

27 août 1943 - VILLERS - SIR - SIMON

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(with editorial corrections, *additions* and *comments* by Craig S. Hartley)

The 351st Bombardment Group target for the August 27, 1943 is the blockhouse for the V2 secret weapons at Watten - Eperlecques. Twenty two airplanes of 351st Bombardment Group took off at 5:10 p.m. from Polebrook Air station in Great Britain, under the leadership of Major Elzie Ledoux for their 32nd mission since their arrival in that theater of operations in April 1943.



Aerial view of Polebrook, England, base for B-17s.

Aboard the bomber B - 17 F encoded YB - H, serial number 42-29716, nicknamed "FAST WOMAN" of the 508th Bombardment Squadron the following crew was in place:



First Row (kneeling) :S/Sgt Orville G Greene, S/Sgt Joseph M May, S/Sgt Louis A Lochen, S/Sgt Lionel D Mount
Second Row : T/Sgt Alexander B Noe, 1st Lt William J Suit, 2nd Lt James F Grayson, 2nd Lt Bennie H Bell, 2nd Lt Myron L Johnson, T/Sgt Bertil E Erickson.

For this young crew is the ninth mission. All are confident; Is not 1st Lieutenant Suit a good pilot? (N.B. This picture was taken at Polebrook and sent to the families of all of the crew sometime in July, 1943. The plane was not the one that they flew in on the fatal mission. Records indicate that this crew never flew in *The Venus*. It was just a convenient prop for “photo day” for the folks back home. This had the effect of some sources erroneously identifying the fatal aircraft as *The Venus* (see the excerpt below), which was, in fact flown by a different crew and lost with all aboard later in the year.)



Pilot 1/Lt William J. (Jack) Suit and Co-pilot 2/Lt James F. Grayson, Jr.

The French coast was crossed Berck-sur-Mer at an altitude of 15,000 feet (500 meters). Immediately, packs of Messerschmitt 109 and Focke-Wulf 190 batter the groups of B-17s. For ten minutes, the fighters attacked the heavily armed bombers. Seven German aircraft were destroyed by the bombers’ gunners. However, air support was rendered ineffective not only by a lack of coordination between the bombers and supporting fighters but also because the aircraft camouflage used by enemies and friends was too similar.

(N.B. This circumstance probably led to the account given after the war by a surviving crew member that the fatal attack described below included Allied support aircraft “ One(survivor) contacted and visited Mom and Dad at Hurst, IL and said that one of our own fighters shot them down – everyone was trigger-happy” This unverified account is given by Lt. Grayson’s sister and is written on the reverse of the picture above.)



(N.B. The purple line locates the origin (A), the place where the attacking bombers crossed the French Coast (B), the target (D) and the approximate site of the crash(C.)

Around 7:05 p.m., Lieutenant Suit's bomber came under fire from six Messerschmitts. The pilot was killed. The co-pilot (Lt. Grayson) assumed control of the aircraft. He broke formation, leaving the group. Irreparably damaged, the order to evacuate the aircraft is given. Seven airmen jump with parachutes before the aircraft exploded in the air with its pilot, the co-pilot and rear gunner. They will find an horrific death. *(N.B. Both the pilot and rear gunner were killed in the initial attack. The assault followed the German pattern for fighters attacking a B-17. In the first pass they tried to take out the pilot and the #2 engine (inboard, nearest the pilot) because that maximized the chance of the plane catching on fire due to the proximity of this engine to the gas tanks. It appears that this was a perfectly executed attack by ME-109s. Also, it was S.O.P. for the co-pilot (or pilot, if he survived) to keep the aircraft aloft and as steady as possible for two minutes after an order to evacuate. This was to allow time for the survivors to bail out. Lt. Grayson was following this procedure when the aircraft exploded.)*

For the rest of the group, the bombing of the blockhouse at Watten had a poor result due to the fact that a large cloud was on the target, forcing the group to make two passes over the target area. The group returned to base without further incident, at 9:20 p.m.

(N.B. The following three accounts of the raid on this complex are from www.v2rocket.com/start/deployment/watten.html:

1)

Friday August 27, 1943

STRATEGIC OPERATIONS (Eighth Air Force): VIII Bomber Command Mission 87: 224 B-17's are dispatched to the German rocket-launching site construction at Watten, France; 187 hit the target at 18.46-19.41 hours; they claim 7-0-6 Luftwaffe aircraft; 4 B-17's are lost, 1 is damaged beyond repair and 98 damaged; casualties are 1 KIA, 18 WIA and 32 MIA. The mission escort consists of 173 P-47's; they claim 8-1-2 Luftwaffe aircraft; 1 P-47 is lost and the pilot is listed as MIA. This is the first of the Eighth Air Force's missions against V-weapon sites (later designated NOBALL targets).



