

A Friend Never Met

I finally admitted it. I didn't kill him deliberately, with malice and intent, but kill him I did. At least I was responsible for his death.

Strange, that I even remembered something that happened almost 50 years ago. It wasn't a particularly singular occurrence; at least in those times it wasn't. It happened back during World War II, on August 18, 1944 to be exact. With the first burst of machine gun fire I saw the bright flashes of the armor piercing incendiary projectiles as they tore into his aircraft, saw the canopy fly off and his body come hurtling out, all in far less time than it takes to tell.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. In order for one to fully understand the situation, it is necessary to go back a little in the history of the air war in Europe. The 31st Fighter Group had been equipped with Spitfires, one of two such American Groups in the Mediterranean and had provided support and air cover for the ground forces through the North African, Sicilian, and the early Italian campaign. However, the 15th Air Force, formed in late 1943, needed additional escort fighters for its heavy bombers, in order to attack targets in such well-defended places as Ploesti, Munich, Budapest, western Czechoslovakia and even up into southern Poland. At the end of March 1944 the 31st was ordered to turn in its Spitfires, accept delivery of new P-51's and move to San Severo on the eastern side of Italy as part of the 15th Air Force.

I had joined the group just as the transition was taking effect. By mid-August I had already flown 55 missions and had been in enough fights with German fighters to believe that I was one of the hunters rather than the hunted. I had shot down six Me-109's in the process. Of course by Luftwaffe standards I was a neophyte - many of their pilots, those who still survived, had been in combat for several years and had flown hundreds of sorties. But I didn't feel like a new type, exhibiting the excessive confidence so often associated with fighter pilots.

Although we pilots in the Group did not realize it at the time, the Luftwaffe had been worn down to the point where shortages of pilots and materiel had seriously affected their ability to engage the formations of bombers and fighters, which appeared often, and unrelentingly over southern European targets. By late summer of 1944 the defense of the German Industrial targets had become an impossible task for the Luftwaffe. We still lost aircraft and pilots to the German fighters - there was no mistaking the fact that the Me-109 G, in the hands of an experienced pilot was a formidable opponent - but the fighter opposition was definitely weakening.

At that time my squadron commander was Captain "Tommy" Molland, an old hand from Spitfire days in North Africa and Sicily, and a close friend. He told me that he had gotten permission to put up four extra aircraft on an upcoming mission. Unlike the sixteen aircraft of the normal squadron formation, the extra flight would have no close escort responsibility but would be free to roam about the skies in the vicinity of the target looking for enemy fighters. His idea was that German fighters were avoiding the Mustangs and were using their remaining strength to attack the bomber formations where the escort was thin or non-existent. If one could loiter in the target area long enough - so his reasoning went - the chances were good that enemy fighters could be found and engaged. He said that he was going to lead the extra flight himself, and offered me the number three, or

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element lead slot. I jumped at the chance. Besides being a great opportunity for some air action, I was pleased that he had seen fit to choose me to participate in his experiment.

The mission he picked was on the 18th of August, another trip back to the oil fields of Rumania. The task of the group on that day was to provide close escort for B-24's of the 55th Bomb Wing attacking oil refineries near Ploesti.

We had our usual powdered eggs and coffee but I went easy on the coffee - Ploesti was a long way - 5 1/2 hours all told - and the relief tube, as a means of processing slightly used coffee, was absolutely useless. At the briefing the tail markings of the 55th Wing were described, and other mission details were covered but Tommy and I couldn't have cared less. We had no intention of staying with our squadron and their bombers once we reached the Ploesti/Bucharest area. Take off was set for 0814, all the data was duly inked onto palms or backs of hands and watches synchronized. Then it was time to go and everyone headed for their transportation to the airdrome some six miles to the west.

We had scheduled two of the newer pilots to fly our wings and so the four of us piled into Tommy's Jeep for the trip to the field. We were in no hurry since we were going to take off last and tag along behind our squadron, the 308th, as it climbed up to its assigned altitude of 26,000 feet.

