

**The Liberator of the American pilot Edward Leininger:
Crashed on Mai 27th 1944 at the Rebenberg in Köllerbach¹
by Klaus Zimmer**

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TRANSLATION BY RALF SCHMITT

Funktion	Name	Rank	Remarks
Pilot	Edward G. LEININGER	1st Lt.	Currently living in Fountain Hills, Arizona
Copilot	Francis LAWN	2nd Lt.	+ Oakhurst, New Jersey
Navigator	Jack A. GRIFFITH	1st Lt.	Currently living in Tempe, Arizona
Bombadier	Adelbert E. DORSETT	2nd Lt.	killed; from Roselle, New Jersey
Radio Controller	Ernest I. MITCHELL	T/Sgt.	+ 25.10.1979
Gunner, top	Ernesto RODRIGUEZ	T/Sgt.	+ 31.07.1998, Novato, Kalifornien
Gunner, front	Philip A. BOWMAN	S/Sgt.	killed; from Tulsa, Oklahoma
Gunner, right	Arthur H. VAUGHAN	S/Sgt.	+ 08.07.1986
Gunner, left	James A. LEONE	S/Sgt.	Currently living in Houston, Texas
Gunner, tail	James T. DANIELS	S/Sgt.	+ 24.03.1978

The city of Saarbrücken with its marshalling yard played a significant role in the considerations of the US Airforce. After the initial attack on Mai 11th 1944 it was bombed again on Mai 23rd and Mai 27th. The later of these missions targeted the marshaling yard at Saarbrücken as well as the railway stations in Neunkirchen, Konz-Karthaus, Ludwigshafen, Mannheim and Karlsruhe. This time it was not Flying Fortresses (B 17) being sent to the river Saar, but Liberator bombers (B 24) of the 2. Bomber Division. At 1:36 PM 69 of these heavy bombers, approaching from south-east, released their load onto Saarbrücken, followed by a second wave of 73 Liberators arriving at 1:46PM. The railway station, but also a lot of apartment

buildings, were heavily damaged by the almost 1000 bombs released over the city. Several people were killed, according to the NS propaganda of that time victims of "flying murderers and arson" and "anglo-saxon mercenaries."²

Among the second attack wave was the plane of pilot Edward Leininger from the 389. bomber group stationed in Hethel in the English Duchy of Norfolk. End of January 1944 he and his crew had received a new B24 to fly it over the Atlantic to England. The day before they started their journey they decided to name the plane "Oh My Sufferin' Head", quoting the favorite saying of Leininger when he was frustrated once again. Navigator Jack Griffith painted the quote and the

head of Leininger onto the front of the plane using chalk. Then the crew was photographed in front of their Liberator, while Griffith still had the chalk in his hands (see picture). The delivery flight to Great Britain, following the "southern route", took place in several stretches along Florida, Puerto Rico, Trinidad, Brasil, Senegal, and Marocco. After the delivery the crew never again saw the "Oh My Sufferin' Head". Instead, they were assigned to another plane. Leininger and his crew participated in the following 19 missions:

04/08/44, Braunschweig;
04/09/44, Tutow;
04/13/44, Oberpfaffenhofen/Lauffen;
04/18/44, Rathenow;
04/19/44, Paderborn;
04/20/44, Wisernes;
04/25/44, Mannheim;
04/27/44, Watten;
04/28/44, Marquise/Mimoyecques;
05/07/44, Osnabrück;
05/08/44, Braunschweig;
05/09/44, Florennes/Juzainne;
05/11/44, Belfort;
05/13/44, Tutow;
05/19/44, Braunschweig;
05/20/44, Reims;
05/23/44, Orleans/Bricy;
05/25/44, Troyes;
05/27/44, Saarbrücken.³

On Mai 27th 1944 the anti-aircraft guns in our region were successful once again. Herbert P. Wright, flying in another Liberator, observed the following: *"Plane 42-94951 and plane 42-95091 were both hit by anti-aircraft fire at about the same time. Plane 42-95091 was burning at the bomb bay. It started to wobble and finally the plane started to dive. Then I saw that plane 42-94951 was hit and lost sight. At the same time our own plane was hit by anti-aircraft fire and I lost sight of the two damaged planes. When we leveled out again I saw 4 parachutes, but I don't know which plane they were coming from."*⁴ The burning plane was the one flown by pilot Loren F. Reid (crashed in Altenkessel, see the next chapter) and

the other plane was the one flown by Leininger (Wright confused the numbers).

