

TRIP REPORT: CZECH REPUBLIC, GERMANY & FRANCE
APRIL 2000

My son, Bob, and I had one of the most interesting trips to Europe I've ever had. Without email I would not have been able to set this trip up. What made it so interesting was the fact that we had contacts arranged in each of the three places we visited: Bill Preddy's crash site in the Czech Republic, the cemetery in France where George and Bill are buried side by side, and the crash site where George went down in Germany.

We landed in Prague and were met by several members of the Museum of the Air Battle Over Krusnohori (the battle took place on 11 September 1944). The Museum is located about 60 miles northwest of Prague in Kovarska, and that is where we went immediately. As we arrived, they showed us the school building on which one of the 100th Bomb Group's B-17s named "Heaven Can Wait" crashed. At the Museum they have a photo taken of the B-17's tail sticking out of the roof of the school building. They also have mementos of Bill Preddy and Captain Ray Reuter, Bill's CO. Both were shot down on April 17th near Ceske Budejovice, about 100 miles south of Prague. This Museum is really isolated, but has been visited by a number of people from the 100th and from the 339th Fighter Group. General Francis Gerard of the 339th was one I remembered from the research done on Bill. Our primary Czech contacts, Jaromir and Martin Kohout, admit that the museum should be moved to Pilsen where they live.

The next day we drove to a small village, Zaluzi, where Bill crashed after strafing the German airdrome at Ceske Budejovice. We met the Czech gentleman, Jan Smejkal, who actually pulled Bill from his Mustang. He is now 81 years old, but seems to be in very good health. Jan loaded Bill onto his horse-drawn cart and took him to the nearest emergency treatment center about 5 km away. The center was attended by two German doctors. The doctors bandaged Bill's injured head and neck, but would not take Bill to the hospital in Budejovice. So Jan Smejkal continued his journey another 10 km to Budejovice.

For our benefit, the Kohout brothers and friends took Mr. Smejkal and us along the trail he had taken in 1945. We stopped at the house which was then being used as the German emergency treatment center. The lady who lives in the house now lived there then, and she remembers seeing Bill on the cart. We spoke to her, and she showed me inside the house where the German doctors had a room. Then we proceeded on to Budejovice and took photos of the hospital where Bill was taken. That was the last Jan saw of Bill. He never regained consciousness as far as Jan knows. Then they took us to the local cemetery where Bill was buried on April 19th.

So they believe that Bill probably died on the 18th of April. Ray Reuter's Mustang was hit over the airdrome and exploded. The Kohouts took us to the site where pieces of Ray's aircraft may still be dug out of the ground. Using a metal finder, we dug up a dozen small pieces of his Mustang. When we returned to Zaluzi, a group of about 25 local citizens and their mayor were waiting on us. They have set up a memorial to Bill

near his crash site, and another to Ray near his crash site. Here is a photo of the memorial to Bill. Note the aircraft parts next to the memorial stone. The parts are owned by Frantisek Hokr. I asked if I could have a couple of the parts to give to museums in NC. Franti gave me my pick of parts: I selected the rudder pedal and a part of the instrument panel. See photo.

This completed our trip to Bill's crash site. The next day we drove across Germany stopping in Nurenburg, Heidelberg and other places. Then we went on the Metz, France where we stayed with a French couple, Arnaud and Catherine Beinat. Arnaud is a freelance photographer for books and magazines. He is also an expert modeler. Arnaud has taken an interest in the Lorraine American Cemetery at St. Avold, especially the grave sites for George and Bill. He places flowers on them each Christmas. He had arranged for our visit with the Director of the Cemetery and with the press. The visit was an emotional experience to say the least. I had not been there since 1969 when my wife, Betty, and I visited while on a business trip. The cemetery is the largest American W.W.II cemetery in Europe.

After the cemetery visit we went to Langerwehe, Germany where we met Ron Putz. Ron lives in The Netherlands. He met us in Langerwehe to show us where he thinks George Preddy crashed after being hit by Allied AA rounds. He and Sam Sox have been in communication with Harold Kennedy who says he witnessed the crash of Preddy's Mustang. Although Ron has found no evidence of the crash such as that found from Ray Reuter's, he is convinced that George crashed in Langerwehe. His theory is that George's plane, flying very low, hit sort of flat and scattered over a large area. Local citizens probably recovered all the parts for scrap soon after the crash. However, Ron has not given up; he has investigated over 700 crash sites and identified many of them. His book on Operation Bodenplatte is to be published early next year.

We visited the church where Harold Kennedy was posted in the steeple when he witnessed the crash of George's Mustang. The steeple has been rebuilt since 1944, and we were not able to go up. The Priest was not available. The windows in the steeple were closed with shutters, so we could not have seen out even if we had been able to go up. However, we were able to see the area where Harold Kennedy said George crashed. We did not search for parts.

We returned to Prague where we spent a couple of days seeing the sites in cold, rainy weather. Then we flew back home on Air France. All in all, we had a very interesting trip and met a very interesting group of people.

Joe Noah