Chapter 4

Travel by Train

During my first days in the Netherlands, I gave up my escape kit but retained the two benzedrine pills in my case in case they might be needed at some future time. The kits, though compact and equipped for use, were easily identified if I was stopped and searched. Furthermore, the money in the kit was of more use to the people helping me than it was to me.

I wore my dog tags at all times and figured out a way to keep my G.I. watch. When traveling I tied the watch to the draw-strings on my boxer shorts so I would not make the mistake of letting it be seen on my wrist.

In my escape kit were two passport type pictures of me in civilian clothes. The organization of helpers used one of these to make identification papers which all people needed to carry. With identification papers, proper attire, and the correct timing, I was prepared to move on after 17 days at Miss Glimmerveen's. My mind churned with the excitement of travel, and I was anxious to get started on the long trip home.

My guide was a young slender man who wore glasses and arrived on schedule. He had me follow him at a safe distance as we walked along the canal toward the train station for my first train ride. Even though I felt mentally and physically prepared for the trip, I almost made a dreadful mistake. In England, in recognition and respect, you saluted and were saluted by people wearing many different uniforms. Saluting therefore, became an instinctive reaction. This day, while walking to the station, we met some German soldiers. Even though I was in

civilian clothes and acting the part of a Dutchman, I caught myself starting to salute those uniforms. From that instant on I knew the value of being in conscious control of my behavior at all times. A subconscious reaction could give away your true identity.

My guide and I arrived at the train station without further incident. The tickets had been purchased in advance, and the train was on schedule. We were soon headed for Venlo, Holland. We sat together, but we did not talk. If anything went wrong I would be on my own and not with him, because if captured I would probably become a prisoner of war. I had landed in uniform behind enemy lines and changing into civilian clothes did not make me a spy. On the other hand, if my guide should be caught helping me, he would become a statistic. The risk was always there, but I wanted very much not to be responsible for the death of a friend if it could be avoided.

The trip, even though it was one of some distance and several short stops, offered very little in the way of scenery. The shades were drawn well before darkness, but anyway I didn't want to appear like a rubber necking tourist. It seemed safest to pretend to be napping as we rode.

It was well after dark when we arrived at Venlo, and for the first time I became aware of a major difference between riding trains in the United States and Europe. Mentally I had prepared myself to expect someone to check for identity papers, and as a result, I was fully prepared for that we when got off the train and started to exit the station. Seeing an armed German guard at the exit was not surprise to me. After all, we were within two miles of the German border. Everyone was moving quickly past the guard and with my identity card in hand I was prepared to do the same. About 12 feet from the guard, in the dim light, I saw that people were turning in their train tickets. They were not being asked for identity cards. In the United States, tickets are collected upon entrance to the train or soon

thereafter, but in Europe, the ticket was normally collected at your destination. Not aware of this difference, the matter of my ticket and in which pocket I had put it was something that I had let slip my mind. To delay now while I checked would be certain to call attention to myself, so I decided it was time for a quicker and more positive action. I walked boldly past the guard, flashed my identity card like it was a pass and proceeded quickly on and never looked back or wavered in my manner. Apparently in the mind of the German guard, one more official had just passed his station. In reality, this American on his first train ride in Europe had just learned one of the key differences in traveling by train in Europe as in contrast to the United States.

As we walked in darkness from the station, I felt I had been lucky on a very close call. We walked a few blocks and entered a house where I spent the night. Before retiring, I gave my guide the train ticket and he smiled as we both heaved a sigh of relief. This was as far as he took me. Our trip had been a success, but a few weeks later my guide, Tuibro Suis, was arrested and killed. I do not know the details or the circumstances, but it happened to many fine young Dutch men like Suis. It was often done without a trial or any real proof of guilt.

The man who occupied this house in Venlo was I believe a Mr. Jon Hendrikse, a school teacher whose code name was "Ambrosius." During the night, he awakened me from a sound sleep and introduced me to an attractive young girl about 20 years of age who spoke excellent English. Her name was Joke, which is Dutch and pronounced "Yoe-kuh." She was to be my next guide, but at this moment they were to have me answer some questions to help determine for certain that I was an American pilot as I had said. In some way and somewhere there were methods of making intelligence checks. This was probably a good time and place as I would only be

there for one night and I was now being moved down the line through their organization's network. They had only a few hours before I would be exposed to other members of the group. Joke's calm and business-like manner let the interview proceed smoothly, and in a few minutes it was completed. She left for the night with assurance that she would return the next day, and she did. When we tried to locate the Hendrikse house in 1983, we found that the area was a shopping center. The houses had been destroyed during bombing raids on the Venlo rail yards during the war.

It was afternoon and a clear day when Joke and I left the house for our walk to the train station and our trip to Maastricht. In the railroad yard were parked some beautiful steel railroad cars that appeared to be special – and they were. I was told that the German military provided for the sexual needs of their men. It seemed that women who became pregnant while performing their assignment of meeting those needs were well provided for. The object was also to glorify the Fuehrer with healthy babies. These women were referred to by the Dutch as "Grey Mice." On our way to the station we had walked past a large house with a large yard surrounded by an iron fence where the women were given excellent care and trained to be good Nazi mothers. If it was necessary to move these women by train, even in their final days of pregnancy, these special cars were equipped to meet any need, including hospital room deliveries.