2)

On August 27, 1943, In the village of Penin, Augustin Flippe watches as a B-17, which has left its formation is trailing bluish smoke from the rear of the aircraft. The trail thickens and becomes black. The crewmen jump from the burning airplane just before it explodes killing 3 still onboard. Other witnesses of the catastrophe, said the remnants fell towards the town of Villers-sir-Simon, along with seven parachutes. But Augustin Flippe, who is only nine years old, turns back homeward after the sad scene is described to him

The Boeing B-17, The Venus, belongs to the 508 Squadron of the 351 Bomb Group of the 8th US Army Air Force. On that day of August 27, 22 Flying Fortresses take off from Great Britain to attack the V-2 Blockhaus at Watten-Eperlecques. After having crossed the coast, the B-17's are attacked by German fighters, which take advantage due to lack of coordination of the allied bombers. Somehow this one B-17 gets separated and six Me-109's pounce on "The Venus". The crew survivors landed in the direction of Hermaville. Slightly wounded, 4 of them were stopped by the Germans. These men were sent to a hospital in Arras, then shipped to prison camps in Germany and Austria. If not for the intervention of some brave local residents, the other 3 American airmen would have fell to the same fate.

3)

On August 27, ten days after the raid on Peenemünde, 187 Flying Fortresses of the Eighth Army Air Force, escorted by 147 P-47 Thunderbolts, attacked the bunker in the late evening. After crossing the coast, the B-17s were attacked by German fighters, which took advantage of the lack of coordination between the bombers. Despite the deadly accurate anti-aircraft fire and attacks from German fighters, the attack continued for about an hour with a total of 366 bombs being dropped. The 2,000-pound bombs devastated the huge site, especially the northern section where large quantities of concrete had just been poured, leaving a hardened, twisted mass. At the time of the attack, workers had completed more than a third of the total construction. Some of the forced laborers died in the attack, while others took the opportunity to escape. During the raid, the Americans suffered the loss of four B-17s, with 98 others being damaged, along with one P-47 shot down. Upon landing in England, the crew of one B-17 counted more than 200 flak holes in their aircraft. The American aircrews claimed a dozen German fighters shot down. The daylight attack of August 27, 1943, was the first time the German V-weapon sites had been targeted by the U.S. Eighth Air Force. For good measure, from August 30 to September 7, the complex was attacked four more times in smaller raids using medium and heavy bombers.

The blockhouse is now a museum: Le Blockhaus D'Eperlecques Museum, Rue du Sart, 62910 Eperlecques, FRANCE

<http://www.leblockhaus.com/modulosite2/welcome-gb.htm>

What was the fate of members of bomber shot down over Villers Sir Simon? After the explosion, pieces of metal are thrown in all directions. Seven airmen safely land in the fields.

The navigator, Bennie Bell, injured on arm and shoulder, was arrested and immediately transferred to the military hospital at Arras. He was then sent to Germany in a POW camp.

The bombardier Myron Johnson touched the ground miraculously alive, but wounded. Indeed, his parachute had not stopped to flare (*i.e. to open completely*) throughout the descent. He landed in the field with two broken legs. He spent the night lying in the field with for only care stamps (*sic*) of morphine that French nurses brought to him. Transported to the military hospital at Arras, he was later transferred to Germany at the Stammlager Luft III. Complications in the healing of the fractures forced the German doctors to amputate one of his legs. It was then repatriated to the United States via Sweden, in September 1944. (He died in his hometown of Pontiac, Illinois in

February 1994 at the age of 76. He kept in his body numerous pieces of anti-aircraft shrapnel received during the raid).

The top turret gunner Alexander Noe, severely burned on his face and head, was treated and later transferred to Stalag XV # B in Austria. He remained in custody for twenty two months. (He died in Sumter, South Carolina in 1985 at the age of 72 years).

The left waist gunner Joseph May was also captured by the Germans and transferred to Germany.

Regarding Louis Lochen, right waist gunner, let René Ducroquet tell the story:

"I was with Jacques Martin (Massart), my brother-in-law. Both refractory to STO (N.B. *These were farm laborers who had refused to go to Germany to work in exchange for the return of French POWs. To avoid forced labor, they were concealed by the local populace.*), we were hidden at the farm of Mr. and Mrs Duval, our in-laws. That day, we were in the fields when the drama unfolded. Seeing the airmen fall with parachutes, I ran to the closest one. It was near the Fillescamps farm. Lying on the ground, he seemed to suffer. Lips clenched, he could not pronounce any word. Indeed, the form of one of his boots clearly indicated that the foot had to be broken. Suddenly Gilbert FEVRIER of Avesnes le Comte with his bicycle and Leon Burny, another refractory hidden with us, arrived on the scene. With many precautions, we raised the wounded man.