The bomber rendezvous was made at 1000 hours between Craiova and Pitesti and the squadron immediately took up its assigned escort duty over the bombers. Tommy stayed with the formation for a short time but when I saw some fast moving tiny dots to the east and called them out, he made a slight turn to the right and off we went to investigate. However, we lost visual contact so after loitering beyond the Ploesti/Bucharest area for a bit, Tommy turned back toward the target area. We weren't straight and level for 30 seconds when I happened to look back and what I saw really shocked me. Very close, far too close, and slightly above us was a formation of Me-109's. I called a break immediately and the fight was on. The initial stages of the fight are a blur. The first gut-wrenching, graying-out turns are all instinctive, as are the moves inside the cockpit; tanks away, mixture full rich, full throttle, full RPM, gun switch on. Now I am behind a 109, in range, open fire. The six .50's immediately come to life. A half second later the burst produces a series of sudden flashes on his fuselage and wing roots. His canopy is off, he's over the side, falling away from my view to a lower altitude where his chute can be opened in safety. I snap a quick look around, spot another 109 at my eleven o'clock well below me and diving at high speed. A sharp turn to check my tail and then I'm closing on him, still at max throttle. No evasive action. Zero deflection shot. He rapidly fills the sight. Pipper in the middle of the fuselage. NOW! Again the aircraft seems to tremble as the machine guns begin firing. Again, a split second later the strikes begin to play upon the fuselage but this time I hold the trigger down. The canopy flies away two, three, seconds - a long burst. In the midst of this furious fusillade a black figure separates from the doomed aircraft. Now I stop firing and follow his falling figure, turning steeply to keep him in sight, waiting for his chute to blossom. He falls and falls and still no chute. Now it's too late. He hits in an open field where a Rumanian farmer has stopped his horse-drawn plow to watch the deadly game played out over his field.

I had never seen anything like that before and I'm momentarily stunned. Incredibly, I wonder half aloud if I hit him as he left his machine but in another second the sense of

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peril returns and I am again the hunter, reducing power, checking instruments, calling on the R/T, and searching every bit of sky in my vicinity. No 109's. No Tommy. No wingman. Nothing.

I was not yet finished for the day. On my climb I was bounced by two more ME-109's and succeeded in getting one of them. Finally, it was over and I was finally out of the target area homeward bound. It was then that I began the introspection that was to last for 50+ years. Why did I hold the trigger down? Could I have stopped firing sooner? Absolute nonsense, of course; trying to examine reflex actions which occurred in a span of a few split seconds. Still, the fact that there wasn't and couldn't be an answer did not stop the questioning.

The latent doubts over the years finally evolved into a desire to identify the unknown warrior-victim. And it was only recently that I began seriously to act on this compulsion. From a fellow aviation writer I secured the address of a Belgian, Eric Mombeek, who specialized in WWII Luftwaffe history. I wrote to him giving the particulars of the fight with a request to determine, if possible, the name of the German pilot. About two weeks later I received his reply. He said that only two Geschwaders could have been involved and only one, the First Group of JG-53 was in action on the day in question. He further stated that fortunately, a very complete and scholarly history of JG-53 (Pik As) had just been published and when he consulted it, he discovered that there was indeed a reference to a pilot shot down on that day whose parachute did not open. It resulted from an action with a P-51 near Gazanesti, Rumania, exactly where I had placed the encounter. There was no doubt about it - we both were certain it was the correct aircraft. The pilot's name was Herbert Franke, a Feldwebel, who had recently been promoted to Lieutenant. Included in the letter was a photocopy of a picture from the book of the third staffel taken at Maniago, Italy in the spring of 1944. A red arrow drawn above the group pointed to Herbert Franke. I studied the small image as it stared back at me and it was an emotional moment.

I finally managed to locate and purchase a copy of the history and painstakingly translated the text. Gradually bits and pieces of the military career of Herbert Franke began to emerge.

