

Chapter 13 – The Untold Story – ACT 1 [v2]

“Now You[‘ll] Know The Rest Of The Story”

- Paul Harvey

Not a lot of information flows during times of war. That is probably good since the real story would be overwhelming to those back home. It must have been very stressful for the Hofmann and Schuch families but the sequence of events seem simple on the surface – there was an accident, George survived, was captured and transported to a camp in Eastern Germany. Letters were arriving frequently. His Christmas spirits seemed good in his last letter of 1944. How bad could it be?

I do not remember much of what he may have told me as a child. By the time I was old enough to really understand, he spoke nothing of it at all. I found his memorabilia tucked away in a drawer in the basement of our first house in Plainview, Long Island, New York, when I was ten. I thought it was “pretty cool stuff” but until now never appreciated the reality and drama of the story nor its significance.

How bad could it be!? It was a nightmare that silently haunted my father for the remainder of his life. This chapter is ACT 1.

The daily bombing missions that began in April continued unabated in May. Because of their training the crews fell into a well establish routine although their oxymoron-like attitude was a little strange. They hated every minute of combat while eagerly volunteering to fly as many missions as they could get!

Why? Army Air Force Policy – twenty-five missions then home for R&R.

SECRET (continued)

596TH BOMBARDMENT SQUADRON (M)

397TH BOMBARDMENT GROUP (M) Station 168, England

15 June 1944

SUBJECT: May Installment (1944) of Squadron History.

TO : Historical Section, IX Bomber Command, APO 140, U.S. Army.
(through 397th Bombardment Group (M), APO 140, U.S. Army)

In May, 1944 the Squadron T.O. was changed by IX Air Force General Order 129, Paragraph 1, dated 10 May 1944 which authorized the increase of the Squadron strength from 21 crews to 24 crews. During the month we remained at Station 168, Rivenhall, England.

Lt. Hausman, Kassel and crews transferred from Hq, AAF Station 236, APO 639, dated 20 May 1944. Lt. Brandle, Barcroft and crews transferred for Hq. AAF Station 236, APO 639, per paragraph 1, S.O. 147 dated 29 May 1944 to 596th Sq.

The following missions were flown by the Group during May and our Squadron participated:

MISSION NO.11. 1/5/44 TARGET-Mantes-Gassicourt (MY & BRIDGE) Results-Good.

Major McLeod, Capt. Rhodes, Lts. Jordan, Estes, Flowers, Colahan and crews flew in 2nd Box. Lts. King, Roberts, Illanes, Goodnow, Hayes, Hoch and crews flew in 1st Box.

MISSION NO.12. 2/5/44 TARGET-Busigny (MY) Results- Excellent.

Col. Coiner led 2nd Box, with crew from 596th. Capt. Rhodes and crew flew deputy lead.

MISSION NO.13. 4/5/44 TARGET-Etaples (GUN POSITION) Results-Poor.

Capt. Gibson and 596th crew led 2nd Box. Capts. Evans, Boyar, Lts. Hayes, Parker, Freeman, Roberts, Broan, Illanes, Flowers, Wegman, King and crews flew in 2nd Box.

MISSION NO.14. 8/5/44 TARGET-Oissel (RR BRIDGE) Results-Fair.

Major McLeod and crew led 2nd Box. Capts. Weltzin, Rhodes, Lts. Freeman, Jordan, Flowers, White, Goodnow, Colahan, Hoch, Illanes, Cannop and crews flew in 2nd Box.

The Parker crew on the Missouri Mule II was not flying on May 8th but an opportunity came up for George to fill in for the bombardier in Elmer Freeman's crew – one more mission closer to twenty-five and a trip home. Sterling Hoch was also on this mission.

The crew departed Rivenhall around 8:00 AM joining the mission formation in the 2nd box position.

