

**7b) HISTORICAL SOURCE MATERIAL AND EYEWITNESS
REPORTS OF THE CRASH OF A US AIR-FORCE BOMBER
IN WAIDHOFEN/YBBS - ST.LEONHARD
ON FEBRUARY 23, 1944**
by Walter Zambal

English translation by the author.

1) INTRODUCTION

On April 9, 1992, Mr Lamar Howard (*1918) from Johnson City, Tennessee, USA, visited our town. He had come back after 48 years to the place where he, as co-pilot of an American B-24J 'Liberator' bomber, escaped death by hair's breadth. His plane was hit by ground fire on February 23, 1944, while bombing Steyr. After further attacks by German fighter planes the bomber was badly damaged and forced towards Waidhofen, where it crashed close to a farmhouse called "Felbrach" (St.Leonard 77). Three men of the crew were killed and seven of them managed to get off the plane with their parachutes. Mr Howard spent a few days in Waidhofen to gather information about the crash¹ and he told us about his plans to arrange a meeting with the surviving crew members in Waidhofen for the year 1993. After some preparations the reunion was set for the time between April 14 and April 21, 1993. The following crew members (some of them with their wives) arrived in Waidhofen on April 14, 1993:

John and Shirley BYRNE from Florida
Lamar HOWARD from Tennessee
John PIZELLO from Utah
Walter and Sarah PRICE as well as their son Paul from LOUISIANA
Max and Ruth RASMUSSEN from Illinois
Steve and Lena SWIDARSKI from Ohio

Marvin GRICE, the pilot of the plane, who worked as a psychiatrist in Texas after the war, could not take part in the reunion. He died of cancer in 1979.

The ten crew members had the following positions:

Pilot	Marvin GRICE
Copilot	Lamar HOWARD
Navigator	Walter PRICE
Bombardier	John BYRNE
Engineer and Top Turret Gunner	Max RASMUSSEN
Nose Gunner	Steve SWIDARSKI
Ball Turret Gunner	Aerial HOFFMANN
Waist Gunner (right)	Franklin HERMANN
Waist Gunner (left)	Thomas ROOT
Tail Gunner	John PIZELLO

It was a very busy week for the American airmen. They visited the place where the plane crashed, the places where they had landed with their parachutes, the churchyard at St.Leonhard where their three comrades were temporarily buried as well as the local museum

¹ Compare the report in the local newspaper "Bote von der Ybbs" from April 17, 1992.

in Waidhofen. On Sunday, April 18, 1993, there was a meeting with eyewitnesses of the crash at Harreither's (an inn at St.Leonhard), where interesting details of the crash turned up. - As a gesture of reconciliation the American airmen were invited to Steyr to visit the plant they had bombed in 1944, today's SKF. At Steyr they also visited the "Community for Peace - St.Ulrich". In a memorial service in the parish church of St.Leonhard they commemorated the three crew members Franklin Hermann, Aerial Hoffmann and Thomas Root, who died in the crash.

On the last day of their trip they visited the then Gestapo prison (today's district court) in St.Pölten. The American airmen had to spend the night from February 25 to February 26, 1944, in solitary confinement there.

After their return from St.Pölten there was a farewell party at Gasthaus Ettel at St.Leonhard, the inn where they had to spend the first night as prisoners.

The following places where the American airmen landed with their parachutes could be located:

Steve Swidarski:	at Bruckbach in the River Ybbs, below the weir
John Byrne:	at Luegergraben, Doppel, Necking
Walter Price:	below the farmhouse "Kogl", a few hundred meters below the Sonntagberg church
Lamar Howard:	below the farmhouse "Felbrach" close to the Flaschelsteinbach (a little creek) near the road to Hiesbach
Marvin Grice:	close to Max Rasmussen in a tree
Max Rasmussen:	in the immediate vicinity of the wreck near the road to Hiesbach
John Pizello:	in the immediate vicinity east of the wreck

The atmosphere of the whole visit was very friendly and harmonious and the airmen explained in personal talks and discussions that they considered their mission (in which targets of military importance were attacked) as a contribution to the liberation of Europe from Nazi dictatorship. They were impressed by the many gestures of reconciliation that they experienced during their stay in Austria.²

2) CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS:

February 23, 1944: Ash Wednesday

0811: The bomber starts at San Pancrazio near Lecce, southern Italy.

1208 / 1215: Bombs are dropped over Steyr.

1215 / 1230: The plane moves towards St.Leonhard and crashes there.

Afternoon: Byrne, Howard, Price and Swidarski are taken to Waidhofen.

Rasmussen, Pizello and Grice are taken to St.Leonhard.

Evening: The four airmen from Waidhofen are taken to St.Leonhard by soldiers of the German Wehrmacht. They stay overnight there together with their three comrades at an inn (today's Gasthaus Ettel).

February 24, 1944: The seven prisoners are taken to Waidhofen and interrogated at the police station. They spend the night at the police prison.

February 25, 1944: A 'Jagdkommando' of the Criminal Investigation Department St.Pölten takes the prisoners to St.Pölten (solitary confinement).

² Walter Price writes about his trip to Austria in "Liberandos Intelligencer" vol.13, No.2, p12: "The highlight of the trip was meeting a lot of wonderful people who took us in and treated us like we were family."

