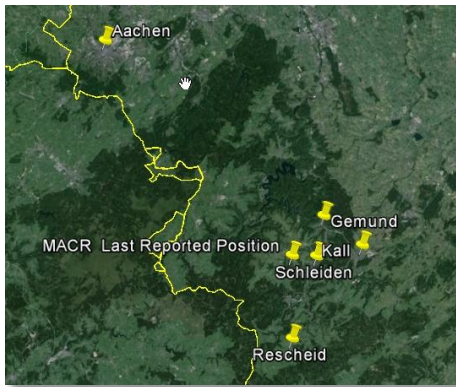
*So that is how quick this happens – all in a matter of seconds.*

*But the chute was open. My right gauntlet [glove] was gone. I don't know what happened. Did the wing hit it? .... But the chute was open. It was a lot of luck.*

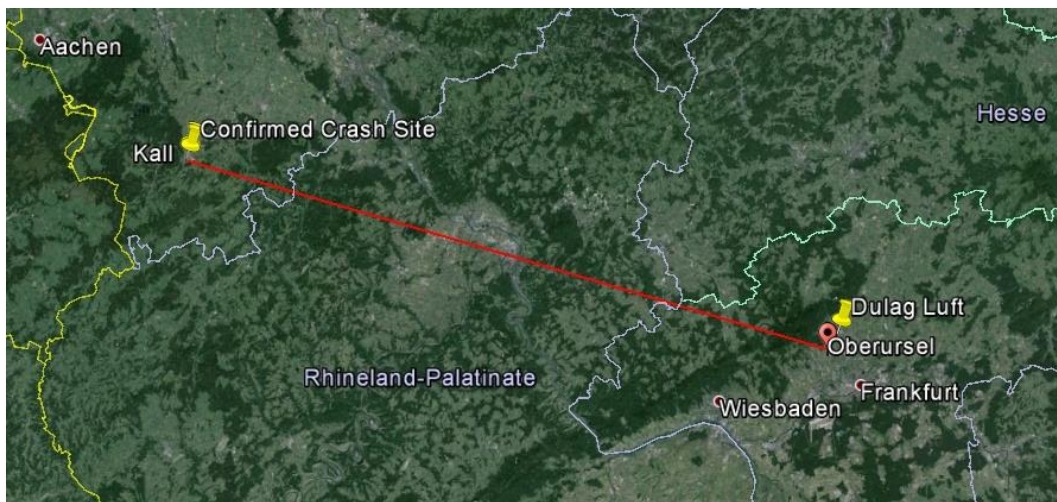
*If I look all over Germany I couldn't have found a softer place to land – tall grass about 12-15" deep. I hurt my leg but I didn't know it when I landed. It only started to bother me when I didn't get medical treatment for the infection.*

In the confusion of the fight there was conflicting information regarding the location of the crash site:

- Knittle reported, "10-15 miles east of Aachen."
- Both he and Updike reported they were, "over Rescheid base target."
- A 'Captured Aircraft Report' issued by the Staff Officer at the German Bonn-Hangelar Airbase gave the position as, "500 meters north of Kall and 6 kilometers south-east of Gemünd." Bonn-Hangelar also reported that the aircraft was 85% destroyed having both crashed and burned.



A later report from Bonn-Hangelar entitled 'The Capture of Members of Enemy Air Forces' confirmed the Kall/Gemünd position and reported that 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. James W. Harrison was indeed captured and taken to Dulag Luft Interrogation Center at Oberursel.



**Capture – September 27, 1944 – “Vas Du das Kreig ist über.” [For you the war is over]**

As survivors reached the ground, captivity began for most. Those who did not survive were frequently buried at the crash site in unmarked graves. This transcription from a German newsreel as a member of the 96th Bomb Group has been laid to rest depicts initial captivity.

- [German airman] “Is it painful?”
- [American airman] “No, it’s not painful.”
- [2nd American airman] “Gibbons”
- [German airman, check with another] “Gibbons. Are you wounded?”
- [2nd American airman] “Twisted ankle.”
- [German airman] “Twisted ankle, but that’s all? You can walk, after all?”
- [2nd American airman] “Yes.”

A downed airman describes the moment.

**John Wranesh** – *“I had landed in a kohlrabi (turnip) patch and was immediately captured by the overseer of the German farm. I was an intruder entering his territory from the sky above, didn't speak the language, and just how far could I run in flying boots dragging a parachute? He motioned for me to come forward which I did and then and there became a "Kriegie." This is the short term for the German word kriegsgefangener meaning war prisoner. Americans are always finding nicknames and shortened versions of words.*

*Five of our crew landed in what we estimated to be a seven-mile radius. The navigator and top turret gunner bailed out immediately as we were hit and were not assembled with us. The five of us; pilot, bombardier, tail gunner, ball gunner (Shef) and myself were assembled by the local police and trucked to Brunswick, Germany. It was after dark and we were herded into an air raid shelter. The British were doing their nightly bombing performance - it was quite an experience, being bombed and in an air raid shelter with Germans who would have executed us right away had we not had police and German guard protection.*

*Following the air raid, Brunswick was pretty much in flames and the guards were very upset to say the least; however we were taken by a small truck to a German Air Cadet Center to spend the rest of the night. In the morning we were placed on a train under guard and transported to the interrogation center at Oberursel where we were placed in solitary confinement for several days.*

*Following interrogation we were transported to the nearby Dulag Luft #1 at Wetzlar where we were provided minimal personal care items and some different clothes like shoes provided by the International Red Cross Service and limited personal care items.”*

Airmen such as these were fortunate enough to have fallen into the hands of the Luftwaffe. Their safe arrival at an air prisoner of war camp was virtually assured. It was far different for others. The airmen prisoners were confined to four principal camps, known as Stalag Lufts. Officer prisoners were taken to Stalag Luft I at Barth on the Baltic Sea and Stalag Luft III at Sagan southeast of Berlin. Noncommissioned officers were imprisoned at Stalag Luft VI at Heydekrug on the border of East Prussia and Lithuania and Stalag Luft IV at Kiefhiede in East Prussia.