We wanted to return to the nearby farm. But when we arrived in the driveway at some distance from the main gate, we found ourselves in front of a German soldier, rifle in hand. He ordered to lay the wounded man on the ground. Soon after, other soldiers arrived. An officer came and stood at attention in front of the man who suffered. When the latter was able to say a few words, he asked me how many men had left the plane after him. The answer I gave him brought him proof that the rest of the crew remained in the plane and then killed."

Louis Lochen was then transported to the military hospital at Arras with the Navigator. He would then be sent to a POW camp in Germany. For Orville Greene, ventral (ball) turret gunner, Mr. Ducroquet continues:

"Meanwhile, my brother-in-law, Jacques Martin had rushed to meet the next one who appeared in the sky. Reached its height, he made it clear to remove the parachute harness, helped pick up the white canvas and showed him a heap of oats to hide, while he hid the silk pack under another mound. He explained by signs to the pilot not to leave his hiding place and wait for his return that night.

When it was dark, my brother and I went looking for him. The man waited, despite the pain of a sprained foot during the fall. We returned to the farm and comforted him. The next day, we cut off his mustache, and gave him civilian clothes. A few days later, when he recovered, he wanted to go alone. We have only a little information on his journey. He seems, however, to have been passed by the Guittard of Frévent network."

For Bertil Erickson, radio operator, the situation is as follows:

In Habacq, Marcel Lenfle, farm laborer, was working in a field. Roger Dionet was busy weeding beets in another plot, when their eyes are attracted by a heavy bomber in distress. Soon several parachutes appear in the sky, and one of the airmen touches the ground about 200 yards away.

Without hesitation, the two young men leapt over to him and addressed him. “Quick ... quick ... by gestures they made him understand that he must hide quickly because the Germans in the village will soon arrive! The airman understands and follows their suggestions, he lies in a field of alfalfa. The parachute is bundled and hidden. Both say they will return at night. For the airman, he must wait. Soon the German soldiers and French militiamen pass on the road nearby, and as their eyes scan the plain, they do not stop to interview workers in the fields.

When night came, accompanied by Oscar Bolin another comrade, the young men prepared a snack, civilian clothes, and went to the alfalfa field where the American remained. He waits patiently. They then went to a cowshed in the middle of a meadow bordered by the road. Two of them take bales of straw from a stack back to that room, so that the aviator can burrow underneath. A brief moment of fear occurred when two German cyclists doing their rounds at night, passed two steps away. The next day, when young people return to visit their protege, he has disappeared. They will learn later that Marcel Mastin took charge of the airman, who then passed him to Mr. Petin of Izel lez Hameaux.



Portion of wing near crash site.

The remains of three killed airmen crashed into the plain, near the site of the fall of the largest aircraft debris. Because of their precipitous decline, they are driven into the ground. It's broken bodies that German soldiers take back from the fields. They are placed in wooden coffins and after identification, they are placed in the chancel of the church. On 28 August, after a religious service celebrated by the pastor of Ambrines, the coffins are placed in a German truck that went to the cemetery of the village. The people came from all around to follow the funeral procession.



A few days later, "V" (for victory) and cross of Lorraine flowers were laid on the grave. Five slabs of white marble also adorn them. Three plaques bearing the names, identification numbers and hometowns of aviators, one bearing to the famous Victor Hugo quote:

*Among the most beautiful names, their name is the most beautiful.
 All glory goes to them and falls fleeting
 As a mother would do, the whole nation rocks them in their graves.*

the latter being offered by women POW's wives of Villers Sir Simon.



AMERICAN BATTLE MONUMENTS COMMISSION
 European Office
 92380 GARCHES - FRANCE

Grave of 2/Lt. J. F. Grayson, Jr.



Memorial to Lt. Grayson in Blairsville, IL, cemetery, where his parents are buried. Their headstones are the other side of the memorial.

In 1946, the U.S. war graves service came to exhume the three bodies. 1st Lieutenant Suit was repatriated to the United States and buried in Arlington National Cemetery. Those of 2nd Lt. Grayson and S / SGT Mount were buried in the American Military Cemetery at Colleville-St Laurent in Normandy.



In 1997, a monument to the memory of these airmen was erected by the Souvenir Français Association, committee of Arras.