

THE SHOT DOWN BOMBER

by Kees Vermeer

"There is another one!", I shouted, pointing to a parachute unfolding against the blue sky one summer day in 1944.¹ "Rotmoffen (Bastards)!" I shouted again as German flak exploded among broken pieces of an Allied bomber and unfolding parachutes with crew members hanging from them. "Keep your mouth shut!", shouted my mother, which was sound advice, as German police occupied several houses not far from us.

I was 13 years old and seated at the table with my family for lunch. When we heard the noise of a whining plane and explosions, my mother and I ran out of the house. My brother Jan and sister Ali perhaps ran to the upstairs balcony. We could not see the plane in front of our house, so we ran across the street to the neighbors' homes from where we could see the bomber. From that location, my mother and I, and a few neighbors, watched how a life and death drama of a shot down bomber and its crew unfolded in front of our eyes.

The bomber was going down, then the flak exploded.² When the flak hit the bomber, there was no fire; the plane engine just whined one last time, then the plane spiralled out of control, somersaulted a few times, and broke up in large pieces. About 5 parachutes unfolded after the bomber split up, one of which disappeared quickly.³ The flak stopped soon afterwards and the crew floated further unmolested to the ground. The parachutists landed near Gorinchem, a small Dutch city where I lived. Pieces of the plane were scattered between Gorinchem and Hoornaar, a village founded in 642 AD. I heard the parachutists were caught by German soldiers and brought to Gorinchem for incarceration in the old army barracks of Dutch pontoniers, then occupied by Germans.⁴

The next day, my friend Sjors (George) de Winter and I set out into the polder to look where the plane pieces had dropped. We knew the polder around Gorinchem very well, as we often went out in spring to search for Mallards nesting in old pollard willows. Mallard eggs were a good substitute for chicken eggs which were scarce during wartime. We trekked as straight as the crow flies through the polder; and jumped across many ditches with the aid of long poles to where we thought the pieces of the bomber fell. We saw a few people standing where the wing of the bomber had fallen across a large ditch. A pair of feet of a crew member were sticking out of the water beneath the wing. The dead airman's feet were only dressed in socks; obviously someone had pulled off his shoes. Sjors and I were upset that someone could commit such a sacrilege. That person may have needed the shoes, but had no respect for an Allied airman, who paid with his life to fight against our common enemy.

People were helping themselves to anything from the plane they thought they could use. Shortly after, I informed my older brother Jan where we found pieces of the bomber. He collected strips of rubber from the wing site. The rubber was used to repair the big holes in the soles of my shoes. I was on my last pair of leather shoes, which after the repair, lasted for several more months. Several weeks later, my older sister Cato found a pair of sunglasses, still intact in its case not far from the wing site. I can no longer consult her but her son, Johan, has

the case with the sunglasses (Photo 1). Inside there is a note from the manufacturer -- American Optical Company with some serial and order numbers. My sister Cato also wrote a note "Wednesday, July 28, 1943 found in the surroundings of Hoornaar. Fallen out of an American warplane. Signed C. Vermeer."

Later on, I found an airplane turret which had slammed into a griend, a place where willows grow in dense rows. The turret was partly submerged in muddy ground, and landed about 1 km from the site where the wing rested. I brought Jan to the site; he collected phosphorescent tipped light switches from the turret as we could use those at home. We also collected pieces of shatter proof glass from the turret dome. People carved rings, little airplanes, and other items from that glass. These were then much in fashion as souvenirs from shot down Allied airplanes. People wore the rings on their fingers and pinned little airplanes on their blouses and jackets. They were also traded for goods and scarce commodities such as eggs, sugar, tea, coffee, cigarettes, etc.

