

Topping Out, Topping Off

*Construction tradition from
Pre-Christian times continues
today in modern projects*

*Story and photos
by Justin Ward*

Today's European culture is steeped in pre-Christian history. Take for example the traditional Christian holidays of Christmas and Easter, which include elements not necessarily associated with Jesus Christ – such as the Christmas tree and the Easter bunny. According to various sources, these symbols date back to pre-Christian times when nature was deified and when early Christians wanted to include the pagan beliefs into Christianity in an effort to popularize the religion.

Other traditions from pre-Christian times continue today, even on construction sites.

One tradition is the “Topping Out” ceremony, which usually occurs when the only remaining assembly on a building is the final roof beam. A small tree or leafy wreath is then placed atop the structure, and a celebration is held to commemorate the successful construction of the edifice's framework.

It dates back to the time when Northern Europe was covered with a vast forest and those who lived here were dependent on the trees for survival. Low-hanging bows provided shelter; nuts and fruits from the trees provided food; fallen wood provided kindling for fire.

For centuries, the inhabitants of this area revered trees as deities. Scandinavian mythology suggests that the world sits upon the branches of an enormous tree that connects all living things through spirit. They even thought humans evolved from trees and that our souls return to the trees after death.

Before a wooden shelter could be constructed in those times, the builders would formally address

the forest, asking for its permission to use its trees. The topmost leafy branch of the tree used in construction would be set atop the roof of the structure so the tree spirit would not be rendered homeless.

As time passed, beliefs changed, but the tradition of placing a branch or small tree on



Col. Kurtis D. Lohide, commander, 435th Air Base Wing, Ramstein Air Base, thanks guests for coming to a recent Topping Out ceremony held at the base's general officer quarters.

A master carpenter stands near the rafters atop the newly completed building, reading an ode to the carpenter and the construction. After making several toasts to the future success of the building, he will bless the facility by shattering a glass against it.



the rafters or roof beams on top of a newly built structure remained, ostensibly to acquire a blessing of fertility for the land and the home from the forest god.

Whether out of habit or custom, the ritual has continued in Europe and has branched out to construction projects of all types in the United States and elsewhere, whether the structure is a home or a bridge and whether it's made from wood or steel.

In Germany, this tradition is known as a *Richtfest*, meaning the arranging festival. The term originated from the obligation of putting up or "arranging" the tree on the roof of the structure.

During this fest, dignitaries involved in the project are invited to make speeches and thank those who were involved in the construction. A master carpenter in traditional clothing is invited to recite a poem next to the tree that commemorates the construction. In between stanzas, he'll drink ceremonial wine or beer from a traditional glass and at the end of the tribute, throw it to the ground. With skill, the master carpenter will shatter the glass, thus indicating that the establishment has been blessed.

The Topping Out ceremony is one of many traditions throughout Europe that involve the blessing of structures through song and drink. And it is another unique aspect of the European society that Americans stationed abroad are able to experience.

Ramstein wins national award for installation excellence

Story by Justin Ward

Ramstein Air Base officials accepted in May the Commander in Chief's Annual Award for Installation Excellence, presented to one installation from each branch of service. Although the prestigious award was given to Air Force representatives, it recognizes all those team players who helped Ramstein become the best.

One of the key criteria to get the award is quality of life. And because of the recent transfer of airlift operations to from Rhein-Main Air Base to Ramstein, the construction of new quality-of-life facilities has significantly increased.

In charge of many of these new quality-of-life facilities is the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Europe District.

In the past two years, the district has helped design and construct a 120-person dormitory, a passenger terminal, a new fitness center, and two new general officer quarters. Most important to bringing quality of life to Ramstein, however, is the replacement of family housing units.

"MILCON housing replacement repair started in [fiscal year] 05 and will continue until [fiscal year] 09," said Brian Dykes, regional program manager. "The total housing program at Ramstein over this period is \$258.9 million and will ultimately involve the construction of 850 new housing units. It's by far the biggest program we're working on."

Col. Kurt Lohide, 435th Air Base Wing commander, agreed that quality of life is one of the most significant highlights of the base. "I believe Team Ramstein can be particularly proud of the IEA since it validates our efforts to make Ramstein the best base in the Air Force in terms of quality of life, customer service and innovation," said Lohide.

Along with the award, each installation received a check for \$1 million to be put toward further improving quality of life.

1st Lt. Tracy Page from the *Kaiserslautern American* contributed to this story.