

WAVERLY GARDENS

NEWS FROM THE NEIGHBORHOOD

AL SANDERS

Mail time. As usual, we were sorting the day's delivery and chatting when I happened to notice a gentleman looking at a photo. It's fun to share pictures, so even though I did not know him, I asked if he would like to tell me about his. What a story unfolded! What follows is Alfred (Al) Sander's story condensed from an article in the *Space Coast Chapter of the American Ex-Prisoners of War magazine*, a book in French entitled Once Upon a Time There was a Liberator by Willy Felix, and memories from his daughter, Winki.



Al Sanders was born in Kentwood, Louisiana in 1918. He attended Louisiana State University preparing to be a science teacher. In order to pay for his education, he worked for the track team as the team manager. It quickly became apparent that the hours of running barefoot

through the piney woods of Kentwood was training in itself, and Al became a track star in his own right and received a full scholarship to the University. He graduated in June 1942 with his degree in education, married his sweetheart, Millie Allen, and received his pilot's license. Then he enlisted in the U.S. Army Air Corp.

Al received his wings at Blytheville, Arkansas, aspiring to fly the heavy bombers of the Strategic Air Services, especially the B-24 Liberator. After months of intensive training, he was assigned to Davis Monthan Air Base near Tucson, Arizona where his ten-member crew joined him. Eight were

under the age of 21, one slightly older, and Al, the pilot, was 26. Below the cockpit was the painted head of a Bengal Tiger with the caption, "Mike, Spirit of L.S.U.", the university mascot.

On March 5, 1944 the crew headed for Great Britain and more training. After stopping at seven bases along the way, they arrived in Sudbury, England. Al and his crew flew four major raids without serious problems between May 8 and 28, 1944. The fifth raid was to target the synthetic gasoline plant Wintershall at Lutzkendorf, Germany. All synthetic oil refineries were vital for the German effort and were defended by hundreds of AA guns.

The eight-hour round trip was on schedule. When the bomb runs began, the flak became extremely heavy and planes were hammered by exploding shells. The Germans were making a last ditch effort to protect Wintershall. They knew the bombers were coming and were ready for them. The leader plane of the squadron was hit and headed in a dive for the ground. In the confusion and smoke, the deputy leader who took over, never gave the order to release the bombs. The remaining bombs would have to be released on the return trip. However, Sanders and his crew were in definite trouble. His B-24 was hit, and after struggling to keep it flying, the engines began failing one after the other, catching fire in turn and had to be feathered.

Sanders followed orders that stated "when one of the engines has to be shut down, all stores should be jettisoned," and he dropped his bombs into the smoke of the burning refinery. When it became obvious that the plane would not make it back to England, Sanders gave the order to jump as the plane began to lose altitude and burn over Belgium.

WAVERLY GARDENS

NEWS FROM THE NEIGHBORHOOD

AL SANDERS

Those on the ground saw the bomber slowly turn to the right, away from the village and go into a dive. It crashed and burst into flames in a forest.

Strangely enough, there was a man on the ground who was taking pictures as *The Spirit of L.S.U.* slammed into the ground. Al was the last to jump. He broke his ankle upon landing but was quickly picked up by a Melchoir Resteau, a member of the Belgium Resistance, who had two bicycles with him. The men pedaled as fast as they could to a corn field where Al was left to hide.

The Germans were already searching the nearby houses. Three Resistance members eventually rode up in a fish merchant's van and took Al to a safe garage where they provided him with civilian clothes, a belt to hold up the overly large trousers, and high-top shoes to hold his ankle in place.

Meanwhile, back in Louisiana, Millie gave birth to Al's son on May 30, 1944. Following a mix-up in plane identifications, it was thought that Al went down with his plane. Millie received the dreaded telegram informing her that her husband was reported missing in action over Germany on May 28.

