

Chapter 5

The First Border Crossing

After about one week in Maastricht, my host, the butcher, told me I would be leaving. As promised, Smit, one of the men who had delivered me to this location, returned to start me on another part of my journey. It was dusk as we began our walk through the streets of Maastricht. We went two or three miles before arriving at a street corner where I met my next guide, a girl about 17 or 18 who seemed even younger because she was so short. She was less than five feet tall, but was strong and in good physical condition. Years later I learned that her name was Marianne Spierings. Her code name was "Cato."

It was dark, and my new guide was riding a bicycle. I certainly felt odd when she told me to get on the back of her bicycle so that she could give me a ride. It would have been more natural for me to be the one pumping and steering the bike. But to be practical, she knew where we were going and I did not.

Crossing the border from one country into another added an extra challenge because these were places where the Germans had guards and natural check points. Going from Maastricht, Holland, into Belgium could be accomplished by travel over land at certain points or by crossing the river at still other locations. I was moved via the land route.

My identification papers and my own inadequacy made going through a check-point before a German guard a poor risk. The challenge was to get me across the border undetected. My guide, Marianne, quickly took me two or three miles toward the border. I don't remember seeing other people along the way, but it was not an isolated street, just dark.

When we were within 100 yards of the border, Marianne stopped, and we both got off the bicycle. She then placed the bicycle into an open shed alongside the road, and we proceeded on foot. We were on the opposite side of the road from the German guard-house, but we could clearly see it. We hid in the shadows as the German guard took his stroll around the outside of his guard-house. When he finally went inside Marianne instructed me to continue along that side of the road, hiding behind a privet hedge which was lower than the roadway. Crouching, I went past the border check-point to some 30 or 40 yards beyond and waited for Marianne as she had instructed. In the meantime, she checked past the guard who knew her and engaged him in some small talk to be certain he would not be observing as I moved through the area.

Years later I learned that via different paths in this area, Marianne had managed to get a total of 72 people across the border into Belgium. Her method of operation also brought her nearly 40 years of scorn by some neighbors and would-be friends who knew only what they saw, which was not as it appeared. Her regular work, as well as helping men like myself, required that she cross the border through this checkpoint often. She decided the only way was to develop a friendship with the German guards to create trust instead of suspicion. To do this she would bring the guards cigarettes and small items and then sit in the guard-house and talk with them. The local people saw this as fraternization with the enemy and treated her accordingly by their actions and gossip.

In her own mind, Marianne had chosen to be a helper for the sake of the individuals involved and not because of any great feeling of nationalism. Although many people do good things for the favorable recognition it brings them, Marianne worked to achieve the results which brought aid to those she helped. Without such helpers, I might not be

alive today to write this tribute to those unsung heroes and heroines who risked everything to help downed fliers.

When Marianne again joined me, we were out of sight of the German guard. Together we walked a few blocks, and she led me to a house where I would remain while she returned to somehow bring two more fliers across the border.

I doubt that this particular situation of leaving a flier in that home while returning for others happened too often, but this stop of an hour or so made an impression on me. I remember that the lady of the house appeared to be very uncomfortable with my presence. That is understandable when you realize that I was their ticket to death if the Germans had in some way been following us. While I was treated kindly and given something to eat, we remained in the one room where I had entered. The man seemed more relaxed and comfortable with my presence than the lady. I understood she had brothers who had been conscripted and were serving in the German army. I believe that would be cause for mixed feelings, and I've often wondered how we would react in a similar situation. Here was a family faced with the life-threatening condition of my presence while they had family members who were being forced serve in the army they were hiding me from. How would we go about trying to make the best of a bad situation? I'm pleased that they had been willing to be of assistance on our side. I hope it never brought them any harm.

When Marianne returned with the other two men, we walked a few miles and entered a house at the edge of a village. Here we remained overnight and prepared to move on the next day. It had already been established that Marianne and two of her friends were attractive young ladies, of about two who were thin and approximately five-foot, four inches tall. The three young ladies moved with what appeared to be confidence and determination. They

were accepting the challenge like three young cheerleaders leading their team to victory.

