

Good afternoon. I am John Russell, the son of American World War Two B-17 bomber pilot, Hal Russell.

Professor Vollenhoven, Commissioner Smitt, Mr. Mayor and all in attendance today, I am honored to offer a perspective from a family member of one of these 36 brave WWII airmen – Hal Russell was my father and I am proud of that.

Before I offer that perspective, please allow us to again recognize the efforts of historical societies that conducted research on this era, and the museums that collected and protected artifacts from the aircraft and aircrews we are recognizing today. A project such as this needs focus to achieve its goals and the Foundation has provided that focus. Its web page has served as a great source for families to access information concerning these airmen. And when we all look back on the catalyst for this undertaking and the glue that has brought and kept the families of these brave airmen together – Peter den Tek provided the energy and enthusiasm that got many of us engaged...and kept us engaged. Thank you Peter!

I was born in 1946, not a long time after Hal Russell was released from a German prisoner of war camp – making me a leading edge member of the ‘Baby Boomer Generation.’ For me to have been born after the war makes the implicit statement that my father – Hal – is one of the 22 fortunate aircrew members who survived his encounter in the skies over the Nazi-occupied Giessenlanden region. Sadly, 14 of these allied airmen did not survive – they paid the ultimate sacrifice in service to something greater than themselves.

Like those airmen who survived, these 14 men made that sacrifice in defense of people they had never met; flying with young men they had only recently met; and drawn to the cause of freedom by a Nazi enemy they were all destined to meet. And I think it’s safe to say that when these 36 airmen – 36 men in six different aircraft – when these 36 men took off on their last missions during the nine-month period beginning in June 1943, they did not think we would be here in Giessenburg today talking about them; commemorating them; memorializing them. Not much more than a year ago – I would not have anticipated our presence today. And perhaps that’s what makes this ceremony so special to us – the family members of these brave airmen.

I don’t think the Russell Family would be unique if it said our father (and grandfather) did not talk much – if at all – about his experience in WWII. It’s perhaps a characteristic of that generation – and their experience while preparing to go to war and during the conduct of their missions – that they spoke little of what they had ‘done in the War.’ Perhaps they felt they were not doing anything special, nor anything much different from that asked of their fellow countrymen and those of our allies. And hence – they might say – theirs are stories not worthy of being told...and were most certainly not to be retold.

I suspect we can all understand and respect that position, for these were young men – some were teenagers – who disrupted their lives to liberate Western Europe from Nazi control and they had basically earned a right to whatever level of privacy or visibility they felt appropriate. But to many of the

remaining family members, the untold story of their bravery and sacrifice left a void in our own lives, a void that this ceremony – as well as the journey that has been undertaken to make this ceremony a reality – a void that this event is helping to fill.

When we read a letter written in the spring of 1943 – one of the last letters we have that was written by AAF SSgt Robert Martin – he is more interested in inquiring about things back home than describing his situation as a B-17 gunner. This note – to his former football coach and sending encouragement for the upcoming season – gives us some insight into the abruptness with which war dealt with the lives of these men. Shortly after sending this note – in July 1943 – he was killed in action returning from a bombing mission into Nazi Germany.

For the families to learn the story of RAF Pilot Officer Archibald Wallace and how he evaded capture for nearly a week after his Halifax bomber was brought down in June 1943 is to appreciate the dangers faced by these airmen. When we see the pictures of Wallace in his flight uniform, we are introduced to a young man – proud to serve in the Royal Air Force and proud to make a statement for freedom. We gain additional insight when we learn that – after the War – Wallace came back to the Netherlands to personally thank the family who assisted him as he evaded capture for an additional week of freedom. I'll want to circle back on that thought in just a moment.

After USAAF Lieutenant Albert Lichters' P-51 was brought down in February 1944 and he parachuted into the skies near our present position, he was quickly captured by the Nazi occupiers stationed nearby. After his subsequent release from a Nazi POW camp more than a year later, Lichters vowed never to return again – he was done with that piece of his life. But we learn something else about the families of these airmen when we consider this: Albert Lichters was ready to close the book on this phase of his life... but his family was not. And in June 2007 two of his children traveled to the site of the crash of Albert Lichters' aircraft. There – along with three of Lichters' grandchildren – they were witness to the digging recovery of the remains of the P-51 flown by Lieutenant Albert Lichters on his last mission.