An interesting sidelight to that general activity was used for collecting information by the British Intelligence. Some of the German pilots carried cards which showed the place and time of having sex and the verification that health measures had been taken. These were commonly referred to as "Nuci Cards." The span of time between that act and their being shot down over England did on occasion assist in establishing the location of the air base from which their

mission to bomb England had originated. Such a German air base might then become a target for a counter-attack.

The train was on time and our trip from Venlo to Maastricht seemed easy under the guidance of Joke. No doubt she had made the trip many times, and when she was able to get us in a compartment by ourselves, we had an excellent opportunity to discuss the circumstances that had brought us both to this point in Holland. Most of our trip was made within sight of the German border and she was able to point out places of danger. Traveling arm in arm I thought we looked like any other Dutch couple that might have been on the train. It was during this trip that I learned about the difficult tests that these underground couriers had to pass before they were accepted by the organization. The work was very dangerous and Joke knew this, but she moved with confidence and was able to make others feel the same confidence in her ability. She knew well the ways of the Germans and was blessed with great observational talent.

Upon our arrival in Maastricht train station, we were met by two men about my own age. One was tall and thin and the other one was shorter. Years later I would learn that their names were Jacques Vrij and Smit. I said good-bye to Joke and became their responsibility.

Before leaving the station with them, I could not help observing something else that was occurring there. A German troop train traveling in the opposite direction to the train we had been on arrived at the same time. On the platform to meet the troop train was a group of young boys in uniform with their musical instruments. The oldest ones appeared to be in their early teens. As the troop train stopped, these boys came to attention in typical military fashion and began to play music which was designed to lift the spirits of the military personnel. I had just been introduced to a segment of the Hitler Youth! This group of boys, considered too young for combat, had already been

indoctrinated with Hitler's military ways. They would become combatants for the future, but were being used to make some contribution to the war effort at this very young age. When a man like Hitler could brainwash adults, you must realize how effective he could be in shaping the attitudes of the very young. A whole generation was growing up under the influence of Hitler and his regime with their ways of war.

We left the railroad station without incident, walked down a main street to a bridge, and crossed the river Maas into the main section of Maastricht. We passed many stores and arrived at a butcher shop. There I was passed to the care of the butcher, and my two guides departed with assurance that they would return at a later date.

I was with the butcher for approximately one week and that time was not without its interesting events. First, the shop was operated by two brothers, Giel and Jen Ummels. Giel, the one I stayed with, lived over the shop. The living room where I stayed was at the front of the building, allowing me to look down on the street below when the drapes were open.

As in the United States at that time, meat was rationed and ration coupons were required. The butcher shop had to collect coupons at the time of sale and then turn them in to the authorities. My host thought it was quite ironic that I spent one day pasting the used coupons into the books which he said would be mailed to Hitler. For me it provided a good laugh and something to do with my time.

There was a young girl and a boy in the house. Both were well-mannered and nice to have around. I was surprised when I saw them provided with a small amount of beer to drink in much the same manner as we might give a child a Coke. But I came to realize that for them it was a natural drink and not thought of as something served to adults only. Years later I learned that the butchers were uncles of the children. Airmen like myself who passed

through the home were also referred to as uncles to satisfy the children's natural curiosity about their visitors. The girl, Betsy, remembers thinking that she certainly had a lot of uncles.

One evening Jen, the brother who was part owner of the shop but did not live there, returned from a trip and came in with a very interesting story that was encouraging to me. He had been on a train that day and had seen two German pilots carrying their rolled up parachutes. They had been shot down by American planes. Having parachuted out and landed safety, they were returning to their base by train. They felt beaten and expressed discouragement about the superiority of the American Air Force. While it was good news about German fliers being forced to bail out, I couldn't help thinking that they had an easier and faster way back to base than I.

There at the butcher's in Maastrict, another incident occurred that brought out the reality of life in such a place. Maastricht is located in that very narrow part of Holland which is surrounded by Belgium and Germany. Under normal conditions, trade and personal relationships exist without great concern for borders. The war and German occupation changed most of that, but it could not change everything.

One afternoon the butcher told me he was going to have company and that I should go to a bedroom at the back of the house and hide under the bed. This I did when time for the appointment approached. I soon heard the footsteps of a lady ascending the stairway and going into the living room. The visit was not long and I heard those same footsteps descend the stairway. The butcher quickly appeared in the bedroom and had me follow him back into the living room. It was not yet dark, but the blackout curtains had already been drawn. We went to the side of one of the windows where my host had me peek with him around the edge of the curtain as he pointed to the street below.

