

Introduction

Between 1940 and 1945, during the German occupation, people in The Netherlands had almost no contact with the free world. Transportation of merchandise was strictly regulated or prohibited, people were unable to travel freely, and even listening to Allied radio stations was strictly forbidden. Later radios were even confiscated so that listening to Allied broadcasts became impossible unless one had clandestine equipment. In the occupied countries of Europe, the way in which an individual country attempted to resist the authority of the German Third Reich and its henchmen often reflected the specific historical character of the nation itself. After the occupation of Western Europe, national boundaries did not disappear. On the contrary, borders between countries, for example between The Netherlands and Belgium, became much more of a reality than before the invasion. Each nation, now cut off and isolated as a closed entity, fell back upon its own previous national experiences. Thus specific conditions arose during the German occupation which accommodated and incited people to resist the enemy. Against this background, Dutch 'pilot help', i.e., help given to airmen downed in action, deserves a special niche in the history of World War II. 'Pilot help' regularly brought Dutch resistance organizations which were involved in aiding Allied airmen into contact with similar organizations in Belgium and France. As far as one can speak of an international underground movement, existing parallel to other national resistance movements, one can find manifestations of such international cooperation within the escape routes that came into being thanks to 'pilot helpers' in The Netherlands, Belgium and France. However, within the network of organized resistance, 'pilot help' never held a prominent position, and the number of individuals specifically helping downed airmen was rather small. It was not until 1969 that 'The Escape', the Dutch Association for Pilot Helpers in World War II, was established. In the statutes of 'The Escape' Association, 'pilot helper' has been defined as follows:

"The term 'pilot helper' refers to a private citizen who, during World War II, risking clear and certain danger for one's own life or freedom, gave assistance in a manner prohibited by the enemy to a member of the Allied Air Force either in occupied The Netherlands or, as a Dutch citizen, elsewhere in enemy-occupied territory."

By this definition of 'private citizen', an individual could qualify as 'pilot helper' without being affiliated with an organization. This definition is also in agreement with the criteria used after the war by both British and American authorities when presenting decorations for bravery, i.e., not only for giving assistance to downed airmen but also for supporting airborne crewmen stranded on Dutch soil after the failed attack on Arnhem in September 1944. Based on this definition, 6,000 to 7,000 individuals were counted as having been involved in helping downed airmen.¹ The

above-mentioned definition of 'pilot helper' will be used throughout this book, although it differs from that employed by many other authors such as Dr. L. de Jong who is the most prominent Dutch historian on the occupation of The Netherlands in World War II. On the one hand, De Jong extends his definition to include those individuals who also aided escaped Allied prisoners of war (POW)². On the other hand, he limits his definition by only considering individuals who were active members of some organized resistance as truly being 'pilot helpers'. Based on these qualifications, De Jong limits the number to slightly more than 1,000 'pilot helpers' active up until September 1944.³

During the German occupation, the term 'pilot helper' was generally used in The Netherlands, although the word 'pilot' also included other crew members such as the navigator, flight engineer, radio operator, bombardier, and gunner. In this book, the terms 'pilot', 'airman', 'flyer', 'crewman', etc., will be used alternately when referring to any individual holding such a position.

Never before has a complete book been devoted specifically to the topic of 'pilot help' in The Netherlands. One can find chapters regarding this specific form of resistance in reference books on World War II or read about the activities of an individual group of 'pilot helpers' or find mention of the help offered by willing Dutch men and women when reading about the history of air battles that took place above The Netherlands. In this review about 'pilot help' in The Netherlands, emphasis will be placed on the specific characteristics of this form of resistance that were largely determined by the geography of the country and by the role that The Netherlands played in Allied strategy. Not only will the actual assistance offered by the Dutch be discussed but also the problems encountered by Allied crewmen who landed on Dutch soil alive, the attitude of the populace towards downed airmen during the occupation, as well as the punitive measures taken by the German authorities against resistance workers. Within this framework, the role of each individual 'pilot-help' organization, as well as those people who participated, will be presented. It was each individual involved who formed another stepping stone to freedom, each person desperately hoping that his or her own effort would more rapidly make freedom a reality.

It is not the intention of this book to present the names of thousands of 'pilot helpers' nor does this book attempt to supply the full identities of the crewmen who were helped or to give data regarding their units, airplanes, missions and crash dates. Their stories would not make the information given in the following pages more transparent. What is more important is to offer a clearer understanding of the nature, as well as of the complicated organizational structure, of the help given by the resistance, of the problems as well as potential opportunities that arose during the struggle and, finally, of man's ability as well as his inability to cope with the difficult situations occurring during the German occupation. As far as possible, an attempt has been made to illustrate with striking examples and citations the relevant information in the hope that one will find common ground in and obtain a deeper empathy towards the stories told.