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## **Thomas Bernhard and the “air crash“ on Tettelham in 1944.\***

***“It was a spectacle of unrelieved tragedy.”***

The work of Thomas Bernhard (1931-1989), throughout his literary life controversial “negative state poet of Austria”, is not just marked by philanthropy and compassion. His autobiographical novel “A Child“ (“Ein Kind” 1982) is a sarcastic sequence of early experienced personal disappointments and injuries - interrupted only by warmhearted recollections of his grandfather Johann Freumbichler (1881-1949), a critical regional writer and therefore not very successful.

There is one particular episode in his lifetime which stands out of the ordinary - not even Thomas Bernhard himself mentions an exact date – though, historic combinations resume it might have been in February 1944.

### **Thomas Bernhard: “A Child“:**

From January 1938 to 1945, Bernhard lived in Traunstein, Upper Bavaria, together with his mother and his stepfather. Their dwelling in Schaumburgerstrasse 4 / corner Tauben- (Pigeon) market still exists. When moving from their former home in Seekirchen, Upper Austria, Thomas Bernhard was a child of only six years of age. In 2009, the city administration attached a memorial tablet at their house in Traunstein – an action, the author probably would have filled with smug wrath, were his Traunstein childhood years yet filled with humiliations in his parental home and at school! Only visiting his grandfather who lived close by in the village of Ettendorf kept him from committing suicide - provided that one gives real faith to his claims in “Ein Kind” (“A Child”).

*“It was winter, cold as ice Thomas Bernhard remembers in that autobiographical story “Ein Kind”, when he sat with his grandmother in the Traunstein flat “in a marvellous, deep blue one Midday when the roar of a a bomber formation swelled: “The American planes, in formations of six, gleamed in the sky on their rigid course towards Munich. Suddenly, from a still greater height, a German plane, a so-called Messerschmitt ME 109, appeared and in no time shot down one of the silver giants. My grandmother and I saw the bomber drop out of formation and finally, with tremendous force, break into three parts which landed at widely separated spots. At the same time there were several white points indicating the members of the crew who had bailed out by parachute. It was a spectacle of unrelieved tragedy. Our stark noonday picture showed several parachutes which failed to open. We could see the black dots falling down to earth faster than the parts of the plane. Other parachutes opened but for some reason caught fire and burnt out in no time, falling down to earth with the crew-members attached to them”*

Grandmother and grandson ran to the railway station “sensing excitement”, caught the train for departue to Waging and got to Otting, where the remains of the destroyed plane were still smoking. One of the two enormous, thirty-five metre long wings (the real instep width amounted to thirty-three metres) had hit a full pigsty which was why there was an *“unimaginable stench in the air”*. Nevertheless, for the sensitive young Bernhard it revealed *“...what had been merely a sensation I now saw from a different angle [...] Great holes were to be seen in the snow, where the bodies of the Canadians (who eventually turned out to be Americans) lay shattered after falling from the sky. I was horrified. Everywhere the snow was scattered with blood.” (1)*

Only three years earlier, in 1941, the ten-year-old boy had been fascinated when he observed light pillars of the anti-aircraft flak that pierced through the night sky - a prodigious floodlight spectacle during a child country dispatch (Kinderlandverschickung) from the train window in Munich: *“The sight of these columns of light was my first experience of war.”*

Now, however, he was standing very close by: *“There’s an arm, I said, and on the arm was a watch. I wanted to see nothing more of war [...]”* (2)

In that mood and attitude they went back to Traunstein. Grandfather Freumbichler, usually never short of advice and consolation, remained silent all evening. (3)

Bernhard's wish *“to see nothing more of war”* did not come true. In October 1944, Salzburg was heavily bombarded upon. At that time Bernhard had lived in the city at a boarding school. He saw the destructions, the piles of rubble and the helplessness of the people. After an air raid a *“soft object”* on which he stepped turned out to be shocking: *“[...] at first sight I took it to be a doll’s hand, [...], but in fact it was the severed hand of a child.”*

In the winter of 1944/1945, the allied air strikes focussed on the supposed Alpine fortress (Alpen Festung) and thus around Berchtesgaden. Now targets for attacks were also the nearby air base Ainring as well as the railway stations in Traunstein and Waging.

