

One year ago a photo was found in the archives of the city of Gorinchem. This started a search for the American crew of an on June 22<sup>nd</sup> crashed B-17 bomber. 8 crewmembers landed in the Lingewijk [*Note Peter: a part of Gorinchem where is was born, when I was young I found in the garden an English coin and I now think this came from one of the crewmembers*]

The Pilot and one other crewmember landed near the wreck in a field just outside of the village of Arkel. The photo shows a large crowd walking past the Paardenwater [*Note Peter: This translates as "horse's water" where in the old day the horses would stop and rest before entering Gorinchem city. In the midst of them 2 police officers who are escorting a man to the German commander of the city garrison. The search ended with a still living crewmember in the United States.*]

## **Waving**

Strangely in the local newspapers around that date there is no report about the crash of a plane. The police reports of that day only mention that a door belonging to a plane had been found and that 3 young men had been arrested because they waved at the crew of a crashed bomber. One of these young men was Henk Sommer, now a well known Gorinchem entrepreneur. In an article in the newspaper of June 21<sup>st</sup> 2000 he describes how as a 15 year old boy he saw the plane crash, speaks to two of the crewmembers and how he is arrested and taken to German headquarters. After this article was published a Mr. van Baalen came forward and mentioned that he was the man who took this photograph. He personally saw how 8 men jumped out of the plane and that one landed on the roof of the bakery. He mentioned that this was the man who was escorted by the police. Another report mentioned that a girl found a boot with internal heating (?)

## **The Search**

The question remained of any of the crew survived the war and when the local search did not provide any more answers the search continued in the United States after being advised to do so by the institute for aviation history. They advised to contact Leo Wery an American from Dutch descent and who worked as a volunteer at a museum in Savannah, Georgia.

When he read the article in the newspaper a continuous stream of information was being sent to and from using fax, email and telephone. He didn't rest until he found his first bit of information. Because he had still contacts in the air force he came 3 months later with a good result. He discovered who the airman was who had been speaking to Henk Sommer, got wounded and who was put on a local man's bike. The owner of the bike had to push the American all the way to the sugar factory where German soldiers were stationed. His name was Robert Clark from Massachusetts who was now a very lively 80 year old. When he heard about this search he immediately wanted to come to Holland. Also he wondered if more crewmembers were still alive and when Leo Wery found another crewmember, a waist gunner, more and more information became available. The most important was that all 10 crewmembers survived the German POW camp and the death march towards the end.

Meanwhile in Holland the search continued, also in Arkel. Numerous pensioners remembered the crash in the field. Of much interest was the information that the pilot Harold Russell, also a name now well known, succeeded in hiding for the Germans for 3 days. The question than rose if a local could tell more about this. The search than led to Cees van Andel, caretaker at the home for the elderly and enthusiastic amateur historian. Needless to say that he than helped to find out more, after all the crash happened in the field behind the house he was born. A few months after the initial contact he tells the story in the canteen of the home of the

elderly, the story which had such a great impact on his life and he mentions the results of his search.

“I was born a month before the crash in a house dating from the early 1600’s on the land side of the dike and where I still live. My Father was a “small farmer” as he describes it. It’s June 22<sup>nd</sup> and the weather is nice and Ceesje (= *little Cees*) is sleeping peacefully in his cot which is standing in the living room. In the front of the house near the bedsit there are people living who are hiding from the Germans and in the back of the house 10 German soldiers are living ( Note Peter: It was very common in those days that soldiers were stationed at local farms). I am practically raised by Germans those first years, they liked a little baby. They always gave me food and my brothers were watching with hungry eyes as they gave me something to eat. What happened on that day Cees knows from his sister “when the plane with burning engines came everybody thought it would crash on our house. They ran towards the cot and dragged me out, the plane rushed over the roof lost its engine and crashed after 100 meters. The Wehrmacht soldiers left the house and rushed towards the plane. Directly after that German cars came speeding by towards the crashed plane. “Rien Sterk, our neighbour ran towards the plane but was halfway stopped. The Germans accused him for knowing where the pilot was hiding. They interrogated him at the back of the house pointed a gun towards his head and kicked his teeth out. But Rien knew nothing. The pilot who was standing on the wing just before the plane crashed jumped off just in time and landed in an apple orchard. He was directly taken away by my father and another person of whom I have forgotten the name. Father brought him to a field of rye and told him to hide there. These decisions were taken instantly and there was no time to think about the consequences of helping allied airmen. If the Germans would know you would be shot. For the night they arranged that he could be at the top of the haystack owned by the Versluijs family. They often had people who were hiding from the Germans. Perhaps the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> night he was betrayed and taken to Arkel.

## **Betrayed**

Cees van Andel later asked his neighbour Bob Volkerts, who was during the war the NSB mayor (Note *Peter: NSB is the Dutch Nazi movement and collaborators with the Germans. NSB is still used today as a word indicating somebody who would betray you*), what happened. He told me that he knew that an American pilot was hiding in the fields and that he also knew about the other people in hiding, but despite of his Nazi sympathies he deemed it not right that the Germans would discover the people who were hiding whilst looking for the pilot. He ordered the pilot to put on his uniform and would report to the Germans as a POW. The pilot Russell agreed with that and came out. My friend Gijs van Houwelingen the florist received from the pilot his belt with the name “Russell” on it. He was so proud that for years he wore it to school. The belt is now owned by collector Henk Sterk who lives in the village of Vuren.