February 26, 1944: The prisoners are taken to a large military airport (probably Markersdorf). In the evening they leave for Frankfurt/Main by train.

March 1944: The US airmen are committed to camps for prisoners of war:
 Stalag³ Luft I (at Barth, near Stralsund):
 Byrne, Grice, Howard, Price

Stalag Luft VI (Heydekrug, today Silute, at the Baltic Sea):
 Pizello, Rasmussen, Swidarski

3) REPORT OF THE CHIEF OF THE WAIDHOFEN POLICE, VINZENZ PITZEL, ABOUT THE CRASH OF THE US BOMBER

In His 'Retrospective View of the Events at Waidhofen/Ybbs from March 11, 1938 to May 9, 1945' inspector Pitzel reports as follows:

"Then there were the days of the heavy air-raids in Steyr. On February 23, 1944, there was an air-raid warning at 11.30. The warning line had just been repaired when it was destroyed by bombs again. I was just receiving the 22nd Luftlagereport: 'Many planes above Steyr' - when suddenly I suffered a heavy blow against my ear which left me almost deaf. At the same time the lights went out. A bomb had destroyed the grid to which our power station belonged. At 12.06 our guard at the tower reported '22 planes above Waidhofen' and '5 parachutes are coming down in the Waidhofen area'. This report could no longer be transmitted to the 'Warnkommando'. The observation that a plane was coming down at St.Leonhard and that a strong unit was overflying Waidhofen could not be transmitted either. Since we had no more contact with the 'Warnkommando Steyr' we didn't know when to sound the 'all-clear' signal. Later on we got the necessary information from Amstetten.

In the meantime we got further reports from Bruckbach and Sonntagberg that some airmen who came down with their parachutes had been taken prisoner. The commander of the anti-aircraft unit at Böhlerwerk ordered that the airmen had to be taken to the 'Schutzpolizei' by a patrol of the 'Wehrmacht'. Since there were also reports about parachutes coming down in the Windhag area, patrols of the 'Stadtwacht' were sent there. The search for the airmen was very strenuous because of the knee-deep snow.

A messenger from St.Leonhard reported that a plane had come down near the house 'Felberbauer', that three men had been taken prisoner, and that one airman burned to death. (Two burnt bodies were found in the plane.)

The Wehrmacht patrol which had been sent to Bruckbach brought the four airmen to Waidhofen. One of them came down at the weir at Bruckbach and was wet to the skin. We allowed him to sit down near the stove at the police station and we also gave medical treatment to another airman who was injured. Some people were very angry with us and denounced us for this. Our police station really had a lot of trouble because of these prisoners. The anti-aircraft commander delivered the prisoners to a 'Wehrmachtskommando' from Amstetten after he had interrogated them briefly - they only told us their names and refused to answer any other questions. The commander of the 'Wehrmachtskommando' - a lieutenant who, as we found out later, had survived a shot in the head - behaved in a very aggressive way towards the prisoners, which created a very embarrassing situation. So we were very glad when he left the town with the Americans.

³ 'Stalag' is the abbreviation for the German word 'Stammlager' of prisoners of war.

It is small wonder that the Americans attracted many curious people in front of the police station.

The prisoners were taken to St.Leonhard although the snow was up to one meter deep. There the other prisoners were picked up. On the following day the patrol of the Wehrmacht brought the prisoners back again. During the night a so-called 'Jagdkommando' of the Criminal Investigation Department St.Pölten had arrived to take over the prisoners. On the following day a nasty fight broke out over the prisoners among the 'Jagdkommando', the 'Wehrmacht' and a 'Kommando' of the airforce. Finally the 'Jagdkommando' was victorious.

At 12.34 there was an air-raid warning and the prisoners had to be taken to the police cells, which normally was forbidden.

In the afternoon the 'Jagdkommando' left the town with the prisoners and we were very glad about that.⁴

Whereas the airmen who came down in the Waidhofen area in February 1944 were relatively well treated, inspector Pitzel later on in his report writes about a massacre of American airmen in Amstetten on March 20, 1945. The railway station of this town (about 26km north of Waidhofen) had just been completely destroyed by American bombs:

"March 20, 1945: The railway station in Amstetten was completely destroyed by more than 1000 bombs. When we arrived at Amstetten we became eyewitnesses of a horrible scene. American prisoners of war (airmen) were massacred by a large crowd at the main square of Amstetten. Mrs Gruber, responsible for the transmission of news, was horrified by the excesses which were ordered by the mayor of Amstetten. I got the impression that amidst a large crowd there was a pile of lifeless soldiers, only one of them was still moving. A number of women came towards me and asked me urgently to stop this horrible massacre which they thought Amstetten would have to pay for. But neither the commander of the Amstetten police nor I nor anybody else was able to halt the mob since the mayor and the 'Kreisleiter' (the top Nazi official of this district) had ordered it.