In his recollections in *“Die Ursache”* (*“The Cause”*), Bernhard describes deadly low level air raids on the railways and the heavy bombings of Traunstein of April 18th and 25th, 1945: *“Then thousands of bombs fell on the little town of Traunstein, and in the space of a few minutes the area around the station was completely destroyed. [...] This small town on the Traun had suffered one of the most horrific and senseless bombing attacks, just a few days before the end of the war.”* (4)

The breakdown of civilisation in areas affected by World War II, particularly its not reclaimed prehistory and posthistory, and especially the contribution of Austria therein, should become one of his literary topics. In his autobiography, they operate as *“[...] for my whole life abusive events”*. (5)

### **A youthful eyewitness on site:**

The portrayal of the events of another youngster, the then fourteen-year-old pupil Andreas Seehuber, is more exact in recollection. His report also agrees with the historically documented circumstances. He then lived in the small village of Tettelham in the northern outskirts of Traunstein – in times of peace one of the most beautiful regions in the Bavarian Highlands.

It was on his parents' farm ("Hofbauerngut"), a stately court farmer's property, situated below the castle hill of Tettelham, that the youngster witnessed first an airplane with trails of smoke within a flying combat unit in northwest direction and then "*some parachutes*". Seconds later an explosion followed. "*I looked upwards and imagined, the remains could also come down some kilometres away from me.*" But at first smaller airplane fragments crashed down on the court buildings, then the burning wings with the engines and the fuselage followed. They hit the still snow-covered castle hill, damaged the peace-lime-tree ("Friedenslinde") that homecomers of World War I had planted and destroyed a historical granary. The Seehuber family has ever since considered it a great mercy that the burning wreck had not devastated their home and killed the inhabitants.

About a hundred metres away lay a member of the crew, apparently ejected by the impact and "[...] *he repeated "good bye" several times. When the Doctor of Waging arrived, he could only detect the man's death.*" Pilot and copilot were still sitting in the cockpit but died soon afterwards. The priest of Waging administered the last rites. In the airplane and the vicinity, the bodies of five dead soldiers were recovered. They had to be buried anonymously on police order. But nevertheless, the priest, Seehuber's father and the mayor succeeded in asserting a Christian funeral for them with wooden crosses and name data on the nearby cemetery in Otting the next day. The survivors as well as the fallen soldiers could be identified at the nearby air base Salzburg-Ainring by means of their military identity discs.

*“Because at least one was Catholic - he wore a rosary around his neck - all five were buried according to Catholic ritual”* reported the priest. The sixth dead body that had been discovered further away without parachute found his last resting-place on the cemetery of Traunstein. **(6)**

Seehuber also reports about the aerial combat of a Me-109, the standard fighter aircraft of the Luftwaffe. Yet, it is very likely that both young men got this information from later news of the broadcast transmissions but were not present as eyewitnesses themselves.

### **"Big Week": The big week of the bombers**

What had happened?

On Sunday, February 20<sup>th</sup>, 1944, the allied aerial armed forces started to act out their strategical plan of "Big Week". British night attacks and American daylight attacks had to hit “day and night-double blows” within one week to weaken the German arms’ and armaments’ industry decisively.

Main targets were military airports, production plants and arrangements for combat airplanes. The air defence of the Reich should thereby severely impaired, so that the planned invasion at the beaches of Normandy in June 1944, could be undertaken. Core objective of the Allies was to have the complete sovereignty in the air.

Already on the first day of the aerial offensive about one thousand and three four-engined USAirforce B-17-“Flying Fortresses” and B-24-Liberator bombers, accompanied by hundreds of escort fighters took off from air bases in England and southern Italy to attack different targets in the “Reich” and the areas occupied by Germany.

The bombardments continued without any interruption also the following days and nights. However, destruction hit not so much the well camouflaged

factories, protected by “Flak-Alleys” but in many cases civilian residential areas. Responsible therefore was the strategy of the Allied forces of wide surface bombardments, without differentiating between residential areas and industrial areas.

Due to the weather conditions, the distraction by German anti-aircraft defence and violent aerial battles led to bomber fleets unloading their explosives and incendiaries not specifically targeted, but “somewhere” over the city.

Though RAF and USAirforce had expected the counteroffensives of German interceptors, they were particularly surprised by the magnitude of newly equipped ME-109 and Focke Wulf 190 machines.