In the afternoon of the same day the already heavily damaged Flying Fortress "Delayed Lady" of pilot William Dee was shot down finally by anti-aircraft batteries at the cities of Saarbrücken, Völklingen, and Bous. This bomber was on its way back home from Ludwigshafen and crashed close to the town of Differten in the Warndt region (county of Saarlouis).⁵

The commander of the 2. heavy Anti-Aircraft Group 903 (Klarenthal) wrote the following report about the shoot-down of Leininger's plane: *"On 5/27/44 a squadron was sighted coming from direction 3 and was attacked. The squadron flew in a wide formation with 6 groups. It consisted of 120 planes of type Liberator and they were flying on a wasterm course. At 1:43:45 PM fire was opened at a distance of 8500 meters. The target height was 6000 meters, the speed was 100 meters/second. Altogether 19 groups (110 shots) were fired targeting visually. Between 1:43 PM and 1:44 PM bombs were falling in direction 4 to 5. Due to the well aimed anti-aircraft fire the squadron changed course to fly north. During this maneuver, the groups seperated from each other. At 1:45 PM one of the planes left the formation close to the city of Püttlingen and received a direct hit. The plane burst at high altitude and fell to earth almost straight down. At 1:45:30 PM fire was ceased again."*⁶

The front section, cockpit, and one of the wings fell into a field at the Rebenberg close to Köllerbach-Kölln, at the extension of today's senic "Wine Route". The dead bodies of two crew members, Bombadier Dorsett and Chin Turret Gunner Bowman, were lying in the same area. The second wing was lying at the place where today you can find the parking lot of the Köllerbach fitness center.

In the morning of this day at the beginning of the mission Leininger and his crew were still in high spirits. German interceptors were already rarely seen at that time, and the invasion of the European continent by allied forces was imminent. They were sure that under these conditions they would soon have finished the required 30

missions. Their minds were already occupied with the dance that was planned for this Saturday evening in their station. Leninger himself had a date with a beautiful girl, arranged by a college. First everything was going according to plan, and soon Leininger handed control to his copilot Francis (Frank) Lawn, to give him the chance to gain more flight experience. Leininger gave the following detailed report: *"When we came closer to our target the tail gunner reported by on-board radio that anti-aircraft shells were flying on our height towards the tail. I signaled to Frank that he should stay closer to the formation, which he did. According to mission planning the leading plane was supposed to turn to the left slowly after releasing its bombs. I knew exactly what I was going to do at that point. I would take over controls, pull the plane up out of formation, turn to the left and then enter the formation again. I had done the same thing before on a previous mission with good results and without complaints from our Captain. We released the bombs and totally relaxed I raised my hands to take over control. However, instead of turning to the left, the leading plane turned to the right. This was so unexpected, that I lowered my hands again and fell back into my seat. At that moment there was a loud explosion, and I jumped out of my seat. Frank Lawn jerked back, holding his right shoulder. I grabbed the controls, but only to realize that they didn't react any more. As we lost hydraulic pressure, the engines got out of control as well. In such a situation the propellers are losing their pitch and are running flat in the air. In this case they are running extremely fast and have no effect any more. Aside of this, there is the possibility that one of the propeller blades comes loose, spinning the plane out of control and even crashing through the cockpit. Pilot and copilot were sitting just opposite of the propellers. I tried to use my on-board radio, but my set was shot into peaces.*

I shouted to Frank to give the order for bail-out, which he did. I tried to keep the plane level by using the elevators. We lost altitude, but the bomber was still flying in a level position. I didn't know how much time had passed since the

command to bail-out, but I was sure that everybody had had plenty of time to leave the plane. When I decided to jump out myself, the plane tilted slightly and I went back into the cockpit to make some smaller adjustments. Then I left the cockpit and went to the bomb bay. When I looked towards the front and the back of the plane I could see that everyone had left the plane. Since hydraulic pressure was gone, the doors of the bomb bay had to be opened with a hand wrench. The crew only had opened the doors by about 30cm. The only way to leave the plane through this opening was lying down on the beam separating the two doors and let yourself roll through the narrow opening out of the plane. And this is what I did.

