

Le 21 octobre 1942, une formation de bombardiers B-17 du 97th Bomb Group de la 8th Air Force attaque la base sous-marine allemande de Lorient à 13H06, c'est le premier bombardement effectué par l'aviation américaine en Bretagne au cours de la seconde guerre mondiale. Sur les 18 forteresses volantes engagées par le 97th Bomb Group lors de cette mission, trois sont abattues par la chasse allemande, l'une d'entre-elles tombe en mer en baie de Douarnenez.

Harry R. Erickson était le bombardier de cet appareil, il se souvient qu'à cause d'une hélice défectueuse son B-17 a pris du retard sur le reste de la formation alors que la côte bretonne était proche. Un bombardier isolé devenait une proie facile pour les chasseurs allemands et la forteresse volante ne tarda pas à être la cible des Focke-Wulf 190 envoyés pour intercepter la formation. "En quelques minutes, notre B-17 fut gravement endommagé par les FW 190", raconte Erickson. "Bart" Schwarzenbeck, le pilote, effectue un brusque piqué afin d'échapper aux chasseurs allemands et met le cap à l'Ouest. Mais l'arrière de l'appareil est en feu et le B-17 devient difficile à contrôler. Alors que le bombardier arrive au dessus de la baie de Douarnenez, Joe Gray, le navigateur, avertit Erickson que le pilote vient de donner l'ordre d'évacuer l'appareil. "J'ai sauté par la trappe de sortie avant et je suis tombé dans l'eau indemne. Pendant ma brève descente, j'ai vu un autre parachute et un grand bouillonnement d'eau causé, je suppose, par la chute de notre appareil". D'après Harry Erickson, l'avion serait tombé à mi-distance de l'entrée de la baie et de la côte Est et

à environ 500 mètres de la côte Sud.

"J'ai été repêché par un petit bateau dont l'équipage était composé de trois hommes, ils se sont ensuite dirigés vers l'endroit où l'autre membre d'équipage était tombé. Un second bateau de pêche est arrivé sur place avant nous et l'équipage m'a fait comprendre par signes qu'ils n'avaient trouvé personne. Je n'étais pas blessé et je voulais être débarqué au plus vite sur la côte, mais les pêcheurs ont mis le cap sur le port. Comme ils ne parlaient pas anglais et moi pas français, j'ignorais leurs intentions, je me suis allongé au fond du bateau sous une bâche. Pendant les quelques 15 minutes que dura la traversée, il répétaient sans cesse le mot "souvenir" et je leur ai donné quelques bandes patronymiques en cuir qui se trouvaient dans la poche de mon blouson et cela a semblé satisfaire leur curiosité. J'ai également pris mon pistolet 11,43 et son étui, un kit d'évasion et une enveloppe scellée contenant des francs et je les ai placés au fond du bateau. L'équipage m'a regardé faire et a paru comprendre mon intention de laisser tout cela avec eux au cas où je serais pris. Quand j'ai senti que le bateau avait accosté, j'ai jeté un coup d'oeil de ma cachette et tout ce que j'ai vu c'est le canon d'un fusil. A l'autre extrémité de l'arme il y avait un soldat allemand d'âge mûr qui m'a accueilli par ces mots : "Für sie der Krieg ist kaputt" (pour vous la guerre finie)".

Le lieutenant Erickson est conduit dans une petite maison donnant sur le quai (sans doute le bureau de la Gast, ou douane allemande). Là, on lui confisque ses vêtements et

il passe la nuit sur un lit de camp, enroulé dans une couverture. Le lendemain matin, Erickson récupère ses affaires, à l'exception de son blouson en cuir et de sa montre. Puis il est emmené à l'aérodrome de Pluguffan, où il retrouve le lieutenant Milton Stenstrom, le pilote d'un des deux autres B-17 abattus la veille, ainsi que le copilote, le navigateur et le bombardier de ce même appareil. Pendant les deux ou trois jours qu'ils passent à Pluguffan, les cinq officiers américains reçoivent la visite d'un colonel de la Luftwaffe qui essaie vainement d'avoir des détails sur le modèle de B-17 qui équipe leur unité et d'un pilote de chasse qui affirme être celui qui les a abattu. Erickson et ses compagnons sont ensuite escortés jusqu'à la gare de Quimper où on les fait monter dans un train à destination de Paris. Un autre train les mène jusqu'à Frankfort, d'où ils sont conduit au Dulag Luft (centre d'interrogatoire de la Luftwaffe) de Wetzlar. Trois semaines plus tard, les cinq aviateurs sont transférés au Stalag Luft III de Sagan, en Silésie. Ils ne retrouveront la liberté qu'à la fin du mois d'avril 1945.