Al was driven to an isolated, abandoned farm, and, to his surprise, was introduced to seventeen Russians who had deserted the German Wehrmacht (along with a large variety of weapons). Among the group was a horse doctor who proved to be very good with broken ankles. Two days later another American airman arrived named Henry Walcott. Feeding and hiding nineteen men was not an easy task so they were split up. Al, Henry, and three of the Russians,

armed to the teeth, were taken in an old truck at night to a farm in Wisbecq. Unfortunately, the owner of the abandoned farm they had just left was arrested and sent to prison where he soon died.

After fourteen days there, things got interesting when Germans encircled the farm and blocked all the roads. The five men squeezed into a narrow hiding place under the wooden floor of an attic. The Germans searched the farm and the attic but failed to move a trunk, which had been shifted onto the hatch that accessed the hiding place. Under the floor, the men could see the German boots above them. The



two Americans were kept busy preventing the Russians from bursting out to attack the Germans. Finding nothing, the Germans then focused their

attention on two bicycles in the yard. One belonged to a visitor but the other one was registered in another province and actually belonged to a resistance fighter. The farmer was taken away, but released later for lack of sufficient evidence.

The two airmen were hidden next by an owner of a steel mill and lived briefly in a mansion, eating their fill and drinking Heidsieck Champagne. But, on they moved to Chateau Janssens-De Stordeurs and then again to Chateau Rowart. Mr. and Mrs. Rowart were well-seasoned, having hidden many Jews and airmen. It was there that Sanders met Janet, a young Jewish girl, who would eventually move to the

WAVERLY GARDENS NEWS FROM THE NEIGHBORHOOD

AL SANDERS

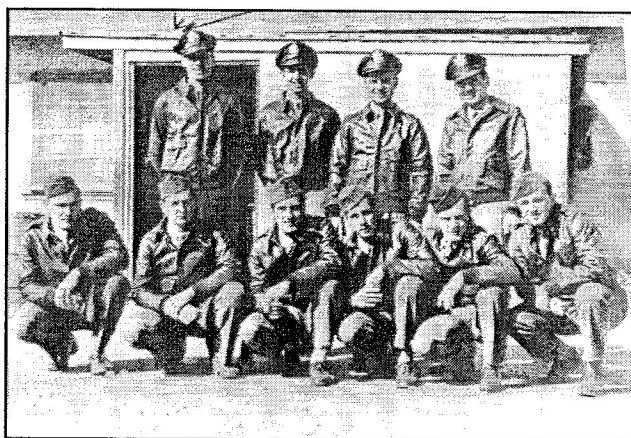
United States after the war. Al also became pals with the Rowart's little puppy.

The next move was in a hay wagon, built with a false bottom, to a village a few miles away. They were stopped by a German sentry who stuck his bayonet several times into the hay, but the airmen remained safely hidden.

In early August of 1944 an employee of the Swiss Embassy in Brussels informed Melchior Resteau that the American airmen could get back to Great Britain through Switzerland. Melchoir Resteau met "Anita" in a cemetery and the pass phrase was given: "There are not many rabbits this season." A driver and "Anita" picked up Al and Hank and were to take them to safety, but instead took them to German Headquarters. Upon arriving, air raid sirens began to blare. When "Anita" and the soldiers ran for cover, the driver, Al, and Hank took advantage and drove off in the car to Brussels.

There, they were met by a man without his left thumb. He was to help with the last leg of the move. On August 9, when they went to get passports and pictures, instead of going to the photographer, they were taken to the Palace of Justice. Al and Hank

were arrested and transferred to Saint Gilles prison where they stayed until August 28. The prisoners had very little food or water and interrogation occurred nearly every day. The Germans wanted to trace Al's movements and find anyone who had helped him. His response was always, "My name is Alfred Sanders. Number 0810227. Second Lieutenant U.S. Air Force. I have nothing else to say." The prisoners were completely isolated and had no idea what was happening outside the prison walls. Freedom had been so close.



B-24 Crew Al, top left

Myrna Camp & Winkie Ruiz
Conclusion will appear in the February issue.