First the wind was rushing around my ears, which had to be expected, but then everything became very quiet and calm around me. I carried a parachute on my back and I didn't want to wait too long until pulling the release line, since in case of a malfunction of the release I would have to grab behind my back to open the chute by hand. I pulled the release line all the way down and immediately I was hovering in the air. I heard myself saying again and again: 'Holy mother of God, have mercy on us!' I don't remember that I had ever said this before. I scanned through the sky and counted the other parachutes around me to see if everyone made it. I counted about 20 other chutes. Then it occurred to me that another plane must have been shot down as well. Since I was still in the target region I began pulling on the chute to get out of this region. I actually made a pull-up on the control ropes of the chute and could see how I was drifting along. I tried to make it to a small forest, but suddenly the ground rushed closer very fast and I landed. I pulled off the parachute and hurried to grab it together, but a group of civilians was already coming towards me. Since I believed I was in Alsace-Lothringen I thought they might be French and would take care of me. However, I had to abandon this hope fast, since among them there was a little boy wearing a T-shirt with a swastika on the chest. Before I could even try to communicate a group of soldiers

approached us, that already had other american airmen in custody, but none of them from my crew. They all were as tall as me, and I heard a german civilian comment: 'American – tall.' The face of one of the airmen [Comment: Flight Engineer Robert Staton from the Altenkessel plane] was covered by a handkerchief. He had been burned and was guided by a comrad. Later in the prison camp I heard that he made a full recovery.

Now I want to describe my feelings. Fear? Not at all! I felt proud, strong, superior. After all, I was an american officer of the Airforce and the Germans were poor civilians. My appearance was impressive and upstanding, perhaps this is the reason I was treated with respect. I landed not far away from a gravel road, which explained why the Germans showed up that fast. One of the civilians ran back and brought me my parachute. Another one came forward with a handkerchief I had lost. We were loaded on an open truck and taken away. During the ride one guard pointed out to me respectfully that I should duck down since we approached some low hanging tree branches. We reached a small town where of course people had gathered at the side of the road to see us. I saw older women threatening us with their fists.

We entered a stone building. It was perhaps part of a small school or an administration building [Comment: perhaps Püttlingen]. The others had already arrived: Griffith, Lawn, Rodriguez und Mitchell plus the members of the other crew. Dorsett and Bowman were missing. Frank showed me his hand. A granade fragment had passed through his left hand. His fingers and the bones were totally twisted and buckling. However, no bones were sticking out of the skin, which was good. While we were there, a man squeezed into the room. He approached me and said: 'Your name is Leininger. I know some Leiningers living close to here.' I was probably still in a fighting mood and snapped at him: 'Go to hell!'. 'I only wanted to be nice', he replied. Later I thought that my behaviour had been very silly. The next day we were brought to a railway station and transported to Frankfurt.⁷

Navigator Jack Griffith also sent a detailed

report to the author, describing in particular the situation in the cockpit:

"During target approach I was at the front right window, since Leininger had asked me to use his camera and make a picture of the leading plane in our group while it was releasing its bombs. The bombs started to fall and I got my snapshot. Dorsett, our Bombadier, reported: 'Bombs away!' Exactly at that moment he shouted through the on-board radio: 'I'm hit!'. I swang around and saw him sitting on an ammunition box holding his left upper leg. His left leg was cut off above the knee and hang down held only by a few threads of meat. Desperately, I looked for our First-Aid kit. I needed a compression bandage and Morphin at once. But I couldn't find it!

While I was continuing searching, Frank Lawn's voice came over the on-board radio: 'Bail out! Bail out!' The engines were spinning wildly, which was awfully nerve wrecking. I feared that we might topple over or spin out of control. I was feeling horrible when I realized that I couldn't help Dorsett. I grabbed a chest mounted parachute, attached it to my harness and grabbed the red ring of the release line. With my left hand I grabbed a beam below the navigation table and swang down. Next to the beam was the red handle of the emergency exit release. I let go of the beam and pulled the emergency exit release. A second later I was outside, falling down head over heels not seeing the plane any more. Since I didn't strap my helmet, it came off.

Even months after this incident I was tortured by the question whether I really couldn't help Dorsett. It was a useless exercise and I decided to close this chapter to keep my sanity. However, even today every memory of this topic is a sadening experience.

