



d.i.s. magazine

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Dutch International Society

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Summer 2019

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Membership Form



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Our Cover

Artist's conception of the
encounter between bicyclist
and B-24 bomber from the
story “*Dit is Mijn Vader!*”
*The Story of the Man on the
Bike on the Dike.* John
Wilson, 2019.

“Dit is Mijn Vader!”

The Story of the Man on the Bike on the Dike



by Robert Baumgardner

*The Krijnen house on
Koekoeksedijk, outside
Zevenbergen*



On Monday afternoon, September 18, 1944, 52-year-old Gerardus (Geert) Krijnen left his son's hospital bedside and rode his bicycle north along Hazeldonkse Zandweg, the dirt road between Breda and Zevenbergen, provincial towns in southern Netherlands. At about 4:40 p.m., as he pedaled along the elevated roadway toward the bridge over the Mark River at Zwartenberg he heard the unexpected roar of engines, looked to his right, and saw coming toward him a four-engine B-24 bomber, skimming the riverside fields at 210 mph.

He jumped off the bicycle and ran down the embankment as the plane passed over his head. Then, as the plane sped westward, he picked up his bicycle and pushed on to the small wooden house on Koekoeksedijk, where he lived with his wife, Johanna, and their four other children.

When Geert arrived home, he was "enormously scared and startled", according to his oldest daughter, Adrianna, who was 22 years old at the time. "He shouted that he had almost died." This account is based on her memory of that day.

The day before, Sunday, the first day of Operation Market Garden, the day that thousands of Allied paratroopers and glider forces landed some 30 miles to the east, between Eindhoven and Arnhem (site of the "bridge too far"), some of the Krijnen family had gone to Mass at St. Bartholomew Catholic church in Zevenbergen. That morning the priest warned the congregation that a raid by occupying German forces was imminent. He advised all men to leave town and go into hiding as soon as possible. However, of more pressing concern to Geert and Johanna was the health of their younger son, 17-year-old Jan who later that day was taken by hand-carried stretcher, then by ambulance to Langendijk hospital in Breda suffering from an excruciating headache caused by an undiagnosed brain tumor.

Geert was returning from a visit to the hospital that Monday when he had the near-fatal encounter with the low-flying B-24. He and daughter Adrianna made the 22-mile round trip to visit Jan over the next few days, until fighting between German and Allied forces made the trip too dangerous to attempt. Finally, after

*Jan Krijnen, son of
Geert and Johanna
Krijnen*



a six-week hiatus, when the Germans had capitulated or been driven from the area, Geert was able to make the trip again, only to find that Jan had died on November 22 and had been buried in an unmarked grave. The family still does not know where Jan is buried, owing to the chaos of those days when liberation hung in the balance.

Geert, the *actual, real-life* man on the bike on the dike, was born June 19, 1892 in Standdaarbuiten, a village 11 miles southwest of Zevenbergen. As an adult he worked at a sugar beet processing plant in Zevenbergen. He died March 26, 1977, having

outlived six of his ten children. He is buried in the Catholic cemetery at Kerkhofweg in Zevenbergen.

Adriana van Leent, 97, lives with her only child, Henri, 59, in Zevenbergen. She saw the story in the local paper, and exclaimed to Henri, “Dit is mijn vader!”

Here is the story of how we found Adriana (known as Tante Ad) and Henri van Leent. I sent Henk den Ridder, one of my Dutch correspondents, a digital copy of the “man on the bike” brochure on April 9, 2019. He had published a brief article based on our emails in the online version of *BN De Stem*, the regional newspaper where he works, in February 2018. That piece generated no response. Henk was intrigued by the brochure and offered to publish an update if I furnished him with more information. On April 25 I sent him a 2-page summary of the research I had done during the ensuing 14 months. His update was printed in the paper version of *BN De Stem* on May 13. Henri van Leent emailed Henk later that day, writing that his grandfather was the man I sought. On May 22, carrying 20 questions from me, Henk interviewed the van Leents and confirmed their claim. Remarkably, Henk lived next door to the van Leent family in Zevenbergen for 25 years until he moved away from his parents’ home. Although Henk had

known that Henri’s family “had great stories about WWII”, he had never heard the story about Adriana’s father’s encounter with the B-24.



*Gerardus (Geert) Krijnen and his wife,
Johanna, on their 25-year wedding
anniversary, August 1941.*

Editor's Note: The author wrote the following explanation of the origins and process of his search for "the man on the bike on the dike" in April, 2019, before he finally found the answer to the question he asked nineteen years ago. DIS Magazine published Robert's letter to the editor in our March 2019 issue.

I can trace the origin of this search to July, 2000, on the occasion of my uncle Lt. Col. Haynes Baumgardner's (USAF, retired) 80th birthday party. That was the first time I saw the wartime scrapbook he had assembled. As we looked through the stiff, black pages, he told the story of the low-altitude supply mission he flew to Allied troops in the Netherlands on 18 September 1944. He described seeing his leader, Capt. James K. Hunter's plane shot down, crash, and explode in front of him, and how the rest of the squadron flew out of Holland "below dike level", as he put it. As they approached one of those dikes he saw a man on a bicycle directly in their path. Flying at 210 mph only a few feet off the ground, there was no time and no room to swerve, but the bicyclist threw himself to the ground just before the plane passed over him.