Happy New Year!

Manigong Bagong Taon;	<i>Filipino</i>
Godt Nytt År	<i>Norwegian</i>
Ein Glückliches Neues Jahr	<i>German</i>
Gott Nytt År	<i>Swedish</i>
Gelukkig Nieuwjaar;	<i>Dutch</i>
Nav Varsh Ki Subhkamna	<i>Hindi</i>

Shana Tova	<i>Hebrew</i>
Buon Anno	<i>Italian</i>
Hauoli Makahiki hou	<i>Hawaiian</i>
Kul 'am wa antum bikhair	<i>Arabic</i>
Stastny Novy Rok	<i>Czech</i>
Boldog uj evet	<i>Hungarian</i>

WAVERLY GARDENS

NEWS FROM THE NEIGHBORHOOD

AL SANDERS, WWII STORY, PART II

This is the continuation from the January issue of Alfred (Al) Sander's exciting story condensed from an article in the *Space Coast Chapter of the American Ex-Prisoners of War magazine*, a book in French entitled Once Upon a Time There was a Liberator by Willy Felix, and memories from his daughter, Winki.



Al, photo taken at Wisbecq farm

The first part of Al's story ended with freedom being so close, yet unattained. He had escaped captivity, more than once, by the Germans in Belgium. Just as he was about to make the last leg of the journey into Switzerland and freedom, Al was betrayed back into

German hands, landing in Saint Gilles prison where he stayed until August 28, 1944.

On that August morning, the prisoners were taken by truck to the train station in Brussels. They were packed into train cars, some standing so that others might sit. They remained at the station until dark on August 31. The train was constantly delayed because the resistance fighters blew up the railroad ties every night, and the train engineer fell off the train injuring himself. He was unable to drive the train, so a replacement had to be found. Delay, delay. Everyone knew where the Germans wanted to take the train and what would happen to its occupants. The prisoners were determined that it

would not leave the station. The train, however, eventually did pull out, but was derailed again a few miles north of Brussels. In the confusion, the German guards all got out on one side of the train leaving their packs in their train car. Sanders slipped into that car and stole one of the packs hoping to find some food, but there was none. How were the guards going to react when they realized a pack was missing? Al decided that the best thing for the other prisoners was for him to jump the train taking the pack with him. Walcott was going to go also, but changed his mind at the last moment.

After help with the lock, Al hit the ground running. It was probably the fastest quarter mile in the history of man for this track star from L.S.U.! Bullets were flying, but in the dark they missed their mark. Al found himself in a sports park and could hear the dogs behind him. He ran on and reached a street and a canal.



Mr. and Mrs. Wijs

Not knowing which way to go from there, he ran in the opposite direction from the Germans with their lights and dogs. He saw a barge on the river and took his chances. He jumped onto the deck and rapped on the door to the cabin. Inside, Mr. and Mrs. Wijs thinking it was the Germans or a burglar were terrified. But when they heard Al speaking English, they opened the door. Al ingeniously whispered, "President Roosevelt," and Mr. Wijs responded with "Queen Wihelmina," the name of the reigning monarch of the Netherlands,

WAVERLY GARDENS

NEWS FROM THE NEIGHBORHOOD

AL SANDERS, WWII STORY, PART II

and hurried Sanders below deck. The guards flashed their lights on the boat but passed by.

Everyone could breathe again. Al hid with the Wijs's until the Canadians arrived and took him with them. There was still fighting to the north, and Sanders didn't want to be captured again in a combat zone, so he was issued a new identification card and set out for France alone. He was helped by the Comte Line, part of the underground that helped allied airmen to escape throughout the war. He reached Amiens, France, where the last of the American C-



46 transports waited for him. After being assured that he was indeed the man they were waiting for, Al was hauled up into the plane, as it was ready to take off and the steps had already been stowed. A few hours later, he arrived safely in England.