Subject: General Crew Stations/ Box Formation

On a normal B-26 the crew would consist of a Pilot, Copilot, Bombardier/Navigator, radio/gunner, engineer/gunner and armourer/gunner. Normal bombing practice was to bomb by formations of 18 or 36 aircraft. A flight of 18 x B-26's was called a box formation and this constituted of 3 flights of six planes. (See layout below)

Box Formation

Box Lead
Wingman Wingman

Deputy Box Lead
Wingman Wingman

Flight Lead
Wingman Wingman

Deputy Flight Lead
Wingman Wingman

Flight Lead
Wingman Wingman

Deputy Flight Lead
Wingman Wingman

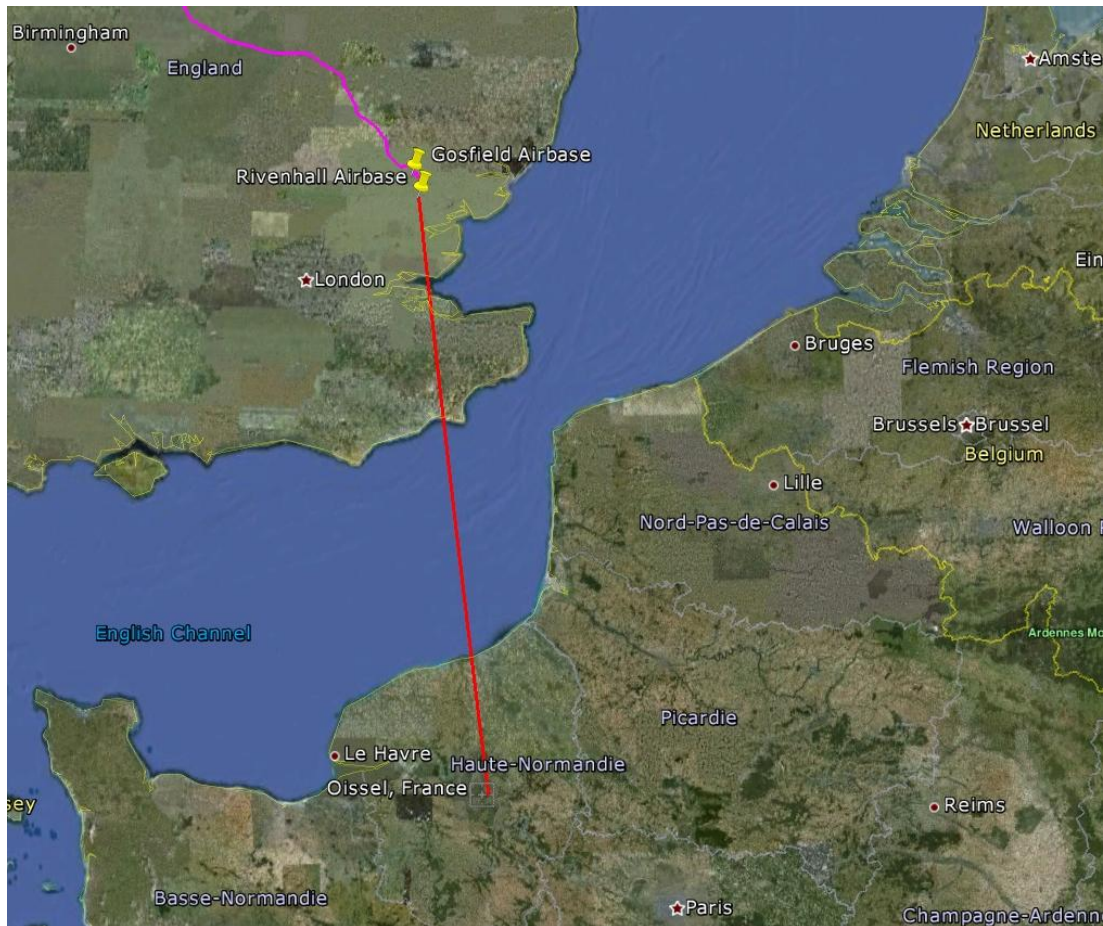
Only the Box Lead/Deputy Box Lead, Flight Lead and Deputy Flight Lead normally carried a bombardier and a navigator.

All other ships in the formation dropped their bombs on a signal from the Box Lead, so there was no need for both a navigator and a bombardier in these ships.