Since that day I have wondered what the (barely) fortunate bicyclist thought of this heart-stopping encounter. But, I did not have the time to satisfy my curiosity until I retired on Oct. 31, 2017. This was only 2 months after uncle Haynes died, at age 97. So, mindful of his wartime service and distinguished career in the U.S. Air Force, I decided to do everything I could to find *the man on the bike on the dike*.

On November 1, 2017 I began an online search for all possible sources of information about the September 18 mission. I found several WWII-related museums in the Netherlands. Most were politely discouraging ("that was more than 70 years ago ... It's a search for a needle in a haystack..."), but Ernst Vos, at the Wings of Liberation Museum (Bevrijdende Vleugels) in Best was immediately interested and very helpful.

With the lead navigator's and lead bombardier's accounts from the official, unclassified after-action report for the Sept. 18 mission, and with Ernst's deep knowledge of Operation Market Garden (Sept. 18 was the second day of that massive effort) we were able to identify the approximate route of the 491st Bombardment Group from the Dutch coast to the



Adriana van Leent, 97, lives with her only child, Henri, 59, in Zevenbergen. She saw the story (below) in the paper Wirst, and exclaimed to Henri, "Dit is mijn vader!"

*Author Robert
Baumgardner*



drop zone between Best and Son, then to the point where Hunter's plane crashed (northeast of Udenhout), and back to the coast. Based on Ernst's familiarity with the Dutch countryside we surmised that the dike in question probably is somewhere west of Breda.

With the approximate route in hand, I contacted several Heemkundekring (HKK) along the low-altitude flight path between Tilburg and the Channel coast of Schouwen-Duiveland. Several people responded by announcing my search at their meetings and publishing the map in their organization's newsletters. My next attempt to find the bicyclist was contacting Dutch expatriate organizations in the U.S., Canada, and Australia. A woman in Canada forwarded my query to a relative in the Netherlands, and soon thereafter I was contacted by a documentary filmmaker in the Netherlands who is interested in making a documentary of the search. The plans for this are still in flux, but I hope that we can recreate the close encounter of the B-24 with the bicyclist using a drone and a cyclist dressed in period costume.

On 12 January 2019 I placed a 2-column advertisement in Brabants Dagblad. And, in April 2019 I produced a brochure (in Dutch and English), in cooperation with a Dutch colleague, who translated the English text into Dutch for me. I sent digital copies of the brochure to all interested correspondents in the Netherlands, U.S., Canada, and Australia, as well as newspapers, churches, HKKs, regional archives, and retirement centers in the Netherlands. In addition to the online distribution of the brochures, I will take them to the 75th anniversary commemoration of Operation Market Garden in September 2019. I have permission from the organizers to hand out paper copies to participants at the base camp near Eindhoven.

So far, my efforts to find the man on the bike on the dike have been unsuccessful. But, I have additional work to do. I am searching for someone, perhaps a student or young retiree, who would be interested in visiting retirement centers in the West Brabant area, posting the brochure, and, perhaps, talking to elderly residents who might know something about this 75-year-old incident. Unfortunately, my emails (with the brochure) to the administration of several retirement homes have gone unanswered. The same is true of emails sent to churches in the West Brabant area.

In addition, I have conducted an extensive search for members of my uncle's crew to see if someone can corroborate the story of the man on the bike on the dike with an eyewitness account, either through written records (such as letters and diaries) or stories passed on by the crew member. So far, it appears that only the nose gunner left a written record. I have not seen it, yet, though his son-in-law has promised to send me a copy.

Furthermore, I have tried to confirm another aspect of my uncle's account of that mission. He

describes flying low over a town along the route and being fired on by a German machine gun nest, mounted at the intersection of two main streets. Just past that intersection Dutch women on their second-floor balconies waved flags at the low-flying bombers. I have asked my correspondents in Oosterhout and Breda if there are archives in those towns that could confirm or refute this story. And I have hired a genealogist to search the Tilburg regional archives for such accounts in the diaries stored there. These efforts are still in progress.

In addition, I have searched through my family's correspondence files from that time. I have found letters from uncle Haynes to my father, Robert, who was in B-24 pilot training at Liberal, Kansas, at the time, and letters from my grandmother to my father. It is a curious example of the absurdity of war that during the same week Haynes was risking his life flying a "treetop" mission into German-occupied Netherlands, my father flew over his family's farm (100 miles from his air force base) at "barn top-level". His youngest brother climbed atop the barn to wave as my father's plane roared overhead, much as the Dutch women waved at my uncle from their balconies. Of course, neither brother knew of the other's experience of that week until much later.

In a followup email to me this May, Robert wrote,

Indeed, it has been a thrilling experience to correspond with Henri and his mother, who heard the story on the very day it happened. Please make sure you mention the journalist, Henk den Ridder and the illustrator, John Wilson, who made that eye-catching drawing.

The newspaper pictured on page 12 is from the May 13, 2019 issue of BN De Stem, a regional paper focused on the western part of North Brabant and Zeeland.

AADAS Emigration to North America Tour

last week of April/first week of May 2020

The American Association of Dutch American Studies invites DIS members and DIS magazine readers to its first emigration to North America tour in the Netherlands. Henk Aay and Mary Risseuw (both AADAS board members) are planning and leading this educational tour; they have extensive experience with and contacts for leading excursions and conducting genealogical and other research in the Netherlands.

They plan to use a motor coach and a home base at two city hotels for the entire tour. The price point is expected to fall between \$4000 and \$4500 per person (including the flight but excluding meals, and personal travel). For more details see <https://dutch-americans.org/2019/06/21/2020-aadas-emigration-and-ancestry-tour-2/>