What Mr. Ummels showed me was enough to remind me forever of the narrow line that existed between the enemy and the reality of life under occupation. Very few cars ever moved on the streets because the petrol was nearly nonexistent except for the military. There in the street below was parked a black German car with a chauffeur at the wheel and a German officer sitting in the back. We watched as the lady, who had just been the visitor in the very room where we stood, walked across the street and climbed in beside the German officer. I'm uncertain about the true relationship that existed with the butcher, the woman visitor, and the German officer, but this I do know: Germany had just provided the transportation that made it possible for the lady to make a social call on the butcher who was hiding an American pilot. It was a situation the butcher took some satisfaction in pointing out to me.

Because of its geographical location, I feel that Maastricht, more so than any place I had passed through, represented a dilemma that many people of Europe faced during World War II. Personal relationships develop around the happenings of day-to-day activities. Although strong national ties and beliefs exist, they are tempered at times by personal contacts that have a tendency to create a blending of ways. National differences and personal feelings can easily find themselves in conflict in the middle of a war, creating some unusual situations and at times even straining family relationships. It is small wonder that some fliers who were unfortunate enough to land in a crowd when forced to bail out found themselves among those who would like to help them, as well as some who would have much preferred to kill them.

The butchers, Giel and Jen Ummels, were arrested by the Germans in May and they died in separate concentration camps, at Buchenwald and Oranienburg, later in 1944.

As I noted earlier, when I was on the run behind enemy lines, I tried not to remember the names of those who helped me or at least only to remember their first names. Yet even their first names, as we knew them, were likely to be "code" or "safe" names. In addition, we were sworn to secrecy about our experiences when we returned. That classification of our information was not released for many years, all adding up to a situation that made contacts across the ocean difficult to impossible. I was extremely well pleased therefore, when I received a letter from Joke. She was also known as "la petite" by the Belgian underground.

On the train from Venlo to Maastricht I had learned a few things about Joke, but it was from fellow travelers in Belgium and France that I learned more about her resistance work. Several of them had been helped by her and some had hidden for an extended period of time in her parents' home. After the war, the following letter received at my parents' home near Topeka, Kansas, was the first news from Joke.

Leist 16 Sept 1945

Dear Clayton,

Yesterday, I read your report you made about your "cook's trip" in Holland, Belgium and France, and it gave me the courage to write you. I am so happy you did return safely, and I hope you found all in good health at home. I did not know anything about you and the last 50 people I brought to the South, because the Gestapo caught me in April (1944) and after I was condemned to death. They sent me in September to Germany. It was more exciting than a thriller film and the prolongation lasted till the 6th of May (1945) when drunken Russians liberated me. But, now I am 2 months at home. I did not know how good it was to have a home where they wait for you.

Do you remember the boy with the spectacles who brought you to Venlo (called Suebro Suis)? The huns shot him down too. Oh it is awful how many people don't return and they are always the best, those who we love the most. But you'll have the same feeling I suppose about your friends in the Air Force.

The tall dark boy, called Jacques, in Maastricht and the little one, are all safe. I don't think I know more people who you knew so, I'll finish and I do hope you'll write again when you have time. So for now my very best wishes to you.

Yours Sincerely,
Joke

Joke's letter didn't reveal her months of anxiety, starvation, and imprisonment with the loss of numerous close friends and thousands of the Dutch underground. She didn't mention that after being in prison camps from April 1944 until 6 May 1945 it took her and three friends six weeks to get away from a Russian prison camp. Those were some of the things we would learn later.

When I answered Joke's letter, I informed her about my exciting days and months before my return to England. I sent her a picture of my wife and me taken in front of a cabin at Crooked Lake, Michigan. Imagine my surprise in 1982 when she showed my wife and me the picture in a book about the Dutch underground and the fliers they helped during World War II.

In 1954, after having moved several times, it appeared that I would be able to make a trip to Europe, and on 19 May 1954 I wrote to Joke. Several years had passed since our last contact, but she soon replied as follows:

Leiden 4 Juni 1954

Dear Clayton,

What a wonderful idea coming to Europe! Is it holiday or business or combination, for you must do it now on a quieter way! I looked at the photo you sent me in 1945, are you much changed, and your beautiful wife, and not living any more in Topeka?

Did you write to the other people in Limburg or shall I do for you when you write again when and how long your stay'll be?

No, I did not go back to the Indies. My parents stayed here (they did not want the older generation back) but my brother went, four years all-ready he is in Sumatra.

I finished my study for "juvenile delinquency" and worked till my marriage in 1950 to Ben de Groot, a "marconist" (secret wireless operator) and now assistant Surgeon here in Leiden.

We are very very happy, with 2 boys ages 3 ½ and 1 ½ and now a third (a boy again I hope) is coming along.

We live in a very interesting old little city in a "hofje" of 1402 (4 little houses, formerly for widows) with a small garden enclosed on 4 sides by normal houses.

We made doors through, so that we live now in all the little 4 houses (1-room and attic) painted and rebuilt and it is very nice now and picturesque.