Accordingly, there were high losses on the allied sides. The responsible military leaders had never before counted such a high rate: 411 downed airplanes and 3000 fallen crew members within the “Big Week” had to be recorded. But, while the allies were able to compensate their losses in manpower and material again quickly, the deaths of 225 pilots and loss of 258 fighter airplanes for the German Luftwaffe were more significant in the outcome of the war.

In any case, the strategical objective of the massive and in total over 4000 missions were not reached. It was only one month after the “Big Week” that more interceptors and battle airplanes than ever before left the mostly subterranean German production halls. In the midyear of 1944, the German aviation industry reached its highest level of production ever during the war. **(7)**

### **Target Regensburg: “Shack Wolf” explodes**

This event reportedly also happened within the scope of the “Big Week”.

Since autumn 1943, Grottaglie, the airfield of Taranto (Apulia), had been occupied by American and English armed forces. The 449th Bombardment Group of the 15th US aerial fleet was involved. The group had been flying their operations ever since December 1943 from the Italian Grottaglie.

On Friday, February 25<sup>th</sup>, 1944, between 08:20 and 08:40 in the morning, thirty-five US bombers of the type B-24 H ("Liberator") took off heading for South Germany. Fifteen airplanes had the assigned target of Regensburg (mission No. 31). In each of the four-engine-planes sat ten crew members: Pilot and copilot, navigator, bombardier and six on-board gunners. The Lake of Chiemsee, broadly situated on the northern foothills of the Bavarian Alps served as a landmark and assembly point to the aerial fleets. Targets were the Messerschmitt factories in Regensburg and in Prufening as well as the nearby airfield of the Messerschmitt company in Obertraubling, all of which were heavily bombed upon at about 13:00.

While the Regensburg Messerschmitt plants soon resumed their production again, a really effective military precision blow did succeed in Obertraubling, but at a high price for the invaders. **(8)**

It had only been two weeks before that the 1<sup>st</sup> Group of the Jagdgeschwader (fighter wing) 5 (I/JG 5) called "Eismeer" (Polar Sea) of the Luftwaffe had been moved from its operational areas in northern Finland to Obertraubling to support the Reichsverteidigung (defence of the Reich).

The USAirforce attack on February, 25<sup>th</sup> 1944 devastated the airfield completely and destroyed numerous aircraft and technical equipment on the ground. Subsequently, the remaining planes of JG 5 had to be moved to Herzogenaurach. **(9)**

However, several "Eismeer-Jäger" had succeeded before and during the attack in quickly starting their machines. They pursued the bombers and shot down three Liberators that were flying back rigidly in formation from the Danube to the Chiemsee. Among them was machine No. 61 from 716 squadron, called "Shack Wolf", led by Lt. Robert J. Knapp.

“Shack Wolf” was hit at about 13:30 close the north hemline of Lake Chiemsee by an ME 109 of the Eismeer-Jäger which launched an air-to-air missile. Pilot of the ME 109 was Lt. Max Endriss of I/JG. The Boeing Bomber exploded yet in the air. Three parachutes were observed coming down from the other US bombers of the formation. **(10)**

Indeed, four members of the crew survived by bailing out on parachute. They landed widely scattered between Traunstein and Waging and were taken POW - prisoners of war.

As it turned out later, one victim's parachute went up in flames and another had tried in vain, to link arms in a pickaback-procedure with the comrade. **(11)**

A rescue team of the Wehrmacht loaded the wreckage of the bomber onto a truck and transported it to freight carriages at the railway station in Waging, as Andreas Seehuber reports with reference to other contemporary witnesses.

Soon after the end of the war in summer 1945 - Bavaria had become part of the US-Zone of Occupied Germany - the fallen Americans were exhumed according to instructions by the US-military authority and buried again in various US war cemeteries.

### **German American anniversaries from August, 3<sup>rd</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> 1988**

Our story has not yet come to an end here. In 1946, war homecomers of Otting began with the construction of a small war memorial chapel on the castle hill of Tettelham next to the old peace lime-tree. The “Friedenslinde” had suffered severely by the air crash, but was still alive. On August, 15<sup>th</sup> 1947, the chapel was consecrated. Since then, a globe crowned by a peace cross, which consists of a metal part of the plane, is resplendent on the turret roof with bell.

