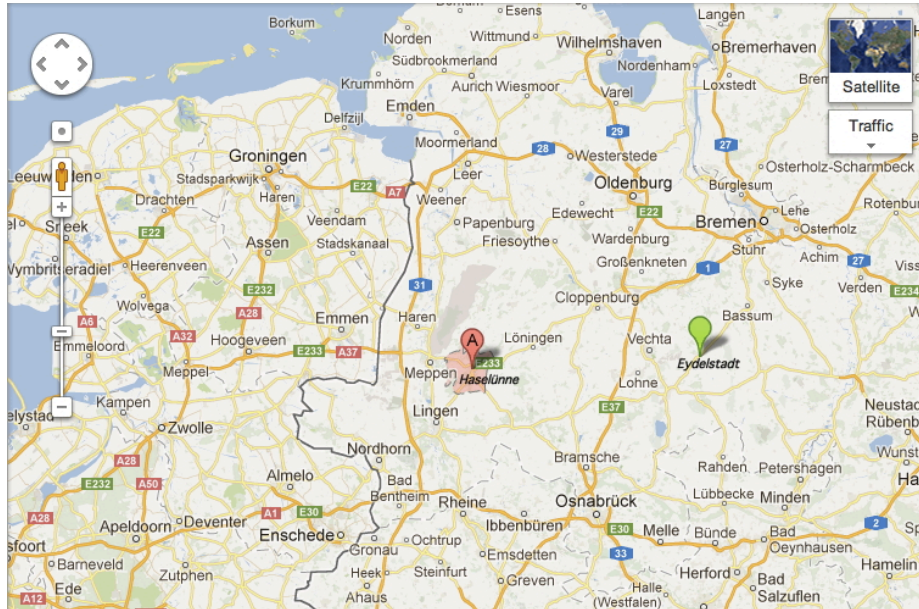


Death of Ofw Detlev Lüth (6/3/1944)

The reports at the time state that he was hit by return fire from US bombers during their first daylight raid on Berlin on 6 March 1944 and that he failed to eject before his aircraft hit the ground near Eydelstedt. There is no record of his place of burial



"Target Berlin" by Jeffrey Ethell and Alfred Price records the battle over Haselünne at noon. Other books have titles such as "High-noon over Haselünne"! The US bomber stream which was almost 100 miles long was accompanied by long-range fighters over the entire journey to and from Berlin. However due to a navigation error by a pathfinder many of the aircraft flew slightly south of the intended track, so that a fairly exposed group approached Haselünne. The Luftwaffe assembled 107 aircraft for the first assault. These comprised Messerschmidt Bf109s and Focke-Wolf FW190s. They were arranged in five boxes with a top-cover of Bf109s. In the first wave there were three boxes and these were followed by two boxes. The technique was simple, if terrifying. They attacked head-on. The combined speed of approach was approximately 8 miles per minute. At 800yds separation a selected bomber was in a German fighter's gun-sight. One second later (600yds) the fighter was about to open fire. Half a second later (500yds) it started firing. Half a second after that (400yds) it stopped firing. Finally, half a second later (300yds) the fighter pilot pulled up to fly over the bomber-stream. As the fighter flew out of the line of oncoming aircraft all guns from the bombers fired at it as it banked sharply to port and swung round to overhaul the bombers and make another attack. However, as they came in in groups of four and the entire attack beginning to end lasted only a few seconds it was difficult for the American gunners to find a target

In the initial assault a total of ten bombers went down, but bearing in mind that they were at 28,000feet and travelling at 185mph it was quite some distance before they hit the ground. Many crashed near Quakenbrück which is 20 miles to the east of Haselünne. The number of escorts with this group was quite small, but they became very active and were soon joined by escorts from the main group of aircraft that had travelled off-course. They started to exact their revenge and very soon German fighters began to go down and indeed, they found it difficult to mount a second attack on the bombers.

I have been able to account for most of the FW190s and Bf109s that were shot down by the Americans, both in terms of who the pilots were and who their attackers were. None of these was Lüth who was in one of the two boxes in the second wave. This leads to a conjecture which would place Lüth as the first German casualty of the action. In their narrative of the battle Ethell and Price record:

"In the top turret of B-17 'Our Mark' of the 100th flying immediately to the left of the leader of the Low Group, B Formation, Sergeant George Madden engaged each wave of fighters in turn. Then, a little behind the final wave, came a single FW190 making straight for the lead bomber, *Nelson King* piloted by Lieutenant Jack Swartout. Madden fired a short burst into the German fighter as it came past then glanced down to check his guns. When he looked up almost the entire fin and rudder of 'Nelson King' had gone, the Focke-Wolf had collided with or rammed its victim and carried away almost the entire assembly"

(*Nelson-King* held together and completed its mission.)

Given that the German attack was a well-practised manoeuvre it is difficult to understand why the pilot collided with Swartout's B-17, unless of course he had been hit by Sergeant Madden's guns*. So, given that all other shot-down German pilots and their aircraft have been accounted for, I hypothesise that this was the FW190 piloted by Lüth. The only problem is of course that it is reported that he crashed near Eydelsted which is approximately 40miles east of Haselünne. The distance itself is not a problem. The various US bombers travelling at 185mph travelled on for about 20miles before impact with the ground. The FW190 could fly at over twice that speed, so that a crash 40 miles east of Haselünne is certainly not inconceivable. However, the aircraft was flying westward at the instant of collision, so the pilot would have had to be sufficiently conscious to turn it through 180° for this hypothesis to be viable.

As said earlier, Lüth did not eject before his aircraft hit the ground and as he has no known place of burial it is likely that he is still inside the wreckage of his aircraft, which might be several metres underground - an archaeological project for the future?

* As said earlier, when the German aircraft were attacking in groups of four it would have been difficult for them to choose a target. On the other hand, a lone aircraft approaching would have attracted concentrated defensive fire.