

# THE OUTER CIRCLE

## 359<sup>TH</sup> FIGHTER GROUP ASSOCIATION

WORLD WAR II

STATION F133 - EAST WRETHAM, ENGLAND

WEB SITE: [www.359fg.org](http://www.359fg.org)



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359<sup>TH</sup> FIGHTER GROUP, 1943-1945



VOLUME 26, No. 1

Cum Leone

APR 2015

## World War II War Crime or Mercy Killing?

from  
Char Baldrige,  
Group Historian

*In the December 2014 issue of The Outer Circle, it was reported that a pilot's body buried in the woods near Rosein, Germany, had been recovered by JPAC. (See report for details). The recovered body was positively identified as Lt. John W. Herb of the 359<sup>th</sup>*

*Fighter Group, 368<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron. Lt. John W. Herb has been repatriated and will be put to rest with full military honors in Arlington National Cemetery on 18 June 2015.*

Lt. John W. Herb was from University Heights, Ohio. He flew his first mission with the 368<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron on 19 February 1945. He was killed on 13 April 1945, while on a bomber escort mission attacking the marshaling yards at Neumunster, Germany. He is listed on the Tablets of the Missing at the Netherlands American Cemetery in Margraten.

On that day, after bomber escort, fighters strafed ground targets in Northern Germany, resulting in 15 enemy aircraft destroyed and 7 locomotives also destroyed. While making an attack on ground aircraft south of Neumunster, Herb flew too close to the trees and tore his coolant scoop off. His ship was unable to gain altitude due to this damage. In the vicinity of northwest Hamburg, Herb's engine quit and he tried to crash-land, but about 30 yards away he crashed into some trees, fell to the ground and burned. Herb was not observed to get out of his plane and was presumed Killed in Action (KIA).

*Continued on page 3*



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359<sup>TH</sup> FIGHTER GROUP  
OFFICERS

VICE PRESIDENT  
AND JUDGE ADVOCATE

**Vernon Judkins**

(520) 825.1778

64713 E. Drifter Drive  
Tucson, AZ 85739

TREASURER

**Charles Levitt**

(817) 498.9252

5796 Rockport Lane  
Ft. Worth, TX 76137  
[charlie.levitt@att.net](mailto:charlie.levitt@att.net)

ROSTER CUSTODIAN

**Dorothy Turcotte**

(413) 532.3161

32 Lindbergh Avenue  
Holyoke, MA 01040  
[pilotandme@comcast.net](mailto:pilotandme@comcast.net)

GROUP HISTORIAN

**Char Baldrige**

(434) 946.0901

715 Sardis Road  
Amherst, VA 24521  
[baldrige@prodigy.net](mailto:baldrige@prodigy.net)

NEWSLETTER

**Gigi Doersch Paddock**

(757) 566.8856

7567 Vincent Drive  
Toano, VA 23168  
[d-gpaddock@verizon.net](mailto:d-gpaddock@verizon.net)

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## Welcome to the “Crossroads of America!”



## Reunion Update Indianapolis: 16-19 July 2015

Indianapolis is getting ready to welcome the 359<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group! **David & Melanie and Mike & Karen Powell**, family of **Rex Powell (369<sup>th</sup>)**, have been working to lock in plans that include events beginning on Friday, 17 July. Please try to arrive on Thursday, 16 July, if possible!

Hotel information: Omni Severin Hotel & Resort  
40 West Jackson Place, Indianapolis, IN 46225

**Reservations: 317.634.6664** (Specify “359<sup>th</sup> Group Rate”) \$129 + tax. The Omni Severin is an award-winning downtown facility with many amenities including pool and fitness center, on-site dining, breakfast vouchers, and airport shuttle (\$10).

Included in Entertainment package: Indianapolis tour, tour to Indianapolis Motor Speedway, and visit to Rolls-Royce Allison Heritage Trust Museum. Entertainment fee is being calculated and will be detailed in the Reunion supplement (arriving in early June).