To make the trip by train would require money, so the man of the house, who must have been Marianne's father, proceeded to take care of that. From a back room he brought in and opened a briefcase full of small bundles of newly printed bills. I received the impression that the underground in this area had the means of printing, or at least securing, money if and when necessary. Today as I learn more and look back, it doesn't really matter about the source. There was a need for money, and in this case it was available. I guess it was the apparent quality that surprised me most. The incident provided me the satisfaction of knowing that for the moment at least they had enough money to continue providing help. Train tickets and the many other things necessary required money.

While we three men spent the night on the floor in the house we were informed that there were three other American fliers in a shed back of the house. One of the two men that I arrived at the house with was an American. He had been injured and had previously hid for a few weeks while his injuries improved so that he could travel. The other man was an English flier.

With the three of us in the house, three more in the shed out back, and three girls to act as guides the next day, I had the feeling it was the night before a mission – a mission with the objective being the mass movement of personnel. For the first time I would not be a lone traveler. Before retiring it was proper that we should have some tea. It was good English tea and our host served it with great personal satisfaction. Good tea was difficult, if not nearly impossible to acquire. Having some to serve us meant they possessed something the Germans didn't think they could possibly have. Little acts like that always seemed to do something for the morale of everyone; at least for me it was something

to remember forever, even though I seldom take time for tea.

When we visited Marianne in 1985, we learned that a few months after helping me, she was scheduled to meet a fellow helper who would have men for her to transport across the border. She arrived at the prearranged place at the appointed time, but her contact was not there. She waited for a few minutes to ponder the situation, then aware that there were problems in the organization and many helpers had been arrested, decided this missed contact was a clue to how close the arresting Germans were to her personally. She departed the rendezvous location and without returning home left the area for Northern Holland.

In Northern Holland, Marianne got a job as a nurse's aide and remained there until after the war was over. The various clues she had used to make the decision not to return home that fateful day kept her from being arrested and sent to prison or worse. She learned later that the Germans had gone to her home to arrest her. They would have found her had she returned as expected, and at home, no one knew where she was.

It is now known that one man in a chain of helpers gave names to the Germans in an effort to free his mistress from prison. That information along with the Germans successfully passing one of their men off as an Allied airman, who indeed had been shot down, resulted in the arrest of 300 helpers. The arrests occurred throughout Holland, Belgium, and France during a period of about two weeks.

After the war was over, Marianne returned home, married, and raised a family, several of whom work together to operate a successful catering service from the home where I had stayed my first night in Belgium near the village of Rekem. When we visited there in 1985, it took a few minutes before I was certain it was the same house. A room had been added to the side of the house where we had

entered and left 41 years before. A new building had been constructed at the rear of the house to accommodate the facilities which are used with the catering service.

Betsy and Pierre Franssen, with whom my wife and I were staying in Venlo, had driven us to Marianne Slabbers-Spierings' home. After lunch, the three of them escorted us around Maastricht and over the route I had traveled in 1944. On our way back to her home, Marianne and I walked across the border together for old time's sake. She also pointed out some of the other nearby paths she had used to get Allied airmen across the border. In daylight the border area looked the same as I had remembered it in darkness in 1944. The German guards were gone, but the building where they had been was still there, just less obvious. The building with the shed where Marianne had hidden her bicycle was unchanged. The privet hedge was still there, but trimmed lower than I had remembered it. I could stand there and let my mind's eye see past unfold before us – a safer and more pleasant way to relive it.

In the evening, two of Marianne's sons catered the meal and served each course delightfully to honor their mother and her guests. We were fortunate to have been there on a day when they had not been engaged to cater elsewhere.

We learned that Marianne had once worked for Jacques Vrij at his office as well as in the resistance. She expressed the reason she helped the airmen when she said, "You fliers looked down from your formations of airplanes with fear and uncertainty, We looked up at you and saw friends."



Left: Marianne Slabbers-Spierings, "Cato." This picture was taken about the time she was escorting airmen across the Holland-Belgian border.

Below: Marianne in front of her home where Clayton and two others stayed one night in 1944 while three other Americans were in the shed behind the house.