After the war some of the people involved in the killing of the US airmen were brought to trial at an American court martial in Salzburg."⁵

4) ARTICLE IN "BOTE VON DER YBBS" OF FEBRUARY 25, 1944

Terror-Bomber of the Enemy Shot Down in the Area Waidhofen a.d. Ybbs - Steyr

A few days ago bomber squadrons of the enemy overflowed the Enns and Ybbs valleys. The terror bombers were pursued by our fighter planes and air fights broke out above the Ybbstal mountains. In the course of these fights a four-engined American bomber was shot down and crashed a few kilometers outside the town of Waidhofen a.d. Ybbs. A few members of the crew managed to get out of the plane and landed with their parachutes. Two members of the crew burned to death in the plane. The parachutes of the enemy airmen, which came slowly to the ground, could be well observed because of the clear air. Stadt- and Landwacht⁷ as well as sections of the NSDAP together with the people living in that area quickly arrested the airmen. Some people also became eyewitnesses of the air fight in which our heroic fighters again and again attacked the enemy formations, which had already been scattered.

⁴ Rückblick auf die Ereignisse in der Stadt Waidhofen an der Ybbs in der Zeit vom 11.März 1938 bis 9.Mai 1945 von Vinzenz Pitzel, Polizeiinspektor i.R., verfaßt im Dezember 1950, maschinschriftliches Manuskript, Stadtarchiv Waidhofen/Ybbs, page 13.

⁵ Pitzel, p.30.

⁶ The "Bote von der Ybbs" is the local newspaper of the Waidhofen area.

⁷ Stadt- and Landwacht - a kind of auxiliary police consisting of older men

5) ARTICLE IN THE OBERDONAU⁸-ZEITUNG OF FEBRUARY 27, 1944

Gauleiter Eigruber: 'Now even more than ever before!'

Steyr, the 'Rothenburg of the Ostmark'⁹ with its beautiful streets and sights was attacked by British-American terror-planes in the last few days. The town was severely hit and some other villages and towns were also damaged. Considering the severity of the attacks, the number of people killed in the air raids was rather small. The exemplary behaviour of the people as well as the precautionary measures taken to protect them prevented a larger number of victims. Measures to help the people concerned are under way. The cooperation among the different offices responsible will guarantee quick and efficient help.

Our enemies have again and again stated in their propaganda broadcasts and at their conferences (which have already been unmasked as lies) that one of their aims is to liberate this country and to create an independent Austria, which has once been the most helpless and dependent state in the world. Our enemies were under the illusion that their promises would produce a favourable response among the people in the Ostmark. Now we know all about it! The enemies are of the opinion that if promises show no results the German people can be forced to give in by terror. But Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin are very much mistaken there! They cannot get us down with bomb-terror! On the contrary! Considering the first people killed by enemy bomb terror in the 'Reichsgau Oberdonau' I can only say that the people of Steyr and of the whole province are more than ever determined to continue their fight until the final victory. Our slogan for the future is: 'Now even more than ever before!'¹⁰

Now I would like to compare this propaganda article of Gauleiter Eigruber to excerpts of a report in the 'Amtsblatt der Stadt Steyr', in which exact facts and particulars about the extent of the damage caused by the air raids in February 1944 are given:

"In the course of the air raid on February 23, 1944, 288 bombs (250kg each) were dropped on Steyr. 15 people were killed and 55 were injured. 8 fires broke out. The house Stadtplatz No.14 built in the late Gothic style, was destroyed, the neighbouring house No.12 was severely damaged. The Steyr factory was only slightly damaged since most of the bombs exploded in front of the entrance to the plant.

On February 24 there was a further air raid in which Steyr was attacked. The attack of the 15th Airforce was directed at the same targets as the day before. ... In the two waves of the attack a total of 996 bombs were dropped. The damage was much worse than the day before. 212 people were killed, 371 were injured and more than 1000 became homeless because 65 houses were totally destroyed and 445 were damaged. The streets which suffered most were the Haratzmüllerstraße, the Bahnhofstraße and the Johannesgasse. The bridges crossing the Enns River and the Steyr River remained intact although along the Enns River there were 253 bomb craters within a distance of only one kilometer.

In the factory the M-building (27,000m²) was destroyed. The C-building and the sawmill were damaged. One of the two chimneys was destroyed, too. The Americans obviously wanted to destroy the most important parts of the plant but they seem to have had old plans. It was no use attacking the old object XIII and the H-building, in which ball bearings had once been produced, with hundreds of bombs. The really important part of the plant, in which the

⁸ 'Oberösterreich' - the word for the Austrian province of 'Upper Austria' was replaced by the Germans by the word 'Oberdonau', because the Nazis wanted to wipe out the name 'Österreich' (Austria). Austria was called 'Ostmark' and was considered to be part of the 'Third Reich'.

⁹ Rothenburg is a beautiful, fully fortified medieval town in Germany.

¹⁰ Oberdonau-Zeitung, February 27, 1944.

engines for German planes were produced, was only slightly damaged by two chance hits. The valuable heat-treating department remained totally intact. It also seems that the Americans had inaccurate knowledge of the roller bearing plant in Steyr-Münichholz. This plant only suffered one chance hit.“¹¹

6) EXCERPT FROM THE CHRONICLE OF THE PARISH OF ST.LEONHARD AM WALDE

The following two entries concerning the events of February 23, 1944, can be found in this chronicle:

“On Ash Wednesday, February 23, 12.30, a four-engined American bomber crashed near the house 'Felbrach'. It came from the direction of Steyr and was presumably damaged during the preceding fights. From the ten-member crew seven succeeded in saving their lives by getting off the bomber with their parachutes. They were taken prisoner by 'Volkssturmmänner' in the course of the afternoon. The other three crew members burned with the plane. The fire lasted until the next morning. During this time constant explosions were heard. It is obvious that the villagers were excited and worried.

