

Brief History of Klaus Hans Friedrich Peters

Compiled by Oliver and Kim Peters from military service notes and two memoirs written by Klaus, along with anecdotes transcribed by Oliver. [Annotations] added to direct quotes for clarity.

Klaus Hans Friedrich Peters was born in Stolpmünde, Germany on March 24, 1924, son of Eduard Hermann Peters and Erna Mina Thom. Stolpmünde was a seaside harbor and resort town on the Baltic Sea, part of the land taken from Germany after the war, and is now Ustka, Poland.



Klaus and his mother Erna Mina Thom - 1924

In 1951, Klaus wrote: “The ancestors on my father’s side were seafarers, whereas my mother, Erna Peters (born Thom), stemmed from trade and farm families. Eduard Peters [was] a municipal employee of Ostseebad Stolpmünde in Pomerania.”

Eduard was a masseuse and managed the medical spa identified as “Warm Bad” on brochures and maps of Stolpmünde from that period. Klaus mentions his home town and the spa in his 2006 memoirs:

Our town had many connections to the United States. My father was in charge of a medical spa in our town. The lobby of the spa displayed large advertising pictures of the Hamburg America Line (steamer ship). Looking at those pictures, I imagined going on a steamer to America. But it took many years until that happened.



DRK seminar in Falkenwalde May 10, 1940. Eduard 4th from left middle row.

The NAZI influence is evident in their uniforms.

Klaus’ father, Eduard, was also the leader of the DRK – Deutsches Rotes Kreuz (German Red Cross) in Stolpmünde and had been active in the DRK since before the first World War. The DRK was taken over and made part of the NAZI party in 1938. He participated in a leadership seminar with others from Pomerania (now Poland) in May 1940 in the town of Falkenwalde.

Eduard created an Ahnentafel (family lineage chart) in 1937 for Klaus as was required by the NAZI party to verify Aryan blood lines. In addition, he collected baptismal and marriage certificates and created a history of the seafarers in the family dating back over 300 years that was published in the local Stolpmünde newspaper on September 18, 1937.

Klaus dearly loved growing up on the sea in Stolpmünde and often spoke of the sea, the beach, and the fun he had with his friends. He and Dorothea returned several times after the dissolution of the U.S.S.R. made travel to Poland less challenging.

Klaus shared some of his memories of his childhood in his 1950 and 2006 memoirs:

I was born in 1924 in the beautiful seaside town and fishing harbor of Stolpmünde, 200 meters from the Baltic sea. Recalling my youth, it was good and I was happy. When I was 6 years old, my mother's lady friend and her son from the United States, visited us in our Baltic harbor town Stolpmünde, Pomerania. For my birthday they gave me a little American gramophone with the record: *Stars and Stripes Forever*, which I played over and over again. I can still hear it in my mind as clear as ever. I really did like that march, and I always will.

My mother's lady friend and her son Christian visited several times from New York until 1938. Christian and I were school friends before they left Stolpmünde. Sadly the year 1938 was the last visit of our friends, because a year later WWII started.

From my sixth year on, I attended elementary school in Stolpmünde. After five years of attendance at the elementary school, I continued at the secondary school for boys in Stolp. After completion of the secondary school, I received the diploma [equivalent to High School diploma in the United States]."

When I was 12 years old [March 24, 1936] I wanted to join the youth organization called the Jungsturm [Young Storm], which was like the Pathfinders or Boy Scouts. The year 1934 changed all that and all youth organizations were taken over by the Hitlerjugend [Hitler Youth]¹. That was a big disappointment to me, because I had to give up my nice light blue uniform shirt. But after a while I got used to it.



Stolpmünde Jungsturm (Young Storm) troop circa 1936. We believe Klaus is the last boy on the right.
Translation note on back of photo: "In memory of our last Youth Storm service, Stolpmünde. Klaus Peters"

A photograph of the Thanksgiving Day parade in Stolpmünde on Sunday, October 3, 1937, shows Klaus marching down Hitlerstrasse – formerly Hauptstrasse. Klaus, now a member of Hitler Youth, can be seen on the first row far left carrying his bugle and the Hitler Youth banner with a single lightning bolt.



