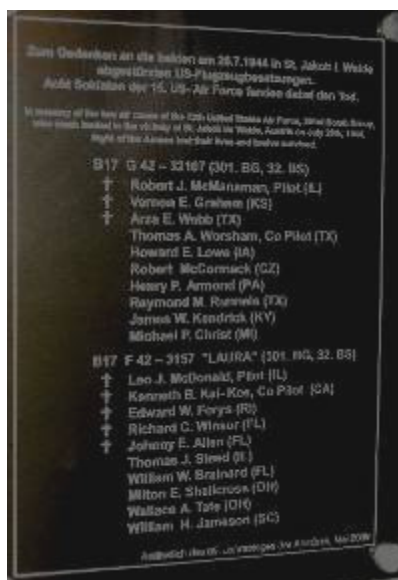


# GOING BACK SIXTY-FIVE YEARS LATER with SAINT JAKOB im WALDE, AUSTRIA

## RECOLLECTIONS of NOW AND THEN

By: Bill Brainard May 30, 2010



Last year 2009, May 30<sup>th</sup>, in the ancient rural town of Saint Jakob im Walde, Austria, there was a commemoration planned by the town folks and the area veteran organizations rejoicing in 64 years of peace since WW II. At the same time *they* would be honoring their Austrian war veterans, they also would pay respect to the veterans from each side of the war who had engaged in a horrible air battle above their town on the *day* of July 26, 1944. That *day* two American B-17 bombers crash landed in the farming fields nearby the town. Each of those planes had a ten man crew and I was a member of one of the crews. The memorial plaque to be dedicated in their honor lists the names of those fliers who were killed in action and those who survived the turmoil to live another *day*. And while the

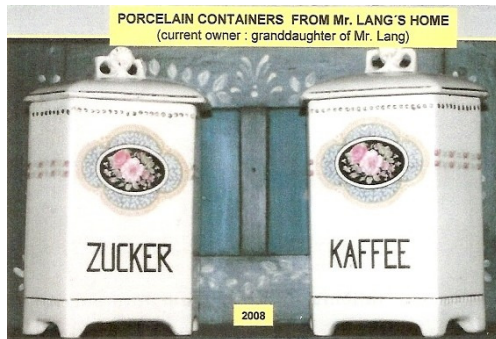
people would be in a joyous mood they would also happily celebrate their beloved town's 800<sup>th</sup> Anniversary WOW! For the Town celebrations the known living American crew members or close relatives thereof, were cordially invited to the ceremonies by the Town's people. Hence, the Brainard's, Rainey & Bill, from Florida and the Spencer's, Gail & Tom, from California, representing the 32nd Bomb Squadron, were proud to join the gathering. Gail is a second cousin of our copilot, 2nd Lt. Kenneth B. Kai-Kee. Apparently at 87 years of age, I was the only crew member from either plane that was well enough to make the trip. Two of *my* buddies and crewmates, Ed Shallcross and Bill Jameson, were alive but not well enough to go abroad. Ed passed on in September 8, 2009.



Another American and good friend of the four of us made the trip to Austria. His name is Lynn Keener, a Texan. Now retired he volunteers in honor of his Dad, part time helping with the upkeep of the 301<sup>st</sup> Bomb Group archival records for the four squadrons, 419th, 353rd, 352nd and 32nd. Lynn's father was an armourer waist gunner flying with the 352<sup>nd</sup> squadron. Their crew arrived for combat *duty* in early February, 1945. He accumulated 21 missions prior to the war ending. There is a young Austrian, a native of St. Jakob, whose name is, Christian Arzberger, he was very instrumental in the planning stages of

their excellent memorial. In his youth visiting some of the bomber crash sites with his father, he became interested in knowing more about the men flying in those big war planes? Eventually,

when older he began his research of *many* of the downed bombers, mostly B-17s and B-24s from the 15<sup>th</sup> U.S. Army Air Force, recording the names of crew members and *many* burial sites across the Austrian lands of men killed in action and also the names of some who lived for another *day*. With this information he then set about contacting everyone he could reach in the States and elsewhere, such as crew members or close relatives of one, for further information. And he has not stopped *yet*. The two crews honored during the recent ceremonies were the McManaman Crew and the McDonald Crew, my mates, flying in B-17's of the 32nd Squadron, 301st Bomb Group of the 15th USAAF. About two years ago Christian first contacted me and for well over a *year* by our hit and miss questioning via the computer E-mail system we discovered many things. Such as, precisely the meadow where my chute and I landed, exactly where I hid out that *day* until nightfall when I decided to move on but knew not where? We learned that it was Mr. Jakob