The American prisoners were held in custody over night at Mr Aigner's house, who was the mayor of St.Leonhard. During the night the prisoners were guarded by 'Volkssturmmänner'. On the following day a group of German soldiers came from Waidhofen and took the seven prisoners with them.

On February 29 the corpses were recovered from the wreck. One of them had an injury on his forehead, the other had lost his left leg and his head was crushed. The third airman was completely burnt, only a carbonized lump remained.

According to instructions from the 'Landrat' in Amstetten the three bodies were taken to the fire brigades' house in a box. - Further instructions from the 'Landrat' said that the bodies had to be buried quietly in our churchyard. This happened on March 10, 1944, at 5pm.“

„Record taken down at the office of the parish of St.Leonhard on March 11, 1944.

Topic: Burial of American soldiers

Present: the undersigned

On February 23, 1944, at 12.30 an American bomber crashed near the farmhouse 'Felbrach', St.Leonhard 77. Three men of the crew were killed in the burning plane. Their names are:

1. Franklin Hermann
2. Thomas Roth¹²
3. The name of the third airman could not be found out since his corpse was totally carbonized.

Further information concerning the dead soldiers could not be obtained here.

The three dead American airmen were buried quietly in a common grave at our Catholic parish churchyard on March 10, 1944 at 5 o'clock p.m. according to instructions of the 'Landrat' in Amstetten. The undersigned were present at the burial.

The grave is the last of a row of graves at the left-hand side of the church. There was no (Catholic) burial service with the parson of St.Leonhard since the religious denomination of the dead soldiers was unknown.

N.B. The three airmen were exhumed by an American military commission on June 24, 1947, at 4p.m. After a temporary burial at a cemetery for US soldiers in Belgium the bodies will be transferred to the USA.

¹¹ Volker Lutz: Bombenangriffe auf Steyr, in: Amtsblatt der Stadt Steyr, 1985, p20; p120.

¹² His correct family name was "Root".

According to this commission the name of the third airman was 'Hofmann'."

7) EYEWITNESS REPORTS

Among the many hints we got from the people of Waidhofen and the surrounding area two of the most detailed reports shall be picked out.

The first was given by Mr Johann Sonnleitner, farmer at Haus Felbrach, St.Leonhard 77. As a child he observed the crash of the plane in February 1944 right before his home. He remembers the following details:

"The plane was still rather high above our house when it was attacked by German fighter planes. Suddenly it got into a spin and lost altitude rapidly. Then it seemed as if three brown balls were thrown out of the plane and immediately afterwards three parachutes opened. I ran into the house with my mother and we could hear a detonation followed by further explosions. The plane had crashed on the ground right in front of our house above the pond at the road to Randegg. Burning fragments of exploding ammunition were thrown at our house, which was then still thatched with straw. Only the snow on the roof prevented the house from burning down.

The wreck was strictly guarded and a few days later the corpses were taken out of the plane. One body consisted only of the carbonized trunk and another had only one leg; only the third body was still complete. The dead airmen were temporarily buried at the St.Leonhard churchyard.

I also remember maps which were found in the wreck. They were dried above our kitchen stove by the guards. There was still fuel in the tanks, which were attached to the wings of the plane. My father went out at night, when the guards were asleep, to fetch some of it. This was strictly forbidden. Although propaganda said that the fuel was highly explosive, my father could operate his machines with it for some time.

A few weeks after the crash a man wanted to take a photo of the wreck. He was discovered by the guards and when he ran away he was shot and suffered a leg injury. His wound was dressed in our kitchen afterwards.

Italian prisoners of war later had to clear the site of the crash and parts of the bomber were transported to the railway station at Randegg where they remained until the end of the war."

The second report was given by Mrs Edeltraud Gassner. She is the daughter of the then owner of Gasthaus Lagler, an inn at Sonntagberg, where Walter Price landed with his parachute. - She remembers:

"We stood in front of my parents' house and watched the American bombers over Steyr. We could see them drop their bombs and then we realized that one plane was forced out of its squadron and came towards us. It was attacked by German fighter planes and four men flew out with their parachutes directly above Sonntagberg. One landed at Bruckbach, one directly at Sonntagberg below the cemetery, and the remaining two were driven in the direction of St.Leonhard.

The airman who landed below the cemetery (Walter Price) was taken to our inn. We offered him something to eat and to drink but he refused to take anything. Even when I ate some of the food to show that it was not poisoned, he neither ate nor drank anything. Soon afterwards he was taken to Bruckbach."

When Mrs Gassner came to the meeting at St.Leonhard on April 18, 1993, she immediately recognized Walter Price among the airmen, although almost 50 years had passed.

