

Sixty-one years enough time to heal, allow memorial

During the first week of August, correspondence between Brewster; Borger, Texas; Goodland; and Zeist, the Netherlands, started.



sally
michael

• brewster beacon

It began in Zeist with a Dutchman by the name of J. Co deSwart.

Mr. deSwart had a commitment of finding a survivor of a man who was killed in a plane crash in Holland on Oct. 20, 1943. Through the efforts of Cleo Morrison of Borger and Lloyd Holbrook of Goodland, a meeting was arranged for Wilma Dimmitt Lantron Horney of Brewster and her son Curtis of Goodland with deSwart, Morrison and her husband and son and Holbrook. It was a lunch meeting at the home of Don and Wilma Horney on Wednesday, Oct. 13, in Brewster.

Wilma and Curtis are survivors of an airman killed in action during World War II and were finally connected to a memorial that was dedicated last year in deBilt, the Netherlands, for those killed in the crash. In 1942, like many young ladies of the time, Wilma Dimmitt was working in Denver. She had recently graduated from high school in Goodland and was doing what she could to help with the war effort.

One evening, she met a young airman from Texas by the name of Edward Lantron Jr. After a few months, the couple decided that marriage was a step they wanted to take, and they were married in Blythe, Calif. They were able to have several trips together, including one to Dyersburg, Texas, where the couple would spend some time with Edward "Les" Lantron's father.

Les was the only child of this man, and like many of the day, the elder Mr. Lantron was not happy that his son had joined the Army Air Corps. One of the pictures Wilma has of her first husband is of the two men sitting on a bench with the elder man's arm around his son's shoulders. There was much love in that photo.

Staff Sgt. Lantron was hooked up with a group of young men belonging to the 96th Brigade that were sent to Europe in the summer of 1943. The group made flights from England into the German-held territories of Europe.

They were on one such flight on Oct. 20, 1943, which took them into the Netherlands and over the town of deBilt. There was also a German in another airplane in the same area, and he got the Boeing B-17 in his

sights and shot the aircraft down.

There were 10 crew members on the B-17, and five of them were killed when the aircraft was hit. Staff Sgt. Lantron was in this number. The other five men were able to bail out, where four of them were taken prisoner by the Germans and one was able to make it back to his station after a grueling trek through many countries.

On the ground, there were three homes destroyed or damaged by the wreckage that was strewn over a large area, and three Dutch people were killed at this time. There was also a 7-year-old boy watching from the roof of a nearby butter factory.

That youth was Co deSwart, who had the memory seared into his life, and when he was able, he, along with the help of a radio station owner, gathered the information together to create a memorial for the tragic crash.

This memorial was held Oct. 20, 2003, and there were 87 invitations sent out to the surviving spouses, children and such of the people involved, including the family of the German pilot.

Of the 87 invitations sent, 86 responded and were present at the reunion. Mr. deSwart did not know about Wilma or Curtis at that time. The last living survivor of the crash was the co-pilot, and he died Aug. 7, 2004, in Castro Valley, Calif. He was not able to attend the reunion in 2003, but at the time of the reunion, he enjoyed a meal with the youngest sister of the pilot of the German plane.



Survivors of pilots and crew involved in a crash during World War II gathered in deBilt, the Netherlands, last year to dedicate a memorial. A Brewster woman and her son from Goodland are survivors of a staff sergeant who died in the crash.

All of those invited, plus many other guests, on hand for the dedication of the memorial that was designated for the event, totaled several hundred people.

After the dedication is when the story of Wilma begins again. At the time of the dedication, it was not known what had become of Wilma. She had contact with the wives of other crew members for a few years until the life of those days was dimmed by the life that she began after Les' death.

One thing that kept her busy was finding out she was expecting a baby shortly after her husband left for Europe. She had written him

about this surprise shortly before she learned of the crash. Although she never heard from him again, she feels that he did receive the letter. Curtis Lantron was born in April of 1944 and was the image of his father.

In 1946, Wilma remarried to Don Horney, and after a few years, they made their home on a farm near Brewster. In 1950, Don adopted Curtis, and anyone who knows them realizes there is a father/son bond between them.

Two other sons joined the family as the years went by, but Don and Wilma always made sure the Lantron family was included in the



Curtis H.



Wilma H.



deSwart

life of Curtis. Many family vacations were planned around this relationship to make sure that Curtis would remember his roots.

Now, we get to the present, and deSwart's wonderful part in the story. Through the efforts of Cleo Morrison and Lloyd Holbrook, the connection was made for a meeting of all involved. Mr. deSwart was coming to America for the third time for the 30th annual reunion of the Eighth Air Force, including the members of the 96th Brigade, that was held in Kansas City, Mo.

Following the meeting, he headed west on I-70, while the Morrisons headed north on U.S. 83, where they met up in Colby.

Wilma said she honestly had mixed feelings about going back to that long ago time, but she and Don are glad they met deSwart, who has dedicated his life to the memory he had of watching the plane burn.

There were many battle scars across his country but none any closer than this one was. The memorial joined the three countries together, the United States, Holland and Germany.

The German pilot, whose name was Col. Erich Burkert, was shot down just a little over two months later over the Northern France/Belgium border by P47 pilot Maj. Walter Beckham.

This story is really too big for a small article because of all the stories that are included, but the Horney, Mr. Holbrook, the Mor-

risons and especially Co deSwart thought that at least sharing about the human side of this war story and all the lives that were touched that one afternoon in Holland is an important

step in healing. The dedication and work that this gentle man from Holland put into the memorial is to be commended and I know that somewhere in the future, there will be more written about his efforts.

I was thinking about the families of the downed airmen, the families of the Dutch people who were the victims that day and the family of the German pilot all sharing a sunny day in deBilt, the Netherlands, in 2003. And this man wanted the widow and son that had not been notified of this event to also share in the special time.

Mr. deSwart presented Wilma and Curtis with a video of the ceremony, a miniature replica of the memorial and a notebook of memories that brings the event into a perspective that there were lives lost, but life does go on for the survivors.

One could wonder if some time in the future there may be a young person now that will put a healing touch on the American families, Iraqi families and even descendants of terrorists. No, it doesn't seem likely, but I will just about bet that 61 years ago no one would have believed this event could take place.

Isn't it wonderful that there are people like Co deSwart who can look past tragedy and see something that binds the past to the future in hope?

I want to thank Mr. Holbrook for calling me and asking if I would like to write something about the meeting.

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