

The date June 22nd 1943, tomorrow it will be 57 years ago, is still very clear in the mind of Henk Sommer. As a 15 year old boy he experienced an exciting day after he witnessed how an American bomber got shot down over Gorinchem.

“Yes I can still remember it very clearly” the 73 year old is saying. It was a warm summer’s day. I was doing my homework in our house when all of a sudden an enormous roar started. I immediately knew it was a plane and with a pair of binoculars I ran outside, planes were my greatest hobby. It looked like a huge swarm of birds and together with my brother we counted hundreds. They were B17 bombers returning from bombing raids on German towns. When we counted almost 500 our attention was drawn to a plane which was flying much lower than the rest. I immediately saw that the plane was in trouble and immediately after this thought German fighters arrived, it was like starlings attacking a crow. They were Messerschmitts from the German airbase at Gilze-Rijen, they attacked the plane.

For us boys this was a fantastic spectacle, than I saw from the belly of the plane a door being opened followed by 10 men jumping out by parachute. 2 of them fell near us and my brother and I jumped on our bikes and cycled as fast as we could to the end of the Haarsekade Street. We just arrived when the two men landed in the field next to us. I heard one saying in English to the other one “congratulations”. English I asked...”no American” was the reply and he pointed to the patch on his arm. I asked him which town they bombed but he couldn’t tell me. The other American had sprained his ankle when he landed and meanwhile a lot of local people had gathered around them. Than all of a sudden a Mof appeared (Mof is the Dutch swear word for Germans...a bit like krauts) on a bike wearing only swimming trunks and a pistol. He came from the sugar factory on the Arkelsedijk where a regiment of Germans were stationed. He told everybody to stand aside and took one of the bikes of the locals, he than ordered the injured American to take that bike. The owner of the bike had to walk with the German and the two Americans to the sugar factory.

Henk Sommer and his brother than went to the village of Arkel where they saw the plane came down. At the “Drie Heulen” in the Rietveld Polder the burning wreck was lying surrounded by a huge crowd. At this spot the Germans also arrested an American and he was taken to a Wehrmacht car. The car passed us and Henk and his brother started to cheer and wave at the American. Immediately the car stopped and the German officer got out, my brother quickly got out of the way but the German got me. “You are coming with me and will ride in front of the car with your bike” so there I went with my 15 years in front of a Mof, I still remember what I was wearing, a shirt with blocks and brown shorts. We were going when the German officer shouted it was going to slow and he stopped halfway on the Arkelsedijk and took my Ausweis (Identity card) and without that anything could happen to me. He than ordered me to cycle by myself to the Garrison Commander in the old city centre of Gorinchem. I was pretty worried but thought they wouldn’t shoot me. When I arrived there were 2 other young men sitting there, one was Henk Janssen who later became a captain in the merchant navy and the other one was Pul, the son of the drawing teacher. Strangely enough also one of the Americans was sitting there; I can still see myself sitting there in that hall. The American wanted to light a cigarette but the package lucky strike was empty. Henk Janssen asked if he could have it as a souvenir. When he got it he chucked it out of the window so they didn’t find it when they would interrogate them. Later a Dutch police officer allowed him to pick it up. Than the German commander got me in, he was a very hard man and was sitting behind a big desk. I didn’t admit that I had waved otherwise he would surely had hit me because he was that sort of man. Eventually he let me go ad we were picked up and brought to the city hall were we were locked up for 4 hours in a dark room.

My dad heard where I was and came and picked up my bike which was a very valuable commodity in the war. I was arrested a few time after that...war was exciting for boys!