8) DOCUMENTS FROM THE US AIRFORCE HISTORICAL RESEARCH CENTER, MAXWELL AIRFORCE BASE, MONTGOMERY, ALABAMA

Before the most important facts and data contained in these documents are presented, I want to give some brief information about the general organization of the American bomber squadrons:

The 47th WING of the 15th AIRFORCE consisted of five so-called 'BOMBARDMENT GROUPS', the 98th, the 376th, the 449th, the 450th and the 451st. The name of the plane which crashed at St.Leonhard was 'Harry the Horse' and it belonged to the 376th BOMBARDMENT GROUP. At that time this group consisted of 33 planes. The number of planes fluctuated since bombers were shot down again and again.

The data are taken from the following documents:

- Mission No 216, "A" PLAN (combat order of Feb 23, 1944)
- Special Narrative Report No 9 of February 24, 1944
- Missing Air Crew Report of February 24, 1944
- Mission Summary of the 376th Bombardment Group
- Casualty Questionnaires
- Intops Summary No 216

Besides the documents mentioned above, the diary of the engineer and top turret gunner Max Rasmussen was also used. He wrote this diary on the paper of 19 cigarette packages when he was a POW in the camp. In February 1991 he copied it on normal writing paper and handed it over to the other members of the crew.

The first part of the following paragraph concentrates on the bomber which crashed at St.Leonhard, the second part is based on data concerning the 376th Bombardment Group, and the last paragraph treats the whole mission of the 47th wing above Steyr.

A) The bomber which crashed at St.Leonhard

Location:	San Pancrazio, Italy (near Lecce)		
Date:	February 23, 1944		
Time of Departure:	08.11		
Type:	B-24J, 'Liberator'		
Name and Number:	'Harry the Horse', Number 84		
Serial Number:	42 - 73090		
Engines:	Type, Model and Series:	B - 1830 - 65	
	Serial Numbers:	a) 42 - 89551	
		b) 42 - 89085	
		c) 42 - 89681	
		d) 42 - 89407	

<u>Crew Position</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>Rank</u>	<u>Serial Number</u>
Pilot	Grice, Marvin E.	2nd LT	0803189
Co-pilot	Howard, Burford L.	2nd LT	0682865
Navigator	Price, Walter E. JR.	2nd LT	0673949
Bombardier	Byrne, John J.	2nd LT	0684940
Engineer	Rasmussen, Max A.	S/SGT	16128685
Radio Opr	Root, Thomas G.	S/SGT	17156461
Gunner	Pizello, Ralph J.	S/SGT	12134114
Gunner	Hermann, Franklin O.	SGT	12044206

Gunner	Hofmann, Aerial R.	SGT	34600059
Gunner	Swidarski, Steve	SGT	33289045 (7)

B) Data concerning the 376th Bombardment Group

Mission on the day before: Regensburg Aircraft Factory
Mission on February 23, 1944: Mission No 216
 Target: Steyrwaffen Walzlagerwerk
 Alternates: Klagenfurt Aircraft Factory
 Trieste Oil Refinery
 Fiume Oil Refinery
 Sibenik Shipping and Harbor

Installations

Briefing before take-off: Little anti-aircraft and no fighter planes in the Steyr area.
 (Max Rasmussen's diary entry: "What a lie.")

Number of planes: 33 B-24 bombers take off at San Pancrazio. 21 of them probably reach Steyr. (Some return earlier and some are shot down before they reach Steyr.)

Route: The 33 planes are divided into two sections of 16 and 17 planes respectively. The first section was briefed to join the 451st group over Fasano. The second section was briefed to rendezvous with the 450th group over Mesagne. From these two rendezvous points both formations were to proceed to the initial point Wels (48-10N, 13-00E) and from there to Steyr.

Altitude over Steyr: 21.000 feet

Average Speed: 165 mph

Enemy resistance: a) Fighter planes already appeared above the Alps. 20 minutes before the target was reached the bombers were attacked by about 8 - 10 Ju88, 15 Me 110, 25 Me 109 and some FW 190. Attackers came to about 150 yards before breaking off. 75% of the attacks came from behind, from above and below. The remainder of the attacks were made from about 4 o'clock and 8 o'clock, with one or two attacks from the nose.

b) Flak: Anti-aircraft fire was moderate first but later it became intense and accurate. The flak was of heavy calibre.

Losses: 3 aircraft were shot down
 5 aircraft were missing (probably lost)

Damage: 6 ships holed by flak
 7 ships hit by fire from German fighters

Casualties: Aside from the 8 crews missing (80 men) only two casualties were suffered.
 Two gunners were seriously wounded.

Victories: probably 11 enemy aircraft destroyed

C) The whole mission of the 47th wing above Steyr

According to the 'Intops Summary No 216' of February 23, 1944, the mission did not only include the groups 376, 450 and 451 mentioned above, but also groups 98 and 449. Thus the whole 47th WING of the 15th AIRFORCE took part in this mission.

The following data give information about the overall extent of the air raid from the American point of view:

<u>Total of B24-bombers that took off:</u>	102
<u>Some planes returned for different reasons:</u>	19 returned early
	38 returned with bombs due to overcast
	7 aircraft dropped their bombs on different targets

(Considering the fact that some planes had been shot down before they reached their target, the actual number of planes that reached Steyr on February 23, 1944, was about 30. This number also corresponds with the report of Krobath¹³. The majority of these 21 bombers seems to have belonged to the 376th Bombardment Group.)