Klaus elaborated on his training in the Hitler Youth in the memoirs he penned in 2006:

The training was similar to the Boy Scouts; later with more military training. I sure did like the glider training. Flying in a small open cockpit glider from huge sand dune in Leba at the Baltic Sea [Germany now Poland] was fun, even if the first flights only lasted a minute or two. And no matter what, I knew then that I wanted to be a pilot in the Luftwaffe.



Circa 1941 – Klaus in Hitler Youth glider training; probably for B Exam.

I finished A, B and C Exams in Hitlerjugend. The B Exam is done by a motor winch pulled up by a steel wire. Looks a little scary the first time. The C Exam is done by being pulled up by a small plane. It is done in a larger glider with a closed cockpit that could seat two persons. There are more Exams, but when I was 17 years I volunteered for the Luftwaffe and was called up in 1942.

In his 1950 memoir, Klaus said it was because of his glider training that he was taken into the flying corps in 1942. Klaus' Luftwaffe flight training started with proficiency in gliders and then moved on to motorized flight. His basic aviator training was in Oschatz, Germany, Antwerp, Belgium and Eindhoven, Netherlands from March 20, 1942 to July 9, 1942.

Klaus recalled his Luftwaffe training in personal histories he wrote in 1951 and 2006.

On March 20, 1942, I had to report at a Luftwaffen testing facility in the town of Oschatz in Saxony. The day after I arrived by train, soldiers were checked by doctors and physicians and selected for basic training. The same day that I became 18 years old [March 24, 1924], the day sergeant ordered me to buy beer for the whole room. I was happy to do it.

Right away testing of medical and physical and all sorts of sports followed. I was selected to be fit for the Luftwaffe as flying personnel. The next day our train transport went to Antwerp, Belgium, where a very strict training began. Later a train took us to Eindhoven, Netherlands. Still marching or crawling, etc. But it also got a little easier because we had to do shift watches at the airfield where German bombers were parked in camouflaged hangers to be ready for flying to England.

I recall one incident during our early morning watch. We saw a person in a beige flight suit walking around in one hanger and touching the side of a JU 88 [Junker 88]. At that time we knew the man was an Englishman. We fired one shot with the rifle in the air. The man had his hands up and shouted "Don't shoot!"

Now we made him understand in our school English to slowly walk toward us with hands still up. He was unarmed but looked scary. We watched with an unlocked pistol while we let him sit down crossing his legs. Our English went along a little better, so we found out he was a British paratrooper who got lost. Exchanging cigarettes made the whole situation more pleasant, which to us in a way was funny. Anyway our man understood that he was a prisoner of war. We saw him days later working in the kitchen.

As we could not leave our post, we had to wait for the next shift to arrive. It came shortly, like always with a sergeant who was astonished about what had happened, but said we did a great thing. He searched the prisoner one more time and took him along.



A few days later, they transported us near the Netherland coast to the town of Haamstede on the Island of Schouwen close to the English Channel. On a clear day you could see the white cliffs of Dover, England with field glasses. There was not too much marching anymore. Day and night we had to be on watch duty looking out for British and Canadian commandos being dropped off at the beach. We were warned, and pictures were displayed on the bulletin board showing that they had automatic machine pistols strapped under their arms, which were triggered when they raised their hands. So we were instructed never call, "Hands up," but rather to shoot right away.

It was dirty and not fair, but the whole war was dirty. Luckily nothing ever happened on our watch. One night some British fighter aircraft shot the Haamstede lighthouse to pieces, but nobody was hurt.

After the basic training we were selected for different positions. Everyone wanted to be fighter pilot, but it didn't turn out that way. I was selected to be a navigator, so I was very disappointed.

But later I found out that in the German bomber crew, I could also be a co-pilot, so I felt better.

The photo on the previous page dated January 1943 shows Klaus in his Luftwaffe uniform with the single “gull” insignia indicating rank of “Flieger” or flyer which corresponds to the rank of Private in the U.S. military and Aircraftman 2nd Class in the U.K. military.



