DUTCH RESEARCHER AIRWAR WWII INITIATES EXCEPTIONAL MEETING.

 Story by Co de Swart

Long cherished wishes on both sides of the Atlantic were fulfilled during the weekend of August 17, 2018.

That week, in the U.S., nine Americans, all family of WWII USAAF crew/escapees, boarded a plane for Mol, Belgium in Europe.

In Berlin, Germany, the daughter of a German WWII fighter pilot took a train to Holland and from there drove to Mol, Belgium with Dutch researcher Co de Swart and his wife Louise.

From Belgium and France, family members of Belgian WWII Resistance/Underground men and women also traveled to Mol, Belgium.

All stayed for the weekend in the centuries-old Abby of Postel near Mol, a perfect ambiance for this meeting.

In the months before, much information was exchanged with Belgium and Holland to prepare a wonderful weekend program. In the U.S. John White, Jr., son of evader John White, Sr., got the group of nine Americans together.

Organized and invited by Mr. Wim Govers and his Mol Historic Society VVG and supported by the Mol community, they all met for the first time since their parents met exactly 75 years before. Those men and women of the Mol Resistance had met under totally different circumstances after the crash of the B-17 42-30274, nicknamed ‘Our Bay-Bee,’ in Mol Dessel. All crew were able to bail out. Three of the crew evaded capture by the Germans, thanks to the help of the fathers of the Belgians present this weekend. The remaining seven crew members endured a nasty 21-month stay in POW camps in Germany and Austria but survived the war.

In the crash area bottom turret gunner crew member John White, Sr. was helped to safety by Emile Joris, Marcel Coppin, and Robert Bousmanne. Bombardier Sarnow and co-pilot Minnich were rescued and hidden by August Fruythof. With death a risk, all three later made it to safe houses, most of them part of the Comet Escape Line, on their way through Belgium and France and over the Pyrenees to British Gibraltar in Spain from where they were flown back to base in England in late 1943.

Long-lasting research by Co de Swart in the early 2000’s resulted in first bringing together family of this B-17 crew in Colorado Springs during the AFEES 2010 Annual reunion. There, as a surprise, they also met the former vice president of AFEES, Yvonne Brusselmans-Daley, daughter of the honorable Ann Brusselmans. During WWII, Ann was an important member of the WWII Comet Escape Line. She hosted Minnich and Sarnow for many days in her Brussels’ safe house on their way to freedom.

That meeting in Colorado Springs was one “never to forget”. From that meeting, the wish was born to meet again, but now in Belgium.

Mr. Wim Govers and Co de Swart, who earlier had researched the crash in Belgium and found and visited most of the relevant Resistance descendants, contacted them again and invited them for what would be the event of a lifetime for everyone present.

And there it was at last. Newspapers and TV informed the Belgian people of this exceptional event on

August 17, 2017 and a Belgian national paper, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, on Aug.20, 2018 interviewed the attendees and published an article in Flemish, translated for us in English by Belgian Edouard Reniere, which told about the weekend program.

A lot of emotional moments with tears were shared while on the tour through Mol. All family members rode together in old WWII US Army trucks and Jeeps of the “Keep ‘em Rolling” Society. They visited the main hiding places and shared stories with the Belgian children.

Another stop—near the former crash site--was at the monument which had been erected to honor and remember the crew. Flowers and wreaths were laid and Brigitte d’Oultremont, President of the Comet Kinship Association, spoke. The photos added to this article show these moments.

Later in the afternoon, Secretary for VVG Wim Govers told the ‘Our-Bay-Bee’ story to invited VVG members and family of the the former Mol Resistance. He told them how this weekend became reality, John White, Jr. told the story of how AFEES came to life, and Dutchman Co de Swart told about his research and how the victims of war were remembered. How lucky this crew was to survive!

And indeed, victims of war who were to be mourned were there too. All the attendees also visited a cemetery where some of the Mol Resistance men found their last resting place. Of the Turnhout-Mol Resistance Group, through betrayal, thirty members were arrested by the Nazis in early 1944. Only four survived the concentration camps and returned to Belgium. At the closure of this, indeed, special, wonderful weekend they were remembered and honored in moments of silence. We all assembled there on August 17, 2018 and, thanking Wim Govers and his VVG, realised too who payed the highest price. “ Freedom isn’t Free, Somebody Paid.”

 

Neerbeek, The Netherlands, Fall 2018