Estimates about the number of bombs dropped:

American sources say that 214 tons of 500 pound bombs were dropped. This number is far too high and seems to refer to the total number of 102 bombers that took off. According to Lutz¹⁴ only 72 tons of bombs (288 500-pound bombs) were dropped over Steyr. This number also corresponds with the number of approximately 30 planes.

Time when the bombs were dropped: between 1208 and 1215

Losses: 7 bombers were shot down
10 bombers were missing

Bomb strikes: The photos show many strikes in the target area with possible damage to office buildings west of the Steyr-Daimler-Puch factory. No serious damage to vital buildings is visible. There are five craters along the north boundary of the plant. One strike damaged the southeast machine shop at Steyrwaffen Walzlagerwerk. There were many bursts in town.

9) DESCRIPTION OF THE EVENTS BY THE SURVIVING AMERICAN CREW MEMBERS

The following reports of the six surviving crew members are based on interviews which were recorded in April 1993 by the author of this article. The only exception is the interview with Lamar Howard, which had already been recorded in April 1992.¹⁵

John BYRNE (*1921)

Before we reached Steyr I had already seen that some of our planes had been shot down. Soon after we had dropped our bombs our plane was hit. I heard the whine of one of the engines getting higher and higher. The electric supply on board had broken down and we lost altitude very quickly. I opened the door to Steve Swidarski's turret; we clipped our parachutes on and I left the plane immediately after Steve. When my parachute opened a ME 109 circled me and the pilot waved at me but I pretended I was hurt and didn't move.

¹³ Erlefried Krobath: Steyr nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg, in: Veröffentlichungen des Kulturamtes der Stadt Steyr, Heft 28, Dezember 1976, p71, footnote 1.

¹⁴ Volker Lutz: Bombenangriffe auf Steyr, in: Amtsblatt der Stadt Steyr, 1985, p20; p120.

¹⁵ This interview was published in the local newspaper 'Bote von der Ybbs' (April 17, 1992). It contains a few mistakes which were corrected according to new facts that had turned up in the meantime.

After I had landed in the snow on a steep slope I immediately buried my parachute and the book with the bomb site coordinates in the snow. Soon afterwards I was taken prisoner by older people with guns, a kind of home guard.

On the evening of the same day we had to walk up a hill. We had to carry the guns and ammunition of the soldiers and we thought that they would shoot us. But we were taken to a house in a little village on top of the hill. We got some soup there and stayed in the house over night. On the following day we had to walk back to town. We had to march through a square to a jail. - A few days later we were taken to isolation cells in the Gestapo prison at St.Pölten. I was interrogated by two officers and I was astonished to hear that they knew that I was raised in Detroit, which was true. They even knew the name of the street where I lived. This information about me had probably been found out by the Gestapo before. They asked me lots of questions but I only told them my name, rank and serial number. - After a stop at Frankfurt/Main we were taken to a prisoners' camp in Barth near Stralsund. We were deloused and shaved there and we got fresh clothing. I stayed there until the end of the war and I have no recollection of having been treated cruelly. - After my return to the USA in summer 1945 I worked as an accountant in a firm until I retired.

Lamar HOWARD (*1918)

After we had dropped our bombs over the ball-bearing factory at Steyr, the tail of our plane was damaged by anti-aircraft guns and then we were attacked by German fighter planes. Five of our six bombers disappeared and our plane, which was severely damaged, drifted towards the south-east. Since there was no longer any chance to manoeuvre our plane we got the order to parachute out. This happened at an altitude of approx. 10,000ft. As soon as my parachute had opened a German fighter plane came towards me. I thought that my last hour had come but the pilot waved at me and then the plane turned off in front of me. After two or three minutes I landed in the waist-deep snow near a little creek. I put my parachute away and hid it. Immediately afterwards a man with a gun appeared and took me prisoner. He forced me to walk in front of him and we went down a valley until we came to a school where children were playing (Hiesbach). There a vehicle picked me up and I was taken to Waidhofen. Since I had a face injury a doctor was called and my wound was treated. We were intimidated with guns; they pushed us with the butts and our goggles were smashed on the floor. Then they forced us to pick up the pieces. Overall we were well treated, according to the circumstances. We did not get our first meal until after 48 hours. It consisted of potatoes and turnips.

On the evening of the first day my three comrades and I had to walk up the hill to St.Leonhard where three further members of our crew had been captured. The way up the mountain in the deep snow seemed almost endless to me after all the hardships of the day. On top of that we had to carry the machine guns and ammunition for our guards.

The seven of us spent the night at an inn at St.Leonhard where we fell asleep at the table of the parlor after we had received some cider.

On the following day we were taken back to Waidhofen. We were shown to the people of Waidhofen and I could see some people showing the 'victory'-sign to us.

On one of the following days we were transferred to the Gestapo in St.Pölten. When we arrived there we would have been lynched by the people if our guards had not protected us. After a short stay in single cells in the Gestapo prison we were transported to Frankfurt/Main in box wagons. There we were interrogated and we received Red Cross kits with some food, soap, razors, etc. We were also allowed to send a postcard home to our families.