Klaus, his mother Erna and his father Eduard Peters in Stolpmünde Sept. 1943. Insignia reflects his promotion to Gefreiter June 1, 1943.

Those selected were transferred by train on March 27, 1943 to Thorn, Germany on the Weichsel river (now Torun, Poland on the Vistula river) for training at the local Luftwaffe navigator school.

Klaus was promoted to Gefreiter on June 1, 1943 while in Thorn. The Gefreiter rank corresponds to Private First Class in the U.S. and Aircraftman 1st Class in the U.K. military. He returned home to Stolpmünde in September 1943 to visit his parents. The photograph shows two “gulls” on the insignia on his uniform indicating the new rank of Gefreiter.

Klaus described his training in Thorn in the memoirs he penned in 2006:

The officers and teachers all came from the German Navy. The classroom training was not so easy. In between classes, we had some introductory flights on twin engine planes. Two students had to be belly down in the front of the cockpit. When I told my partner to hand me my chest parachute, the pilot said, “What for? We don’t fly that high.” The pilots which took us, did of course want to show off, flying under powerlines and doing some other stunts to see if we became scared. But it didn’t bother me and I didn’t get airsick.

After several weeks I passed my training and was flown to Schwäbisch Hall, Germany. There, more navigational flight training began on the Heinkel HE111, a twin engine bomber. This plane was used at all war zones during this time, but mostly over England. After a few days bomber crews were put together. The Heinkel bomber He177, was a long range bomber, with a crew of six men.

Klaus trained with pilot Julius Schneeberger at Schwäbisch Hall. Schneeberger’s Flight log includes missions he flew with Klaus and others from January 26 to August 6, 1944. Klaus was an Observer (navigator) and co-pilot in both the Kampfgeschwader (bomber wing group) 100 Viking from September 15, 1943 to June 8, 1944 and the Kampfgeschwader Hindenburg 1 from June 9 to September 28, 1944. Klaus was promoted to Obergefreiter (leading aircraftman) on July 1, 1944.

Klaus’ flights from Schwäbisch Hall documented in Julius Schneeberger’s flight log appear to be primarily training missions which explains the variety of flights and the multiple short duration flights labeled “Platzflug” (local flights) which were likely take offs and landings.

During his time in the Luftwaffe, Klaus escaped death or injury numerous times, either direct contact in combat or through flying accidents. In one incident he was scheduled to fly as replacement navigator

with another pilot whose regular navigator was on leave. At the last minute, the regular navigator returned and Klaus didn't go on the flight. The pilot of the flight decided to show off and buzz his hometown while returning from the mission but flew too low and clipped a building. The resulting crash killed all aboard.

In another incident pilot Julius Schneeberger was landing on a grass strip at an unfamiliar field. The approach was too fast, so they overshot the end of the landing strip and ran the bomber into a ditch. No one was injured, but the landing gear was damaged and an investigation ensued to determine if the pilot and crew had tried to commit sabotage. Luckily, the investigators ultimately ruled it an accident and the crew went through additional training and then returned to regular flight assignments.

When Klaus' flying unit was disbanded due to fuel shortages, and they were assigned to the Fallschirm Panzerkorps Regiment 2nd Hermann Göhring Division on September 29, 1944. They were re-assigned to the Führer Escort Division in Berlin to provide general security for Hitler and others. This unit included thousands of troops, so he never actually saw Hitler, but he was stationed at the Wolf's Lair where the failed attempt on Hitler's life took place in July 1944.

