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Spring 2024

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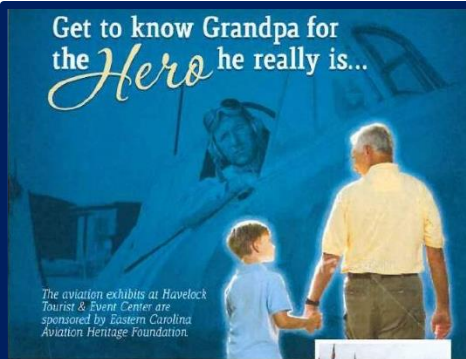
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July 15-19, 2024

High School 3D Workshop

July 22-23, 2024

High School Anatomy Camp

July 24-Aug 1, 2024

Elementary School Engineering Camp

July 22-26, 2024

Free Family Fly-In STEM Night

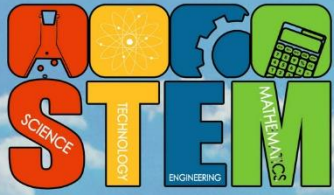
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Great Uncle Rudolf Tröhler, Luftwaffe Pilot

By Barry Fetzter, ECAHF Historian

Eastern Carolina Aviation Heritage Foundation Newsletter, Spring 2024

For the past several years I've written pieces in this Eastern Carolina Aviation Heritage Foundation (ECAHF) Newsletter about various aviators, including men, women, civilians, and military. Most of the articles have been about relatives of mine who plied the "wild blue yonder" or had some role in helping others do the same. These included my dad, Robert Fetzter (a WWII US Army Air Corps weather forecaster); my Uncle Bill Hay (a WWII USMC PBJ (B-24) aircrewman in the Pacific); my Great Uncle Ray Hill (an early aviator and participant in the 1932 National Air Races and a WWII US Army Air Corps Air Transport Command pilot); my first cousin once removed Richard Tresemer (a WWII US Army Air Corps B-26 "Marauder" pilot) and his sister, my first cousin once removed Helene Tresemer Cook (who worked in a Columbus, Ohio, Curtis Helldiver manufacturing plant during WWII); my Uncle Norman Fetzter (a WWII US Navy instructor pilot and member of an ACORN Unit—see the ECAHF Fall 2023 newsletter to learn about ACORN units); and my brother-in-law's father, Colonel Francis Eli Wishart, USA, who met Charles Lindbergh in 1927; as well as others.

I'm grateful for the legacy of aviation in my family, without which I likely wouldn't be where I am today—at least as aviator. As my dad would have said, I have aviation blood "coursing through my veins", a heritage that led to my own career plying "the wild blue yonder" and working in and around aviation, even today at the ripe, old age of 71.

So, let's keep going. There's more! For this quarter's newsletter I'm writing about another of my relatives who added to my aviation birthright. This relative has been the toughest one to write about because, other than photographs, there's no information about my great uncle Rudolf Tröhler's aviation record. Uncle Rudi was a member of Germany's WWII Luftwaffe. Rudi was my maternal grandfather's brother, my mom's uncle.

Why is there so little information about him? Perhaps the biggest of reasons is the same, timeworn issue I've written about so often in this newsletter. We need to ask questions about their lives while our relatives are still alive. I was too self-absorbed as a young man to attempt to get to know Rudi and ask him questions. He lived until 1982. I was 29 years old. Had I been less "self-aware" and more "externally aware", I might have reached out to him. Now he's gone and he took his "library" of information about his life and times with him.

A second reason for the paucity of information on him is that the war history about our German family members during WWII was rarely, if ever, talked about in my American family. It's as if our family connection to WWII Germany was taboo, a subject just not discussed. When I would bring up the subject of our German relatives with my grandmother (married to Rudi's brother, my grandfather Ted Tröhler, who had emigrated to the US in the mid-1920's), her answer was always the same, "Why do you care about old, dead people anyway?" By the time I developed even a passing interest in my German family members, my grandfather—Rudi's brother—had been long dead of a heart attack when he was just 60 years old.