Please make reservations directly with HOTEL by **DEADLINE: 15 June**. Entertainment Fee (separate from hotel cost) will be coordinated with David Powell, more info coming.

--> **Note: 359<sup>th</sup> veterans and association widows attending this reunion, your hotel room and Entertainment Fee will be reimbursed by the 359<sup>th</sup> Association funds. ★**





Continued from first page

### **Details from the JPAC-CIL 2014-133-I-01 case file**

On 18 and 19 June 2014 a Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC) Investigation Team excavated an unmarked burial site near Gudow Village, Amt Neuhaus municipality, Lüneburg District, Niedersachsen State, Germany. They excavated a burial feature, from which human remains, material evidence, and [other] equipment was recovered. The human remains consisted of a nearly complete skeleton in fair condition, with a class ring from Riverside Military Academy in Gainesville, Georgia, with the date 1940 on the left side. The interior of the ring was engraved with the initials J.W.H. (JPAC R&A historians contacted Riverside Military Academy. The school confirmed that a student named John William Herb graduated from the academy in 1940). The Lüneburg homicide squad was present during the excavation operation. On 19 June all items were transferred to the Lüneburg police department, due to rumors about a possible war crime incident, for their forensic analysis. Most of the evidence was later returned to the U.S. Army and transported to the JPAC-CIL on 2 September 2014.

**Background:** The case designated as MACR 13905 for the 13 April 1945 loss of a P-51D piloted by Lt. John W. Herb sustained damage while strafing enemy targets and reportedly crash landed northwest of Hamburg. According to German eyewitness information Lt. Herb survived the crash, but shortly members of the Reichsarbeitsdienst (RAD) arrived at the scene and shot the pilot. His body was allegedly buried near the location of the crash site near Gudow.

In February 1950 the Army Graves Registration Command conducted an investigation northwest of Hamburg specifically searching for information related to Lt. Herb. Further correspondence with Lt. Herb's wingman, **Captain John A. Denman**, suggested that instead, the aircraft crashed southeast of Hamburg, and may be in Russian controlled territory. Captain Denman's letter did not lead to further investigations. On 23 April 1951 the War Department declared John W. Herb's remains to be non-recoverable. The AGRC Memorial division notified Lt. Herb's mother, Vera W. (nee Hood) Herb of the final determination of non-recoverability of her son.

In September 2013 the JPAC Research team contacted Mr. Enrico Schwartz, of the Missing Allied Air Crew Research Team (MAACRT), who himself



*Excavation site. Photo courtesy of M. Römer.*

### **CO-FOUNDERS**

Tony Chardella  
Floyd Myers

### **PAST PRESIDENTS**

Andy Lemmens, 2007  
Nancy Jennings, 2006  
Tom Mettel, 2005  
Randall Jennings, 2004  
Lawrence Beaupre, 2003  
John Baldridge, 2002  
Arvy Kysely, 2001  
Andrew Lemmens, 2000  
Leon Levitt, 1999  
John McAlevey, 1998  
Tom Morris, 1997  
Bill Stepp, 1996  
Gene Surowiec, 1995  
George Doersch, 1994  
Andrew Lemmens, 1992/93  
Earl Adkins, 1991  
Jack Bateman, 1990  
Martha Staley, 1989  
Robert York, 1988  
Larry Bouchard, 1987  
Charles Morton, 1985/86  
Joe Meisl, 1983/84  
John Oliphint, 1981/82  
Robert Gaines, 1979/80  
William R. Rufe, 1977/78  
Anthony Macari, 1975/76  
Anthony Chardella, 1973/74  
Floyd Myers, 1973/74

had been contacted by a local historian, in Rosien Village, Mr. Manfred Römer. Mr. Römer had information on an aircraft crash and possible execution of an American pilot near his village by members of the RAD. Since there was a growing amount of local interest in the site and people had been disturbing the area looking for aircraft wreckage, JPAC recommended that witness interviews and a site survey of the alleged grave site be conducted. This was done. In June 2014 a JPAC team working in the vicinity of Gudow, Germany, interviewed five local witnesses, who as children during the war recalled seeing a U.S. aircraft strike a tree and crash. Some of them also reported that the pilot had been badly injured in the crash and he had been shot after German soldiers removed him from the wreckage. (This could be where the “mercy killing” idea came from. They went on to say that the pilot’s body was buried near the crash site, alongside a path now known locally as Fliegerweg [Airman’s path].