He first appears as an Obergefreiter (Corporal) flying with I/JG 53 on the Russian front. On 6 June 1942 he crashed a Me-109 F near Voronezh but no details were given, other than the aircraft was totally destroyed. He next shows up a year later. The date is 13 July 1943 and his gruppe had earlier been withdrawn from Sicily to Vibo Valentia, on the extreme southwest coast of Italy. On this day the gruppe was being transferred farther west to Lecce since Vibo was being pummeled mercilessly by Allied bombers. Several of the pilots, including Herbert Franke had flown their aircraft to Lecce, but since there were more aircraft at Vibo than available pilots, seven of them boarded General Galland's He-111 at Lecce to be ferried back to Vibo. The bomber arrived just at the end of a bombing raid and the excited pilot, attempting to land, overshot the landing field and wound up 50 meters in the Tyrrhenian Sea, wrecking the aircraft and injuring all of the passengers. Herbert was taken to the hospital in Naples and did not return to duty until February 1944. The third staffel of I/JG 53, of which he was a member was then based at Maniago, in northern Italy. The 15th Air Force had been attacking rail targets in northern Italy and

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sallying farther north into Hungary and Austria so his unit, sitting astride the pathway northward was in a position to intercept the American bombers and fighter escort.

On 5 April 1944 on one such intercept mission, his gruppe engaged a formation of B-24's and their accompanying P-38's, and even as he shot one down, he himself fell victim to another P-38. He was wounded and forced to bail out of his "Yellow 5" just west of Treviso, landing him in the hospital again. When he rejoined the gruppe, it had been transferred to Rumania to assist in the defense of the Ploesti oil complex. During the month of June 1944 he succeeded in shooting down two B-24's; one on the 6th and one on the 24th.

On the 2nd of August he wrote a letter to his friend, Ernst Pausinger, who was in the hospital in Vienna from wounds to his face and left eye suffered when he was shot down by a B-24 gunner. Up until now all of the information I had gleaned about Herbert was about facts - dates, units, locations. Now, for the first time I hear him speak. Not to me, of course, but still I hear him expressing himself in his own words. It is a poignant letter indeed, obviously written in haste, in response to a letter he had received from Pausinger.

"Dear Ernst,

I received your letter from Vienna with thanks. Please excuse me for first answering it today. Things are again rather mad. Deadly dogfights with large numbers of greatly superior Mustangs. We can scarcely get close to the bombers. Capt. Bauer has fallen, Uffz Zemper was shot while hanging in his parachute. (Fahnlein)! Many that you don't even know have not returned. I wouldn't like to mention numbers, or else it would look very bad to you. Only now and then is one of the Tommies still shot down. At the present time, only Kornatz, Burggraf, and I (of the people you knew) are still flying in the Staffel.

But little friend, how can one be upset if he has to lie in bed? Man, sleep away until you are completely rested! I could sleep day and night !!! And with your eye, it will heal good. I hold both my thumbs. (I'm pulling for you) Only don't give up.

The only happy news: Uffz Janietz was promoted to Feldwebel. That is however, the only good news. We have become just a young pile. (motley crew)."

Herbert Franke was to live only 16 days after he wrote this letter; our paths were inexorably drawing together now, resulting in his death on the 18th of August.

I wrote to several of his staffel—mates who survived the war, hoping to learn more about Herbert but without success. I had just about resigned myself to being satisfied with what I had when Fate intervened again.

One day in the spring of 1994, I was leafing through a copy of Jager Blatt, which a friend had given me. Jager Blatt is a bi-monthly news booklet put out by the Gemeinschaft der Jagd.flieger, the German Association of Fighter Pilots. I was looking at pictures,

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picking out words, which I recognized when I was electrified by one, in particular. It was a picture of two older men, one presenting a painting to the other. They were identified as Edu Neumann, Commander of the fighter forces in Rumania during WWII and...ERNST PAUSINGER! Surely there could not be two Ernst Pausingers; this had to be the friend of Herbert to whom he had written his last letter. When my astonishment wore off, I called my friend, Kurt Schulze, himself an ex-Luftwaffe pilot and asked if he could get the address of Pausinger for me.

A few days later he telephoned with the news that Pausinger had indeed been in the I/JG 53 and today lived in Bavaria in the tiny town of Herrngiersdorf. Armed with this news and the address, I wrote to him explaining who I was and asked for any additional information that he might have. Six weeks went by and I had begun to think that he wanted nothing to do with me when a letter arrived from Herrngiersdorf. It was from Ernst Pausinger and he volunteered the information that he had been in Italy on holiday and had only seen my letter a short time before. He seemed genuinely interested in my request and in continuing the correspondence. However, many of the details he offered, I already had from the "Pik As" history. He did have some new information:

“. . . . On 11 June 1944 I myself was wounded, shot down by a Liberator and was taken to a hospital near Bucharest. I saw Herbert Franke there for the last time.