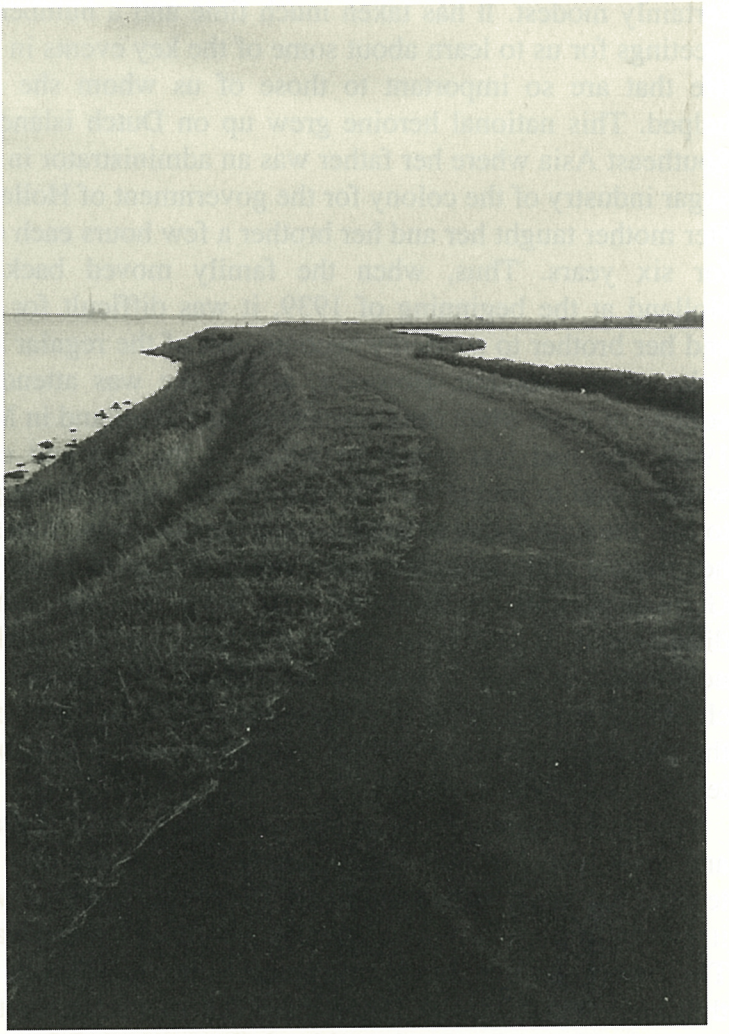
I have a real guest room, so you stay with us and we'll show you Holland in peace-time.

When you write or see Kenneth Shaver could you give him my very best wishes? He has a 9 year old daughter now. Hoping to hear from you soon.

Respectfully yours,
Joke de Groot-Folmer

Our trip to Europe in 1954 was cancelled and we lost contact again until 1978 when Joke and Jacques Vrij were members of a group of Dutch underground helpers making a visit to five American cities following a short visit in Canada. My wife and I had a marvelous two days with Joke, Jacques, and Letti Vrij in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Later the group went on to Washington, D.C., to receive special recognition and to meet with President Jimmy Carter at the White House.

Joke came back to America in 1982 and attended the Eighth Air Force Historical Society meeting in Cincinnati, Ohio. After the meeting she returned with us for a visit in our home. In 1983 my wife and I finally made our first trip together to England and Western Europe. At that time we visited Joke in her home on the island of Schiermonnikoog, Nederlands. It was a wonderful experience, and we visited the place where the Germans had a flak battery on the island from which they fired at us when we flew over during the war. Our trip was cut short by an emergency at home, but Joke did find time to take us to the dike where I had landed near Durgerdam at the outskirts of Amsterdam. In 1985 she helped us pick up the trail at that point so that my wife and I could retrace my escape route from Amsterdam to Gibraltar.



Above: A picture of the dike where Clayton first landed near Durgerdam.

Modesty is a trait often found and admired in individuals who risk so much to help others, and Joke is certainly modest. It has taken much time and a number of meetings for us to learn about some of the key events in her life that are so important to those of us whom she has helped. This national heroine grew up on Dutch island in Southeast Asia where her father was an administrator in the sugar industry of the colony for the government of Holland. Her mother taught her and her brother a few hours each day for six years. Thus, when the family moved back to Holland at the beginning of 1939, it was difficult for her and her brother to suddenly become part of the regular and strict school routine. However, at 17, she was attending college in Zeist when the Germans invaded Holland in May 1940. She had just begun to adjust to the wet and cold weather and to accept the flat countryside, when she began to feel the hatred that existed toward the Germans. Some of her friends and classmates were doing things to resist the German occupation. Some of them were shot and others disappeared. It had been rough for Joke, getting used to new habits and life in general in Holland. She missed her childhood environment. But after the events in May, plus the unfriendly treatment of her best girlfriend, a Jew, by a teacher, Joke was changing.

She had begun to feel that she was a real part of Holland and must help Holland. She began to think about why the teacher had been unpleasant to her friend and realized what it meant to be a Jew in a country occupied by Germans. The friend and her family attempted to leave Holland, but they were betrayed. Her friend died later in a concentration camp. In 1941, after her best friend disappeared, Joke went home to Zeist to visit her parents. A family friend asked her to deliver a message for him. She didn't know what it was, but being a sweet young girl it was easy for her to go through the German soldiers and not to be questioned. She continued delivering messages unaware that her parents

had been hiding students and Jewish people in the house. In their own way, her parents had already been active in the resistance for some time.

