

## **Hot on the Trail under the Farm Field**

Missing persons:

As of Saturday, Uwe Benkel believes he knows where the missing airmen and their aeroplane lie buried.

By Frank Geller

Laumersheim

The search for the English, seven man Avro-Lancaster bomber which crashed over Laumersheim farmland in April 1943, is making progress. After thorough investigation of the area on Saturday with deep ultrasound equipment, Uwe Benkel, the researcher on missing persons, is certain that the bodies are not in the near field but diagonally across.

The 79 year old Ehrenfred Stahler from Laumersheim is certain that, there in the corner, is the tripod with which the scrap metal dealer dug out the metal pieces from the ground in 1947.

Moreover, on the night in April 1943 when the English bomber was shot down on the return from a raid, probably by flak in Mannheim or gun battery at Frankental, the pensioner can remember exactly:

“The aeroplane exploded while still in the air. The next day we ran to the field to look at the wreckage. Here in the field there were three huge craters.”

The description corresponds exactly to aerial photographs from 1944 which Benkel got from the Bomb Disposal Unit. On the photos an elongated patch is recognisable, which clearly suggests a distortion of the ground. Working with ultrasound in the harvested field with a nearby fenced orchard, Uwe Benkel and Markus Kowollik quickly confirm the suspicion: the equipment, which can detect metal to a depth of 8 metres, has come upon something solid several paces long:

“We are most probably standing over the aircraft cockpit about 5 metres long.” Two more places are found very close by, presumably two of the four engines which formerly powered the Lancaster. A third could be under the field path a short distance away. The only thing now which the aerial archaeologists have in their sights is a bigger field diagonally opposite.

Numerous small fragments are still being found today, such as aluminium metal pieces from the plating, but no related remains.

Since this is not just about the big discovery but also about bombs, Uwe Benkel wants to inform the Bomb Disposal Unit just in case.

“Bombs in the wreck would indicate that the plane had a serious technical problem, probably as a result of a hit,” explained the aerial archaeologist.

“To save weight, the crew would usually dump all the bombs on the return flight. Perhaps the pilot was looking for an emergency landing, which would correspond to statements from witnesses of the time, who reported on a flat flight path.”

First sporadic excavations with a spade confirm the suspicion that the team is on the trail to the heart of the bomber: Phil Adams brings to light a plug with the remains of a cable, which must have come from the cockpit. A little later a pressure switch turned up, possibly from the oil pressure gauge.

A few minutes before the end of Saturday’s search, the helpers make a spectacular discovery: bone fragments. Now Uwe Benkel is quite certain that they are only a short distance from their goal. Above all, it’s the aim of the researcher for missing persons to find the bodies of missing soldiers and clarify their fate for their relatives.

Benkel has had email contact for months with Alf Bone, the brother of the pilot Alexander Bone. Benkel reported that the Englishman, who himself had been an airman during the Second World War, was following the search with great interest:

“As soon as we started on the excavation work, he wanted to be here on the spot at all costs.”

Now he also wants to stand again, side by side in word and deed with Peter Menges, the amateur historian from Ludwigshafen. He himself experienced the crash and was first to bring the Lancaster in Laumersheim to the attention of the experts.

First Uwe Benkel has to get in touch with the owner of the field, with the proprietors of the Zelt Winery of which it is part:

“We want to get on with things before the field is sown again. A JCB digger will be necessary for the excavation work. It would be fantastic if someone would put a digger at our disposal for a few hours and only charge minimal costs.”