

*".....und brennend abgestürzt" \**



## JB 299

### Just a badge on the wooden cross

**A border called the Iron Curtain would later divide the northwestern area of the German Altmark for 28 years. That night in January 1944 there was only the border between the country states of Lower Saxony and Saxony-Anhalt.**

German night-fighter crews were in the bomber stream. One of them was commander of the Nachtjagdgeschwader 3, Major Helmut Lent and his crew, who started with their Messerschmidt Bf 110 G-4 night-fighter at military airport Stade, located west of Hamburg, to follow the British bombers flying in the direction of the Altmark.

It wasn't until 22.28 hr that Major Lent could aim at a target.

*\* Translated from German into English from of the book: ".....und brennend abgestürzt." (".....and crashed burning.") Fates of British and German airmen in WW II, written by Helbig/Andree, ISBN: 978-3-938845-36-3, published in 2011, from pages 199 to 203*

Night-fighter ace Lent aimed at one of the first Lancaster bombers in the head of the bomber stream, Pathfinder Lancaster JB 299 of 97 Squadron. The pilot of the pathfinder was F/L F.J. Roberts RAF. He and his crew had started at the airport in Bourn, located in Cambridgeshire.

The four-engine bomber was probably shot north of Wittingen, so still in the Lower Saxony area. Commander Lent left the burning bomber to its fate and carried on his flight to Magdeburg, where he made his 87<sup>th</sup> kill just about 30 minutes later.

A burning Lancaster JB 299/ OF-W was also reported by rear gunner F/S Albert Williston RCAF of Lancaster LL 672.

An elderly male, born at Schmölau, at that time a soldier, reported his wife's eyewitness account of the crash of JB 299 on the night of 21<sup>st</sup> January 1944:

"My wife told me, that the bomber - bright illuminated by burning- came out of the southwest, in deep flight, close to our village. Shortly before the village the bomber dropped two bombs, which landed near a house but happily did not explode. Later I was told the bombs were blind shells, but perhaps they just had not been armed. The bomber then flew - very near to the roofs of the houses - in a northeast direction and smashed in a huge fireball about 1200m away on a hill. Wreckage of the aircraft flew everywhere, even back into our village. Our inhabitants later found a lot of pieces. In the whole area, parts of the bomber lay spread in the landscape. My wife even saw two dead crewmembers still sitting in the wrecked remains of the cockpit. She saw no other

bodies or body-parts. She told me, that both dead crew members were buried at our cemetery and that after the war, around the year 1946, the Brits dug them out again and brought the bodies away. What happened to the other crewmembers of the bomber I couldn't tell you. But the bomber flew so deep in, that parachutes would not have opened after a possible emergency-exit.

If the whole crew was still onboard when the airplane smashed to the ground, a recovery of the crew – caused by the huge explosion – would not have been possible."

It is obvious, that the bomber-pilot tried to make an emergency landing. When the airplane hit the ground, there was probably still the 4000-pound air-mine onboard, which then exploded.

That is all that is know about the crash and the crash-site near the village Schmölau, located 30 km southwest of Salzwedel.

In 1948 - the RAF had to wait for over two years - the Russian occupiers allowed them to exhume the collective grave on the local cemetery at Schmölau. The grave was marked with a simple wooden cross. On that cross was nailed a RAF (Royal Air Force) cap badge.

In the grave they found the bodies of the 7 crewmembers, buried without coffins.

The crew was reinterred in the Berlin war cemetery (located in Berlin-Charlottenburg) on 20<sup>th</sup> April 1948.