The events that had happened around her and the disappearance of her Jewish friend caused Joke to be drawn to the interests of the students who had become active in the resistance in 1940. In 1942 they asked her to do courier work and escort an RAF crew to the south. As the underground saw her successes and as her confidence increased, she became involved in the movement of people. By the time she was arrested on 28 April 1944, she had helped approximately 320 people of which 120 were American, British RAF, and Canadian fliers. The others were civilians as well as military people from Holland, Belgium, and France who needed help. Naturally there were Jews among those she helped and even some Russians. Joke was sometimes called "The Little Rabbit" because she would refer to those she was escorting as rabbits. A contact with another helper in the chain might be, "I have two rabbits. Can you use them?"

During the war, the people of Holland hid over 200,000 Jews and anti-Nazi activists from the Germans. Some 1,600 fliers who parachuted from their damaged planes or crash-landed in Holland were helped by the people of Holland. Some of the airmen were later captured by the Germans, but the Dutch people made every effort to help get them back to England. The 120 helped by Joke was the largest number assisted by any of the women who made up the main force of the some 15,000 people of Holland who helped the fliers.

Today Joke knows the names of 72 of those 120 men she once saved and is still in contact with quite a few, their wives and families. But there are many more she has been unable to locate in the United States, and so the hunt goes on. Joke seeks the satisfaction of knowing that another person she helped was able to return to his family.

Joke like many others, paid a price for the help she provided. On 28 April 1944 she and her mother were having lunch at the Central Station in Amsterdam when they were both arrested by the Gestapo. Joke and a friend had escorted five British fliers in April 1942. The friend had been arrested and put in prison. Though treated kindly, she had been in solitary confinement for 14 months before she broke and gave Joke's name and address. Joke had changed addresses many times, so the Germans had followed her mother. Always careful to have no material on her, Joke was determined to tell the Germans nothing. They knew only about the five people she had helped. However, they kept her in solitary for five weeks at Scheveningen prison, then the Vught concentration camp, and then in the Utrecht prison where she was at the time of her trial. Her mother was in prison for three months. Joke's trial in September was with one of the underground groups of 1942. She was given the death sentence. Then she, with the group, was abruptly transported to Germany, at the time of the battle of Arnhem, where nobody wanted them.

The prisoners were shoved about, and Joke was sent from Anrath to Dusseldorf, to Ziegenhain, to Cottbus, and finally to Waldheim in the Russian zone. Her papers from the trial were lost, which saved her life. The lack of identification papers for the condemned underground workers confused the record-conscious captors to the point of procrastination. Joke told me she was one of 300 women from occupied Europe, there were Dutch, French, Beglian, Danish, Norweigan, Finnish, and even Turkish prisoners in those camps. Only 32 survived the many months of confinement and torture. She feels that her good health from much exercise, which began with her years on the island in Southeast Asia, was a key to her survival. She had learned always to keep herself busy and to have a creative imagination. She tried to get the best possible out of every

day. She and the others made small things out of scraps of material, and the women in her area sang a lot.

During her 14 months of captivity, Joke hung on to one of her father's linen handkerchiefs, and secretly embroidered it with names of the prison camps, bits of songs, and mind boosting thoughts. She hid the needle under the skin of her palm so that the Germans wouldn't find it, while crushing the handkerchief in her hand and holding it to her nose so that the germ-fearing captors wouldn't take it away. Thread was obtained anywhere and everywhere – sometimes off a barbed wire. Joke told me, "When you know you are condemned to death and every day might be your last, you try to make it the best."

On 6 May 1945 Russians unlocked the doors of the prison and Joke and the other women hid in the men's prison. She said, "The Russian soldiers didn't liberate anything. They were just looking for women, healthy ones, not starved ones like me and my cell-mates who had lost 30 percent of our body weight. We had to steal to get food after the Russians arrived. We thought the Dutch Red Cross trucks would come for us, but they never came."

Joke, two girl friends, and one young man tried to get to the Netherlands, but their weakened condition limited them. So they devised a plan to walk to the Elbe, find a boat, and float out of Germany. After many days of hiding, and stealing food, they got to the river and had even found a boat. They were only ten kilometers from the American zone in Dessau and freedom when three Russian soldiers shot at them and forced them to return to the shore. They were soon led to camp Coswig.

Coswig was only a waiting place for the Russian working camp at Odessa for all the non-Germans without legitimate papers, who were afraid they would never get home. (Several thousand didn't, as the Russians took them to Russia to work rebuilding the countryside and they were

too weak from being in prison to survive the hard labor and extended captivity.)

Finally fate stepped in. The American Army found a camp that contained 3,000 Russian prisoners and traded them to the Russians for the 3,000 people in Joke's camp. The Russians made them walk for three days to get to the exchange point and they only had one slice of bread to eat each day. The Americans delivered their well-fed Russians via trucks.

The Americans de-loused Joke and her friends and took them back to Brussels and then to Holland. She arrived home in June, some six weeks after she first thought she had been set free by the Russians at a German prison camp 500 miles away. The Americans had taken them all the way to Brussels before the former prisoners actually felt they were free and the war was history. Death had been so close for so long that they considered themselves fortunate to survive.

