

## GERMAN RESEARCHER REVEALS DETAILS OF FATAL WWII CRASH OF CLEMSON MEN

**[Editor's note:** *In our previous **Echo** article we read of two Clemson alumni on the same fatal flight. It is not known whether they were aware of their common bond. That's certainly not the case with the story that follows.]*

There are many stories of Clemson alumni serving together during the wars of the past 100 years. One such story includes First Lieutenant Raymond D. Davis who attended Clemson from 1936 through 1938 and Second Lieutenant Vernon L. Price, Class of 1941. Davis was born in Calhoun County, SC, and Price in Walterboro in nearby Colleton County. After departing Clemson both pursued civilian careers, but then answered the call to military service.



Davis enlisted in the U.S. Army in November 1940 and was accepted into the Aviation Cadet Program. He graduated pilot training in late 1942 and was commissioned a Second Lieutenant. Price enlisted in May 1942 and followed a similar path into the Aviation Cadet Program. He completed training as a Navigator and received his commission in July 1943. Their paths were joined when they were assigned as members of the same B-17 crew in England. Davis deployed to the 364<sup>th</sup> Bomb Squadron of the 305<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group in February 1943. Price deployed to the same unit in October 1943, and they began flying



bombing missions over Germany as part of the same crew.

**Price**

**Davis**

On February 24, 1944, the crew was assigned as part of a bombing raid on Schweinfurt, Germany. Over the target, their aircraft was hit by flak and heavily damaged. The pilot, realizing he could never make the planned withdrawal and return to England, elected to divert to the nearest safe-haven in Switzerland. He then ordered all gear possible thrown out to lighten the aircraft, but a German fighter intercepted the aircraft. There is no evidence to show whether the fighter attacked and fired at the aircraft. At any rate, the fighter was observed by eyewitnesses and a German pilot did claim the shoot-down when he came by car to the crash site from the nearby airfield at Hessental. However, the four surviving members of the crew did not report an attack. So, perhaps, the pilot 1LT Patterson decided to try a forced landing because of the status of the aircraft, because of signals from the fighter, because of hits, or because of a combination of these reasons. The touchdown was in hilly terrain close to a farm named Rappenhof, only 600 meters from a very suitable flat surface ahead in the direction of the flight. Upon impact, the aircraft made a right rotation of three quarters of a circle and the front section and wings broke away. The aircraft came to a stop and began burning. Five crewmembers in the front section, including 1LT Davis and 2LT Price, died in the crash. The five men in the waist did survive, albeit wounded. One of them, the heavily wounded tail gunner, died the next night in Schwäbisch Hall's military hospital. The four survivors were captured, and given milk and water in the nearby farmhouse. They spent the remainder of the war in prisoner of war camps.

The crash caused considerable interest among the residents of the local village, Geisselhardt, about one hour north of Stuttgart. The day after the crash a young mother from a neighboring village called Untersteinbach took her son of 2 years and 7 months to look at the crashed airplane. Although a very young boy, Walter Wiedmann never forgot the experience. In 2009, now retired from the German forestry service and the German Army Reserve as a Lieutenant Colonel, Walter Wiedmann decided to research and document the details of the crash from the perspective of the German citizens who witnessed it.

Lieutenant Colonel Wiedmann found and interviewed five men and one woman who were eyewitnesses to the crash, ages 8 to 18 in February 1944. One of these witnesses produced

photographs of the crashed airplane which provided significant information about the timing and direction of the doomed flight and the fate of the crew. As part of his research Wiedmann also obtained copies of official U.S. military records which included some corroborating details from post war interviews of some of the crew members who survived.

A Luftwaffe detachment from the airfield at Hessental honored the crew members who died in the crash with full military honors. The deceased, including 1LT Davis and 2LT Price, were laid to rest in the local cemetery at Geisselhardt. Their grave, a “comrades” or common grave, was marked by a large cross with the inscription “Here lies five American Flyers.”

The remains of 1LT Davis and 2LT Price were returned to the U.S. after the end of the war. Raymond Davis is buried in the Pine Hill Methodist Church cemetery in Cameron, South Carolina. Vernon Price is buried in Live Oak Cemetery in Walterboro, South Carolina.

Because of their selfless service and sacrifice, Lieutenants Davis and Price are included on Clemson’s Scroll of Honor. But, even though our countries were at war, these Clemson alumni were treated with dignity and respect by German citizens 71 years ago. Most recently they have been honored by the research of a comrade-in-arms who was at the impressionable age of less than 3 years at the time of the deadly crash.

**[Note: The Clemson Corps is indebted to Lieutenant Colonel Walter Wiedmann of Ostfildern, Germany for providing copies of all of his research.]**