A few minutes after my landing I was arrested by a group of armed civilians. While we marched to the small village close by a young boy of about 12 years asked me: 'Do you speak English?' I answered quite unfriendly 'Yes, of course; it's my native language!' This was the end of the conversation."⁸

The Top Front Gunner Ernesto Rodriguez

(called "Rod") had used the bomb bay to jump from the plane, just like Leininger, after helping another crew member to get out there. After opening his parachute he saw the damaged plane above. Rodriguez landed in a plowed field and tried to run away. But when he heard shots behind him, he preferred to stop running. During his arrest a man in a uniform hit him in the face with a pistol. He was led to a truck where two dead airmen were lying. "Are these your comrades?", the Germans asked. Rodriguez only recognized Dorsett, but couldn't identify the second airman. "He is crazy", a German said with regard to Dorsett. "He shot himself."⁹ However, this was probably not true, since no one in the crew was carrying a pistol. Griffith suspects that Dorsett still managed to leave the plane, but then died of blood loss, as the result of the shock, or during the landing. But another version is possible as well. People from Köllerbach were actually shooting at the parachuters coming down.¹⁰ Perhaps Dorsett was killed by a bullet during this shooting, which would explain the comment that he supposedly had shot himself. The fact that Rodriguez didn't recognize the second dead might be explained by the fact that Chin Turret Gunner Bowman was not a member of the regular crew of this plane. On this fateful day he had replaced the regular crew member Bombardier Wimer on short notice and Rodriguez had seen him for the very first time shortly before take-off.

Dorsett and Bowman were buried on May 29th 1944 in the cemetery of Püttlingen. Their bodies were moved after the war.¹¹ Both are resting in the American military cemetery St. Avold in Lothringen. Eye witnesses report that members of the Hitler Youth were driving a dead crew member, lying on a hand barrel, from the direction

of Püttlingen to the cemetery of Köllerbach. In this cemetery, however, no crew member of the Leininger plane was buried. Most likely, the dead airman was loaded onto the truck mentioned above and finally brought to Püttlingen.

The officers among the prisoners ended up in Stalag Air III in Sagan in Lower Silesia. There, Leininger, Lawn, and Griffith were housed in one room together with 10 other Americans, among them the pilot of the plane shot down at Altenkessel (Loren Reid). Leininger sent a detailed war diary to the author. Due to limited space it is beyond the scope of this report to refer to this diary in detail. The camp was moved several times, and on April 10th, 1945 in Neustadt at the river Donau, during a march from Nürnberg to Moosburg at the river Isar, Griffith decided to escape and try to get to the west by himself. But after the first night, during which he had marched for 20km, he was discovered, called ('Stop') and shot in his leg when he tried to run away. Two weeks later in the hospital in Ingolstadt he was freed by the 86th US Tank Division under General Patch. Leininger studied Law after the war and worked in sales for several large companies. At the end of his professional career he owned and managed a travel agency in the city center of Chicago. Griffith studied History and Theology and became a Protestant priest. Rodriguez stayed in the Air Force at first and later became a teacher for Spanish, History, and Geography as well as a Professor of Law. Aside of this, he helped building the computing center of a University in California. Side Gunner James Leone currently lives in Texas. Despite numerous intensive efforts by the author and others it was not possible to get any information from him.

1. National Archives II, College Park, Maryland, MACR 5260; *Unterlagen Werner Eckel, Limbach.*
2. Eckel, *Luftkrieg*, S. 98 - 104; Freeman, *War Diary*, S. 251.
3. *Communication by Jack Griffith, Tempe, Arizona und Edward Leininger, Fountain Hills, Arizona.*
4. National Archives II, College Park, Maryland, MACR 5260.
5. *Documents of the author; see also Friemond, Kurt, "Zeitzeugen erinnern sich an den 27. Mai 1944", Zur Geschichte des Warndts, Nr. 126, II/1998, S. 2 - 10.*
6. *Copy by Uwe Benkel, Kaiserslautern.*

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7. *Communication by Edward Leininger, Fountain Hills, Arizona.*
 8. *Communication by Jack Griffith, Tempe, Arizona.*
 9. *Communication by Ernesto Rodriguez, Novato, Kalifornien.*
 10. *Communication by Werner Schmidt, Riegelsberg, und Ludwig Knobe, Püttlingen.*
 11. *Cemetery Register Püttlingen (communicated by Helmut Jung, Aßweiler)*