I first learned of his death in October 1944 after I had come back to the unit. Afterward was told that Capt Seiz who led the honor guard at the burial for Franke, became a Russian POW (Rumania went over to the Allies) and first came home in 1949. Franke was, as far as I can remember and after discussion with Mr. Seiz, a charming, friendly, reserved comrade. But we still have not been able to get his home address.”

I have since exchanged many letters with Ernst. To my question about where Herbert is buried, he replied that the return of fallen soldiers to Germany was not permitted in "Socialist Times" and to his knowledge, Herbert and all of his comrades still lie in the cemetery in Bucharest.

Ernst and I finally met face-to-face in October 1994 in Geisenheim, Germany. He is himself a "charming, friendly, reserved comrade" and even in the face of the language difficulty, we got on famously. While withdrawing several bottles of beer from a small bag, which he brought, he explained that the small brewery which produced them had only been in the family for a hundred years, but had been in continuous production for 850 years, since 1131. And so, arms around each other's shoulders we drank the beer, except for one bottle which I saved and brought home with me. When will I drink the last bottle? I don't know; perhaps never. I might just keep it to look at and to remember other times and places.

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While I have found no surviving trace of Herbert Franke, I have found his friend, and he has become my friend.

That was the end of the story as I first wrote it. It was published in Eric Hammel's book Aces in Combat and was translated into German and published in the JägerBlatt. However, the story continues:

Several years ago in one of Ernst's letters, he informed me that he had written to the German Graves registration Agency and had been told that Herbert came from a town in Germany called Eufenschlag, but that he was unable to find it on any of his maps. I called the German Consulate in Los Angeles and asked for their help in locating Eufenschlag. The man to whom I was speaking asked me to wait while he looked it up in his reference books. When he came back on the line, he stated that there was no such place in Germany. He said that his reference Atlas listed the smallest village and Eufenschlag was not listed. He suggested that it might be in Austria.

Before spending any more time and effort in trying to locate Eufenschlag, I decided to write to the Graves Registration Agency and ask them to recheck the information that they had given to Ernst. Several weeks later I received a reply from that Agency informing me that they had indeed made an error. Herbert's home city was Erfenschlag, not Eufenschlag, and it was a suburb of Chemnitz. I informed Ernst of my new information and although we talked about some day going to Erfenschlag to inquire about any living relatives of Herbert, it was not in our immediate plans. I suppose there was a subconscious reluctance on my part because of the fear of opening old wounds and feelings and also the fear of anger and rejection, if indeed, a relative could be found.

Several years passed without any further developments. Then one day toward the end of 2004, I was relating this story to my friend, Tom Caltabiano when he whipped out a pocket computer, got on the Internet and entered a search for Erfenschlag. I was shocked when he announced that he had found an Erfenschlag page on the Internet. The following day I duplicated his action on my desktop computer and noticed that the Erfenschlag site had an e-mail address listed for the Erfenschlag Bürgerverein, a kind of civic association. I prepared a message and sent it off to the listed address. The text of the message was as follows:

Letter to Erfenschlag:

My name is Robert J. Goebel and I am a retired American Air Force officer, who lives in California.

In 1944 I was stationed in Italy, flying a mustang in a group whose duty it was to accompany heavy bombers to their targets. On 18 August 1944, on a flight to Ploesti, Rumania, I was involved in a fight with a Messerschmitt 109. The

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pilot jumped out of his severely damaged airplane but unfortunately his parachute did not open, and he fell to his death.

After extensive research, I have discovered that the pilot was named Herbert Franke, and he flew with the 1st Group of JG-53 "Pik As". He is buried in the German graveyard in Bucharest. His friend in the staffel, Ernst Pausinger, wrote to the Graves Registration Agency and discovered that his home city was Erfenschlag.

I am writing to you, hoping that you can put me in contact with the surviving relatives of Lt. Herbert Franke. I want to tell them, that I am sorry for the pain that I caused to Herbert's parents and family and to tell them that I often pray for him.