Meanwhile the area around the wreck was cordoned off and in order to reach the plane the Germans made a bridge across the ditch. The first thing they did was to remove the ammunition as they were worried this would be taken by the resistance. My brother Joost was forced to carry the ammunition by cart, he made numerous trips. Later de “Mof” disassembled the wreck. It was stuck 1,5 meters in the mud nose first. Via de cockpit a lot of things were removed. For years one of the petrol tanks was just lying in our yard and later it was used for the sewage system. One of the people in hiding Gerrit Mourik married a girl named Dina, her wedding dress was made out of one of the parachutes used by the crewmembers. My father and mother never spoke of this incident.

## Report

What happened next with the crew is described by the radio operator Robert Clark. The plane was named "Daisy June" after the wife of the pilot Russell. He is looking forward to a visit to Gorinchem and Arkel and the visit is planned for May 5<sup>th</sup> 2001. A visit in which this time he is not brought to the Germans by Dutch police officers but a visit in which he will be brought in as a liberator.

A group of young Americans is stationed at Hemel Hempstead just north of London. The group is a replacement for the shot down B-17 planes also known as Flying Fortress. On the morning of June 22<sup>nd</sup> the alarm is sounded and together with other bombers from bases all over England they attack the industrial heart of Germany, the Ruhr area. The target is the synthetic rubber plant at Huls. Just after the crew of the Daisy June have released their bombs, as one of the last, they set course for England. At that moment the navigator screams "I've got him" through the intercom after which parts of a Focke Wulf nearly hit us" It was a gruesome and yet great feeling how the engine and the canopy of this enemy explodes due to the .50 bullets coming out of the nose of our plane. But then we are hit by FLAK.

## Wulf Fighters

This happened probably already over Holland. A lot of damage to the engine and the wings and we start to lose contact with the formation. However we are being covered by another B17 and for a while we cover each other whilst being easy targets for the Messerschmitts and Focke-Wulfs. Then all of a sudden the other B-17 is gone without a sound or a trace (*Note Peter: could be the Wageningen or Geldermalsen B-17...I will try and find out more*) Dozens of enemy planes keep on attacking our lonely plane. Their 20mm cannons lit up. Strangely enough you didn't hear the bullets; only when they struck close by you would hear a ripping sound. More and more planes move in as if they want to see what will happen to us. This goes on for about 30 minutes. Whilst the engine is on fire we still fire at the German planes. Specially the engineer just keeps on firing and used his Thompson machine gun to fire at the Messerschmitts and Focke-Wulfs. He even threw it at them from an open hatch when they were really close. Another gunner is very fanatic and keeps on firing even after his finger is shot off. He has to stop when a bullet hits his thigh. Then the pilot indicates that they need to bail out. The wounded gunner is helped with getting his parachute on. Doctor van Krevelen was called by the Germans to help the gunner later.

## Jumped

Clark continues: "I jumped last together with the engineer, he was thinking about landing the plane just as they did with previous crashed. The pilot and co-pilot flew as long as possible so not to hit any civilian houses. When I jumped it became very silent, but then I saw the ground approaching fast. I quickly pulled the cord and when I landed my chin hit my knees" This was in a field near the Haarweg. Clark then had a blackout. "When I opened my eyes I was looking at a bayonet whilst somebody shouted something with sounded like "Das Dritte Reich". When I stood up I couldn't walk, I had sprained my foot. The soldier grabbed my parachute and pushed me towards the end of the field.

"I looked up and saw a Messerschmitt circling around and which probably led the Germans to the location where I and the rest landed. The plane flew very low and I saw the pilot waving after which one of the Germans acknowledged that and waved back" (*Note Peter..Herr Wrobbel?*). I was then placed on a bike which the soldier took from one of the locals and the owner then had to push me all the way to the sugar factory. In a small room we were searched

by German officers. As we couldn't understand each other they became very careful when they saw my oxygen bottle. The green bottle was handed down and they sniffed it carefully thinking it might be poisonous gas.

## **Pistols**

“After a lot of shouting and screaming we were placed in separate cells where we slept on hard wooden benches ( Note Peter: This is in the sugar factory which is still there but which is now a lactic acid plant and where I used to fish and swim when I was young). Then we were woken up by the arrival of armed Luftwaffe soldiers who took us to another location. We were then led outside where a large cheering group of Dutchmen were gathered. Despite their numbers they moved back when more armed Germans arrived. They aimed their guns to the heads of the people and many had to show their Ausweiss. Because the cheering didn't stop the German soldiers arrested some people .We were then moved to a waiting truck”  
Henk Sommer (Note *Peter: I spoke to Henk 2 weeks ago*) and H. Jansen were arrested. The crew of the Daisy June was taken to a nearby airbase ( *Gilze-Rijen, still used as a Dutch airbase*). By train they were then taken to Germany where they were held in Dulag Luft. Robert Clark ultimately ends up in Austria (STALAG XVIII) where he has a miserable time together with soldiers from all over Europe. Clark's health rapidly deteriorates and starts to have long problems. Due to an exchange of prisoners he then ends up in Switzerland where he is taken ill into a hospital. Shortly after that the Nazi's surrender. From the south of France he returns with a Swedish ship to the US. Later the crew of the Daisy June have a final reunion. They pick up their lives again in America.

Gorinchem, end of April 2001. The wife of Robert Clark phones and indicates that the long awaited visit of Robert has to be postponed. He is suffering from cancer and undergoes chemotherapy which weakens him considerably. A great shame as the Historic Society of Arkel was eagerly waiting to welcome this liberator with open arms.