**Details from two German newspaper articles:** “A Soldier’s Fate is Getting Solved” and “Murder Investigation for Dead WWII Pilot” From the *Hagenower Kreisblatt* (area newspaper). Both articles came from Mr. Jim Goodspeed, and were then translated by a German friend of Mr. Wally Hood, a first cousin to John W. Herb.

- **“A Soldier’s Fate is getting solved,” 20 June 2014.** What made a woman take care of an American pilot’s grave for years and to put flowers on it after he was shot down near the Bohldamm woods towards the end of WWII? Perhaps, she had lost one of her own close relatives in the war and hoped that someone would take care of his grave? Perhaps, this woman, a refugee and forestry worker, long dead now, simply was a caring human being. (Witnesses reported that Frau Waschke, a refugee whose son went missing fighting on the Eastern Front, maintained the grave until she died in the 1960s).

What moved a now 74 year old man, Manfred Römer of Rosien, to care about the fate of that pilot and to ask himself if his remains still rest there or if they had been brought back to the USA? Such thoughts could probably be the memories of a five year-old youngster, which he was in the spring of 1945. Or the memory of his own father, who never returned home from the campaigns in Russia. The family doesn’t know anything about where he might be buried. Thanks to the woman who took care of



*Manfred Römer with JPAC investigator*

the grave for so long, for because of that, the memories of the dead soldier stayed alive. Thanks to the desire of Manfred Römer to participate in the solution of the soldier’s fate, there is now hope to establish the identity of the pilot. Recently, Römer talked about his reasons to an assembly outside a tent pitched in the barnyard of his farm. Listening to him were members of the American organization JPAC, an office of the US Military which searches for remains of Prisoners of War and Missing in Action soldiers, identifying them and returning the remains to the USA. Years went by until leads (that the remains of an American pilot were still buried at the locality) grew so strong that a team from JPAC arrived from the United States to conduct concrete investigations. Römer investigated, questioned witnesses and contacted the War Memorial site in Wöbbelin.

- **“Murder Investigation for Dead WWII Pilot”, 03 Aug. 2014.** An unusual criminal case then landed on the desk of the Lüneburg Crime Commission. The investigation centers round the death of a U.S. pilot 70 years ago. A few days before the end of the Second World War, his plane crashed into a wooded area in the municipality of Amt Neuhas, Lüneburg County. Word is he was pulled from the wreckage alive but shot afterwards. To this date, nobody in the small village of Rosien said anything about it. However, the incident kept bothering one of the villagers, until he set investigations in motion.

**A grave in the middle of the woods.** Manfred Römer was five years old when a burning US ‘Mustang’ fighter plane flew directly above him to shortly crash into the woods. “I began to ask questions and heard that near the point of impact there once was a grave





*Lt John W. Herb will be laid to rest at Arlington National Cemetery on Thursday, 18 June 2015.*

which was cared for by a female forestry worker". Was it a lynch mob murder? "Over there...the pilot's life came to its end, and over there, a hole was dug where his body was dumped ..." Because of his mentioning of the grave's location Römer also found witnesses to the plane crash on 18 April 1945 and learned that the unknown American was lynched prior to his death." "The pilot had survived the crash, he was seen alive by witnesses at the time," Römer said. "It was observed that he was shot to death by persons in uniform ... and buried here afterwards." (The JPAC anthropologist who excavated the burial, reports that the area of the skull [in the back of the head] sectioned and retained by the German authorities revealed an apparent gunshot wound. Eyewitness accounts indicate Lt. Herb was injured in the crash of his aircraft and may have sustained a gunshot wound.) Searching with the metal detector. Römer continued to investigate. Using a metal detector, he found parts of the wrecked airplane under the beech tree and he contacted officials.