The tragic events of winter 1944/1945 had never left the thoughts of the fourteen-year-old boy at that time. Andreas Seehuber held a high political position as a member of the Bavarian Parliament from 1978 to 1995. It was due



to his active commitment that a survivor of the air crash could be invited over from the USA together with his wife, as well as two female relatives of victims.

A German American Memorial week from August, 3<sup>rd</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> 1988 was held and celebrated in their presence. It shared great interest among the population and participation of the Bavarian state government, the church and high-ranking American departments. **(12)**

The sister of one of the crashed airmen had also been invited. She wrote in respect to the deeply moved US pilot who had got to learn only now that he had not bailed out over Austria, but over Germany: *“It’s likely they have been waiting for him to come back. Like they feel, that they saved him, and he somehow belongs to their town, to them.”*

Ever since the celebrations of 1988 a memorial plaque inside the chapel and a stone tablet in the Cemetery of Otting inform about the disaster. **(13)**

\*Translation of: Weithmann, Michael: “Das Schauspiel war eine vollkommene Tragödie”. Thomas Bernhard und der „Air Crash“ auf Tettelham 1944, in: Literatur in Bayern 100 (Juni 2010) S. 28-31.

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- 1) Bernhard, Thomas: Ein Kind. Salzburg. 1982, citations pp. 162-164.
- Bernhard, Thomas: Gathering Evidence. A Memoir. Translated from the German by David McLintock. London 2003. (Contents: A Child pp 1-73; An Indication of the Cause pp. 74-142.); citations from A Child, pp. 71-72.
- Schwenkmeier, Willi: Traunstein und Thomas Bernhard. Eine Spurensuche, in: Bibliotheksforum Bayern (BFB), 2007, 4, pp. 254-255.
- To Johann Freumbichler see: Judex, Bernhard: Der Schriftsteller Johannes Freumbichler. (1881-1949), Leben und Werk von Thomas Bernhards Großvater. Wien, Köln, Weimar. 2006.
- Messerschmitt ME 109 (Bf 109), single-engined and single seated standard fighter of the German Luftwaffe 1937-1945.

2) Ein Kind p. 136. A Child p. 60. Thomas Bernhard interpreted his „Kinderlandverschickung“ (childrens' evacuation to the country) of 1941 to Saalfeld/ Thuringia as a compulsory hospitalization into a home for maladjusted adolescents.

3) Ein Kind p. 164; A Child p. 72.

4) Bernard, Thomas: Die Ursache. Eine Andeutung: Salzburg. 1975. pp. 29, 31-33, 38, 77-85. Traunstein: pp. 86f. ; Cause pp. 87 f; 90 ff; 110 f.

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5) Ursache p. 40; Cause p. 88.

6) Quotations of Andreas Seehuber in: Schuster, Josef; Seehuber, Andreas: „Die Schlossberg-Kapelle zu Tettelham“ in: Heimatbuch der Pfarrei Otting. 1250 Jahre Otting. Otting 1999. Part VII Otting in neuerer Zeit, pp. 546-550. His memories (Erinnerungsbericht) pp. 546-547 and in: Andreas Seehuber senior, in: Verein für Heimatpflege und Kultur Waginger See, vol. 17 (2005) pp. 127-133.

7) Generally: Friedrich, Jörg: Der Brand. Deutschland im Bombenkrieg. München 2002. Hammel, Eric: The Road to Big Week July 1942 to February 1944. Pacifica CA, Pacifica Press 2009; Permooser, Irmtraud: Der Luftkrieg über München 1942-1945. München, 1997. Literary thematization of the air war: Sebald, Winfried G.: Luftkrieg und Literatur. Frankfurt/Main 2002. (Without reference to Thomas Bernhard).

Hage, Volker: Zeugen der Zerstörung. Literaten und Luftkrieg. Frankfurt/Main. 2003 with reference to Thomas Bernhard inside the chapter: Die Kinder des Bombenkriegs“, pp. 89-91, with a quote from „Ursache“ p. 133.

8) Schmoll, Peter: Die Messerschmitt-Werke im Zweiten Weltkrieg. Die Flugzeugproduktion der Messerschmitt GmbH Regensburg 1938-1945. Regensburg, 1999. Attack of February, 25, 1944, pp. 137-146; idem: Luftangriff. Regensburg und die Messerschmitt-Werke im Fadenkreuz 1939-1945. Regensburg 1995.

