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Freedom Isn't Free

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In November of 2013, the former Your Smithfield Magazine published an article I wrote titled "Chance Relics Reveal A Forgotten Tale", about a man in Asperen, Holland, named Peter den Tek, who happened upon some World War II relics in a field near his home. The find led him to the discovery of the wreck site of an American B-17 Bomber that was shot down July 28, 1943 during a fierce running air-battle with four German fighters. The tail gunner aboard that aircraft was Sgt. Robert Martin from Smithfield, who along with another crewman was killed on that mission. The rest of the crew spent the remainder of the war in a P.O.W. camp.

Den Tek is a man with a deep regard for history, and recognizes the need to preserve it, for what is forgotten could be repeated. During World War II Holland was under Nazi oppression, but those old enough to remember the horrors are fading away. For the youth of today; not just in Holland, but all around the world; World War II is a vague concept, touched briefly upon in school history books and glossed over with political correctness. Many take their freedom for granted, not fully realizing what sacrifices were made so they can enjoy it. That's the message den Tek wants the youth of his country to understand – that freedom isn't free. It was for this reason he felt that a memorial to honor Sgt. Martin and his crew should be erected. When he undertook this project of his own initiative, he had no idea how much it would grow to consume a major portion of his time.

In researching the lives of the bomber crew, Peter was put in contact with me due to Sgt. Martin coming from Smithfield. He and I have maintained an e-mail correspondence ever since where he has kept me up to date on the latest developments, of which there have been many.

For starters, anyone who has ever worked on a project of this kind will tell you that one doesn't just "put up a veteran's memorial". There's a process, a long one, tied together with numerous bows of red tape. There are proposal meetings with local, state, and government officials, cost estimates, design presentations, and conceptual drawings. And that's just to get the go ahead to move forward. Often this process drags on because the more people brought into the mix, the more each wants to put his or her thumbprint on the final product by offering "suggestions". If everything is approved, the site selection process begins, which sets off another round of negotiations. Then come the fund raising efforts.

The politics of such an undertaking can't be underestimated or overstated. Which site will be chosen? Who gets to design the memorial? Who gets the contract to build it? Who supplies the materials? And when the dedication day comes, you'd better not leave anyone out!

Den Tek slogged through this process numerous times causing something unexpected to occur. As word of his project got around, long time residents in his locality came forward with information about other allied crash sites all within a radius of twenty miles of the one where Sgt. Martin perished. So far he has found the crash sites of six allied planes which came down in the municipality of Giessenlanden: two American B-17 bombers (One being Sgt. Martin's) one American

P-51 fighter, two British Halifax bombers, and one American P-47. He's currently tracking down rumors of two more, but hasn't found them yet. The discoveries have led him to expand his memorial project to include these aircraft and crews.

These wreck sites aren't as easy to find as one might imagine. The large portions of wreckage were removed decades ago, leaving only fragments which have been covered by Nature with the passage of time. To confirm a site, Peter uses a metal detector.

At Sgt. Martin's B-17 crash site, Peter believes one of the aircraft's four propeller driven engines still lies buried in the ground. He had hoped to recover it for use in the memorial design, but local environmental officials have denied permission to excavate it.

Another area of interest is a lake in Asperen which according to local legend, has a fully intact British Typhoon 1B fighter plane at the bottom. According to some locals, the pilot crash landed on the frozen lake during the war, and was immediately captured by the Germans. Then the aircraft fell through the ice before the Germans could secure equipment to haul it away. If the plane can be located, it would likely be in pristine condition since the lake is deep and contains fresh water – not salt – which would make the aircraft a valuable prize for any aviation museum. However, there are multiple layers of government and international bureaucracy that must be sifted through before any recovery efforts can even begin to take place. If permission is ever granted, the logistics of actually carrying out the recovery becomes a whole other matter.

Part of Peter's research on Sgt. Martin took him to Belgium in late December of 2014, where he visited Sergeant Martin's grave at the Ardennes American Cemetery. While there, he left a copy of the Your Smithfield Magazine story for the cemetery archives.

Sgt. Martin's bomber was part of a formation sent to destroy the Fieseler Aircraft Factory in Kassel, Germany. Peter has since learned that what Martin and his crew had no way of knowing was that the factory was filled with Dutch citizens being used by the Nazis as forced labor. One of them was Leo Schuurmans, of Asperen, who was killed in the raid just twelve days after his 29th birthday. Schuurmans father was shot by Nazis one month earlier, and his brother was arrested and sent to Germany where he died of starvation. Sgt. Martin died hours later over Asperen.

Further research included obtaining a copy of the U.S. Army's crash investigation report pertaining to Martin's B-17, which included statements of the surviving crew members taken after the war. He also interviewed an elderly witness who remembered seeing Martin's Body. He's also been in contact with Richard Campbell, a nephew of Martin's, who has supplied him with copies of family photos and other memorabilia. In addition, he's located one the plane's .50 caliber machine guns in a Dutch museum, and wonders if it's the one used by Sgt. Martin. Now imagine doing all of this research on every crewman of every wreck site he's investigated, and one starts to get a sense of the magnitude of his project, all of which he has accomplished while holding a full-time job!

Peter fills some of his spare time giving talks on the history of the air war in his region to local schools and civic organizations. After a talk in March of this year, he was approached by a teenager who recognized the name Steven Maksin, a crewmate of Sgt. Martin's, and informed Peter that he had Maksin's life vest with his name and serial number on it! He'd found it in a flea market some time ago, and one can only speculate that someone hid it from the Germans at the time of the crash. What Peter found even more interesting is the fact that according to statements in the Army crash investigation report, it was Maksin who was forced by the Nazis to identify Martin's body!

After much effort, as well as personal and financial sacrifice on his part, Peter has finally achieved his goal. As of this writing (Which is a month ahead of publication date.) the memorial honoring Sgt. Martin and other allied crews is being constructed. It will resemble an aircraft wing with the crew names of the local villages and silhouettes of their aircraft etched into it. The base will have six shields, one for each plane containing the names of the 36 airmen.

The dedication is set for May 2nd, near May 5th, which is Dutch Liberation Day – seventy years to the day the Germans surrendered in Holland. Dignitaries from Holland, the United Kingdom, United States, and Canada, are scheduled to attend, as well as twenty-six relatives of the allied airmen. Music will be provided by the Royal Dutch Air Force Band, and it's even been arranged for a WWII British Lancaster to do a "fly over". We Americans, and we in Smithfield, owe Peter a great deal of thanks for what he's done.