The griend, where the turret landed, was in a very isolated part of the Dutch polder. It later became one of my favorite places to visit. Many songbirds sang from alder and willow branches. Plants such as Noli-me-Tangere, bitterroot, hop, marsh ferns, and tall wespenorchis (wasp's orchid), which were uncommon elsewhere in the polder, grew there. I took some of the tall orchid stems home, and shook the spores near red currant bushes in our garden. Beautiful wespenorchis showed up each year in the shade of the currant bushes, and were visited by bees and wasps until I left my home for good in 1954 for Canada.



KEES

FOOTNOTES (written at the end of our research)

1. The date of the bomber crash was July 28, 1943.
2. Five German fighter planes FW190s shot down the bomber.
3. Nine parachutists bailed out of the bomber. The parachute which disappeared quickly may have been hit by the flak.
4. Eight parachutists were incarcerated ; Sgt Robert M. Martin was seriously wounded and his parachute was torn. He was buried in Rotterdam.

EPILOGUE

This story was written for my family. It is the original version with some additions. The Footnotes show what actually happened. This Epilogue explains how my wife Rebecca and I went about our research and were able to identify the shot down bomber, the wreckage and the dead airman.

My nephew Johan Collee's interest in my story encouraged me to look further into the identities of the shot down bomber and its crew, particularly the dead airman I found at the wing site.

Johan and I believed that my sister Cato made a mistake with the year 1943 as Johan could not find a bomber which crashed near Hoornaar that year. So he proceeded to search for bomber losses in the spring/summer of 1944. He came up with a Lancaster bomber which crashed near Goudriaan on May 22, 1944. I pursued the Lancaster crash through the Bombercrew.com Forum while Johan searched for others in the Gorinchem-Hoornaar-Hoogblokland area for 6 days (Mar 14-19, 2013). They all proved to be night crashes. We were told that daylight bombings were under US Command and started in June 1944.

On March 20, 2013, we decided to search for crashes of American bombers in the summer of 1944 near the Hoornaar/Gorinchem area through the Army Air Forces Forum. By March 21, we heard from Ivo de Jong that he was quite sure our shot down bomber was B-17F 42-3116 of the 92nd Bomb Group which was shot down on July 28, 1943 and which crashed near Gorinchem. Hal, another Forum member, provided us with the list of names of the crew and the MACR 0373.

Kees,

*If Ivo's identification is correct one crewman is buried in Netherlands Cemetery and the other in Ardennes Cemetery. I could not find the Missing Air Crew Report but attached below is a photo I took from the book by Stan Bishop and John Hey, **Losses of the US 8th and 9th Air Forces, Vol 1.***

Hal

28 JULY 1943

MISSING IN ACTION:- VIII BC 78 and VIII FC FO83 & 84

92BG,407BS,

B-17F-25-DL	42-3116	PY:U		
P	+2 Lt Harold W Porter		CP	+2 Lt Louis M Peys
N	+2Lt Albert E Brown		B	+2 Lt William J Mahoney
TTG	+T/Sgt Vincent R Tenisci		RO	+T/Sgt Stephan Maksin
BTG	+S/Sgt Sebastian Stavella		LWG	*S/Sgt Jerre M Algeo
RWG	+S/Sgt Ledford T Mays		TG	*S/Sgt Robert M Martin

MACR 0373:- Fifteen B-17s plus two YB-40s took off from Alconbury to attack the Fieseler aircraft works at Kassel, Germany. Shot down by five FW190s at 1210hrs and crashed into a canal at Gorinchem, Holland. The body of Sgt Algeo was recovered from the wreckage on 17th August 1943 and interred at Schelluinen cemetery and is now in Plot H-8-12 Netherlands Cemetery. The parachute of S/Sgt Martin was torn when he b/o badly wounded. He was buried in Rotterdam, now in Plot D-11-12 Ardennes Cemetery. 2 KIA 8 POW.

Pete Tresadern, who had assisted me at the Bomber Crew Forum with the crash of Lancaster NB 956 near Goudriaan, suggested that the dead airman was Sgt Robert M. Martin. I do not think so because in the above MACR 0373, it was reported that Sgt. Martin was badly wounded; his parachute was torn; and his body was buried in Rotterdam.