Only later in my life did I learn of the sequence of events surrounding the shoot down of my father's B-17 in June 1943 – a shoot down that occurred as his crew returned from a mission to Huls, Germany. And as well, only later did we learn of some of the details surrounding the aftermath of the parachuting of his crew into this Nazi-occupied area. Some of his crew had been wounded as had my father. All of them were successful in bailing out of their stricken B-17. And all of them were subsequently captured by Nazis located in the area and spent the remainder of the War as POWs – until repatriated nearly two years later.

Now I tell this story, not because I want to feature my father – he would be extremely disappointed if he thought I were trying to highlight him. After all – he likely did not believe he was doing anything special; nor was he doing anything much different from that asked of his fellow countrymen. But there's an element that must be told...and retold. And I alluded to that in my earlier remarks about RAF Pilot Officer Archibald Wallace.

The loss of one's aircraft did not signal the end of the story for these airmen. For those who survived escape from their aircraft and a successful parachute landing, their war was not ended...it had only changed its form. They were on the ground – somewhat disoriented by the most recent events surrounding their shoot down – in an area heavily occupied by Nazi troops. It was a sudden and unimaginable disruption to their lives. But that's where the story gets especially meaningful for many of us family members.

I'd earlier mentioned the one-week evasion of Pilot Officer Archibald Wallace. We learn that – once on the ground after his June 1943 shoot down – he was assisted by the van de Broeck Family who fed and clothed him, and entered him into a network to return Wallace to the UK. The effort was thwarted by the extensive Nazi presence in the area and Pilot Officer Wallace was captured a week into his evasion. But the courageous actions of the van de Broeck Family – at great risk of retribution from the occupying Nazis – those courageous actions were real...they were recognized...and were greatly appreciated by Wallace. Evidence his return following the War to personally thank the van de Broeck Family for their courage and their sacrifice.

Through the historical research efforts of those involved in commemorating these 36 allied airmen, I also learned of the assistance provided my father immediately following his shoot down. Despite the threat posed by the Nazi occupiers, he was fed and protected by brave Dutch citizens in the area. Because of those same historical research efforts, our family has come to understand that the father of Cees van Andel helped our father hide from the searching Nazi soldiers. And while Lieutenant Russell was ultimately captured and served out the rest of the War as a POW, the selfless act by these Dutch citizens – people he had never met – stepped up to assist him in this most critical time in his life. I am especially pleased that Cees van Andel is here today – this ceremony is special to our family because of his presence and what we have learned about the assistance provided to our father and grandfather by HIS family.

It can't be left there however. Time and again, the research by war historians has uncovered instances of bravery and sensitivity by Dutch citizens in dealing with the remains of those who did not survive the attack and shoot down of their aircraft – the remains of fallen warriors who made that ultimate sacrifice. As a family member of an airman who lived through his encounter with Nazi flak and fighters, I am heartened to know that those who did not survive were accorded the utmost respect by the Dutch citizens who first tried to reach them. And that help was offered in the face of the Nazis who increasingly applied reprisals to those assisting fallen allied airmen and to others opposed to the domination plans of these occupiers.

I cannot claim to fully understand the grief another undergoes with the combat loss of a loved one. But to know that an airman died in service to something all freedom-loving people long for...and to learn that all attempts were made to treat their remains with as much reverence as possible, would hopefully offer some level of comfort. The work of the Foundation and of those who have contributed research to its purpose have afforded that level of comfort.

As I think about what we are witnessing today, it is difficult to know just what these 36 airmen would make of all this – of this gathering that has come together to recognize them and to thank them. I suspect many would say – “Enough already” and bid us to wrap it all up. But I think it’s safe to say – on behalf of the families – to all who are here today; to the historians who have helped to fill our families’ voids of understanding; to the Foundation and its focus on recognizing these 36 airmen...and to the energy and diligence of Peter den Tek – we offer our collective THANK YOU!

I have one final thought...You know, I think there are 36 airmen looking down on today’s event – some of them would certainly say ‘Enough already’ and that we should wrap it up. But I think all would join a chorus of 36 members and would also provide a most heartfelt, deeply appreciative and resounding – THANK YOU of their own!