**Forty cm deep.** This past summer, experts came to Rosien to exhume the dead pilot. His remains were found just 40 centimeters deep in the sandy soil. "The completely preserved skeleton along with some pieces of equipment were found by the archeologist, anthropologists, and forensics," Römer said. Everything was treated very carefully, coded and packed. The remains were sent to forensic medical institutions in Germany to be forwarded later to the U.S. The Lüneburg Homicide Squad was present during the exhumation proceedings. Its spokesperson, Antje Freudenberg, commented: "I can imagine that there will be an inquiry into the possibility that the soldier did not die from the crash but possibly was murdered which also makes this a war crime." The investigators had received a tip concerning this matter which warrants investigation. "It needs to be determined if after all those many years proceedings can be initiated," Freudenberg said. ★

*Sources for this article: Mike Herb, first cousin to Lt. Herb, and wife Patti shared the full JPAC Central Identification Laboratory report and documents. Wally Hood, also a first cousin, had the German newspaper articles translated. Mr. Jim Goodspeed, an educator and Teacher Fellow with the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Wöbbelin, Germany, provided the German newspaper articles. ---Char Baldridge, Group Historian*



## Address Changes

**Kenneth M. Braymen**  
8220 Rainwood Road  
Omaha, NE  
68122-2219

**Rose Erwin**  
32 Crawford Ter  
New Rochelle NY  
10804-4211

**Audrey Plazewski**  
Ahullen Cottage  
Kilanerin-Gorey  
Co. Wexford, Ireland

**Rex Powell**  
5050 Lincoln Ave  
Evansville, IN  
47715-7390

**Benjamin Smith**  
1599 Oconee Rd  
Waycross, GA  
31501-5062

**John W. Wilson**  
4750 J. Street  
Unit 19273  
Sacramento, CA  
95819-5011



## Book Review from Randy Jennings

*Masters of the Air: America's Bomber Boys Who Fought the Air War Against Nazi Germany* - Donald L. Miller (2007, Simon & Schuster)



*Masters of the Air* is a fantastic historical account of the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force's battle against the Third Reich over the skies of Europe. This is a great work of historical writing that is a must read for WWII aficionados. In addition, Steven Spielberg and Tom Hanks are working on a ten-part HBO mini-series loosely based upon the book.

Written by Donald L. Miller, Professor of History at Lafayette College, *Masters of the Air* weaves first person accounts of air battles and life during the war within structured chapters, such as life as a POW. While Stephen Ambrose's *Band of Brothers* followed a single 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne unit throughout the book, *Masters of the Air* goes from subject to subject whilst remaining within the realm of the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force ops in the European Theater of Operations. It is not a seamless narrative but a rich and detailed description of all aspects of fighting at 26,000 feet.

Miller pulls no punches describing the utter failure of the pre-war theoretical concepts of air power with the reality of bloody aerial warfare over Europe. Thus, they were forced to make it up as they went along, and pay the price in blood for the mistakes of the generals in command. Miller also admits to the loose ethical and moral aspects of the claimed American precision day bombing. When in essence we were doing most of our bombing like the British, area bombing with less than 2% of the bombs landing in the general area of the target.

There are fascinating and sad chapters about the physical and psychological aspects of combat at high altitude. Again, there were no medical books for fighting let alone simply surviving at these heights. One could lose oxygen at 20,000 ft, pass out in seconds and die in minutes. Frostbite was all too common, yet one could sweat profusely in combat

conditions while fighting for your life at 40 degrees below zero. Psychological breakdowns were the most common form of incapacitation for airmen. Now called PTSD, or the WWI term Shell Shock, Miller cites WWII heroes also suffered greatly from the mental aspect of aerial combat.

