

Back to [Sgt Schrenk+Obi Müller](#) with many links. Translation by Anders Straarup of [Lester Schrenk 100](#) / [Lester Schrenk var tæt på at dø i krig, men fik 79 ekstra leveår](#) 19 NOV 2023 [TV MIDTVEST](#)
Photos only in the original version in Danish. Back to that - [Lester Schrenk 100](#).

Lester Schrenk nearly died in action but had 79 more years to live in

This week the American Lester Schrenk is celebrating his 100th Anniversary even if a German pilot tried to kill him in an aerial battle over Thy in 1944.

(LESTER SCHRENK) Photo: Private photo.

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On a frosty day in February 1944 Lester Schrenk and the other 9 crew members flew over Thy with a big bomb load towards their target: The German Air Base in Aalborg Airport. But their formation of big B-17 bombers – the American “Flying Fortresses – had to turn round again.

- There was a fog over Aalborg and we would not drop the bombs and risk hitting civilians in occupied Denmark, Lester Schrenk explains, so that is why the whole formation turned round and headed back to their base in England.

But German radars had spotted the planes and from the main base in Karup German Junckers 88 fighters were sent up to meet them, one of them piloted by Hans-Hermann Müller.

(PLANE) Hans-Hermann Müller’s Junckers 88G photographed in Karup during the war. Photo: Private photo.

- Actually I was just sent out to observe, but when I met the formation about 120 kilometres west of the coast at Thisted, I thought it was foolish not to do anything. Then I attacked, Hans-Hermann Müller explained in an interview to [TV MIDTVEST](#) in 2012.

First he managed to shoot down a plane while he was under heavy fire from the Americans. The American B-17 bomber crashed into the sea with all 10 crew members on board. All perished.

- Then I turned round and attacked Lester’s plane, and I could see that my shots hit, Hans-Hermann Müller stated.

(Hans-Hermann Müller) Pilot Hans-Hermann Müller in his uniform. In 1944 when he shot down Lester Schrenk’s plane, he was living at Air Base Karup, then called Fliegerhorst Grove. Photo: Private photo.

79 more years to live

The American plane caught fire, and the pilot turned it round in an attempt to reach land while the German fighter followed it at a distance, but the German pilot did not fire at them again.

- Actually he saved my life and the lives of my fellow crew members because he might have kept firing till the plane crashed, and then I would not have been here today, 100-year-old Lester Schrenk now states via facetime from his home in Minnesota, U.S.A.

So far he gave me 79 extra years to live, and I am very grateful for that, Lester Schrenk says with a smile.

On a flight of 120 kilometres over sea the German Hans-Hermann Müller followed the plane till it made landfall, and from his plane he saw the Americans bail out with their parachutes one by one.

- I saw all of them come out and I was somehow relieved that they succeeded, but from my plane I also saw that one of them landed in a lake, Hans-Hermann Müller stated.

24-year-old William Lavies, Lester's best friend, landed in the middle of the frozen Lake Ove west of Thisted, but he went through the ice and drowned. The other 9 survived and ended up in a German Prisoner-of-War Camp in what is now Lithuania.

(LINK TO MORTAL ENEMIES)

Back to Thy

The violent events became a watershed in Lester Schrenk's life, and today he describes his experiences during World War II as the most defining for the rest of his life.

- I think of World War II every single day, so it has filled incredibly much for me, Lester Schrenk states today.

That is why he visited Thy in 2008 together with his wife and daughter because he would like to see again the places in Denmark where he had been in 1944 during the most dramatic hours of his life. One of the places was a field at Koustrup Møllegaard near Hørdum where the plane with a full bomb load crashed in a gigantic explosion. Later he sailed out on Lake Ove and laid a wreath on the water in memory of his friend the pilot.

- He was like a brother to me, and I still think of him every day, he then said, when TV MIDTVEST followed him closely on his tour of Thy.

During the visit in 2008 Lester Schrenk related that for many years he had tried to find the German who shot them down. Then he said,

- I want very much to meet him. I consider him a gentleman because he let us live. I have searched him for years, but I haven't succeeded in finding him because his name Hans Müller is a very common German name.

The meeting in Heidelberg

But in 2012 Lester Schrenk happened to find the German with the help of Danish friends. He wrote a letter to Hans-Hermann Müller who answered right away.

- I was very surprised to hear that you have been looking for me, Hans-Hermann Müller wrote to Lester Schrenk, and in the correspondence between them he wrote to Lester that if he ever came to Heidelberg, he would be very welcome to visit him and his family.

Lester Schrenk seized that opportunity, and with his daughter and his wife Bernice he went to Heidelberg in 2012 to visit the man who shot him down over Thy – and killed his best friend.

(TWO ENEMIES) The two mortal enemies met in Heidelberg in 2012. Photo: Jens Kolding, TV MIDTVEST.

But really, why would you visit the man who 79 years ago pulled the trigger and tried to kill you?

- Well, you may also see it the other way round. I also tried to kill him, so it goes both ways, Lester Schrenk states.

- He was one of the few Germans I met who showed compassion. Often you would be shot at if you managed to bail out with a parachute. And look how different he was.

TV-programme became a healing process

TV MIDTVEST was also on the side line during the visit to Heidelberg, and it made the documentary MORTAL FRIENDS. Today Lester Schrenk says that the journey to Heidelberg and the process

with the film has been one of the most important events in his life because it has been a healing process to him, a therapy of the traumatic experiences he had in Thy and later in the Prisoner-of-War camp. Most war veterans he knows, including the men from his own crew, were very reticent about the experiences and refused to talk about them, but the journey to Thy and the long TV interviews made him himself open up.

- Today it doesn't bother me at all to talk about my own experiences and all that I went through, states 100-year-old Lester Schrenk from Minnesota.

(CREW PHOTO) Lester Schrenk with the crew in front of their B-17 that they had named Pot O' Gold. Lester Schrenk is number two from the left in the back row. Photo: Private photo.

- Actually I am not at all sorry that things developed as they did. It has meant that now all over the world I have friends who overwhelm me with gratitude. I would not change that for anything in the world, he states.

A death

On 18 August this year Lester Schrenk's wife Bernice died after a marriage of 75 years. She also joined him on the tour of Thy in 2008, and in 2012 when they travelled to Heidelberg. During the funeral service for her their German friends participated online – all of Hans-Hermann Müller's family.

- I still communicate with them, and Hans Hermann's grandchild has also been here to visit us in Minnesota. Of course they were also to attend the funeral service for Bernice, Lester Schrenk explains.

In 2020 99-year-old Hans-Hermann Müller died after struggling for 3 years against the consequences of a stroke which meant that he gradually lost his ability to communicate.

- I was very sorry when I received the message, but I also had to admit that in his condition I wouldn't have wished to live on either. But I am very glad that I met him. How many people experience meeting the person who shot down your plane – and even find out that he is a kind person, Lester Schrenk ends.