And related to the hush-hush on the American side of our family: the Germans, themselves, preferred—and still prefer—to not to talk much about their sordid, WWII, past. It's like, why air dirty laundry and bring up uncomfortable subjects? Just let bygones be bygones.

So, there was all this secrecy surrounding my family's history. And related to this taboo was the rift caused—and why wouldn't there be a rift?—between my grandfather's family (he emigrated to America to become US citizen and ultimately purchased war bonds to buy B-17's that might ultimately bomb the country of his birth)

and his birth family. His birth family remained in Germany, including his mother and father and his four brothers and one of his two sisters (one sister followed my grandfather to America before the war and remained here).

The two families—my grandfather’s adopted family (his American wife and kids (including my mom) and his birth family in Germany—were on opposing sides during the war. My grandfather’s four brothers, remaining in the Fatherland, fought for Germany during WWII, one ending up missing in action and presumed killed during the Battle of Berlin, one captured by American forces serving time as a POW, and another, a low-ranking soldier, who survived the war. Finally, there was Rudi, a Luftwaffe pilot. This family rift just intensified the taboo about discussing my family’s German heritage and their lives during WWII.



My grandfather (Rudi’s brother) Ted Troehler’s War Bond Certificate issued to him by his employer, GE, circa 1944. Ted “Americanized” his name from Tröhler to Troehler when he emigrated to the US. Fetzer

The final reason we know so little of Rudi’s service record is the destruction that Germany (rightfully) endured, especially at the end of the war in Berlin, resulting in many war records being lost, perhaps most of them. There is a website for the German Bundesarchiv (the “Federal Archives”), that notes, “It houses a vast collection of military records, including service records, unit histories, and photographs. However, it’s essential to note that physical records up to 1945 were significantly damaged during World War II. What remains is incomplete.”

Members of my family still in Germany are (reluctantly) helping me determine if any of Rudi’s war and service records still exist in the Bundesarchiv, but so far have had no luck in locating records that may still exist. The “old, dead people” may always remain an enigma.

So, because we have nothing official to go on regarding my Great Uncle Rudi’s war record, and because I failed to ask him while he was alive, we’ll have to go on one family story I heard while visiting Germany a few years ago and on the photographic evidence of his military life and service. We’ll use photographic evidence that somehow survived the war to attempt to construct, “History Detectives-like”, some idea of his service.

Rudolf (“Rudi”) Tröhler greeted the world in 1908 in Freiburg, Germany, one of seven children (five boys and two girls) born to Gottlieb and Maria Tröhler. Rudi’s father, Gottlieb, (“Lover of God”) was a contentious objector in his younger days and very religious. But by the time his son was 17-years-old, Rudi’s focus appeared to be less on religion than it was on motorcycles and race cars, a precursor to his risk-taking service with the Luftwaffe.



Rudi Tröhler seated on a motorcycle 1925.



**Rudi (r) in a race car 1925.
Fetzer Family Photos.**

Every able-bodied man had to serve his Fatherland, regardless of risk or desire. About eleven years after the above photos were taken, Rudi would be pictured together with his brother, Eugen, in their uniforms. Eugen went on to be MIA and presumed killed in combat in 1945. Rudi, along with his three other brothers, would survive, although their health would be “broken” by the war (according to their eldest sister who followed her brother, my grandfather, to the US prior to WWII and wrote a book about her family. Her book, by the way, included little about her brothers’ war-time service and nothing on Rudi’s service in the Luftwaffe.



Rudi (r) and his brother Eugen Tröhler, circa 1935. Rudi appears to be wearing the rank of “Flieger” (“Flyer”) or “Basic Airman” in this photo. Fetzer



Here Rudi is wearing the rank of Airman or “Gefreiter”, a promotion from “Basic Airman”, circa 1937. Fetzer Family photo.



Rudi wearing the rank of Airman First Class or “Obergefreiter”, circa 1940.

A few of years after the above 1935 photo was taken of Rudi with his brother, additional photos of Rudi were taken of him in a slightly more distinctive Luftwaffe uniform. The Luftwaffe uniform Rudi was sporting, above, in 1937 and 1940 as compared to the more standard looking German Army uniform in which he was photographed in 1935, perhaps reveals the evolution of Hitler “thumbing his nose” at the post-WWI prohibition of Germany rearming itself and Hitler’s confidence, therefore, in openly showing his Luftwaffe personnel in their distinctive uniforms.