Démobilisé à la fin de la guerre, Harry Erickson reprend du service actif dans l'U.S. Air Force en 1947 et termine sa carrière avec le grade de colonel en 1974. Il est revenu à Douarnenez avec sa famille en 1991 et maintenant il aimerait connaître les noms des pêcheurs qui sont venus à son secours le 21 octobre 1942. Les personnes ayant des souvenirs de cet épisode ou pouvant apporter des renseignements sur les deux autres B-17 du 97th Bomb Group abattus ce jour là (l'un d'entre-eux serait également tombé en mer) sont invitées à

prendre contact avec l'association Histoire et Collections
(Douarnenez 1939-1945) qui effectue des recherches sur les
avions alliés abattus en Bretagne pendant la seconde guerre
mondiale. contacts : François CADIC, KERGOAT, 29180 QUEMENEVEN,
tél. 98 73 59 49 (après 19h) ou claude HELIAS, Ty-Ar-Groas,
29700 PLOMELIN, tél. 98 94 25 61 (après 18h).

L'équipage du B-17 41-24441, 342nd Squadron, 97th Bomb Group était composé de :

- 1st Lieutenant Francis X. Schwarzenbeck, pilote (tué).
- 1st Lieutenant William L. Tingle, copilote (tué).
- Captain Joe H. Gray, navigateur (tué).
- 1st Lieutenant Harry R. Erickson, bombardier (capturé).
- Sergeant William T. Lynch, mécanicien de bord (capturé).
- Sergeant Kenneth K. Laud, radio (capturé).
- Sergeant Ned R. Herzstam, mitrailleur latéral (capturé).
- Sergeant Kenneth V. Maeran, mitrailleur latéral (capturé).
- Sergeant Mitchell Small, mitrailleur ventral (capturé).
- Sergeant George Whitham, mitrailleur de queue (capturé).

Les deux autres forteresses volantes abattues le 21 octobre 1942 étaient pilotées par le Captain John M. Bennett et le 1st Lieutenant Milton M. Stenstrom. Bennett fut capturé avec sept membres de son équipage, les deux autres étant tués. Stenstrom et tout son équipage furent également fait prisonniers.

Date : 21 OCTOB 42		Group : 97 BG (H)		Squadron : 342 TH		Type of A/C : B-17-F		Serial No : 41-24441	
Base : POLEBROOK			Time off : APROX 08.00 H			Target : LORIENT (56)			
Post in crew.	Rank, name, service number.	Fate (POW, KIA, escaped).	Miscellaneous (age, town, State).						
Pilot	1 LT FRANCIS X. SCHWARZENBECK	K.I.A							
Co-Pilot	1 LT WILLIAM L. TINGLE	K.I.A							
Navigator	CAPT JOE H. GRAY	K.I.A							
Bombardier	1 LT HARRY R. ERICKSON	P.O.W	3306 PEBBLE BEACH DR. SIERRA VISTA, AZ 85635 U.S.A						
Flight Engineer	SGT WILLIAM T. LYNCH	P.O.W							
Radio Operator	SGT KENNETH K. LAUD	P.O.W							
Right Waist Gunner	SGT NED R. HERZSTAM	P.O.W							
Left Waist Gunner	SGT KENNETH V. MAERAN	P.O.W	4365 S. ELATI ST ENGLEWOOD, CO 80110 U.S.A						
Ball Turret Gunner	SGT MICHEL SMALL	P.O.W							
Tail Gunner	SGT GEORGE WHITHAM	P.O.W							

BAIC DE DOCUMENT

3306 Pebble Beach Dr.
Sierra Vista, AZ 85635
7 April 1993

Dear Mr. Helias,

In August of 1991, I visited Brittany with my wife, daughter and her husband. We stopped at Lorient, spent the night at Quimper and then traveled to Douarnenez to view the bay where I had bailed out shortly before our B-17 disappeared into the water. Had I known of you and your interest in World War II history, I would most certainly have extended my stay to visit you. Anyway I will try as best I can to answer your questions about an event that happened over 50 years ago on 21 October 1942.

To begin, a few words about my association with the 97th Bomb Group might be helpful. Fresh out of Bombardier School, I joined a B-17 crew in April of 1942 at Sarasota, Florida and began operational training with the newly formed 342nd Bomb Squadron. Captain Fred Dallas was the crew pilot and "Peggy D" the name of our B-17. In late May we headed for England via Labrador, Greenland, Iceland, Scotland and finally reached our destination, Grafton Underwood, in early June. I flew 6 missions from Grafton Underwood and 5 from Polebrook, 10 of which were with Fred's crew. Our first mission was flown on 17 August against the marshalling yards at Rouen, France. This was the first B-17 mission flown over Europe by the U.S. Army Air Force. My eleventh and most memorable flight was on the Lorient mission as a last minute substitute bombardier on "Bart Schwarzenbeck's crew. I knew the officers on the crew, but had never met the enlisted crew members nor did I see them during the flight since they were stationed aft of the nose section. Now I will try to recall some of the details of that fateful Lorient mission.