On March 15, 1945 Klaus' unit was guarding the German General Staff (Army) Headquarters south of Berlin in Zossen. Klaus once again escaped death during a major attack at the complex. The 8th Air Force Mission 889 resulted in 308 B-24 and 276 B-17 bombers dropping thousands of high explosive and incendiary bombs on the headquarters. Klaus was at the entrance guardhouse when the air raid sirens sounded and the first wave of bombers came into view. Klaus and his six companions jumped in a ditch while bombs exploded all around them. As the second wave of bombers approached in formation, they ran for one of the bunkers and beat wildly on the door but were not let inside, so they ran back to the ditch to take cover again. The bombs came closer this time but somehow they managed to survive with no injuries. The U.S. 446th Bomber Group participated in the mission and one of their radiomen was Harry Astley, from New Jersey. Harry survived the war returning home to New Jersey and later retiring to Lake County, Florida. As luck would have it, Klaus and Harry met many years after the war and became friends. He was able to give Harry his perspective of the mission from the ground, for it was not considered a very successful mission as it did little damage to the bunkers and compound's fortified underground structures, however it was hell on earth for those trapped outside those bunkers.



Troop transport circa 1945. Klaus standing top right.

The Führer Escort Division moved often and at times to places where Hitler was not in an attempt to misdirect the Allies. One such move put Klaus in Czechoslovakia during the closing days of the war. The troops were being moved by rail and were being strafed by the Americans and British fighter planes.

Klaus survived one such strafing by jumping behind a cemetery fence. He hurt his back on a fencepost and took a small piece of shrapnel. The unit commander, who was with him, did not survive the attack and died in the hospital.

Knowing that the war would soon be over, his small unit proceeded to work their way back to the west using trucks, driving by night and camouflaging the vehicles by day. Their goal was to make it to the

American or British-held territory so they could surrender. They faced three fears: being shot as deserters by the few officers who still believed in the cause, being killed by strafing fighter planes or being captured by the advancing Russian troops. While on this trek a chance encounter in the middle of April 1945 led him to his future wife, Dorothea Elisabeth Schneider.

Dorothea, her parents, and siblings resided in Sankt Goarshausen, Germany a quaint little village on the Rhein River near the Lorelei. As a teen, Dorothea was called into service by the Reich despite the protests of her father Ernst Schneider. Dorothea, like other girls her age, were required to serve in the Reichsarbeitsdienst der weibliche Jugend (Labor Service of the Reich for the female youth) and she was eventually assigned to RAD 13/103, an anti-aircraft unit in Czechoslovakia.

The girls in her unit worked to identify aircraft based on the sound of the engine and silhouette of the aircraft. In April 1945, Dorothea's RAD unit disbanded as it became clear that the war was quickly coming to a close. Dorothea and her friend Gertrude Gruber found themselves stranded in Czechoslovakia with the Russian army advancing. The two 19-year-olds were determined to make their way back home - a journey of over 300 miles.



Dorothea Schneider and Gertrude Gruber circa 1945.

They were on this journey when they came upon Klaus' unit in Domažlice, Czechoslovakia (called Taus by the Germans). At the time, Taus was the location of a military hospital and it is likely members of Klaus' unit were taken there for treatment of injuries incurred during the Allied strafing of the transport train.



Klaus and Dorothea were immediately drawn to each other. Thea said she thought Klaus looked like the handsome German film star Carl Raddatz and Klaus was charmed by her smile. They soon parted, but not before Klaus bought her a small roughly crafted wooden box with the skyline of Domažlice carved on the top and "Taus den 18 April 1945" inscribed inside the lid.

Dorothea and Gertrude made it back to the Rheinland traveling on foot from one farm to the next, seeking shelter, sustenance and safety from the advancing Russian Army who were known to be brutes who raped women and girls. They would sometimes stay a few days for safety reasons with a farm family - the farmer telling officials that the girls were family members to protect them.

Klaus and his unit were also heading west to surrender to the Americans or British and evade capture by the Russians. They were hiding at a farm near Wasserburg, when they saw a couple of American troops coming towards the farmhouse. Klaus and his companions carefully approached the soldiers to surrender. He said both the Americans and the Germans were afraid of what would happen next, so in broken English Klaus called out, "You don't shoot and we don't shoot."

At this point the Germans turned over their side arms and surrendered to the Americans. They went back with the soldiers who were part of a convoy of U.S. tanks and were then taken prisoners of war.

Klaus documented the event and what followed: "On May 2, 1945, I was captured by the Americans and put into a prison camp in Ulm, Germany, until I was released on June 28, 1945."