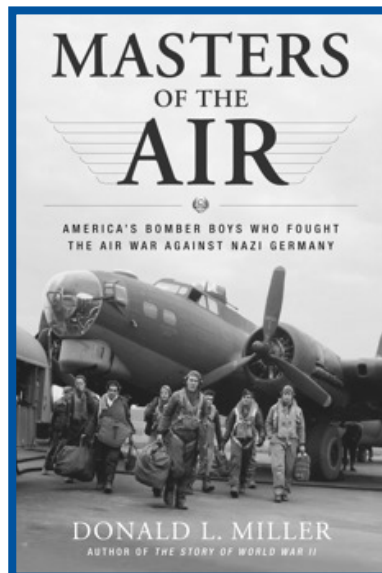
The chapters entitled "The Wire" and "Prisoners of the Swiss" detail the harsh realities of life behind enemy lines or, surprisingly, not so neutral Swiss lines. The shock of being taken prisoner, after the terror of almost being killed in combat and bailing out or crash landing, is almost impossible to comprehend. The deprivation of POW life be it starvation diets, imprisonment, mind-numbing boredom, death marches, and being held prisoner by one's sworn enemy, was yet another war fought within a war. The treatment of interned airmen in Switzerland varied from relative freedom with some limits, to being tortured in camps run by Swiss sympathetic to the Nazis.

Switching to the HBO documentary, filming started in Savannah, Georgia, in 2014 followed by production moving to the United Kingdom this year. The series will have ten episodes, like HBO's *Band of Brothers* and *The Pacific*. HBO has been tight-lipped about the series, but reports are it will center around the 100<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group (Heavy), aka the "Bloody Hundredth". Sources say the working title is *Masters of the Air*, or possibly, *The Mighty Eighth*. The budget is likely in excess of \$200 million (budget for *The Pacific*), so production quality should be impressive.

So I highly recommend *Masters of the Air* as a fantastic read, and I look forward to HBO's rendition of the book. ★

--Randy Jennings

8070 Pantano Place, Alexandria, VA 22309  
randy359th@yahoo.com





# Congressional Gold Medal to Honor American Fighter Aces

On 23 May 2014 President Barack Obama signed a bill to honor American Fighter Aces with a Congressional Gold Medal, the highest civilian honor Congress can bestow. On 20 May 2015 leaders of the U.S. House and Senate will present this Gold Medal in recognition of the American Fighter Aces' heroic service to the United States throughout the history of aviation warfare. The medal will then be displayed at the Smithsonian Institution. House Speaker John Boehner, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, Senate Democratic Leader Harry Reid, and House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi will take part in the ceremony. Dating back to World War I, an Ace is a fighter pilot whose tremendous skill resulted in the destruction of five or more enemy aircraft. Of more than 60,000 American fighter pilots that have taken to the air, fewer than 1,500 have become known as Fighter Aces.



*Design candidates pictured. Final design revealed 20 May 2015.*

**Dortha Doersch** and family will attend the ceremony at Emancipation Hall on behalf of **George "Pop" Doersch**. We honor all our Aces of the 359<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group listed here:

**Ray Wetmore (370<sup>th</sup>) 24.5 enemy aircraft**  
**George "Pop" Doersch (370<sup>th</sup>) 12**  
**Cyril A. Jones (370<sup>th</sup>) 11**  
**Claude J. Crenshaw (369<sup>th</sup>) 10**  
**Robert B. Hatter (368<sup>th</sup>) 9**  
**Donald A Baccus (359<sup>th</sup> FG CO) 9**  
**Robert Booth (369<sup>th</sup>) 8**  
**Joseph E. Shupe (370<sup>th</sup>) 7**  
**Benjamin H. King (369<sup>th</sup>) 7**  
**William F. Collins (369<sup>th</sup>) 7**