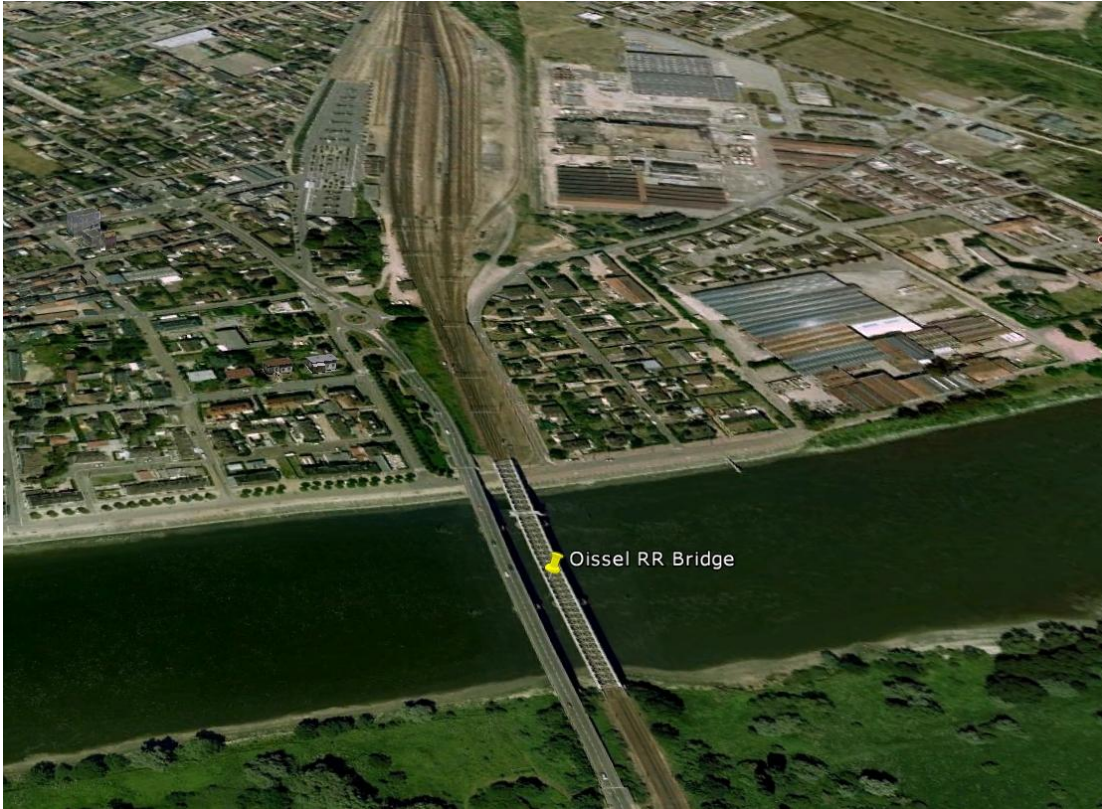
To further complicate crew stations a box lead frequently carried two radio/gunners, one to permanently man the command radio and the other to take over the gunner duties.

When radar aids were fitted. The Box Lead would now carry a Pilot, copilot, bombardier, navigator, gee/navigator, two radio/gunners, armourer/gunner and engineer/gunner. Add to this an occasional photo/gunner.

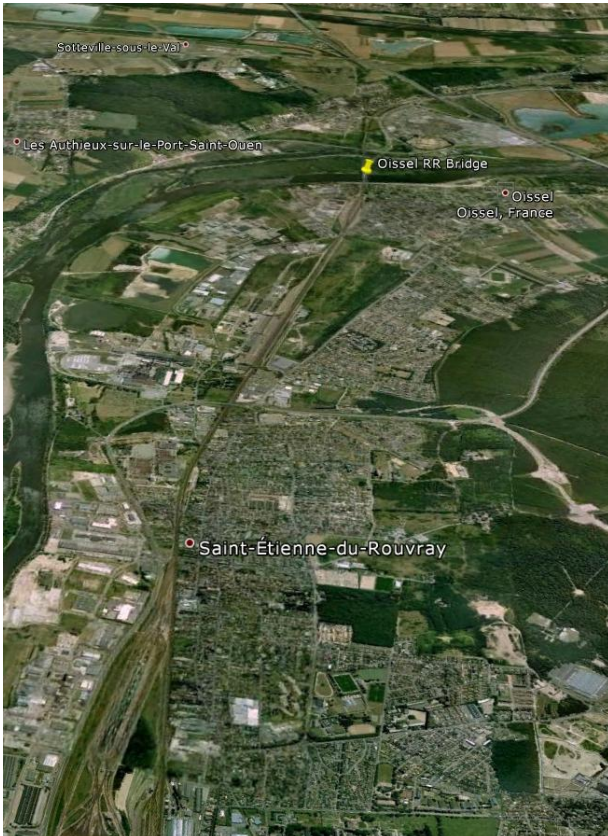
The formation left the Rivenhall air space on a heading of 173° bound for the Oissel Railroad Bridges – one of many links supplying the German western front that needed to be knocked out before the D-Day invasion at Normandy.