Klaus was unable to return to his home in Stolpmünde as it was now part of Poland and occupied by the Russians. He and his parents were now refugees, and for some time he did not know where they were. He eventually learned that his mother fled to Honigfleth on August 3, 1945, as the Russians arrived to occupy Stolpmünde. His father was forced to remain for a year and a half, because the Russian occupiers needed his experience as a municipal employee. He was eventually allowed to leave Stolpmünde and join his wife Erna in Honigfleth. The living conditions in Honigfleth were very poor and eventually, Eduard and Erna were permitted to leave on November 4, 1950 and relocate to Oberwesel on the Rhein. An apartment was provided for the now 65 year old Eduard and his wife in reparation for losing their home and all their possessions in Stolpmünde.

After the war, Klaus worked a number of different jobs before coming to the Rhein in 1948:

After my release from imprisonment, I worked as a farm laborer in Hermannsburg [in the Lüneburger Heide region].

On August 22, 1945, I changed my place of employment and was hired by the North German Timber Control in Unterlüß. I was employed from August 22, 1945, until Jan. 1, 1948, by the 2nd Forestry Company, Canadian Army Overseas as a translator.

After that I was employed by the British Timber Production Agency as a heavy equipment driver and mechanic until [the unit was dissolved on] September 15, 1948.



Klaus remained smitten with Dorothea since their meeting in April 1945. Through his friend Fritz Andres and Dorothea's friend Gertrude Gruber, Klaus was finally able to locate her in 1948. Shortly thereafter, Klaus relocated to her home town of Sankt Goarshausen in the French held territory and took a job at the Schlaadt Company, a sawmill and millworks business in the town. The two married on June 3-4, 1950², and lived with Dorothea's parents in Sankt Goarshausen.

Three months later Klaus took a job as a heavy equipment driver at a raw material handling company about 30 km from St. Goarshausen in Oberlahnstein, but his next job would change the course of his life forever.

On July 24, 1951, Klaus took a job with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in Frankfurt as a mechanic and heavy equipment driver operating bulldozers and road graders. Because of the distance from St. Goarshausen, he lived in Frankfurt during the week and came home on weekends. A letter of recommendation dated August 8, 1956, signed by the Buildings and Grounds Chief, A. F. Hoffman, states that "During his employment he has proven to be efficient, honest and co-operative and performed all tasks assigned to him to the fullest satisfaction of his supervisors."



Klaus, Frankfurt, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers 1951-1956.

In November 1955, Klaus entered a safety slogan contest sponsored by the Army Corps of Engineers Frankfurt Sub Area Safety Officers. He won first place and in December he and received a prize of 40 DM (Deutsche Marks) for his slogan that means roughly: "Safety is not cowardly. Carelessness is not courageous." He and the 2nd and 3rd place winners were congratulated by Colonel John H. Dilley, the commanding officer of the Frankfurt Sub Area.



L-R: Col. Dilley, Klaus Peters 1st place and 2nd place Hermann Radke, Frankfurt Dec.

While working with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in Frankfurt, Klaus made the acquaintance of Army Major Arnet Hennings, and the two became friends. Major Hennings encouraged Klaus to come to America because of the great opportunities that await for people who are willing to work hard like Klaus. He offered to sponsor Klaus and his family so they could immigrate to the United States. Ready to start a new life with his family and eager to experience the opportunities that America had to offer, Klaus decided to take Major Hennings up on his invitation, despite the apprehensions of his wife.

On August 20, 1956, Klaus, Dorothea, and their three-year-old son Oliver, boarded the steamship Irpinia in Vlissingen. Fifteen days later, on September 6, 1956, the family disembarked in Miami and were greeted by Major Hennings and his wife. After a cruise across the ocean and long drive from Miami, the family arrived at the home of Major Hennings in the very rural little town of Umatilla in Lake County that Dorothea said was "the end of the earth".