Lang, a farmer and a shoe cobbler, who captured me the following morning about 6:00 AM as I was stepping out of the woods to get my first sip of water in 26 hours from a little field stream. He said, "Hallo," and I said, "Hello," He came closer to me when I told him I had, "Nix pistole". Actually we had just a few steps to take to be at the front door of his farmhouse. There, he offered me a drink of fresh water plus a bowl of *rye* cereal in goats milk, a new type breakfast for me but I loved it. He

had not wanted me to drink the polluted stream water, I gathered. His treatment of me was calm and firm but not antagonistic. Sitting in his kitchen, I noticed on top of the upper cabinet two beautiful porcelain containers, one labeled ZUCKAR the other KAFFEE. Gee, already I was able to read the language. Christian chased down the jars to the Lang's grand daughter's home, where she now has them displayed. He took pictures of the jars and sent them to me. Probably Mrs. Lang would have been impressed that I remembered them.

After I had eaten we tried talking (?) and then we walked less than 100 yards from his farmhouse to the main crash site of our plane, an older B-17F model, referred to by the control tower crew as #157 with the name "Laura". I had flown in her on one previous flight, again in "coffin's comer", on the outside of the formation and to the rear. The reason, she dropped back a little in the formation when her bomb bay doors were open. On *my* first mission in "Laura" we did have better luck getting back to our Base. Coincidentally, Chris discovered that I had hidden out under a bush in front of a farmer's fenced dairy cow pasture, about 100 feet out from the farmhouse. Well, dammed if that farm and the milk cow, "Bossy", weren't the property of Christian's grandfather's brother, can you believe it? His name was Johann Arzberger!

Christian located and took pictures where the front end of our plane, which included the bomb bay section, came down to earth. When I last saw that site there was a large hole in the ground perhaps 8 feet deep and 25 feet across with pieces of the plane here and there around the embankment. Mr. Lang having seen the crash site the day before, asked me if the several visible greenish oxygen bottles were bombs? I said "no". Then, he pointed to what was an end of one of the six, one thousand pound bombs,



we were hauling. Since there was still some smoldering embers I said, “ ya ya boom-boom, lets move on. I had felt the explosion concussion wave of one of those thousand pounders cooked off by the heat of the fire, the previous morning. At that same time, I was shedding the heated suit lining. It got hot in a hurry, out in the sunshine. In less than three minutes I went from a temperature of 10 below 0 to 95 in the shade and altitude about 2,700 ft. I've leaned.

FYI: Our flight suit jacket and trousers each had removable electrical heat liners. Minus the liners the suits were designed to appear as every day wear. Mine lasted me the entire nine months. It was finally burned due to lice and nits infestation. Oh, man, was I ever glad to get rid of that bunch. Then we moved over to the fuselage section which had landed within our view. It had flattened out like a pancake from the impact forces, so flat that I was unable to see if any men might be inside. I could see one crew member's head crushed into the frame of the left waist gun port but he was unidentifiable. In time I learned he had to have been, Ed Forys, our ball turret gunner. Later in prison camp, I learned the three other gunners from the rear of our plane were also in Stalag Luft IV. They told me that only the navigator, 2nd Lt. Thomas Steed made it out of the front end of the plane. Those crew members who were killed in action are, 2nd Lt. Leo McDonald, pilot, 2nd Lt. Kenneth B. Kai- Kee, copilot, 2nd Lt. Richard Winsor, bombardier and T-Sgt. Johnny Allen, engineer & top turret. For a time I thought I was the only one of our crew who made it out of the plane alive.