Oissel Rail Yard and Bridge looking North



Bombing Run – Inbound at 173°

Thus far, in spite of heavy anti-aircraft activity, no B-26s had been lost in 14 missions. However, there were always a few who had just enough luck to return to England – a testament to the survivability of the B-26 Marauder and other American aircraft.



The bombardier/navigator had the best seat in the house. It is like riding in the front seat of a glass roller coaster. Exhilarating!! But sometimes fatal.



But this time they weren't so lucky.

SECRET (continued)

596TH BOMBARDMENT SQUADRON (M)

397TH BOMBARDMENT GROUP (M) Station 168, England

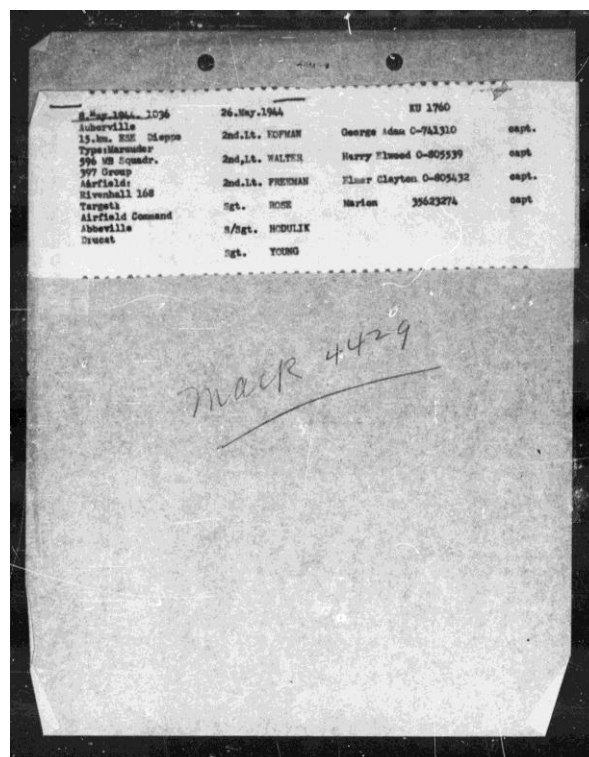
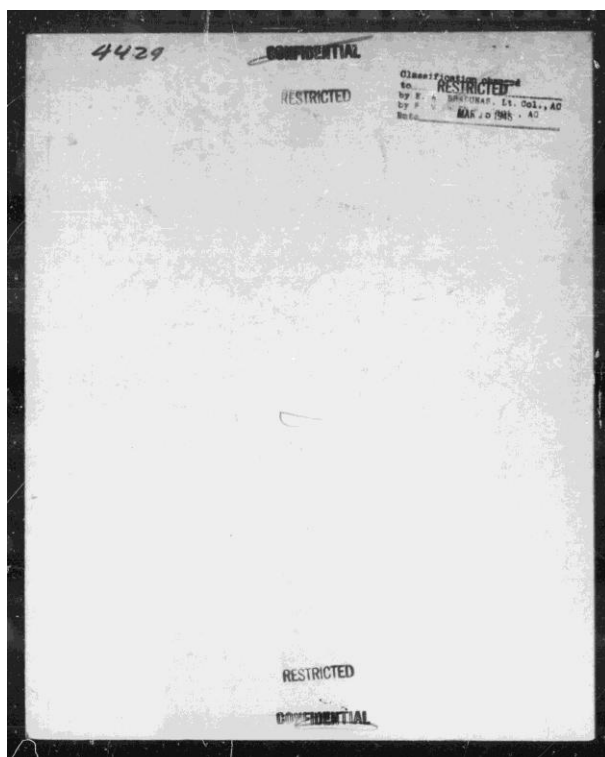
15 June 1944

SUBJECT: **May Installment (1944) of Squadron History.**

MISSION NO.14. 8/5/44 TARGET-Oissel (Railway Bridge) (98th CBW F.O. 45-302)

On operational mission over enemy territory occupied France B-26B55 Airplane No. 42096143 peeled out of formation with both engines smoking. Probably hit by flak. Last seen headed on course 270 degrees 2 miles N.W. Aboncourt, France, losing altitude.

Aircraft 96-143 was running for the English Channel. Declassified Missing Air Craft Report 4429 gives the details of the combat action.



~~SECRET~~

HEADQUARTERS 397TH BOMBARDMENT GROUP (M) AAF
APO # 140, U. S. Army

9 May 1944.

SUBJECT: Missing Air Crew Report.