In the beginning, Klaus found work at Daniels Appliance store in Umatilla (probably arranged by Major Hennings) and Dorothea worked as the Hennings' housekeeper. The family resided in a cottage on the Hennings' property and their son Oliver played with the Hennings two children – their daughter Mary and Richard – the son they adopted from Germany after the war.

Even though Dorothea and Klaus had completed their schooling in Germany, they were required to take an equivalency exam as their diplomas were not recognized. They took night classes and were awarded diplomas through Eustis High School – Klaus in 1958 and Dorothea in 1959. Finally, on June 20, 1962, almost six years after their arrival in Miami, Klaus, Dorothea, and Oliver became citizens of the United States of America.

Klaus took a job delivering and repairing major appliances at W. M. Igou in Eustis, Florida, and the family was able to move into an apartment in a house in Eustis. They scrimped and saved and finally bought their first car – a real luxury in Germany. They continued to save and realized another American dream – purchasing a modest little home within ten years of their arrival in the United States.

Klaus took electronics correspondence courses and learned to repair radios and televisions. He left W. M. Igou after many years and opened his own radio and television repair business in a shop he built on the back of his home as a certified Zenith technician.

Dorothea was a doting mother when Oliver was little, but in 1963 when he was 10-years-old, she accepted a position at the Eustis Lake Region News. She was a reporter, photographer and columnist, becoming a regular fixture covering city council meetings and local social events with English learned by

watching soap operas! In 1970, Dorothea became the bookkeeper at H. Jennings Rou Citrus Company in Eustis, continuing in that capacity until her retirement.

Dorothea died on September 24, 2012 and Klaus lost his best friend and his zest for life. Klaus died on March 7, 2015, 70 years after their first meeting in April 1945.

POSTSCRIPT

In the years preceding his death in 2015, Klaus often spoke of how foolish the German people were not to realize what was happening to the Jewish people. He said there were even people in his home town that went away but no one knew where they went.

His brain was fuzzy on dates at the end of his life, but he said it was during the last weeks of the war when he was in Czechoslovakia that he came face to face with the reality of concentration camps. He said the American fighter planes were strafing troop trains in the German held territory. In one instance, several trains were strafed and Klaus and others ran from car to car to help people out as they were in danger of being killed if they stayed on the train. He said they found a train car packed with prisoners. They pushed open the doors and helped the prisoners out, telling them to take cover. Some of the troops had flour with them which they traded to a baker in the town for bread which they gave to the prisoners. He said this was the moment he first knew the truth about concentration camps.

We relocated Klaus to an assisted living facility in Sanford, Florida after the death of his wife, Thea. Shortly before he died, we discovered that several residents (WWII veterans) upon learning that he had served in the Luftwaffe, were unkind to him. They complained to management that they did not want him at their table. The irony is that a Jewish resident stood up for him and chastised the others for their treatment of him.

We met this gentleman when we were moving Klaus' things from his assisted living apartment to the nursing home wing. He came in and spoke with us for several minutes, telling us he was sad to see Klaus leave as he enjoyed talking with him. Then he told us about how the others had been treating him and told us, "I could see he was a good guy."

We were devastated that Klaus had been dealing with this for over a year but had not said a single word about it. We hope he either did not hear them or did not understand, but more importantly, we were so grateful for this good and decent Jewish WWII survivor who came to his aid and defense.

NOTES

¹ Klaus really liked being in the Jungsturm as he was an only child and greatly enjoyed the comradery and outdoor activities. Klaus loved the light blue uniform shirt. Klaus would have been 12 in 1936 but he states it was in 1934 when all youth groups were merged into HitlerJugend. A Jewish site states: "From December 1, 1936, under the Jugenddienstpflicht all other youth groups were banned and their membership was merged into the Hitler Youth." It is likely that he joined in March 1936 when he turned 12 but is just stating that in 1934 the youth groups came under NAZI control and eventually the uniform changed. <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/hitleryouth.html>

² In Germany it is customary to get married at the courthouse on one day and married in the church later or never. Klaus and Dorothea were married at the courthouse on June 3, 1950 and married the following day in the Lutheran Church. The photo here is from the church ceremony on June 4, 1950.