Sgt. Ed Forys' head set and ball turret hydraulic power lines were severed by the plane's ripping explosion. He had to hand-crank himself to the interior exiting position of the fuselage. He did get out of the ball turret but too late to get his chute on and then jump clear of the plane. There is not room to wear a chute in the ball. He was on his first mission and he could have been wounded, as it happened to Bill Jameson in the tail section. Our bombardier was blown out of the nose as the plastic nose cone broke away due to the explosion. He was not wearing a chute. On the ground, Lt. Steed, after capture, was taken to where Winsor's body came to rest to identify him. Lt. Steed fighting the wind pressure had pulled himself through that same opening in the nose. His chute was blossoming just moments before it got hung up in some tall tree tops, which probably saved his life. He was able to climb down to the ground. It was reported back at Base by the ball gunner, Albert Bernard, flying off our right wing with pilot, John Kelly's crew, that our plane suddenly zoomed upward 50 feet then zoomed downward peeling to the left, then, momentarily leveled off at about 1000 yards below the formation, and then it blew apart. He saw only one chute open and that had to have been our tail gunner, Bill Jameson, who was dumped out of the tail section when it tore away. He has no recollection as to how his chute got opened. Bill is still among the living and with a piece of shrapnel still lodged in his neck. Three or four times a year we do a little chatting over the phone. Bill volunteered to fly that day because he wanted to get his 50 mission tour over and get back to the States, ending up with 51 missions. It was a double mission and turned out to be one more mission than he needed, wouldn't you say. But think about it, he'd have missed out being a POW for the next nine months! If it weren't for bad luck he'd have no luck at all, an old quote. Since the plastic nose cone blew out and the tail section blew away, as did the fuselage, it seems the explosion must have taken place in the bomb bay. Probably gas fumes ignited, because just outside the bomb bay wall, our right inboard engine had been reported on fire by Sgt. Bernard back at Base. Sgt. Ed Shellcross, the left waist gunner with his oxygen mask shot away and Sgt. Wally Tate, R. waist gunner, wounded, bailed out about two minutes prior to the explosion. Wally's chute harness got hung up on the rear exit

door, dangling half in and half out of the plane. Ed, next to jump, saw the problem and yanked the door jettison cable and out they went door and all. Later I'm sure Wally said, "Thank you, Ed". At the crash site the tail section of our plane could also be seen in the distance, perhaps 100 yards away, but we did not go to it. Leaving the wreckage site we went through the woods, not too far, to the meadow where I had drifted to earth. Mr. Lang wanted my chute. I had hidden it in a rock out cropping. He took it away from a young lady who had just found it. Unhappily her plans for a new silk dress were spoiled, but he told her it had to be turned in to the authorities.

The McManaman crew's crash landing came first and within two city block of where the McDonald crew ended up, but trees blocked any view of each other. Just moments before our plane pulled up and out of the formation Lt. McManaman's plane peeled left coming dangerously close over the top of our plane as I was firing away at the ME-109s on our tail. A little alarmed I wondered, where the hell are they going? Their plane, a B-17G with chin turret, appeared under control then but probably it was not. Now off on their own they were no doubt jumped by the German fighter planes. Because of my delayed jump I went down stairs quickly and saw no planes, friend or foe, nor did I see any other parachutes as I was coming down. I did see several crash site fires, our planes and theirs, sprinkled around on the horizon but once on the ground I had no idea of their directions from me. It was a surprise to me that our plane's nose section was so nearby where I landed. The plane of course was on the ground several seconds before me. It must have been behind me descending however, the fuselage section I had just tumbled out of did pass me just missed my chute by 20 feet or so. Once again luck was on my side.

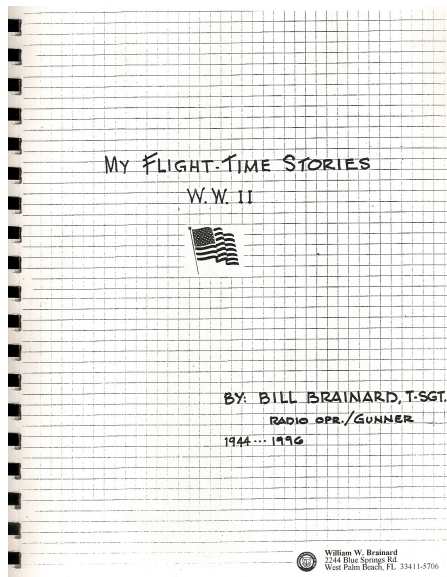


After we put the chute in his Austrain backpack, on my back, it was on to the Lang farm for a short while before heading into the town of Ratten's police station and jail for lunch and a one night stay. My next stop by rail was to Graz, Austria for a day or two in the guardhouse of a GAF Primary Training Base. From there by rail again, about ten POWs with guards were off to an ancient prison in Budapest, Hungary. We were placed in a large cell holding 25 enlisted men awaiting interrogation. After the individual sessions were finished the group then traveled 7 days in a boxcar, our destination was Stalag Luft IV in northern Poland. The food ration for each man was one small loaf of rye bread plus what the guards could drum up at any station where we stopped. At Luft IV, for the next six months we lived and slept in barracks until the Russians broke out of Warsaw causing our camp's evacuation, Feb. 6, 1945, Then, it was three more cold months on the road walking toward the west for about 500 miles, sleeping in farm barns and winding up my POW days until the war was over!