9) Girbig, Werner: Jagdgeschwader 5 „Eismeerjäger“. Eine Chronik aus Dokumenten und Berichten 1941-1945. Stuttgart, 1976, cf. pp. 285–301.

10) Grottaglie, and Home. History of the 449th Bomb Group, forty-seventh Wing. Fifteenth Air Force. Written by Members of the 449th Bomb Group Association. Turner Publishing Company, Nashville, Tennessee 1997, cf. pp. 225-227.

*Shack ? Wolf !* The meaning of this nose art just happens to be an indecent proposition and a rebuff! "Shack?" (to shack up) was a commonly used term, during W.W. II (and after), propositioning a girl to sleep with you (for a night or longer) when you were on leave. "Wolf!" (guys who were "fast" or "aggressive" were often called a "wolf") was her response to the proposal, which essentially meant, "No Way, I'm not that kind of girl!"

11) Shepherd, William D.: Of Men and Wings. The First 100 Missions of the 449<sup>th</sup> Bombardment Group, Fifteenth Air Force. Norfield Publishing Panama City, Florida, 1996, cf. pp. 65 -67. (February 1944) and annotations pp. 247-248.

12) Description of the festival, in: Schuster, Josef; Seehuber, Andreas, as above note 5, pp. 548-550 (with illustrations).

13) Present in Otting, August 1988: Ernest J. Johnson, his wife Victoria; as well as Rosetta Brewer und Minnie Doyle, sisters of Sgt Lloyd T. Wright ("*fallen to death without chute*"). Quote by Rosetta Brewer in „Grottaglie ...“, p. 227.

The names of the six fallen US airmen are noted on the memorial plaque in Otting. Picture of the commemorative tablet in: Schuster, Josef; Seehuber, Andreas, as above note 5, p. 550.



*Der Firmling und sein Pate, der vergötterte Großvater  
Johannes Freumbichler, Traunstein 1943*

12 years' old Thomas Bernhard, candidate of confirmation and his sponsor,  
his "idolized" grandfather Johannes Freumbichler. Traunstein 1943  
W. Schwenkmeier. Der Traunsteiner Stadtplatz 1999, p. 208

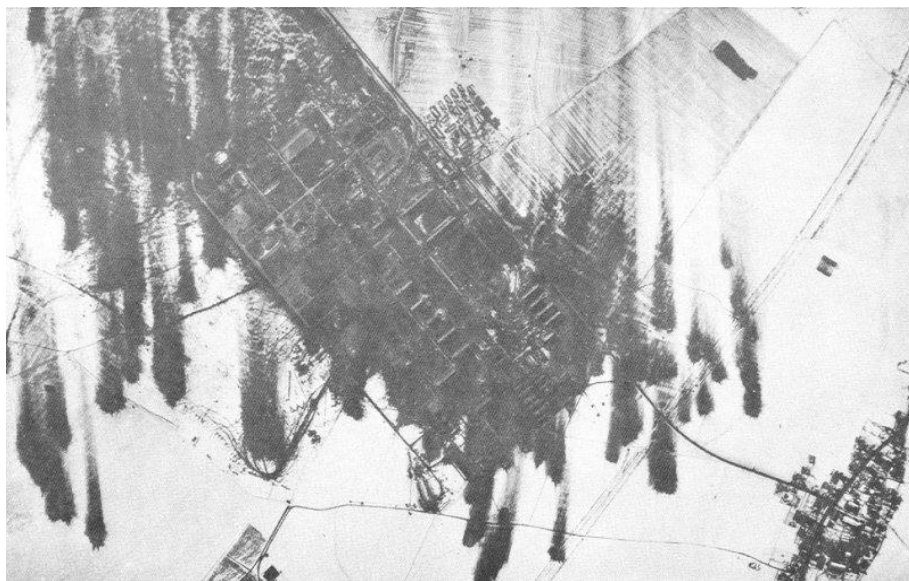
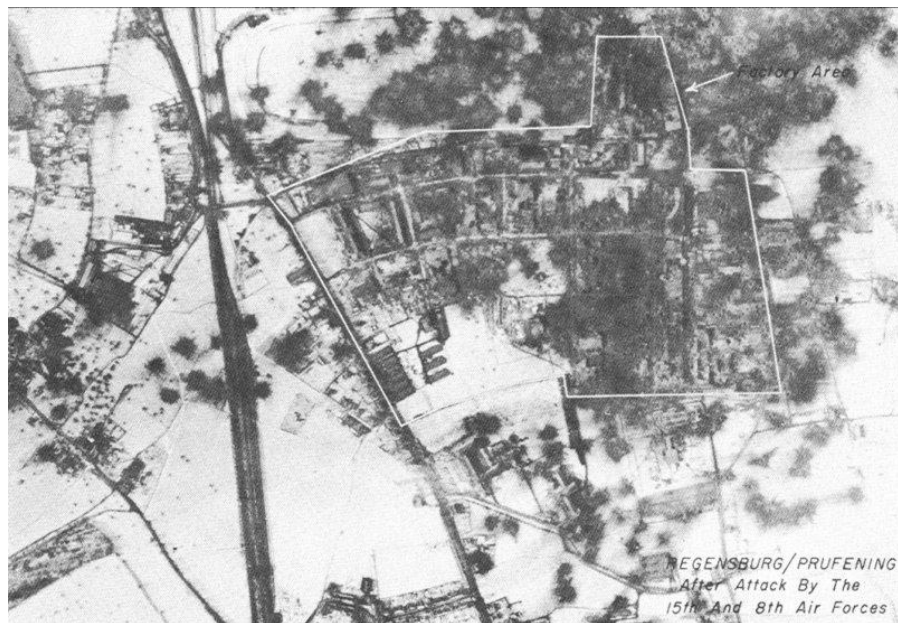