At about 0700 hours on 21 October 1942, I was awakened by someone shaking my foot and asking if I would like to fly as a replacement for a bombardier who was ill. Despite an old army adage about never volunteering for anything, I said yes. Actually I didn't have a choice as my crew was not scheduled to fly and the request was made by the Squadron Operations Officer. The target was the submarine pens at Lorient. By the time I was briefed and handed a target folder, the aircraft had already started to taxi and was stopped to let me climb aboard through the nose hatch. Once in formation with the other aircraft we headed for Exeter which was our point of departure from England. Bad weather over the channel caused the other bomb units and the fighter escort to abort the mission. For reasons unknown to me, the 97th Bomb Group with 18 B-17's pressed on without fighter

escort. We crossed the channel by staying under the cloud deck and started the climb to bombing altitude (24,000 feet) at the French coast in the clear. During the climb, the number three propeller "ran away" and was uncontrollable. The loss of power caused us fall out of formation and become a lone aircraft or straggler. A favorite tactic of the Luftwaffe fighter pilots was to watch for and attack a lone bomber and that they did. Within minutes our B-17 was badly damaged by FW-190 fighters. Lt. Schwartzbeck put the plane into a very steep dive and headed west toward the ocean. There was a fire somewhere in the rear section and the aircraft was shaking violently. Upon reaching the coast of the Bay of Douarnenez the bail out order was passed to me verbally by Captain Gray as the interphone system was inoperative. I exited through the nose hatch at a low altitude and landed in the water unharmed. During my short descent, I saw another parachutist and an area of churning water caused, I believe, by the entry of our aircraft. I estimate that the crash site was about midpoint between the east shore and the mouth of the bay and some 500 meters north of the southern shore.

A small fishing boat with a crew of three picked me out of the water and then proceeded to the area where the other crew member had landed. Another boat of the same type as ours arrived ahead of us and indicated to me by sign language that they were unable to locate anyone. Although I was uninjured and wanted to be taken to the nearest point on the shore, they headed for the dock. Not knowing their intentions as I spoke no French and they no English, I layed on the bottom of the boat under a piece of canvas. During the 15 minute or so trip, they kept repeating the word "souvenir" and I gave them a few leather name tags that were in my jacket pocket and this seemed to satisfy their curiosity. Perhaps someone living in the area still has them. I also removed my shoulder holster and .45 caliber pistol, an escape kit and a sealed packet containing French francs and placed them in the bottom of the boat. The crew observed my actions and seemed to understand my intention to leave the items with them if I were captured.

When I felt the boat touch the dock, I peeked out from under the canvas and looked directly into the barrel of a rifle. At the other end of the gun was a middle aged German soldier who greeted me saying "Fur Sie der Krieg ist kaputt". Not true as I spent the next 31 months as a POW under very trying circumstances. The guard marched me at gun point to a sentry box at the end of the dock and made a phone call. Shortly two German soldiers arrived and escorted me to a small house which was located on the north side of the road which paralleled the shore. There they took all of my clothing, gave me a blanket and I spent the night on a cot under guard. It was close to noon when I was captured.

The next morning my clothes were returned, after being dried and carefully examined, sans leather jacket and wrist watch. I was then taken to a dispensary at a nearby airfield where I joined four officers from Lt. Milton Stenstrom's crew who had also been shot down on the Lorient mission. Amazingly only one of us was injured. Lt. Harold Spire sustained a minor head wound during their crash landing. We were held in a small ward on the second floor and remained there for two or three days. We had two visitors during that period. One was a Luftwaffe Oberst who tried unsuccessfully to get us to identify the model of our B-17s from an aircraft recognition book. The other was a Luftwaffe fighter pilot who claimed to have shot us down. Under the escort of two guards, we were driven to Quimper where we boarded a train to Paris and were held for a couple of days in a room on the second floor of Gare du Nord. From there we went again by train to Frankfurt and then driven a short distance to Dulag Luft, an interrogation center located at Oberursel. After two weeks in solitary confinement and about a week in the main compound, we were moved to Stalag Luft 3 at Sagan, Germany.

The pilots of the other two B-17s lost in Brittany on 21 October 1942 were Lts John Bennett and Milton Stenstrom. John is now deceased but Milton can be contacted at 212 Glenn, Rockwell, Texas 75087. I am sorry that I do not have any photographs covering that period of my life. There were a few official photos made for hometown newspaper publication but the original prints were not made available to crew members. I hope that I have answered some of your questions and if I can be of further help, please let me know. The completed questionnaires and a copy of my retirement order are enclosed.

Sincerely yours,