The experience was something I lived through but I would not bother doing again. I had one shower in the nine months. That was in the Budapest prison just a few days after being captured. If I had known what had happened to so many of our Jewish friends in other places when offered a hot shower I would have bowed out of that one. While in the camp barracks, breakfast was a tall pitcher of ersatz barley coffee for each of the ten rooms, anything else eaten was from your Red Cross Parcel which was supposed to be issued once a week. That almost never happened. It was more like 1/4 parcel per week. Lunch every day was a watery broth? Supper was a bowl of

mashed potatoes, routinely, but never any meat. No toilet facilities or running water placed in the barracks, you waited until morning or used one or the other of two tall pails furnished for the purposes. We drew for 'low card' every morning for the "full to the brim" pails, emptying duty. The duce of clubs was the ultimate loser. There was one twenty-hole privy for each five barracks, and two per compound. About 200 POWs were housed in each barracks. Luft IV had 4 individually fenced and abutting compounds, holding 10,000 GI POWs all flying enlisted men. Half of one compound were British fliers. No inter compound visiting was allowed except for a few G.I camp leaders entered with the latest news from British BBC, all on the QT. "Shhhh, here comes a guard.

(Note: In my book, "My Flight Time Stories", on page 39A and page 41 are sketches of our POW camp) It was one of the coldest winters on record for that neck of the woods of northern Poland and Germany, snow abounded as far as the eye could see. While hiking



along on one occasion, just prior to crossing the Oder River bridges, we 2500 POWs stopped in the middle of nowhere and were told to bunk down on the road side snow banks. I recall that night was February 14<sup>th</sup>, 1945, St. Valentine's Day and thinking, as I tried to get to sleep, it would be nicer snuggling with your sweetheart than this pile of stupid snow. It was good to have a pleasant thought now and then.

However, woe, to the guy whose bowels would go astray along the way. It happened so often, one walking by hardly noticed poor devils squatting along the roadside, cold, aching and probably messing up their only breeches with no place to clean up, etc. The poor diet brought these problems on big time.

On the march you were on your own for breakfast and lunch. In the evening the big farms had to fill the bowls of as many as 2500 POWs with a serving of mashed potatoes for supper. Once we were locked up, we took from the barn bins, anything that seemed edible. On the road we rested ten minutes out of the hour and knocked off an hour for lunch. We averaged about 14 kilometers each day we pounded the cobble stones roads. You had to be good buddies with someone, like Orville Betschart and I were, to watch over your things. When your buddy had duties to take care of, yeah you would not think so, but things like your meager horde of food could disappear if left unwatched. During the lunch hour he and I would quickly de-snow and dig a small hole in the sand, each of us then buried a potato with only a portion of it exposed. With scrounged kindling, we would build a small fire on top of the potatoes lasting about 20 minutes, then scrape the fire away, grab the hot potatoes and eat that portion which was well cooked. Then brush off the dirt and put the raw part back in your nap sack for the next day's lunch. Being a California farm boy, Orville, knew some survival techniques which helped us get by. He and I first met on our boxcar trip to Stalag Luft IV. (Note) Attempting to tell the stories of the past along with the recent stories and jumping back and forth in time every other paragraph seems to be a problem for me. So I apologize for the time table disconnects that pop up.

On the day of July 26, 1944 about five of 11 o'clock AM, 26 American B-17 bombers of the 301<sup>st</sup> Bomb Group, two planes in trouble had returned to Base early, were flying a course to bomb an aircraft engine factory in Wiener Neudorf, Austria. I was a radio operator and gunner on one of the bombers. I had noticed a lot of con trails about 10 miles out off our left wing at 9 o'clock level and so notified our pilot, he said, "I see them now, keep your eyes on them, I hope they're our escort". Soon in the cloudy skies over St. Jakob all hell broke loose. Our fighter escort missed the rendezvous point, which the German Air Force was probably well aware. In less than 4 minutes from the time I fired my first round both the plane and I were on the ground so, were 4 other planes from our squadron of seven planes. One plane lasted another 10 minutes before crashing and only two planes made it back to Base in Italy.

