The last mission of B-17G 43-38103: ‘The Bates Crew”

It is around 01:30 PM on the 5th of April 1945 when a number of low flying aircraft appear above the Grevelingen in the vicinity of Ouddorp. It is a small group of American B-17 bombers that are forced to fly under the low hanging clouds. There is no time for them to realize that they are not flying above liberated Dutch grounds, for immediately they come under heavy fire.

The B-17 with serial number 43-38103 is hit so severely that three engines stop running and a fire breaks out in the cockpit. Pilot Bates recognizes the seriousness of the situation and over the intercom orders the crew to bail out. Bates himself moves towards the bomb bay in order to jump when at that moment the aircraft explodes and the pilot is being blown out of the plane. His parachute opens only partly at a height of just 100 meters. Heavily wounded he lands on the mud flats of the Grevelingen where he notices that his co-pilot Ellis Smith and his navigator John Ewald have already been taken prisoner by the Germans. It was not until Saturday the 7th of April that the inhabitants of Ouddorp get permission to recover the other airmen. What they find at the wreckage is beyond words. Five crew members are eventually buried in three coffins at the public cemetery of Ouddorp. On the 20th of April and the 7th of May, the bodies of James Ireland and Alfred Aulicino are found near the Kilhaven. After the war, the victims are reburied at the American cemetery in Neuville-en-Condroz in Belgium. The families of Hamilton, Conroy, Aulicino, Plotner, Ireland and Anderson choose to bury their loved ones in the USA. John Till is still resting in peace next to 5,325 of his fallen comrades in Belgium. Smith, Ewald and seriously wounded pilot Bates were reunited with their loved ones after the war.