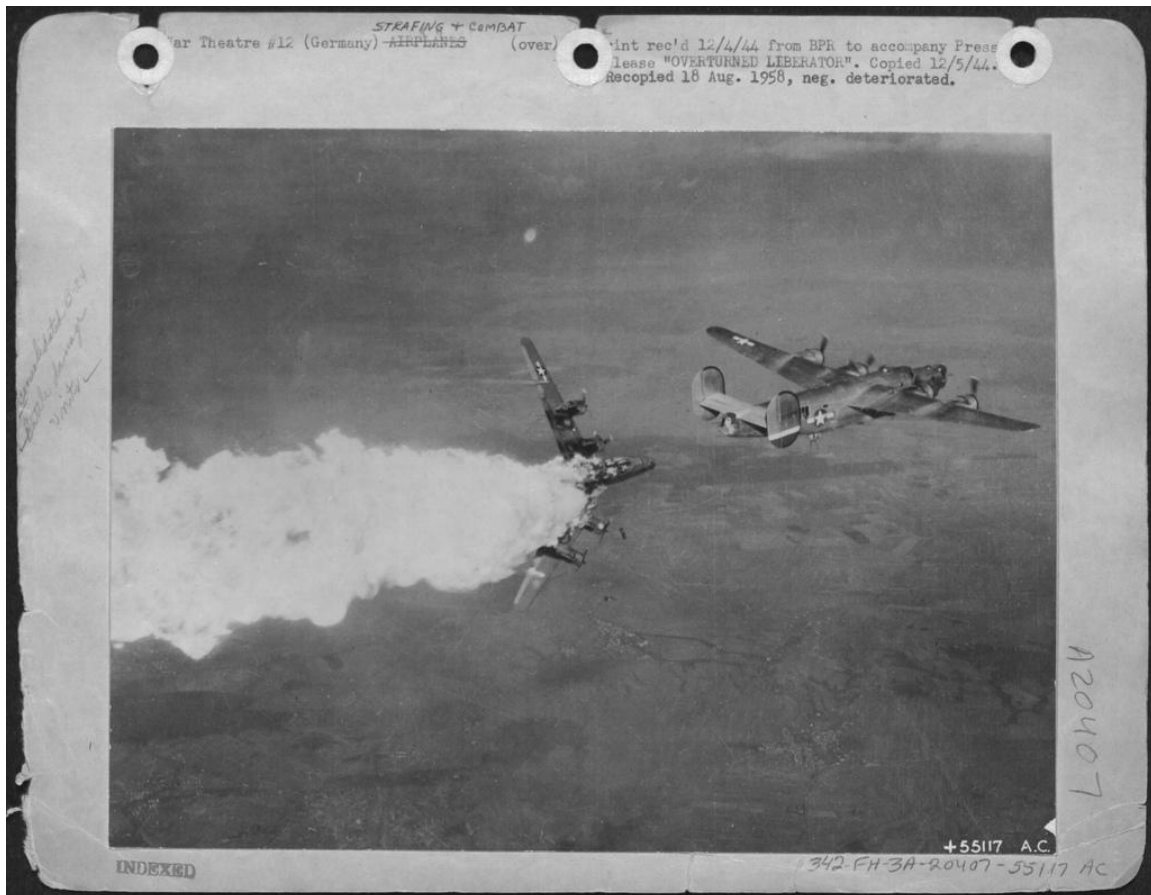
Schlossberg (Castle Hill) of Tettelham, Upper Bavaria. On the right the “Hofbauerngut”, a farm, now offering pretty holiday apartments. [www.beimhofbauerngut.de](http://www.beimhofbauerngut.de)