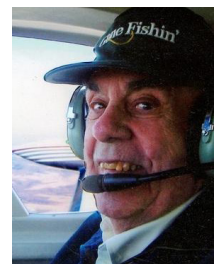
**David B. Archibald (368<sup>th</sup>) 6**  
**Roy W. Evans (Grp Hqs) 6**  
**Robert M. York (370<sup>th</sup>) 5**  
**Niven K. Cranfill (369<sup>th</sup>) 5**  
**George F. Baker (368<sup>th</sup>) 5**  
**John P. Randolph (Grp Hqs) 5**  
**Ralph L. Cox (369<sup>th</sup>) 5**  
**Paul E. Olson (368<sup>th</sup>) 5**  
**Albert R. Tyrrell (368<sup>th</sup>) 5**

Event will be streamed live at [www.speaker.gov/live](http://www.speaker.gov/live) on 20 May, 3:00 p.m. (EST). ★

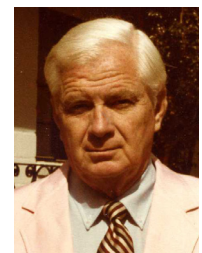
--Gigi Paddock, editor



**Leon J. Levitt**  
368<sup>th</sup> • 23 Apr 2015



**Daniel R. Tuchscherer**  
370<sup>th</sup> • 23 Dec 2014



**Judge Benjamin Smith**  
Board of Directors  
National Museum  
of the Mighty 8<sup>th</sup>  
4 Oct 2014



Special thanks to **Jennifer Burtner** and **Helen Burtner** (pictured) for providing this photo following a visit to the National Museum of the Mighty Eighth Air Force, Savannah, Ga.

Dialogue has begun regarding upkeep of the 359<sup>th</sup> bench and replacing the small name plaque (see inset).

# “He Who Flew Under the Bridge has Passed Over the Bridge”

--Char Baldrige, Group Historian

Our dear friend **Leon J. Levitt (368<sup>th</sup>)** made his final flight on 23 April. By now he has probably already put on quite a show, leading flights of our Group pilots flying under the rainbow.

Leon will be sorely missed. He was so devoted to preserving and maintaining the history of the 359<sup>th</sup>. A few things he did:

Leon wrote stories for the *Outer Circle*, one favorite was “He Who Flew Under The Bridge” (June 1995 issue), where he described his part in “Speedy Project,” a plan in 1945 to reinforce the Swedish Air Force with combat ready aircraft in case the Germans attempted to invade Sweden. Leon and **Tom Klem (369<sup>th</sup>)** volunteered to fly P-51s through enemy air space and deliver them to Sweden. Stockholm is mostly islands connected by all sizes of bridges. When the American pilots arrived in their P-51s they began flying under these bridges. He said, “I selected a small bridge with a sailboat passing under it and tried to hit the



sail with my prop-wash. My first two attempts failed, and by the third try, the skipper had pulled into the bank. People were streaming back onto the bridge, and waving as I passed under, so I made one more run, finishing with a slow roll as I climbed to traffic altitude.”

As Group paparazzo, Leon took hundreds of pictures at the annual reunions and shared them with the newsletter. He and his beautiful family hosted a memorable Reunion in October 1999, in Fort Worth, Texas (Dec 1999 issue).

Leon and his son Charlie attended the Madingley Memorial Ceremony at the World War II Cambridge American Cemetery in England on 30 May 2005, representing the Group at the annual wreath-laying (pictured here, from July 2005 issue). On the return airplane flight, the cabin crew moved him up to First Class when it was known a WW2 pilot was on board.

What a treasure you were, Leon. Blue Skies until we meet again. ★

359<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group Association

FIRST CLASS

## The Outer Circle

Gigi Doersch Paddock  
7567 Vincent Drive  
Toano, Virginia 23168

Address Service Requested

Next issue:  
June '15