For some unknown reason our 301<sup>st</sup> Bomb Group's lead pilot missed getting the Base, "RECALL" message that the raid had been cancelled due to bad weather. Instead of the planned 425 bombers and 366 fighter escorts it was just the 26 of us. We were out numbered about 6 to 1, and that sure makes a difference. The all Negro fighter squadron of the 15<sup>th</sup> AAF was alerted to come to our aid but they got there way too late. Most of our damages came about in the first five minutes of battle. However one of their P-38 fighter planes that did get in at the tail end of the battle went down. The pilot became a POW like many of us that day. More than 60 years went



by before I ever heard that the entire mission had been called off.

And so it was the outcome of these circumstances for two of those flight crews that fateful day which brought about their recognition 65 years later by the Town's people. Some of them still remember that air battle as it was going on over their heads.

The Brainards and the Spencers arrived in, St Jakob im Walde, Friday mid morning May 29<sup>th</sup> and drove to the lodge, Gasthof Lueger Hotel. Lynn Keener, and his Austrian friend Richard Pieber from Graz were there to meet and greet us. Christian and Raphael, his nephew, age 10 joined us awhile later in the lobby. Two reporters from the Federal Austrian Television station Mr. Brossmann the interviewer and Mr. Gert Baldauf, the cameraman, joined us at the Hotel.

After lunch we visited a nearby church for an hour or more. Christian had his museum of plane parts and pieces taken from the crash sites, lots of posters, maps and related pictures taken in the vicinities. Also on display were many of his E-mail correspondence letters of interest regarding his research. Christian gave me a framed piece of aluminum found at "Laura's" crash site, which I now show off in my home.

Then back at the Hotel we prepared for our afternoon field trip. We first drove to the meadow where I had entered their territory via the parachute. Surprisingly after 65 years to me things looked pretty much as they did way back when. The old Arzberger farm and the neighboring farm are there as they were then. Then, I only saw the one farm house since I would not stand up to look over the fence. Their two meadows are now separated by an electrical wire cattle fence in lieu of the beautiful split log



fence I recall. Where we stopped to view the two farm meadows at this time was the opposite end, perhaps 500 yards, from my original landing spot. The pine trees or woods serve a purpose some of the trees are harvested when needed to provide heat in the winter. The woods always have had a replanted pattern, then and now. The access dome to the only underground shelter for miles, they have said, was built jointly by the neighbors back then and is gone now. I saw people leaving the shelter access dome after the air raid alert was over. They excitedly entered their nearby meeting room, talking loudly in German! It was hearing the strange language, when it hit me, I was a long way from home and wondering what was to happen next? Back undercover of my bush I dozed about 2 hours? Only Bossy the cow saw the stranger hanging out in the brush.

Fast forward, next we drove over to the Lang farm area not too far away. It is now owned and rented out by another family whose farm land abuts the same property. The owner came out to greet us but she felt it might be an imposition on the people renting Lang's farm for us to wander



through the house. So she invited us in to her house for a chat and a glass of beer. Her sons joined the session. That was an interesting time in as much as she had memories too of the day the two planes crashed on the nearby farms. They knew some English as do most Europeans. Tom Spencer knew some German I learned. It was now getting on toward late afternoon and we had yet to visit the crash site of "Laura" so we thanked the lovely lady for her hospitality and drove on to the place where our plane came down to earth less than

a half mile. It's in the hills of the Alps so the route was anything but a straight line. We stopped along the edge of a wooded area on a slight slope and Christian said this is it.

Everyone in the three cars got out and walked to the spot. The deep hole has long since been filled. Pine saplings planted back then are now 8 to 10 inches in diameter. Christian told us that strangely just where the front end of our plane landed, burned more than half the gasoline left on board, and then at least one 1000# bomb cooked off, maybe two, there has never been any green underbrush growth beneath the trees like there is in the contingent wooded areas. Perhaps the soil being super heated by the fire and then the bomb bursting that ensued ruined the nutrients forever, just guessing? Tom and Gail dug around the site and found a few pieces of aluminum from our plane which they can treasure the rest of their lives. Being able to find those pieces seemed so unlikely after all those years, it was really amazing. Evening dinner at the Hotel catered to the American group and Christian's family, wife Monica, son Alexander and daughter Anna. After eating we chatted for awhile with our new friends. Then it was off to bed.