Then we were transferred to a camp for POWs on the Baltic Sea. In May 1945 we were liberated by the Red Army. Three months later I could go back home by ship. - After the war I worked in a hospital for veterans.

John PIZELLO (*1923)

First I'd like to tell you that I wasn't a regular member of this bomber crew. I saw my nine comrades for the first time on February 23, 1944 because I volunteered for the regular tail gunner John Scharnitzky, who was ill that day.

Immediately after we had dropped our bombs above Steyr we were hit by ground fire. At the same time we were attacked by ME 109 fighter planes which came down from the sun so that we could hardly see them. Our plane began to fly slower and suddenly I realized that we had become a straggler. There were no more other bombers to be seen behind us and we were now a piece of meat for the German fighter planes. The hydraulic and electric equipment of my machine gun didn't work any longer so I left my turret to pick up my parachute. As soon as I had left my turret our bomber was hit by anti-aircraft again. When the black smoke which filled the plane cleared up, I saw the two waist gunners lying on the floor beside their guns. The head of one of them had almost been torn off and the other one's chest was covered with blood. I was now operating both guns alternatively when the plane went into a spin for the first time. I tried to get in contact with my comrade in the ball turret beneath but when I opened the door to his turret I saw that he too was dead. Since there was no more radio contact to the other members of the crew I decided to get out. When I was just about to jump, the plane went into a spin again and I couldn't get out. I saw the ground coming closer and closer and suddenly I could see my family and other scenes of my life before me. Fortunately the plane went into a glide again and so I managed to get out. My parachute opened and suddenly everything was quiet around me, no roaring of the engines, no smoke. I could hear a dog bark and within a very short time I landed in the snow. Almost at the same time 4 or 5 men with guns came towards me. I took out a cigarette and lit it and nobody said a word. Then they pointed with their guns in what direction I had to go.

Our plane had crashed close to the place where I had landed, below a farmhouse. I could see black smoke and we heard several explosions, which came from the ammunition that was inside the plane. My guards and I took cover and lay down in the snow.

Then I met Grice and Rasmussen, who had also been taken prisoner in the meantime. We were marched to St. Leonhard and on the following day we were interrogated at the Waidhofen police station. The interpreter, a woman, spoke a very clear English and she asked us many questions, but we had the order only to tell them our name, rank and serial number. Then I was taken to Frankfurt/Main via St. Pölten. From Frankfurt I was transferred to Stalag Luft VI in Lithuania. After six months in Stalag Luft VI we were moved to Stettin in coal barges. When we got off there we had to walk about 5 miles to Stalag IV. Each of the prisoners was handcuffed to one of his comrades and with the free hand we were allowed to carry a bag with our belongings. A German officer with a loudspeaker said to the people who were standing on either side of the road: "These are the people who killed your families!" - The people threw stones at us, they spat at us, set their dogs on us and hurt us with bayonets. Most damage was done to English soldiers. Many of them were killed during this march. We began to run and since there was a hill, many of us threw our bags away to save our lives. I also dropped my bag and was able to reach the camp, which was on top of the hill, without serious injuries.

Later on I was transferred to Stalag Luft I in Barth near Stralsund. On April 29, 1945, the German guards left our camp and our senior officers took over the command. We were moved to Le Havre via Reims and from there we returned home by ship.

Back in the US I worked for the Defence Department until I retired. Due to frostbite I suffered during the war my leg had to be amputated in 1970.

Walter PRICE (*1921)

I was the navigator of our plane and I sat behind the pilot and the co-pilot. After we had been attacked again and again there was a lot of confusion on board. Due to the fact that the radio system had totally collapsed it became very difficult for us to communicate with each another. When the pilot gave me a hand signal to get out of the plane I reached up to Max, who sat above me, and said 'Let's go!' Then I jumped out through the bomb bay door. I still remember the contrast very well: While it was extremely noisy inside the plane there was suddenly total silence. I could see a few clouds below me and the peaks of some mountains. When I came closer to the ground I could hear the voices of children and the mooing of cows. Then I hit the ground on a slope which was covered with snow. Above me I could see the roof of a house. I wanted to move away from that house as fast as possible but the snow was very deep and I could only walk very slowly. Suddenly somebody said 'Halt!' - A man with a gun stood in front of me and I had to walk up the hill with him to an inn (Lagler, Sonntagberg). I no longer have any recollection of what happened there since I was still under a deep shock. Afterwards me and three of my comrades were taken to Waidhofen.¹⁶ There one of our guards tried to provoke us. He took my sunglasses, threw them on the floor and broke them. Then he told me to pick them up. - After a short interrogation we were taken to St.Leonhard. They loaded us on the back of a truck which was guarded by soldiers of the 'Wehrmacht'. When the road became steeper the truck couldn't go on because of the snow. So we had to get off and to walk up the hill. They made us carry their machine guns and ammunition cases and when it was getting darker and darker the situation became rather ominous. We thought that they would shoot us in the woods. - When we finally reached St.Leonhard we met the rest of our crew who had survived the crash. We got some soup and one of the soldiers took away our pilot's wrist watch, but the leader of the soldiers forced the man to give it back to our pilot. On the following day all of us were taken to Waidhofen and soon afterwards we were transferred to St.Pölten. Shortly before we were taken by train to Frankfurt there was an incident at the St.Pölten train station, which I clearly remember: While we were waiting for the train at the station a crowd was gathering around us. One man in particular was getting pretty loud and started shouting at us. I think that if it hadn't been for our guards, the people would have lynched us.