Great Uncle Rudi circa 1942 in two different uniform caps and wearing the rank of “Leutnant” or Second Lieutenant to which he had been promoted. Fetzer Family photos.

According to History.com, “On February 26, 1935, “Nazi leader Adolf Hitler signed a secret decree authorizing the founding of the *Reich Luftwaffe* as a third German military service to join the Reich army and navy.

“The Versailles Treaty that ended World War I prohibited military aviation in Germany, but a German civilian airline—Lufthansa—was founded in 1926 and provided flight training for the men who would later become Luftwaffe pilots. After coming to power in 1933, Nazi leader Adolf Hitler began to secretly develop a state-of-the-art military air force. In February 1935, Hitler formally organized the Luftwaffe as a major step in his program of German rearmament.

“The Luftwaffe was to be un-camouflaged step-by-step so as not to alarm foreign governments, and the size and composition of Luftwaffe units were to remain secret as before.

“As German rearmament moved forward at an alarming rate, Britain and France protested but failed to keep up with German war production. The German air fleet grew dramatically, and the new German fighter—the Me-109—was far more sophisticated than its counterparts in Britain, France, or Russia. The Me-109 was bloodied during the Spanish Civil War; Luftwaffe pilots received combat training as they tried out new aerial attack formations on Spanish towns such as Guernica, which suffered more than 1,000 killed during a brutal bombing by the Luftwaffe in April 1937.



A Messerschmitt Bf 109G-6 of JG 27 “Afrika” in flight, 1943. Courtesy Wikipedia.

“The Luftwaffe was configured to serve as a crucial part of the German blitzkrieg, or “lightning war”—the deadly military strategy developed by General Heinz Guderian. As German panzer divisions burst deep into enemy territory, lethal Luftwaffe dive-bombers would decimate the enemy’s supply and communication lines and cause panic. By the outbreak of World War II in September 1939, the Luftwaffe had an operational force of 1,000 fighters and 1,050 bombers.

“First Poland and then Denmark, Norway, Holland, Belgium, and France fell to the blitzkrieg. After the surrender of France, Germany turned the Luftwaffe against Britain, hoping to destroy the RAF in preparation for a proposed German landing. However, in the epic air battle known as the Battle of Britain, the

outnumbered RAF fliers successfully resisted the Luftwaffe, relying on radar technology, their new, highly maneuverable Spitfire aircraft, bravery, and luck. For every British plane shot down, two German warplanes were destroyed. In the face of British resistance, Hitler changed strategy in the Battle of Britain, abandoning his invasion plans and attempting to bomb London into submission. However, in this campaign, the Luftwaffe was hampered by its lack of strategic, long-range bombers, and in early 1941 the Battle of Britain ended in failure.

“Britain had handed the Luftwaffe its first defeat. Later that year, Hitler ordered an invasion of the USSR, which after initial triumphs turned into an unqualified disaster. As Hitler stubbornly fought to overcome Russia’s bitter resistance, the depleted Luftwaffe steadily lost air superiority over Europe in the face of increasing British and American air attacks. By the time of the D-Day invasion of Normandy in June 1944, the Luftwaffe air fleet was a skeleton of its former self.”



**Rudi Tröhler in the cockpit of a Stuka, date unknown but likely late-1930’s.
Fetzer Family photo.**

I’d love to have possession of my great uncle’s Luftwaffe pilot’s logbooks. Without them, there’s no way to know for certain, but it’s possible he participated in the event described below. Based on dated photos of him wearing his wings (though admittedly the inscribed dates could be wrong), the timing was right and the above Stuka with Uncle Rudi at the controls is likely a Spanish Civil War Stuka, one without evidence of German national markings.

From History.com:
“During the Spanish Civil War, the German military tested its powerful new air force—the Luftwaffe—on the Basque town

of Guernica in northern Spain.