On September 7, 1944, a little more than three months later, Millie

received a phone call from Western Union. The operator said it was from Alfred Sanders. Millie said, "That isn't funny!" and hung up the phone. The operator called back and repeated that she had a message from Alfred Sanders. Long story short, the telegram read: "Dearest. I am safe and well. Will be home soon. Letter following. Alfred Sanders." He still didn't know he had a son.

Al stayed in the military after the war, retiring after 20 years. During his military service he continued flying different types of aircrafts and was transferred

from base to base. He met Harry Walcott again and eventually was able to find and reunite with all of his crew. He requested and was transferred to Ramstein, Germany for three years in 1955.

With his family in tow, he contacted most of the people mentioned in this article, and rich and rewarding friendships followed. On one occasion, with his wife, son, and daughter standing behind him, Al knocked on the door of a former Resistance friend who had hidden him. The owner came to the door, looked

carefully at Al and asked him to remove his hat. Tears streamed down the man's face and then he began to laugh, shouting, "Alfred has returned!"

"Alfred has returned!" Since many in the town had known Al, there was quite a commotion that day with people running down the street to see Al and his family.

And the little dog owned by the Rowarts? He was now more than twelve years old but still went crazy when Al walked through the gate to the house, jumping, licking, and barking as little dogs will do when they meet an old friend. What happened to the train that went nowhere? The History channel made a documentary entitled "The Nazi Ghost Train" that



Mr. and Mrs. Rowart had hidden many Jews and airmen. It was there that Sanders met Janet, a young Jewish girl who would eventually move to the United States after the war.

WAVERLY GARDENS NEWS FROM THE NEIGHBORHOOD

AL SANDERS, WWII STORY, PART II

featured Al and several other men who were on it. Many years later, Al's daughter, Winki, and her husband, Len, visited Holland on their way to New Zealand and spent time with some of the original resistance fighters, their families, and grandchildren. A highlight of that trip for Winki and Len was boating from Rotterdam, Holland to Cologne, Germany up the river on a barge. It was not the same barge and it was twenty-five years later, but close enough. The trip was arranged by the son of the elder Mr. and Mrs. Wijs. Christmas cards are still exchanged with the children and grandchildren. Count and Countess Melchoir Resteau came to Florida to visit Al and Millie and the Dutch son, wife, and children came to see them and Disney World.

After Al retired from the military in 1962 he went to Florida State University to get his Master's degree in Vocational Education. He taught electronics at Brevard Junior College in Rockledge, Florida for seventeen years, receiving the Professor Emeritus award. He also received the first Lifetime Achievement Award from Florida State University in addition to the LSU Hall of Honor award.

Following his retirement from teaching, he and Millie took up golf and traveled the world, returning to Belgium several times. Al and Millie moved from Florida to live at Waverly Gardens in October, 2012, to be near their daughter. Al lost his beloved Millie in February, 2013 after seventy-one years of marriage and a lifetime of adventure and memories.

And what about that picture Al showed me at the beginning of this article? It was of the Wisbecq farm with three Russians, the family and the children ...

children who would not have been in the picture were it not for a friendship forged between complete strangers during World War II.

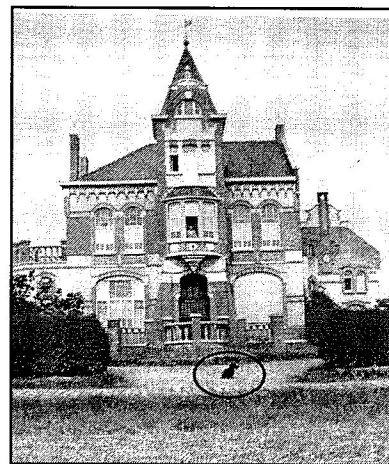
*Myrna Camp, Terrace Resident
Winkie Ruiz, daughter of Al*



Wisbecq Farm



Little Rowart Dog



*Rowart Chateau
(Notice little dog in driveway)*



Al Sanders, currently residing at Waverly Gardens. We are happy that he made it this far!