The TV reporters took lots of film as we made our scheduled visits. They interviewed the five Americans, Lynn, Gail, Tom, Rainey and me Saturday morning to be broadcast to the Austrian people at a later time. We did the interviews and then had lunch at the hotel with the entire group at the table. The afternoon field trip was to be a drive to the village of Ratten, Austria. There we would try to locate the old police station where Mr. Lang and I with the chute had years ago walked one hour from his farmhouse. Since my last visit the three story police station has been converted into a beautiful six unit apartment complex.

Lynn and his Austrian friend, Richard Pieber, from Graz in one car, the TV reporters Wolfgang and Gert in their car and Tom, Gail, Rainey and I were in our rental car making up our group excursion. In Ratten we circled the cars in a parking lot to figure out what our course should be to find the jail. It is a small town so it had to be quite near. In the no. 3 car of our parade we followed the other two and off we went down the main street. Within about six blocks from our circling spot, looking out the rear door window on the right side we passed a building and I said to Rainey, "that's it!" We caught up with the other two cars turned them around and scooted back to the building. Sure enough I was right. We stopped and after some persuasion that we meant no harm as we were standing out in the rain and talking to one of the top floor tenants. He directed us around to the back door to let us in. The land sloped front to back and at the basement level the back door was at ground level. We, including the reporter and cameraman, all entered the back door and there, smaller than I remembered, was the detention cell where I once slept the night away that July 27, 1944. I mentioned that the sloped built-in-bed I had slept on was missing. Our interpreter replied indicating they had only removed that wood bunk bed about two years ago. Today the cell is their firewood storage area. To me it was rather an eerie sensation being in the cell once again but it was reassuring that I could leave when the visiting was over. Our mission was accomplished. It was then time to drive back to the Hotel and ready ourselves for the main evening ceremonies, the big parade, the plaque dedication and the huge banquet. By the way we discovered interestingly that Gert our TV photographer had spent a part of his life in the Chicago, Illinois, area.



The evenings were cool so we allowed time to get back from Ratten to dress for the weather. The program called for a parade with eight marching military bands representing various chapters of the WW11 Austrian Veteran Associations of the surrounding area. Wives of the band members and other marching Vets paraded too with the bands leading the way. There was also a



contingent of younger men and women, probably the sons and daughters of the WWII Vets, who also took pride in being in the parade. Each group had their flag bearers carrying the Austrian national flag and their organization's flag, it did appear.

The flag poles appeared to be heavy, well varnished and of a similar size perhaps 2" in diameter. Perhaps, the type pole has some historic significance. Anyway you could see

the pride on their faces as they held their large flags high never letting them touch the ground. It seemed each chapter had their flag honor guard with rifles firing straight up into the air at the proper moment. The estimate was that over 700 folks would take part in the marching. The streets were also lined with spectators, I have no idea as to how many there were but you could tell they were enjoying themselves.

The St. Jakob im Walde's Veterans Memorial Park, which I might add was very beautifully designed and well kept, was along the parade route. It was in this Park where the large memorial stone and plaque commemorating each of the 10 crew members from each of the American B-17 planes. They had crash landed nearby the town after an air battle that took place high in the sky over their town that day of July 26, 1944. Those that perished that day are so noted on the plaque with a small cross next to their name.



*Helmets of fallen Austrian soldiers in front of the Memorial Monument*

Since I was the only living crew member able to be present on the dedication day I had the honor of removing the veiled dignity clothe from the monument. At that moment of unveiling there was a rifle salute by the Honor Guard. It was an emotional time for all those present and I felt especially honored. Christian Arzberger and I spoke to the gathered people about the historical background of the dedication ceremony and my small part in it.

Following the parade and ceremonies everyone was invited to the dinner banquet. The building was huge and nearby. The main course of the meal was a delicious steak. One of the bands played on into the night. There were speeches, food, singing, beer and

laughter. Too soon the party ended, all enjoyed the fun.

On behalf of the five Americans, Lynn, Gail, Tom, Rainey and Bill, I would like to thank the Austrian people of St. Jakob im Walde, their Veteran organizations, the TV reporters and especially, Christian Arzberger, for having us, Over There!

We Americans were all proud and honored to meet our American Embassy envoy, Lt. Colonel Rich Mc Cleary, for taking the time to come down from Vienna to greet us and attend the St. Jakob dedication ceremonies which meant so much to us.

Sunday morning, it was sad to say goodbye to Austria and her people, but we were scheduled that day to fly back to the USA, St. Jakob, only 234 years old! Happy Fourth of July! Thanks again! We love you!

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- THE END -