“Although the independence-minded Basque region opposed General Francisco Franco’s Nationalist forces in the Spanish Civil War, Guernica itself was a small rural city of only 5,000 inhabitants that declared non-belligerence in the conflict. With Franco’s approval, the cutting-edge German aircraft began their unprovoked attack at 4:30 p.m. on April 26, 1937, the busiest hour of the market day in Guernica. For three hours, the German planes poured down a continuous and unopposed rain of bombs and gunfire on the town and surrounding countryside. One-third of Guernica’s 5,000 inhabitants were killed or wounded, and fires engulfed the city and burned for days.

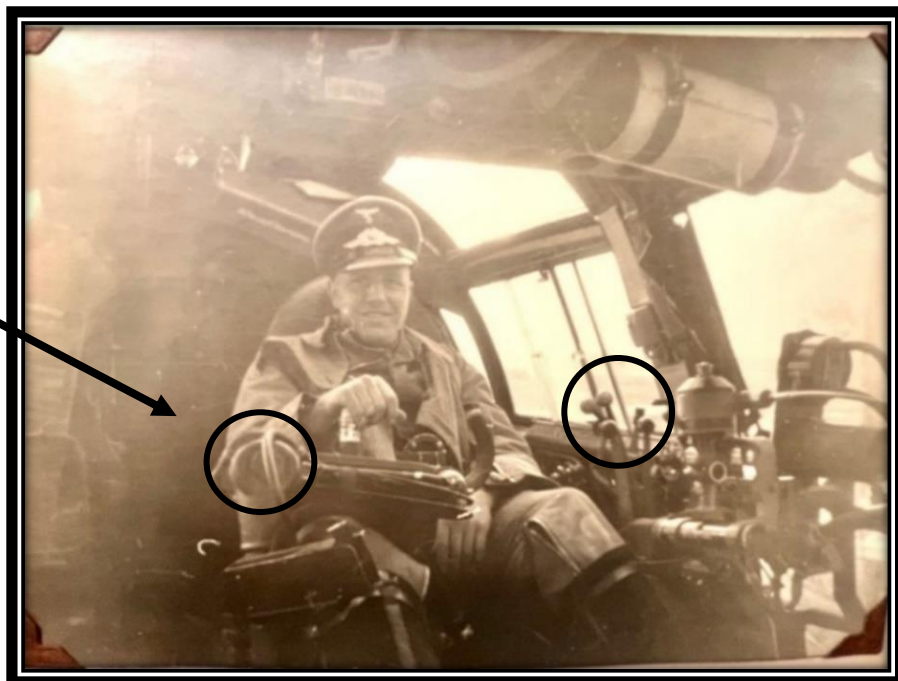
“The indiscriminate killing of civilians at Guernica aroused world opinion and became a symbol of fascist brutality. But by 1942, all major participants in World War II had adopted the bombing innovations developed by the Nazis at Guernica, and by the war’s end, in 1945, millions of civilians had perished under Allied and Axis air raids.”

Rudi probably, as many young Luftwaffe pilots did, got his initial pilot training in the Ar-66 Arado in which he is pictured, below. The Arado was developed, according to Wikipedia, “as a military trainer aircraft during the early 1930s. First flown in 1932, it quickly proved superior to two rival aircraft and was selected to meet the training needs of the Luftwaffe. In addition to primary flight training, the Ar 66 was used for aerobatics and night-time instruction along with the training of various air crew positions, such as bombardiers, radio operations, aerial photographers, and machine gun operators.”



Rudi photographed in an Arado Ar-66 stagger wing biplane. Circa mid-1930's. The Ar-66 was a German single-engine, two-seat training aircraft. It was also used for night ground-attack missions on the Eastern Front. Fetzner Family Photo.

Later, Rudi was photographed with a smile on his face at the controls of a much larger aircraft than either the Arado or the Stuka. I did some research on this larger aircraft's cockpit configuration. I compared Rudi's photo with known aircraft cockpit configurations, which led me to conclude that Rudi “graduated” to the Heinkel HE-111. Let's look at it for a moment.



Uncle Rudi in an unknown aircraft, likely a Heinkel HE-111 and most likely circa 1942, and perhaps just before taking off to buzz his family farm. Fetzner Family photo.