In 1946 Joke – Johanna Marie Folmer – was one of seven Dutch underground workers (the only woman) to receive America's Medal of Freedom with the gold palm. She is also the only Dutch woman with the English George Medal. She is one of only three women whose name carries the Netherland's highest military medals "Unmaerkelse," The Bronze Lion. She also received a Croix de Resistance medal from France.

For many years her six children, including two foster children, didn't know of her wartime experiences. "When we did learn, it helped us to know her better," one of them stated. Joke had to retire from her social work position in 1980 because of camp-related illnesses. She reports that many of the people who were in prison camps never fully recovered. "When you are on the brink of starvation, nerve ends die," she stated, and continued with the observation that "Anger, fear, worry for five years saps one's energy. Nearly everyone has some problem. For many it has come

out later in life." The government of Holland recognizes this as a legitimate illness, calls it "War Syndrome" and gives sufferers a pension.

In 1986, when Joke was visiting our home, I asked her, "How did helping the Allied airmen affect your personal life during and after the war?" She replied, "Realizing that every person counts (even German guards) and not systems. Deep grief (many good friends shot or died in camps and prisons), joy and laughter about small things, and lasting friendships. I need not explain that waiting 11 months to be shot made us look at life differently, glad for every day and nearer to God than ever before."

Above: 1982 – "Joke" in the David home, shows Clayton the embroidery work she did on one of her father's handkerchiefs while in prison and concentration camps. Delicate work wove a reminder of each location where she may have been executed. (Photo courtesy of ***Times Leader***)

Above: Johanna Marie "Joke" Folmer received America's Medal of Freedom with a gold palm on 4 September 1946 from Col. Frank Johnson, an American attaché at The Hague in the Netherlands.

Jacques Vrij

Jacques Vrij and the other helper, Eugene Smits, met Joke and me at the railroad station in Maastricht, Holland, on or about 1 February 1944. Jacques was arrested by the Germans in May 1944. He survived by escaping from them and went on to live a full and rewarding life dedicated to his family, his church, and his country. He retired as General-Director of Transport of Holland's Ministry of Transport and Public Works. From the comments written about him in the 18 February 1974 issue of Profel when he retired, the following information is available.

Mr. Jacques Vrij was born in Emmen, Holland, on 18 April 1916. After finishing an advanced primary school, he went to a teachers' seminary. He obtained his teacher's diploma, his school director's diploma, and a religion diploma. While serving in the military, he was a sergeant in the bicycle regiment. After the capitulation in 1940, he went to Maastricht to work for the Transport Inspection of the Ministry as adjunct clerk.

F. Baron Van Heecberen Van Walien, the chieft of the Transport inspection in Maastricht, had this to say about Jacques:

Vrij made a favorable and pleasant impression. He was given the job of working with the rationing of benzene. First as co-worker, then as chief. Everything, all the petrol and oil, at that time was bought with coupons. Vrij did his work well, serious and trustworthy. He was serious but had a sense of humor. You could feel that he lived under heavy stress. He was quick at finding himself in the resistance, the underground. I am convinced he did it because of his religious conviction. He derived much strength from his faith. We knew that he belonged to the resistance, but did not know exactly what he did. He had once brought us

some Jews so we knew from experience that he was helping oppressed people. They stayed with us for a couple of days and soon Vrij himself took them across the border. In Belgium they were safer. I didn't want to know anymore about his work. That way I could never say anything.

He was often "ill" or he would ask for a couple of "vacation" days to "visit his family." He would get them of course, but that would put him in a difficult position toward the office. Oh, Vrij isn't he here? Where is he now? I would say then that he was ill and he must be at home. Little by little it was known that he was in the underground. That had to have a bad ending. Around May 1944, I came back at 4:30 from the department. My door was kicked open, there stood a "gentleman" from the S.D. (Security Service against the underground).

Where is Vrij? He works here. He will be arrested immediately. Call him in!

He could be warned, maybe, but I heard that he was arrested. The S.D. had the whole building encircled. We went to his room and there stood Vrij with his hands up. Two men frisked him. Strobel, the chief of the S.D., sat behind the desk. I went to stand close in Vrij. Perhaps he could say something. It did not work. He was grabbed by the collar and literally thrown into a car. They took him to the nearby Wilhelmina prison and kept him a day and a half.

Since we wanted to know how things stood, I went to Strobel and inquired, Mr. Vrij is arrested, when will he be back, because if he is going to be away for a long time we must look for someone else. (I had to say something.) And what has he done? The reply was, "Der Vrij? He will never come back. He will be shot right away!"

Vrij stayed with the S.D. 10 or 12 days. In that time the invasion was awaited and for that reason all the prisoners were taken to the concentration camp in Vught. From that camp he escaped with two others. After the war we, of

course, temporarily lost touch. Later I saw him regularly at meetings at the Ministry in Den Haag. I could hardly figure that strong man who saved so many pilots and Jews. But a few people expressed their greatness in difficult situations.