TO : Commanding General, Ninth Air Force, APO # 696, U. S. Army
ATTENTION: 26th S/C/U.
Commanding General, Ninth Bomber Command, APO # 140, U. S. Army
ATTENTION: Stat Control.
Commanding Officer, 98th Combat Bombardment Wing, APO 140, U. S. Army
ATTENTION: Stat Control.

In compliance with Ninth Air Force memorandum 35-6, the following report is submitted.

1. ORGANIZATION: Location 168; Ninth Bomber Command; 397th Group; 596th squadron.
2. SPECIFY: Point of departure 168; Course 1738; Intended Destination, Railroad Bridges at OISSEL; Type of Mission, Operational.
3. WEATHER CONDITIONS AND VISIBILITY AT TIME OF CRASH OR WHEN LAST REPORTED: Light thin scattered cumulus 1/10 to 2/10 cloud cover between 2-3000', visibility 10 miles.
4. GIVE: (a) Date, 8 May 1944; Time, 1015; Location, Near ABANCOURT FRANCE.
(b) Last Sighted.
5. AIRCRAFT WAS LOST AS A RESULT OF: Enemy Anti-Aircraft.
6. AIRCRAFT: Type, Model and Series B-26B; AAF Serial Number 42-96143.
7. ENGINES: Type, Model and Series, R-2800-43; AAF Serial Number (a) O-61312-L, (b) O-61323-R.
8. INSTALLED WEAPONS: Cal 50 M2 Browning Machine guns as follows; 602734, 607368, 603173, 1077088, 1077608, 1077744, 1077560, 387947, 388066, 388441, 388366.
9. THE PERSONS LISTED BELOW WERE REPORTED AS BATTLE CASUALTIES.
10. NUMBER OF PERSONS ABOARD AIRCRAFT: Crew 6; Total 6.

Crew Position	Name in full	Rank	Serial Number
1. Pilot	Freeman, Elmer Clayton	2nd Lt.	O-895432 - RTD
2. Co-Pilot	Walter, Harry Elwood	2nd Lt.	O-905539 - RTD
3. Bombardier	Hofmann, George Adam	2nd Lt.	O-741310 - RTD
4. Engineer	Young, Oscar Eugene	Sgt.	39852035 - RTD
5. Radio	Hodulik, Henry Joseph	S/Sgt.	32766661 - RTD
6. Gunner	Rose, Marion (NMI)	Sgt.	35623274 (RTD)

11. BELOW ARE THOSE PERSONS WHO HAVE LAST KNOWLEDGE OF AIRCRAFT:
 1. Brown, Francis E. 1st Lt. O-727846 Last Sighted
 2. Ganther, Richard A. F/O T-61336 Last Sighted
 3. Humphries, Winfred E. 2nd Lt. O-741180 Last Sighted
 4. Buccheri, John S/Sgt. 11088629 Last Sighted
 5. Dabkowski, Peter S/Sgt. 11044803 Last Sighted
 6. Ragard, Anthony J. S/Sgt. 12216275 Last Sighted
 7. Flowers, William V. 1st Lt. O-795454 Last Sighted
 8. Elliott, Paul E. 2nd Lt. O-812237 Last Sighted
 9. Carl, Scott W. S/Sgt. 19088503 Last Sighted
 10. Coffman, Linden B. S/Sgt. 13145301 Last Sighted
 11. Soonzert, Hilary G. S/Sgt. 16156767 Last Sighted
 12. Gray, Monte D. S/Sgt. 16144698 Last Sighted
 13. Illanes, Gregory H. 1st Lt. O-437416 Last Sighted
 14. Ridenour, Albert R. 2nd Lt. O-812312 Last Sighted
 15. Iuvara, Alfred 2nd Lt. O-741181 Last Sighted
 16. Pensinger, Hubert R. T/Sgt. 35582010 Last Sighted
 17. Willse, Martin J. S/Sgt. 32765458 Last Sighted
 18. Miller, Floyd S/Sgt. 14046471 Last Sighted