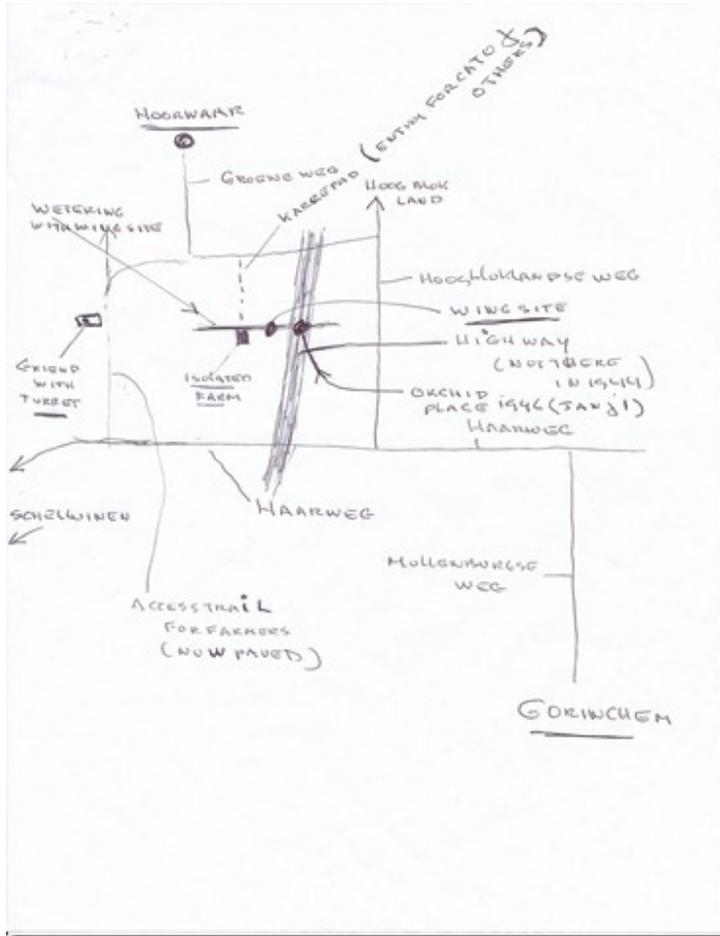
From the same report, it can be seen that the body of Sgt Jerre M Algeo was recovered from the wreckage on 17 August 1943 and initially buried at the Schelluinen Cemetery. That Cemetery is very close to where I found the wing of the shot down bomber across the wetting (large ditch) and the body of a dead airman (see Map 1 & 2). Moreover, the body remained at the site almost 3 weeks after the crash. I think that the body may have been quite decomposed when it was removed so it makes sense that the body would be buried in nearby Schelluinen. I recall people who went to the site after me still saw the feet. I also recall the Germans did not discover the wing site for quite sometime as it was in an isolated part of the polder at that time.

Then came Peter den Tek. He sent me an account (in Dutch) of the July 28, 1943 crash of the B-17F bomber near Gorinchem. In it was a photo of the wreckage across the wetting (Photo 2). I immediately recognized the site and the wreckage. Only it was not a wing --it was the rump of the bomber!!! After 70 years, I hope you can excuse my poor memory !! Also mentioned were the account of eyewitnesses having seen two feet sticking out beneath the wreckage which belonged to Sgt Jerre M. Algeo of Kansas, USA. It was also mentioned that he was initially buried in the Schelluinen Cemetery.