There were countless instances of men surviving the catastrophic destruction of their aircraft high in the sky. The accounts of explosion and fire which left men unconscious in the air only to have them land safely by parachute were so common that in Stalag Lufts I & III such survivors had difficulty finding an audience for the story.

In his memoirs, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. James W. Harrison recalled his own capture:

*They tell you right away to head for the woods. So I looked off to the northwest and I could see the woods down there. There was a fence with a plowed field on one side and I was in this meadow. There was a path along this fence.*

*I went down the path and started down there. I went about 100 yards and I could see there were a couple of German soldiers sitting on the bank with rifles across their knees.*

*They were looking up my way. They didn't get up but they were looking up there. So I thought maybe I should go the other way.*

*So I turned back on the path and passed the plowed field where I saw an old farmer with an ox plowing that field with an ox pulling his plow. He yelled at me and pointed [to the soldiers] and said, 'Soldaten.' He pointed back across the field I had crossed and here comes two German soldiers with rifles across this field, well within range. The woods that I was going to in the other direction were a long way off. So I stopped – and they came over.*

*Now don't try to conclude what you would do in those circumstances because you don't know. You have no idea what I did.*

*I was mad. I was so mad I could spit nails at them. And I am mad at the guys up there because they were going home without me!*

*So when these guys came over, they've both got guns, I was not calm. So I stood there and cursed them. That was foolish but you don't know what you are going to do and that was my response to them. One of them stayed out in front of me and the other one came behind me and patted me down.*



*I was injured at the time but I didn't know it. So they walked me over to a road and there were a driver and a guard who were Generals and a big touring car under a tree. They took me over to that car and when I got there I felt something in my shoe. I looked down and there was blood at the top of my shoe just above the GI shoe. There was a big scrape. It wasn't a real bad injury then but by the time I got medical treatment it was in sepsis.*

*I have no idea what caused it but I can think of several things that might have happened. I never did figure out what happened to the airplane although some guys in the Squadron corresponded with [my wife] Grace and they said there was a black spot in the sky right where I should have been. That usually means flak.*

*Now it could have been a close enough burst out on the wing tip to flip that thing into a spin and I wasn't able to get it out. A P-47 is not an easy airplane to fly especially when you are loaded with fuel and ammunition.*

*My captors took me to a little village jail. They put me in the back seat with this General. We carried what we called 'escape kits – square boxes about this [3"] wide and a little longer than it was wide and 1 ½ inches thick. It was a little plastic box with high energy food, maps, hacksaw blades, money – French and German, fish hooks, line – stuff like that. It had stuff you could inject into your arm to give you energy and keep you going if you needed it. They did not find the escape kit.*

*I kept my box right inside my shirt [in the middle of my chest] out of the way of the parachute harness. But when we carried 45's when we started flying we carried the 45's*

*right in the same place as the escape kit. That was the most convenient place. We had shoulder holsters and we would slide them around to the center of our chests.*

*As I got in the back seat with the General with the driver and the guard in the front they asked me for a cigarette using hand motions. I reached in my breast pocket and took out the pack and gave him a cigarette. But when I put that pack back in my pocket and my hand was on my chest I started thinking if I had my 45 I could have captured a German General! I don't know what I would have done with him.*

*They did not find my kit until much later that day. I got searched three or four times but they never found it. Finally one of the guys who searched me found it and pulled back. He called in another soldier who asked me what was in it and to take it out s-l-o-w-l-e-y. He asked me to open it up which I did. After he saw what was there I talked him into giving me the concentrated food and when I took the food I also took the hack saw blade.*

*I kept the hack saw blade until the next jail I stayed in and the guard took it saying I guess they missed the hack saw blade. He knew it was there.*

*Then they assigned a guard to me to take me to the interrogation center. We traveled during the day and they would put me in a jail for the night. I have no idea where the guard stayed. The next day he would move me. We went on trucks and trains, trolleys and all sorts of things until we got to the interrogation center.*

*They treated us well since it was the end of the war and they knew they were losing. I had a couple of guards ask me when I thought the war would be over. I thought by the end of the year [1944].*

*The interrogation center is where they put you in solitary confinement and question you. I didn't have dog tags when I was shot down. I had a crash bracelet. So they told me since you don't have dog tags we could turn you over to the Gestapo. I said if I had them you could take them as they were no good to me.*

*They asked my the name of my squadron commander but they knew more about my squadron than I did! Our Commanding Officer was Colonel Wardenbaker and we were called Wardenbaker Warriors. They already knew I was a Wardenbaker Warrior. There were a number of them there.*

*It was an awful place. I spent my incarceration in a tiny little room with a cot and like a doggy door you put food through in there. It was solitary confinement.*

*They got you.*

In the last year of the war the German leadership actually encouraged enraged civilians, who had captured Allied airmen who were destroying their cities and killing their women and children, to wreak their vengeance on them indiscriminately. How many men died this way is known only to God. Fortunately, and to their credit, German military personnel aggressively defended shot-down airmen from such outrages.