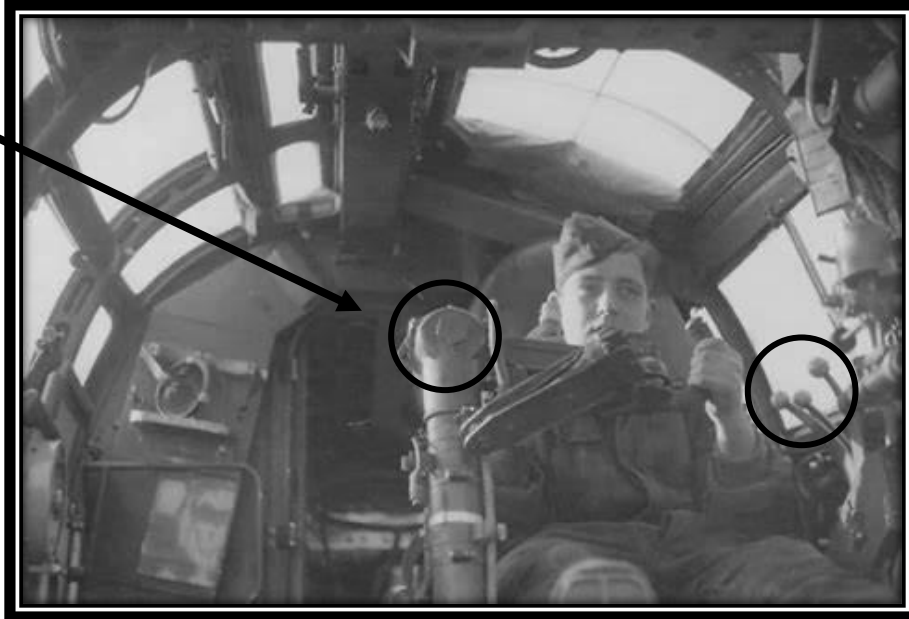


Photo of a Heinkel He-111 cockpit courtesy of worldwarphotos.info. Unknown crewman at the controls. Even though shot from a slightly different angle from the photo of Rudi, above, this cockpit appears to be very similar to the cockpit photo of Rudi Tröhler. Note the same ball-handled controls on the left side of the cockpit in both photos and the reversable yoke (see arrows) that can move the yoke away from the pilot in the left seat to allow entry and exit and potentially give control of the aircraft to either of two pilots, but not to both. The cockpit window configurations also appear the same in the two photographs.

According to Wikipedia, “the Heinkel He-111 served the Luftwaffe across the European theatre as a medium bomber until 1943, when a loss of air superiority resulted in it being relegated to a transport role.” The following statistics on the HE-111 also come from Wikipedia:

Armament

Guns: up to 7 × 7.92 mm MG 15 machine guns or 7x MG 81 machine guns (2 in the nose, 1 in the dorsal, 2 in the side, 2 in the ventral), some of them replaced or augmented by:

- 1 × 20 mm MG FF cannon (central nose mount or forward ventral position)
- 1 × 13 mm MG 131 machine gun (mounted dorsal and/or ventral rear positions)



A Heinkel He-111 in flight. Courtesy of Wikipedia.

Bombs: 4,400 pounds in the main internal bomb bay and up to 7,900 pounds that could be carried externally. External bomb racks blocked the internal bomb bay. Carrying bombs externally increased weight and drag and

impaired the aircraft's performance significantly. Carrying the maximum load usually required a rocket-assisted take-off.

Performance

- Maximum speed: 270 mph or 240 knots
- Range: 1,400 miles or 1,200 nautical miles
- Service ceiling: 21,300 feet

I have but one story about my great uncle Rudi Tröhler's flying career, and it happens to likely be one of him flying the HE-111. He would fly over the family farm at which he spent many wonderful summers as a child in Gundelsheim, Germany. The name of the family farm is Hoschön, literally "high beauty". It is a beautiful place I personally experienced when I visited there several years ago during strawberry picking season. Large, horse-drawn carts of fresh strawberries were being harvested from the farm. The area had not changed very much from the way it looked from the air back in 1942 as you'll see in the below aerial photo of Hoschön.

