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REMAINS OF WAR

The Search for World War II Planes Continues

By Bryony Jones

World War II may have ended six decades ago, but leftovers from the conflict can be found everywhere -- if you're looking. One German group does just that. And finds airplane wrecks buried in fields across Germany. The pilots are sometimes still inside.

Uwe Benkel keeps an atlas marked with World War II airplane crash sites. At first glance, the battered old road atlas -- nestled among the chaotic piles of books in Uwe Benkel's home -- looks normal enough; the kind you might expect to find in Audis and Volkswagens across Germany. Open the cover, though, and it becomes clear this is far from an ordinary map. Place names on many of the pages are obscured by blotches of red ink, and the blotches appear to have spread across the entire country of Germany. There is a system behind the stains: Each mark highlights the site of a World War II-era plane crash, and Benkel is determined to find them all.

Benkel runs his search team from his home just down the road from the huge US Army base at Kaiserslautern. A jovial man, his cheery manner belies the fact that he spends most of his weekends and many of his holidays crawling through mud and hunting for evidence of death and destruction. Many of the wrecks as yet undiscovered are far out in the German countryside and may be buried as deep as eight meters. It may sound like a grim pastime, but Benkel, who's been on the hunt for 15 years, is devoted to it. "It's not a hobby," he explains. "It is a calling."

Plowing for planes

Benkel's interest in digging for plane wrecks began in the summer of 1988, when 70 people were killed and 400 injured after three Italian Air Force jets collided and crashed into the crowd during an air show at Ramstein Air Base near his home. Benkel was on holiday when the accident happened. But when he ventured out to the crash site after his return to see if any help was needed, he was struck by the victims' clothing and personal belongings still strewn across the field, days after the crash.

A year later, on a visit to the Royal Air Force museum at Hendon, near London, he was intrigued to see sections of crashed planes on display alongside complete aircraft. A curator explained that in many cases, the plane parts had been found by farmers plowing up their fields. When this happened the bodies of the crew were sometimes found in the wreckage, and the remains returned to their families.

Sixty years after the end of World War II, reminders of the conflict remain liberally sprinkled about Germany and Europe. Bullet holes high up on building facades, shocking 1950s architecture in the centers of centuries-old cities, a surfeit of monuments. Bombs, too, are occasionally found -- like the 1,100 pounder which stopped traffic and shut down the busy and fashionable Unter den Linden for several hours earlier this month after workers stumbled across it while digging a new subway line.

But some legacies of the war remain hidden. Unless, of course, one looks for them. And that is exactly what Benkel does. As head of the Search Group for the Missing (Arbeitsgruppe Vermisstenforschung), he and his team of volunteers scour the country to find and excavate the thousands of fighter planes which crashed in Germany during World War II. They recover the

remains of the pilots and provide them a proper funeral, decades after they disappeared from wartime radar. In the process, Benkel has healed many a scar -- both within families and across continents.

On his return to Kaiserslautern, Benkel asked his family and friends if they remembered any such crashes in the area around their home during the war. "People told me, 'Yes, there was a crash there and another there, and there,'" he explained. "It just snowballed from there. Within six months I had found out about 400 planes -- American, British, French and German -- which had come down in the Kaiserslautern area alone."

The first crash he investigated was that of a British Vickers Wellington which had come down in woods at Hochspeyer, near Kaiserslautern. Locals told him the pilot had been killed in the crash, and was buried in the local churchyard, but that they would occasionally unearth parts of the wreckage while walking in the area. So he went to see for himself, and came across one of the aircraft's identification markers. By getting in touch with British authorities, he was able to help them update their records, and the story made the local papers in Kaiserslautern.

As a result, more and more people came forward with information about crashes they or their relatives had seen, including one where the pilot's body had not been recovered at the time. Benkel applied to the authorities for permission to try and uncover the aircraft and any remains left inside.

"Flowers on an empty grave"

It is not a simple process -- if the aircraft crashed into soft ground, a mechanical digger is needed to get close to the wreckage after it is located with the help of a metal detector. Then, careful checks for dangerous chemicals, fuel, oil and unexploded munitions are carried out. Finally comes the painstaking search by hand for human remains or anything that may help identify the plane and its pilot.

Since 1989, the 15 members of the group have recovered 80 planes, and found the bodies of 28 pilots who were previously listed as missing.

"For us, the nationality of the pilot or crew doesn't matter," says Benkel. "German or British, American or French, they were all fighting for their country, whether they wanted to or not, and they ended up dying for their country. By the end of the war, many of the pilots were little more than boys, 18 or 19 years old, and they were sent to their deaths before they had a chance to experience life. Whichever side they were on, they deserve a decent burial. We try to bring them back to their families so that on All Saints Day their relatives aren't left to put flowers on an empty grave."

The group doesn't always find what it's looking for. Many crashed planes were dug up in the immediate post-war years when money and materials were in short supply, to be sold for scrap, the bodies of crewmen left in the ground. And 60 years on, people's memories are not what they were, so they do not always end up looking in the right place. But when they do, and they are able to reunite surviving relatives with the remains of their loved ones, the hard work is worthwhile, says Benkel.

The Allies flew thousands of bombing raids over Germany and destroyed dozens of cities, including Dresden. "The most emotional case we've ever been involved in was that of a young German pilot called Georg Fröhlich. He was killed when his plane crashed in Thuringia. His

family -- his widow, his daughter and his brother -- were with us when we excavated the plane, and inside we found some of his remains, part of his uniform and his identity tags.

"I took the tags to his daughter and said, 'look, these belonged to your father, you should have them'. She was so pleased. She said she would never let them out of her sight. They were the only thing of her father's she had. She was only a year old when he died. She had never known him, only recognized him from photographs, and we were able to recover something of his for her. We were all in tears. The story really touched us, so when our youngest daughter was born, we named her Georgina in his honor."

Some 1,200 missing pilots and crew

Fröhlich's story is just one of dozens Benkel can tell, each one involving a different person and a different fate. There's the one about Alfred Appel, a young stonemason from a former part of Germany that now belongs to the Czech Republic. After finding his body at a crash site near Magdeburg, Benkel was able to contact a niece and he was finally given a proper burial. His wife, though, is still missing -- having died during the forced evacuation of the Czechoslovakia following the end of the war. She is somewhere in a mass grave along the evacuation route.

And there's the ring -- belonging to a French officer who crashed in Germany -- which Benkel was able to return to the victim's family.

Indeed, it is a desire to track down these individual fates, and provide the dead with a proper burial, which keeps him and his colleagues coming back, on weekends, days off and holidays, working for hours in what can be harrowing conditions to recover anything they can.

After 15 years, Benkel and his group are now seen as experts on the subject. Benkel's stairway is lined with awards and letters of gratitude for their work, including one from President Bill Clinton. But their notoriety has led some to accuse them of "grave robbing" -- a slight which hurts Benkel deeply.

"Sadly," he says, "there are some people in Germany who do dig up planes and so on to sell what they find -- everything from scrap metal to militaria. And some people assume we are the same as them. But we do all our work in public, and nothing from any of the sites we have excavated has been sold; it is either returned to the families of the dead, handed to museums or kept within the small collection which we use for our exhibitions."

Benkel and his group still have a long way to go if they intend to follow up on all the crash sites they know of. In Rhineland Palatinate alone, they are aware of at least 80 more sites that need to be investigated. Across the country around 1,200 pilots and crew members are listed as missing, believed killed in crashes. Benkel plans to keep looking for them as long as he can -- and he hopes that his children will carry on the work if necessary. Indeed, for them it might be easier. They just have to connect the red blotches in Benkel's atlas.