

## Seven Killed In Bomber Crash



*The B-24 memorial at the time of dedication near Walnut, NE*

**Submitted by  
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On March 8, 1944, a B-24 Liberator bomber on a training mission from the Army Airfield at Harvard, Nebraska crashed with all seven of its crew members killed.

As part of a joint Memorial Day and World War II anniversary observance, the crew and their last flight was commemorated with a sculpture that was erected five miles south of Walnut, Nebraska.

The ceremony at the crash memorial was held the morning of May 30, 1994 in Walnut. The crash memorial site is at the intersection of Pottawattamie County M47 and G30.

The ill-fated bomber was among three flying in formation. The wing of one plane clipped the tail structure of the lead aircraft. Without its tail, the plane was robbed of maneuverability and it plummeted into the rolling snow covered farmland south of Walnut. The planes were based at the airfield in Harvard, Nebraska, and may have come from the 484th Bomb Group then in the process of moving to a new station in Italy.

There was an attempt to locate relatives of the crew members to make them aware of the memorial ceremony here. Letters were sent to newspapers in the crewmen's hometowns and nearby communities. However, after some initial leads, no response from relatives had been received.

The B-24 memorial is a 1-to-9 scale replica of a B-24 sitting atop a former windmill tower. Affixed to the tower is a board with a list of the crewmen aboard the plane when it went down.

The fuselage of the replica bomber was hewn from a fallen maple tree. Harley Ploen, the artist who sculptured the

### **Harvard Nebraska based B-24 fell in Mid Air Collision, March 8, 1944**

replica said, "the plane was difficult to carve because the B-24 fuselage is oblong, rather than cylindrical."

It is not the first aeronautical rendering created by Ploen, whose name is fittingly pronounced "plane. In 1989, Ploen sculpted a B-29 Superfortress to honor the aircraft he serviced as a ground crew member with a bomber group in the Pacific theater during World War II.

Since then, he has constructed a P-38 Lightning, a fighter used extensively in the Pacific, and a Sopwith Camel, a World War I fighter. Ploen was asked to construct the B-24 "just because of the other planes I have around here," he said.

Those who did the asking were local Boy Scouts and Scout Leaders. "I just saw what he did," said Emil Kinser, an assistant Scout Leader in Walnut, "and after I heard the story about the bomber, I thought, 'boy that would be neat if Harley could build a bomber.'"

Emil Kinser has harbored the idea for a monument at the crash site for a long time, according to Jim Hansen, Walnut Scout Leader. Kinser lives near the area. Kinser brought the idea to a scout meeting, and I jumped on it," Hansen said. "I really feel good about this project."

Kinser said he first heard about the crash when he moved to the area 14 years ago. His interest was piqued when he found a machine gun shell while he was raking his yard. He looked up old newspaper clippings about the crash, and felt the dead crewman deserved a memorial.

Kinser said there seems to be a tendency for servicemen and service women who died during training exercises to be thought of with less honor than those who die in combat, even though they all paid the ultimate price for their country.

Ploen added, "the project has been good for the scouts. in addition to the local history lesson, it gave some of the youths a chance to interact with their government."

A group of scouts met with the Pottawattamie County Board of Supervisors seeking support for the project and asking the county to build a road turn-off near the site. County officials enthusiastically granted both, according to Hansen..

Ploen said he felt a connection with the dead crewman because of their mutual service in World War II. He felt pride that he was able to build a proper tribute to them. It is a tribute designed to be long lasting

"It's built to withstand the weather," Ploen said of his sculpture, "It's not a frivolous thing. Unlike the aircraft it honors, this B-24 with its propellers driven by the breeze, will remain aloft carrying the memories of the seven servicemen." If it causes anyone to stop and think for a second, then it did what it was supposed to do," said Kinser.

The victims were: Capt Robert H Mueller-26, Pittsburgh, PA, top ranking instructor at the Nebraska air base; 2/Lt Lee R Steward-24, of Sunray, TX; 2/Lt John P. Maguire-28, New York City; 2/Lt Leonard F Mulligan-23, Teaneck, NJ; Sgt William L Hicks-26, High Point, NC; Sgt. James H. Bulha-20, Newport, RI; and Cpl William L Johnson-26, El Dorado, AR.