Then I was moved to Stalag I at Barth via Frankfurt. There we were liberated by the Russians at the end of April 1945. We were moved to France and from there we were taken back to the United States. After the war I finished my studies and worked as an architect until I retired.

Max RASMUSSEN (*1921)

Long before we reached Steyr we were already being attacked by German fighter planes. As far as I can remember 12 of our bombers were shot down. Shortly after we had reached Steyr we were hit by flak and one of our wings had a big hole. We lost speed and then we were attacked from all sides. The electricity and communication systems collapsed. Since I was at the front of the plane I didn't know what was going on in the back. Only after we had come down I learned about the fate of my comrades in the back of the plane.

Our pilot gave the command to bail out and so John, Steve, Walter and Lamar jumped out. When I was about to jump too, I saw that our pilot had a problem. Due to the damage caused by German fighters and flak the pilot was pinned in his seat by metal parts and the way to his seat was blocked by metal parts. He wanted me to jump out but I refused to do so. I could clear the metal fragments out and I removed the parts that had come into his clothing. I

¹⁶ Compare the report in 'Chronik Markt Sonntagberg, Sonntagberg 1988, p237'. The airmen in this picture is Walter Price.

managed to pull him out so that he was free, at last. After I had found his parachute he was able to put it on. In the meantime the plane had already gotten into a third spin when it went into a last glide. We managed to reach the bomb bay opening and jumped out. The parachute had hardly opened when we hit the ground. We obviously had got off at the very last minute. The pilot landed in a tree while I landed in a snowbank nearby.

I helped the pilot (Grice) out of the tree and within a few minutes civilians with guns came and captured us. They took us to St.Leonhard and we were treated well there. We were taken to a hall with long benches and tables. I remember that people kept coming into the hall, looking at us curiously. In the evening the rest of the surviving crew were also brought to this hall by German soldiers. A woman gave us some soup and bread. The German soldiers took away our watches and lighters and we spent the night sleeping at the tables.

On the following morning we were taken to Waidhofen, guarded by German soldiers. When we had reached the town we were marched on the square while the people watched us with curiosity.¹⁷ Later on we were transferred to St.Pölten where we were put into prison in solitary confinement. In a hospital there some shell fragments in my shoulder were cut out since I already felt strong pain. Then we were transferred to Frankfurt/Main by train. From there Steve, John Pizello and I were taken to a Stalag in today's Estonia or Lithuania. We were taken to this particular camp since we were non-commissioned officers. The rest of the crew, who were commissioned officers, were transferred to another camp. At the end of the war we were freed by General Patton and I went back home by ship via Bordeaux. The name of the camp there was 'Lucky Strike'.

After the war I went to college, studied mechanical engineering and worked as an engineer until I retired.

Steve SWIDARSKY (*1920)

I was the nose gunner of our crew and after our plane had been severely hit over Steyr the whole electrical system had gone. I couldn't open the door of my turret and it seemed an endless time until John Byrne managed to open it from outside. I crawled out and at first couldn't find my parachute, but after some time I found it and put it on. Since I had no more contact with the others I decided to get out. When my parachute had opened I was circled several times by German fighter planes. Then I landed in a river. I was immediately wet to the skin and it was terribly cold. I was shaking like a leaf. Then I was taken prisoner by people with guns and taken to a factory building (Bruckbach) which was situated close to the river. Shortly afterwards I and two of my comrades were taken to a police station where we were asked some questions. On the same evening we were taken to St.Leonhard. We had to walk up a hill and on the way the soldiers who guarded us called us 'gangsters'. We were very scared since nobody else was around and we didn't know what they were going to do with us. But finally we reached St.Leonhard, where we spent the night at an inn. We were totally exhausted and after we had got some soup we fell asleep at the tables. On the following day we were taken back to Waidhofen and from there to Frankfurt via St.Pölten. From Frankfurt I was transferred to Stalag Luft VI somewhere in eastern Prussia. In this camp we were treated relatively well. But in July 1944 we were sent to Stalag Luft IV near Stettin. We were handcuffed together and driven through the streets. Many of us were severely hurt by the people standing on either side of the road. Some even fell and were killed. The treatment in the camp was worse and when the Russians came closer we were evacuated. We were taken to Nürnberg by train and from there they marched us to Moosburg, where we were liberated by General Patton.

¹⁷ Compare the report in '800 Jahre Waidhofen an der Ybbs, Waidhofen 1986, p70'. The picture there shows the seven US airmen at the Lower Town Square. Further pictures are in the Waidhofen museum.

After a short stay at the 'Lucky Strike' camp in France we were taken back to the USA by ship. There I worked in a warehouse as a machine operator after the war.

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