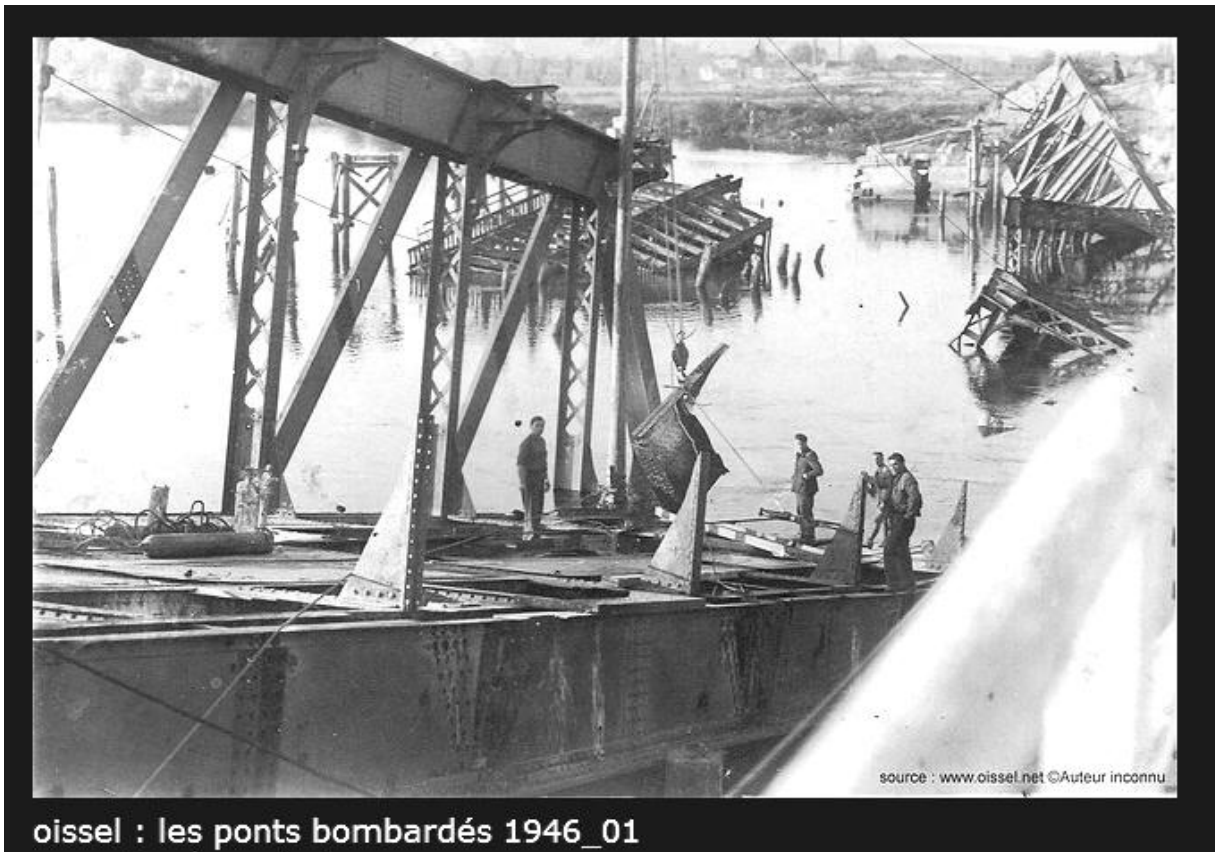
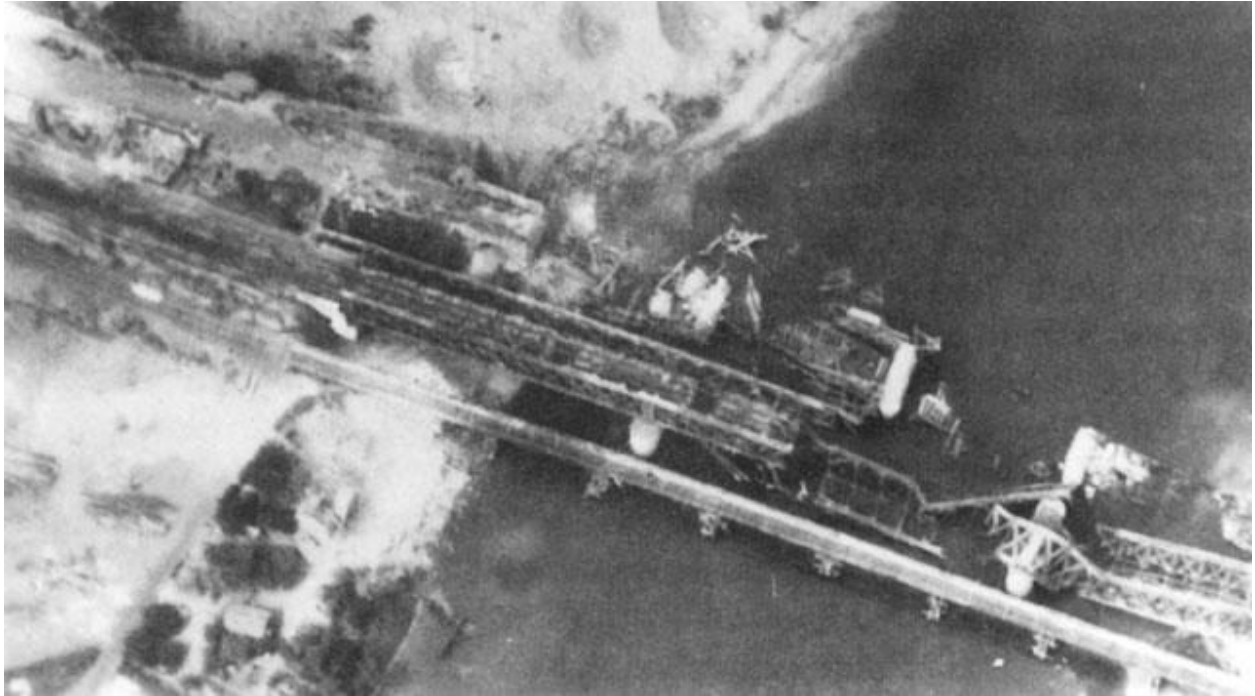
12. It is unknown whether any of the personnel survived.
13. No aerial photographs of that area available.
14. No eyewitness description of missing plane, only sighted it going out of formation.
15. No search made by this Group for missing aircraft.
For the Group Commander:

K. C. Dempster
K. C. DEMPSTER,
Major, Air Corps,
S-3

J. C. P.

~~SECRET~~

The Oissel Railroad Bridges were destroyed ...



oissel : les ponts bombardés 1946_01

... but the mission had its cost.

Over the next few days as B-26 crews and their fighter pilot escorts debriefed more details were reported. Aircraft 96-143 was seen crashing on fire and 100% destroyed - but the crew may have survived.

SECRET (continued)

596TH BOMBARDMENT SQUADRON (M)

397TH BOMBARDMENT GROUP (M) Station 168, England

15 June 1944

Spitfire escort reports six chutes from this aircraft landing in a woods.

The following crew members reported missing in action:

Pilot - Elmer C. Freeman, 2nd Lt. - O-805432

Co-Pilot - Harry E. Walter, 2nd Lt. - O-805539

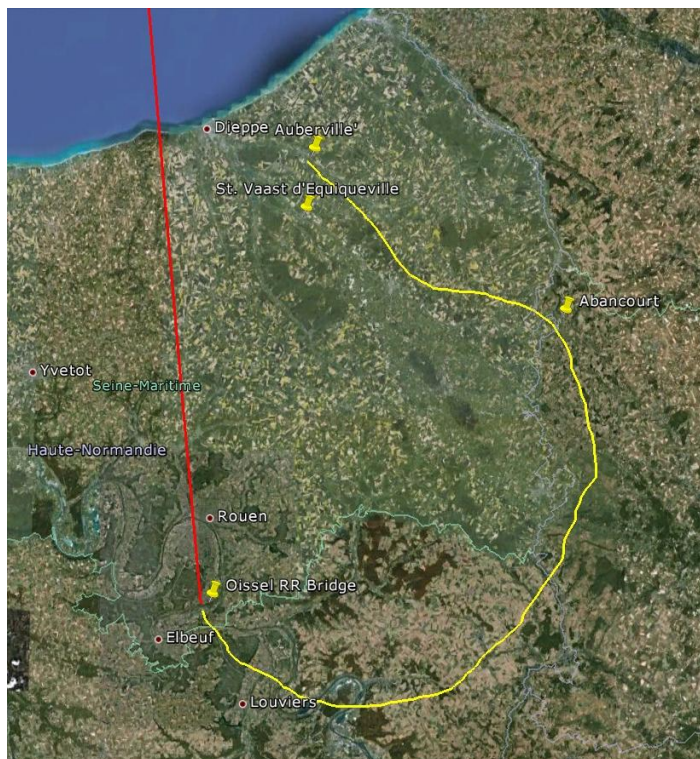
Bombardier - George A. Hoffman, 2nd Lt. - O-741310

Engineer Gunner - Oscar E. Young, Sgt. - 39852035

Radio Gunner - Henry J. Hoderlik, S/Sgt. - 3276661

Gunner - Marion (NMI) Rose, Sgt. 35623274

One of the six parachutes that exited the plane and landed in the woods seen by the escorting Spitfire fighters belonged to George. What they didn't report was that it had not fully deployed.



