

# HISTORY

## FIRST DRAFT

# Hetherington, crew shot down 70 years ago

Seventy years ago this month, Staff Sgt. James Hetherington and his fellow crew members aboard the B-24 bomber, "Ken O Kay," dropped their bombs on a mission over Germany, then headed back to their base in England. They didn't make it.

Details of what occurred to the Ken O Kay and other bombers that were shot down on the same day, April 29, 1944, are being prepared for a book by Dutch-born author John Meurs, who now lives in Switzerland.

Hetherington returned home to Colorado, where he and his family operated an orchard on east Orchard Mesa for more than four decades.

The target for the 453rd bomber group that day was the Friedrichstrasse Railroad Station in Berlin. Meurs has determined that the Ken O Kay was damaged by German anti-aircraft fire and enemy fighter planes, and struggled to make it home. Rather than parachute

out over enemy territory, the entire crew agreed to stay with the plane. They ditched just about everything they could from the wounded bomber, and the pilot, First Lt. Max A. Davison, kept it aloft until they reached the North Sea, east of Norfolk, England.

There they went down, and it wasn't a soft landing. One crew member was killed on impact.



BOB SILBERNAGEL

James Hetherington cut his face badly and remembered little about the crash except waking up in the water. But everyone else survived. They were rescued by an Air Sea Rescue boat and taken to the safety of Great Britain.

After a stint in a hospital, then going AWOL from the hospital to rejoin his crew, Hetherington eventually returned to his native Colorado, working as a military policeman in Denver. There, he met his wife, Louise, and they were married in 1945.

They moved to Mesa County the following year, and with the aid of a man named C.C. Ford, who was partial to service-



Photos courtesy of LOUISE HETHERINGTON/Special to the Sentinel

B-24 bomber "Ken O Kay" is shown during a flight.

men and willing to sell 10-acre parcels to some with no money down and "pay when you can" terms, they started an orchard on East Orchard Mesa. It would eventually become one of the most successful in the area. Louise and son Jim still operate it today.

James Hetherington suffered a stroke and died in 1991. These descriptions of what occurred 70 years ago are based mainly on stories he told his wife and son long after the fact. But, like so many World War II veterans, Hetherington was not particularly loquacious when it came to his war experience.

Now, however, Meurs is preparing his second book about the fate of bomber crews from the Mighty Eighth, and hopes to provide more detail about Hetherington's crew and others who were shot down on the same day, April 29, 1944.

Meurs has already written one book about the Mighty Eighth, the 8th US Air Force; "Not Home For Christmas, A Day in the Life of the Mighty Eighth," was published by Quail Ridge Press, of Brandon, Miss., in 2009. It details what occurred with each of the 34 bombers and their crews that were shot down behind enemy lines on Nov. 26, 1944.

about the bombers that crashed on April 29, 1944.

Meurs has personal connections to a plane that was shot down on that date. One B-17 crash landed in the eastern part of the Netherlands, and the crew was picked up and sheltered by members of the Dutch Underground. One crew member was hidden in the home of Joop Bitter, who became Meurs' brother-in-law.

Military service seems to be in the Hetheringtons' blood. James' father, David Creed Hetherington, was a lieutenant in the Army infantry during World War I. One of James' brothers was a B-17 pilot during World War II, and was never shot down. Another brother served in the Navy during the war. Son Jim served in the Army in Vietnam.

James Hetherington's mother was living in Grand Junction when he was shot down. A telegram listing him as missing in action was sent to her with a May 15, 1944, date. But, due to some foul-up in the sending of the telegram, she actually received a second telegram, dated May 19 and telling her that her son was OK, before she received the first one, Louise said.

"I didn't know all of the awards (James) received until much later," she said. "He could have gotten a Purple Heart. He had three oak (cluster) medals, a distinguished flying cross, two bronze stars and what was called a "Goldfish Club" patch because they went down in the water.

"But the only one he was really proud of was an air medal pinned in him by Gen. James Stewart," better known to the world as Hollywood actor Jimmy Stewart, she added.

"He gave all the credit in the world to the pilot," for keeping

the plane aloft until they were nearly home, Jim said. Without the pilot's exceptional efforts, it's likely the entire crew would have been killed or captured by the Germans.

Altogether, James Hetherington flew 31 missions with the B-24 crew, including some in North Africa prior to going to Europe, Jim said. He was mostly a nose gunner, but occasionally served as a waist gunner, standing in the open side doors in the sub-zero temperatures at 25,000 feet.

He eventually returned to Colorado to marry, raise a family and raise fruit. And, although he stayed in touch with several members of the Ken O Kay crew, he rarely discussed the events that occurred that April day 70 years ago.

*Note: In response to my previous column about the community at Bridgeport, I received an email from Cathrin Emerson Orgish of Mancos, who was raised at Bridgeport and lived there until she was 18. She said her father, Frank Emerson and a relative, John Moore, built the original vehicle and livestock bridge at Bridgeport in the winter of 1925-26. Although they used cables from an old bridge that had once spanned the river at Cameo, she said the bridge was built on site, not hauled in from another site. Additionally, she said the community got the name Bridgeport not from that bridge, but from the multiple narrow-gauge railroad bridges in the vicinity of Bridgeport. Also, she said the name of the fruit ranch on the west side of the river changed from the Moore and Emerson Peach Ranch to the Indian Rock Peach Ranch in the 1940s when her father bought out her cousin, Frank Moore.*



The crew of the Ken O Kay. James Hetherington is kneeling, second from right. The other members are not identified.

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