Some of the danger and difficulties of working in the resistance are expressed in the comments of W.H. Van Keulen, also in *Profiel*. He stated:

We like to talk, but not about the resistance. It still moves me too much. But this I will say about the cooperation with "Leo" who after the war was known as Jacques Vrij. One of the groups that saved pilots was infiltrated with three Dutch S.D.'s. Numerous pilots and a number of resistance fighters should in the end inevitably become the victims of those people. The difficult decision was that the S.D.'s would be lured by the resistance fighter "V" near Sittard. According to what was decided, one of our own members would bring the S.D.'s along the western edge of the Sittard-Roermond railroad line near the small tunnel across from the knit fabric manufacturing plant where the resistance men, Vst, Vrij and myself would be lying in an ambush.

At the moment when the S.D.'s went by the tunnel in question, a peasant with a horse and cart came and hindered us. The plot could not be carried out. We decided that Vst and I on bicycle would pass one of the S.D.'s on the way to the other two who were running a bit further. That was Vrij and V would take care of one of the S.D.'s. The first eight shots wounded the two S.D.'s and as they tried to escape one was shot dead. In the meantime, V and Vrij had also gone on the attack but their shooting missed. The S.D. fled shooting in the direction of the tunnel and quickly disappeared. After the encounter, V, Vst, Vrij, and I went with three bicycles in the direction of Sustern.

Six months after that incident, Jacques Vrij was in prison in Vught. Sharing much of his captured experience and his escape was P.R. Raedts, a man who at the time of the article, still carried the scars of German "treatment." He was a member of the underground force in Helden-Panningen. He knew Mr. Vrij only superficially when they saw each other in the Tongerseweg prison in Maastricht. Reports Mr. Raedts:

From there we were transferred to Wilhelmina prison at Maastricht. It was a cloister that had been requisitioned by the Germans. Then one day we were taken from Maastricht to Vught. After a while we were put to work taking apart shot-down planes. During that time all was discussed – escaping was also talked about. We found ourselves together in barracks 21. More transports were brought in daily and it became more and more crowded. We lay in bunks three high. The night of August 17 or 18, 1944 is a night I shall never forget. We were working at escaping because we knew what would happen to us if we stayed. We were interrogated continually by the S.D. Now they had found something in the south and then something in the north.

The Germans were busy installing a railroad line near the camp. For that reason a temporary gate had been installed in that area of Vught which was enclosed with barbed wire. It would be possible eventually to pass under that gate. Outside of it stood a sentry and further on was a watchtower with a spotlight.

At 12 o'clock we went through a window. Jacques and I wore only striped prison pants. We, of course, had no civilian clothes. We had watched a while and then the sentry had been called by his friend in the tower. After that we began to dig through the sand under the gate. The whole time we were on our backs because otherwise we could not see the barbed wire. After we passed under the gate, we passed through the woods, and after much meandering we

came to a railroad crossing. The railroad guard cautioned us that the commanding officer of the camp lived on the opposite side and that there was a sentry on duty. We asked him for a safe address. No, we did not know him, but we were in luck. He showed us a house alongside the track. We went there and after much knocking a grey haired lady looked out of the window. When she saw our half-naked bodies completely ruined by the barbed wire, she invited us in. "We have escaped – will you help us?" Jacques asked. To the master of the house he said how he could find some clothes. The parents of Jacques lived in Den Bosch, near Vaught. The gentlemen got some clothes. Jacques was the first to leave or to be taken away. Afterwards, I dressed myself by putting clothes on over my prison trousers. I still have them. Thanks to Jacques Vrij, our escape succeeded. Mr. C. M. P. Coolen, Principal inspector of transportation in Limberg, commenting on Jacques Vrij said, "After the liberation May 6, 1945, Mr. Vrij came back to Maastricht. He has always been very cautious except in the war. He was always afraid of harming the interests of his brethren. So, he would not willingly say anything that he would not be responsible for."

While Jacques was head of passenger transportation in Maastricht in 1945, Mr. Coolen noted that, "During the day Vrij was in the office, but in the evening he worked almost exclusively for the underground which was no longer illegal. The next morning he often came to the office with a sleepy head, and some mornings he was a half an hour late. When questioned about this, Jacques replied, 'The officer who helped me so much during the war, and those who assisted me I do not abandon. I sense my moral obligation. I shall pay my debt, but when I have paid my debt – perhaps I should go to another job.'"

Mr. Coolen's comments continue, "Mr. Vrij was later transferred to another bureau of transport so he could study law. After four years as part time student, he received his

Doctorate in 1954. On February 27, 1963 he became the General Director of Transport for the Netherlands. His co-workers and subordinates saw him as a man in search of excellence in the results expected from his department, a man who wanted the best for the society, and searched for the facts in making decisions." (End of information from *Profiel.*)

Jacques risked his life more than once during the war and risked his career for what he knew was right. Through it all he maintained his sense of humor which has been passed on to his family that consists of his lovely wife, Letti, three daughters, and one son. Jacques has been decorated with the Medal of Freedom, the King's Cross for Courage, Ridder Nederlande Leeuw (Knight Nederlande Lion), and Commandeu Oranje Nassau (Order of Orange Nassau).