On their final approach to the targeted Railroad Bridges at Oissel, France, the mission came under very heavy anti-aircraft ground fire and George's plane was hit by flak. With both engines smoking they peeled out of formation and ran for the English Channel and safety. They began their retreat with a long turn to the east and then north. By the time Aircraft 96-143 had reached Abancourt, France, it could no longer maintain altitude and was seen by escort fighters heading 270° - due west - still trying to make the Normandy coast. Protected by the escorting fighters the order was given by pilot Elmer Freeman to bail out and the crew landed in the woods near St. Vaast d'Equiqueville, France, just seven miles short of Dieppe and the coast. The plane crashed very near the village of Auberville'

Perhaps the crew came down in one of the heavily wooded areas that still exist around St. Vaast d'Equiqueville today. That we may never know – but it was nearby nonetheless.



← The “bunkers” at St. Vaast d’Equiqueville



The crew from B-26 96-143 were lucky that day. All were alive when they hit the ground in occupied territory. One told an incredible story of hiding and escaping (see Appendix B for Captain Freeman's story). Unfortunately due to a very hard landing caused by a partially deployed parachute, George injured his back and was immediately captured by German soldiers. It was 11:10 AM. Two of his fellow airmen, radio gunner Marion Rose and co-pilot Harry Elwood Walters were also captured nearby while trying to flee.

Distributor Dalag Luft, Oberursel
24 May 1944

Downing and POW Report

Luft Command Belgium/North France, 8 May 44

KU 1760

Discharge No.	Shot down by	Place of Crash	Aircraft type
1	? 1036 W.	Amberville, 15 km east southeast of Dieppe	Marauder

POW	Remarks
3 men captured: 2nd Lt Walter Harry E. O 805539 2nd Lt Hofmann, George A. O 741310 Sgt Rose, Marian, 35623274	Disposition of the rest Unknown

*MACR
4429*

Local Quarters 8 May 1944

Airbase Command
E (v) 227/XI Place: Abbeville

Final Report Concerning Air Forces Personnel

Date of Crash: 8 May, at 1036 hours
Place of Crash: Auberville, 15 km east southeast of Dieppe
Aircraft type: Marauder, on its way back
Identification markings: Fan side, 296
43
Kind of Landing: Crashed on fire, 100% destruction
Kind of Capture: By flak

Disposition of the Crew

3 men captured

2nd Lt Walter Harry E., O 805539, captured in Angerville, 1055 hours

2nd Lt Hofmann, George A., O 741210, captured in St. Wast. Equiqueville, 1110 hours

Sgt Ross. Marion, 35623274, captured in BoscGeffroy

KU 1760

4429

HEADQUARTERS
Army Air Forces Pilot School (ATE)
Turner Field, Albany, Georgia

SUBJECT: Interrogation of Former Prisoners of War

TO : Commanding General, Army Air Forces, Washington 25, D. C.
Attn: Personal Affairs Branch, Room 4315 Munitions Bldg.

1. In compliance with your TWX AFPPS 3909, 28 Sep 45, the following information is submitted:

- a. Name of casualty Rose, _____.
- b. Rank Sgt.. Crew position Radio Gunner.
- d. Date last seen May 8, 44. Place last seen Leaving Plane
- f. Circumstances of loss of aircraft Loss of one Engine and Damage to others by flak.
- g. Known information (eye witness only)
NONE

h. Hearsay information (all other information about above named casualty, with estimate of reliability)
VERY RELIABLE. Bombardier, Lt. G. A. Hoffman reported that Sgt. Rose was captured and taken to an interrogation center with him. No further information.

(Note: Reverse side may be used if more space is needed in giving information requested above.)

Elmer C. Freeman, 1st Lt.
Rank and name of reporter

0-900437 397th B. Gr.
ASN Unit

While I have not yet found the original source, the following photograph from the archives of the United States Air Force Academy in Colorado shows the moment of capture of an airman still in his Irvin chute that was published in a German newspaper. I believe it is a photograph of 2nd Lt. George A Hofmann at the beginning of his nightmare. I am certain that is his face and it is exactly the way my father described it to me.



“For you, the war is over.”