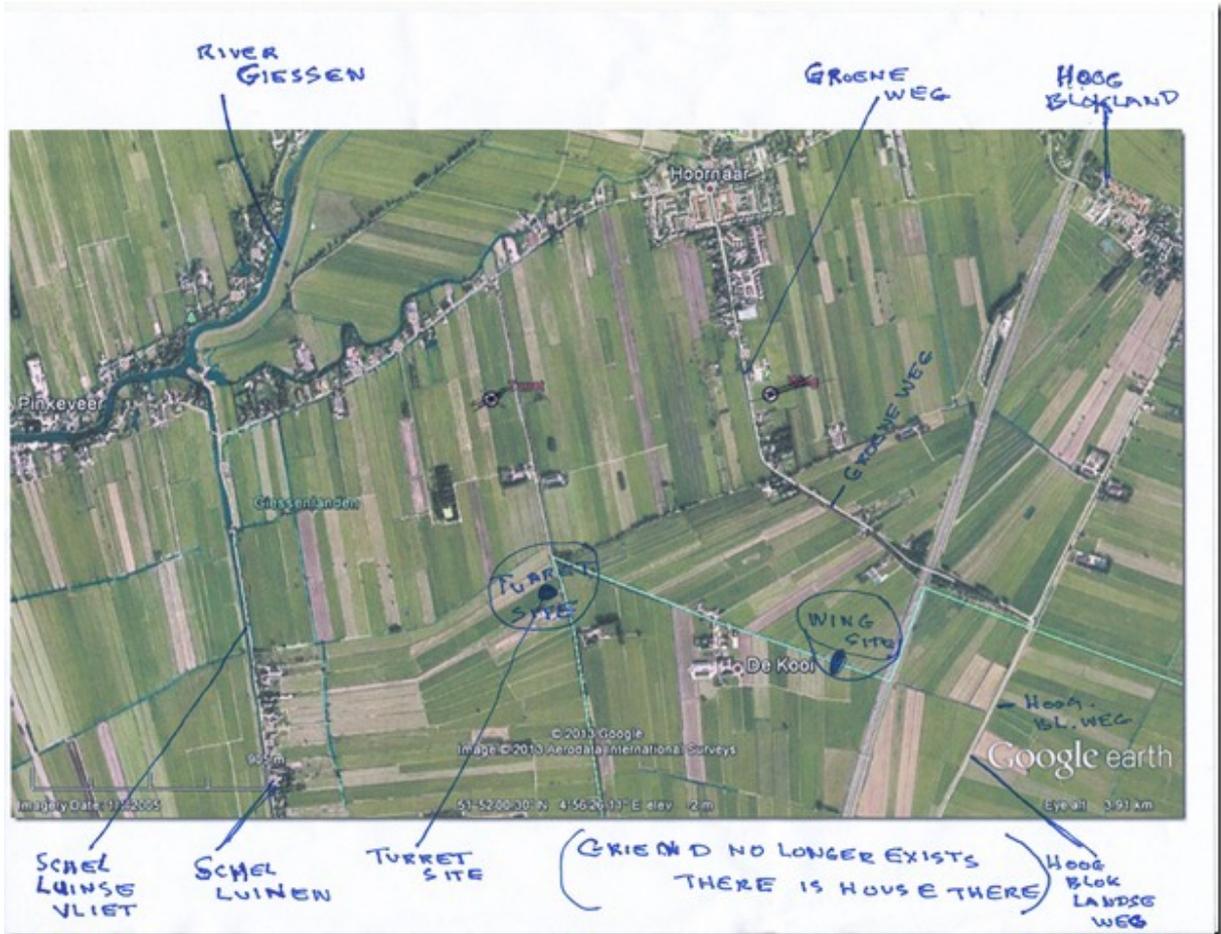
**PHOTO 1-- FLYING SUNGLASSES FOUND NEAR THE WING SITE
(COURTESY OF JOHAN COLLEE)**



MAP 1--KEES VERMEER'S SKETCH OF THE WING AND TURRET SITES



MAP 2-- WING AND TURRET SITES LABELLED BY KEES VERMEER
(BASE MAP COURTESY OF PETE TRESADERN)



**PHOTO 2-- B-17F 42-3116 WRECKAGE NEAR HOORNAAR AND SCHELLUINEN
(COURTESY OF PETER DEN TEK)**