Illness forced Jacques to take early retirement, but he is a fighter, and has fought back to live a full and rewarding life exemplifying his great faith and concern for others. Each visit with Jacques and Letti, whether it was in the United States or Holland, has been rewarding and memorable. It was not surprising to hear that in Israel trees are planted bearing his name. A tribute to a Christian gentleman.

When asked why he chose to help 80 aircrew members and also a number of Jewish compatriots, and how it affected his life, Jacques replied, "The helping Allied airmen – and the rescue of the Jewish people – does remind me continuously that we have to resist undemocratic forces and that we have to strive for a righteous society with space for all men." He pointed out to us that many of the Jewish families lost to the Netherlands during the war were merchants and small business owners. Their removal from society left a void that delayed the recovery process in Holland, a recovery that has appeared remarkable to an outsider.

Left: A picture of Jacques Vrij taken about the time when he was active in the resistance.

Below: Letti and Jacques Vrij pose with Clayton at their home in 1985.

Betsy Franssen-Moonen

At the age of 11, was Betsy Franssen-Moonen too young to be a helper? The normal answer would be, "Yes!" but she represents what happened when escaping airmen were hidden with families.

Elizabeth-Johanna Catharina Moonen was living with her uncles, Giel Ummels and Jen Ummels, in Maastricht when I stayed in their living room above their butcher shop the first days of February 1944. In 1950 I received the following letter from her.

December 10th, 1950

Dear Friend,

War is done long since six years; but I'm sure you'll remind that you have been at Maastricht under very bad conditions, but that's over too, so we don't need to talk about it, although we suffered very much by it.

I write this letter on behalf of my two uncles who are dead; both died in a concentration camp. One at Buchenwald and the other at Oranienburg. My uncle asked me to write you if he didn't come back. But I couldn't execute this commission earlier, for but now, we found your address, this very day. So, I hasten to do it today. I'll not trouble you with this letter, but I confess that I would be very glad to get an answer from you and to know how you are now and what about your job and conditions of life. Do you like it a longer letter from me, next time? I trust you will let me have an answer to the present letter.

With my best greetings, I remain

Yours very truly
Betsy Moonen

Niennestiraat 17-19 (Nieuwstra)
Maastricht, Netherlands

There was a risk to the lives of children as well as adults. However, children could be expected to be a part of the family which was trying to live as normally as possible under German occupation. For us escaping airmen, children and their accepting innocence in the whole situation tended to reduce tensions and permit our minds to wander back to our own childhood with our families. We could think of freedom, open spaces, and family love. We made comparisons that varied in many ways except for the love that we expect in a family.

Children that were old enough to go to school and be with others their age seemed to develop a natural sense of the need for security. In conservation with some of them years after the war, they give accounts of seeing or hearing certain things which were never explained. If, for example, a child told a most trusted friend about resistance efforts occurring at home, it was accepted as a personal secret and never repeated. Learning to live under oppressed conditions seems to develop a type of personal discipline which is not as common in a free and open society.

Betsy was old enough to remember how her father had escaped out a window and over the roofs of buildings to avoid being arrested by the Gestapo. He, too, was active in resisting the Germans, and it was after the war was over that he learned about the fate of Giel and Jen Ummels. Like so many children under German occupation, the meaning of arrest, prison, escape, or death was learned by Betsy at an early age.

During the war children in Europe and Great Britain were reared in the awareness of war and all that goes with it. In the German-occupied countries like Holland, Belgium, and France, the training of children often took very different directions. Although most were being reared in an atmosphere of passive or active resistance designed not to attract attention, there were public displays of the Hitler Youth Movement which was dedicated to open war

in support of Hitler and his beliefs. Many of the active resistance workers and their families have remained reluctant to reveal their experiences. However more of those experiences need to be described so the young people of today can learn the facts from those who were there. In recent years some of the Allied aircrew helpers in Holland have joined with the schools to share their experiences in an effort they hope will keep history from being repeated.

Today Betsy and her husband, Pierre Franssen, live in Venlo, Holland. They have a son, Marcel, who like other young men has accepted his military obligation. Betsy and Pierre own and operate a successful deli and live above the store. Their marriage was arranged and bought the operation of two family-owned butcher shops together. In the arrangement, Pierre agreed to give up his studies as a dentist and operate the combined business. They have not escaped or fought the evolution of change, but have changed with the times and evolved the butcher business into a deli which meets the needs of today's shoppers. Their marriage, their business, and their lives represent a blending of the past to the present and a preparation for the future.

When asked how being around Allied airmen had affected their life during and after the war, Betsy put it all in perspective by saying, "We were glad when was over – gone, we could speak, sing – we remember, we never forget – and learned at home a discipline that some things are a personal secret."

Above: Betty Franssen-Moonen provided this 1938 picture of the Ummels and Moonen family. Adults are Aunt Truda Ummels, Giel and Jen Ummels (who died in separate concentration camps in 1944), Mother Moonen and Father Moonen. Front row left is Betsy Moonen and her brother, Mathieu.