The small chapel on top the hill, erected 1946.



Targets of the 02/25/1944 air strike: Prüfening, Messerschmitt factory area (above) and Obertraubling airfield. [www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/AAF/III/](http://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/AAF/III/)



The "Big Week": Assault on the Reich, loss of a US "Liberator" in 1944.  
 (Valmore Schilleman, ww2shots.com)

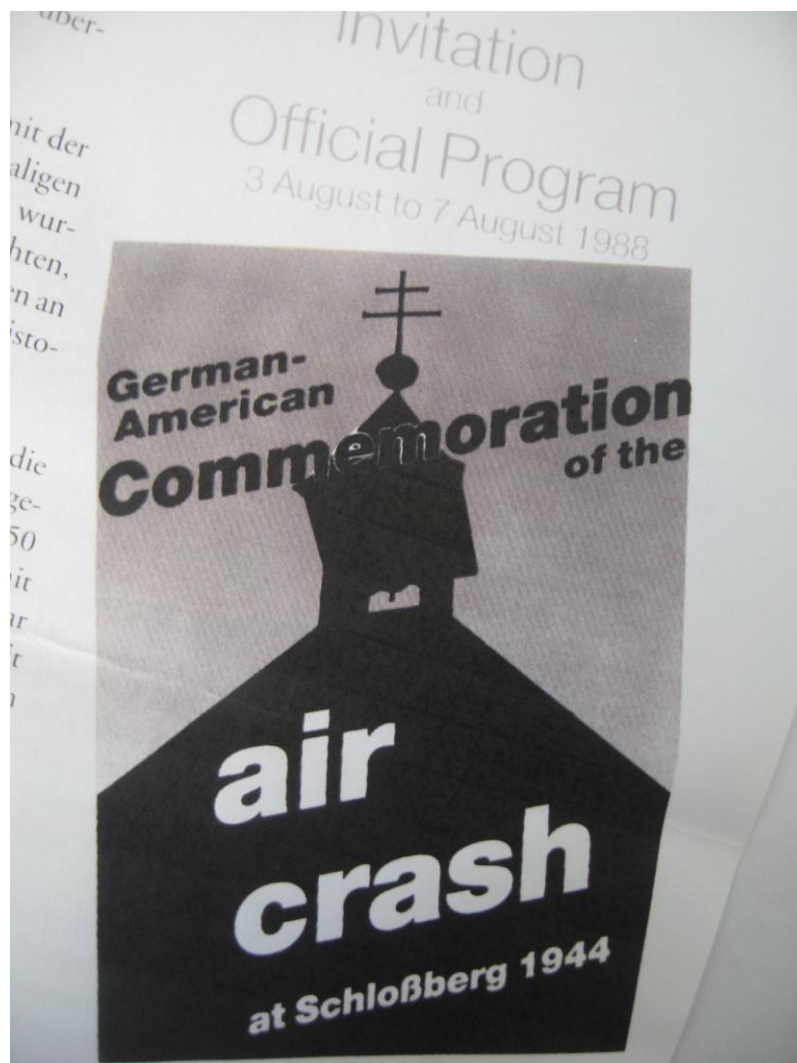


Shack? Wolf?, downed Feb, 25, 1944, to Tettelham  
 (www.b24bestweb.com)





Memorial Plaque at Otting Cemetery



German-American Commemoration of the air crash at Schloßberg 1944.  
Official Program 3. August to 7. August 1988, brochure.





Memorial tablet inside the Chapel, attached in 1988.