I received a reply the next day from Joachim Schuknecht, the webmaster for the Bürgerverein. He said that he had contacted the appropriate officers of the association and all agreed to undertake the project of locating relatives of Herbert Franke. Early attempts were unsuccessful in finding any trace of him, until the Chemnitz newspaper, the Frei Presse, carried an article about the search. The information then began to flow in to the Bürgerverein. It developed that Herbert's parents were deceased but a sister who is now 96 years old was still living in a neighboring town. Herbert also had a fiancé named Gerda Lohse, deceased, and a niece and nephew who still live nearby. They came to a meeting in Erfenschlag with the Bürgerverein and brought several pictures of Herbert in his Luftwaffe uniform as well as the obituary.

A copy of the obituary and of the Acknowledgement of the Bereaved is reprinted below:

Herbert Franke's Obituary

Born 20 February 1921

Died 18 August 1944

A noble heart now rests in foreign soil.

We are grieved to hear the news unfathomable and hardly comprehensible of the death of our only and beloved son, dear brother, brother-in-law, uncle, my confident and kind fiance, grandson, nephew and cousin

Lieutenant Herbert Franke

Pilot in a fighter squadron, holder of numerous combat claims, decorated with the Golden Badge of Frontline Air Missions, the Iron Cross First and Second Class, the Badge for Wounded Servicemen, the German-Italian Africa Medal and other military honors, who died in air combat for Fuehrer and Fatherland. He was buried in a memorial cemetery.

In utter bereavement Otto Franke and wife, Karl Friedrich and family, Kurt Mueller and family, fiancé Gerda Lohse and parents, grandmother Auguste Franke and all relatives.

Einsiedel, August 1944

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Acknowledgement of the Bereaved

In silent remembrance of the distant grave of our dear and unforgettable son,
brother, brother-in-law, and fiancé, in the Southeast

Lieutenant Herbert Franke

We would like to express our heartfelt thanks to all who loved him while alive,
honored him in death and offered their condolences.

Otto Franke and wife, Karl Friedrich and family, Kurt Mueller and family, Gerda
Lohse and parents.

I subsequently wrote a letter to Herbert's niece, Mrs. Johanna Kril, explaining who I was and why I was writing, although I believe that she already had this information from her meeting with the Bürgerverein. I received her reply a short time later. The following is an English translation of her reply:

Chemnitz/Einsiedel, d. 5.3.2005

Dear Mr. Goebel,

I have received your letter of 7 February with thanks.

The first news about your search for the family members were learned from the Erenschlag Burgerverein.

The difficulty goes back 20 years.

During Communist times in the former DDR, the information on a fallen serviceman by the next of kin from the Berlin Missing Person Agency was not possible.

The parents of my uncle were very sad over his death in 1944.

The war made millions of people unhappy.

But soldiers like you and Herbert Franke must do their duty.

Therefore we forgive you.

The family, sister Louise Uhlig, (sister Herta Muller unfortunately dead), niece Johanna Kril, and nephew Rudi Friedrich have been able to learn more through the Jagerblatt article [which you sent] about his fate. As we could read from this

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magazine, you and Ernst Pausinger have written in detail about my uncle Herbert Franke's war experience.

Herewith we include for your remembrance 3 photos of his sister 96 years old, niece 69 years old, and nephew 69 years old.

We wish you and your family everything good, continued best health for all and we remain with friendly greetings.

***Johanna and Siegfried Kril
Einsiedler Hauptstr. 160
09123 Chemnitz
Germany***

As a side note, the reporter who wrote the article about Herbert and me in the Chemnitz Frei Presse, Steffen Jankowski, sent me an e-mail to tell me that he was coming to America to visit his in-laws in San Diego in early March and asked if he could meet with me while he was here to do an interview for a follow-on story. He came to our house with his wife on March 7, 2005 and did in fact do an interview and took photos of June and me for his article. I was shocked when he said that the circulation of the Frei Presse was one million. Apparently when Chemnitz was part of East Germany (and called Karl Marx Stadt) everyone in the whole state of Saxony read it and still do.

During the war, Erfenschlag was bombed and a bell tower in the town was destroyed. However, the bell was found and saved by the townspeople. A new bell tower was recently built and the old bell was hung in it. It's dedication, to world peace, was held in early May of 2005 and I was invited to attend and speak at the dedication. I replied that I had to decline for reasons of health, but I sent a message which was read at the dedication.