The story is that during WWII in Germany, commodities like toilet paper were rationed, the preponderance of the available supplies going to the troops. Rudi would fly over his family's farm as often as he could to drop packages of toilet paper to his family members.

As the story was related to me by distant cousin family members who still own the farm (commandeered in 1915 as a WWI hospital for wounded German soldiers), the family would hear the aircraft approaching at low level and watch packages drop from the bottom (the open bomb bay of the aircraft?). They'd rush out to collect them, grateful to be supplied with the much needed but, at that time in German history, luxurious commodity not available to the average "Hans" or "Ingrid"...but made available to Rudi's family because of his Luftwaffe service.

The below photo was allegedly taken by Rudi, he and his crew dropping toilet paper over Hoschön (the group of farm buildings center, right) in an unidentified twin engine aircraft. Unidentified, yes, but it looks to be the left engine of a Heinkel He-111 and likely the same aircraft in which Uncle Rudi was photographed in the cockpit, above, circa 1942.



Flying over one's homestead is an irresistible urge for aviators. I'd wager there's very few military pilots—or any pilot for that matter regardless of their aviation background or country of origin—that has not flown over their own, their mom and dad's, or their grandparents' place at least once. I did it myself several times. Ask around. If you ask a pilot, they've likely flown over their own or a relative's house.

We kill each other over our differences but as it turns out, we're really not all that different. History has a way of repeating itself, doesn't it? So, it's interesting, from a serendipitous point of view, that my

uncle, Norman Fetzer, as I recounted several ECAHF Newsletter's back about his service as a naval aviator in WWII, also flew over his family farm.

Rudi, my mom's uncle, took risks "buzzing" his family farm in Germany, just as my Uncle Norman (my dad's brother and ultimately my mom's brother-in-law), also risked his US Navy flying career buzzing his family farm in Warrensville, Ohio.

Apparently, my Uncle Rudi's buzzing turned out better for him than did my Uncle Norman's buzzing. While buzzing his grandparents' homestead, Uncle Norman allegedly exhausted his fuel reserves and crash-landed his aircraft on the family farm, resulting in Norman having his "wings clipped". He never flew a Navy aircraft again.

Rudi apparently escaped that fate, although, Uncle Norman's "mistake" was as much a "hush-hush" event in my family as Uncle Rudi's service in the Luftwaffe.

I wonder why there seems to have been so much "hush-hush" in the Fetzer Family? To the best of my knowledge, we weren't weirdos or criminals and had no more to hide from public view than any other family.

But maybe most families had some taboo subjects, especially in the old days when we were more modest and private and less inclined to "air our dirty laundry". And during WWII, "loose lips sank ships", so there was less sharing about family connections to our enemies (even if those "enemies" were family members) over in Germany, Italy, and Japan. And open talk about crashing military aircraft that were taken out of service was just not talked about, not the least of which is that it was an embarrassing event for my Uncle Norman to exhaust his fuel, and an awkward admission, as it would be for any aviator. So, he chose not to talk about it.

But back to Uncle Rudi. We're fortunate to have the photographic evidence of my great uncle's service in the Luftwaffe, including his flying over the family farm. Without these photos, we'd not have proof of his service in the Luftwaffe during WWII. Or we may not have known that he served in the military at all given the "hush-hush" nature of our family's German heritage and involvement in WWII, making our search for history all the more difficult.

I wrote an article in this newsletter several years ago whose subject was my Great Uncle, Ray Hill. In that article I mentioned that author Laura Esquivel was quoted as saying, "Each of us is born with a box of matches inside us but we can't strike them all by ourselves." How true that is. It was the heritage of my dad and my uncle Norman and my great uncles Ray and Rudi and all the other aviators in my family that ignited my interest in, and propelled me into, my own "wild, blue yonder". They struck the matches I couldn't strike myself.

Uncle Rudi, "I hardly knew ye"...and wish I had done more to try to get to know you before you were gone and it was too late. Still, Rudi, *vielen Dank für das fliegerische Erbe*. Thanks for your part in my aviation heritage.



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