

A WING AND A PRAYER

Memorial in Holland honors local man lost in World War II

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CONTRIBUTED

A memorial is unveiled Saturday in Beek, Holland, in tribute to Army Air Corps Sgt. Frederick W. Zumpf, a 19-year-old waist gunner from Washington Depot, and his B-17 bomber crew that got shot down over Belgium during World War II and crashed in Beek on Oct. 14, 1943.

Edward Zumpf, 87, of Washington Depot, is reflected in a shadow box that contains a photo of his brother, Frederick and Frederick's World War II medals.



REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN ARCHIVES

WASHINGTON, Conn. — An American bomber crew shot down over Holland on Black Thursday 74 years ago was remembered Saturday in Beek, Holland, for the price they paid for freedom.

Army Air Corps Sgt. Frederick W. Zumpf, a 19-year-old waist gunner from Washington Depot, was one of 10 men aboard a B-17 bomber that went down Oct 14, 1943. He and three others died when the plane crashed in a boggy field just outside of town.

A memorial sculpted in the shape of a plane's wing, which seems to rise from the fertile soil it plummeted into, was unveiled Saturday before an audience that included 37 relatives representing seven of the 10 fliers. Its artistic design and wording is the result of research from dozens of sources; interviews; hundreds of emails with American relatives and military historians; and an interpretation of the casualties of war by local school children.

Among those in attendance was Zumpf's niece, Holly Haas, and her husband, Steve.

"This is last on my bucket list — for them to get there," said Fred's brother, Edward Zumpf, 87, who couldn't make the journey from Washington Depot for health reasons, but thinks often about the missing brother who left home swelling with patriotism at the age of 17. Holly is recording the events for her father.

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"IT HAS MADE ME REALIZE HOW MUCH THESE MEN ENABLED FREEDOM. THEY WERE SO OFTEN ON SUICIDE MISSIONS. THEY REALLY WERE THE GREATEST GENERATION." — SUSAN LINTON

MEMORIAL: 'He wanted to be part of the war effort'

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Frederick Zumpf's name hangs from a fruit tree planted in his name, near nine others, each bearing the name of a crew member. A contest among children resulted in the words inscribed in a bench beside one of the sculpted wings.

"Airplanes and soldiers on the ground, so that we can walk around," it reads.

For Ed Zumpf, as for many of those in attendance in Beek, the memorial is as much a reminder of the individuals as of what they fought for, he said.

"He was on seven raids," said Zumpf, who strongly resembled his older brother's Scandinavian looks. "He got tired of waiting. He wanted action, to be part of the war effort. He had the kind of fearlessness the Air Corps wanted."

DETAILS THAT HAVE EMERGED over the past year about the plane's final moments and the attention given by the people of Holland have made him "feel better," Ed Zumpf said. In 1943, it was months before Frederick Zumpf was confirmed dead after the plane failed to return and notice finally was given to their mother, Mary, that he had died.

Awarded the air medal and Purple Heart, his name then fell into relative obscurity.

In the house where Ed Zumpf still lives are the unopened letters Mary sent to her son that were returned. Fred's ring, recovered from the crash site and repaired in Beek, also is part of a tattered pile of war memorabilia.

The mission was to bomb Germany's industrial ball bearing factories at Schweinfurt. Fifty-one of 293 U.S. planes from the 306th Bomb Group did not return.

Zumpf and three others in Lt. Vernon Cole's 10-man crew died after a German JU-88 fighter plane's missile struck his bomber above Hasselt, Belgium. The B-17 crashed just over the border in Beek. Six eyewitnesses in the Netherlands saw the flying fortress shot down during a fierce dogfight.

Co-pilot Lt. Robert Partridge and navigator Lt. Charles Kuehn bailed out through the front section. Blown out last, Cole remained with the plane long enough to keep it from slamming into the center of the village. His body was found hanging from his parachute in the next town. It was his name, missing from a local memorial, that inspired the construction of a monument created by Roy Gottgens and a group of local caretakers and historians. It is now part of a liberation route of World War II artifacts and educational curriculum, including a private museum of artifacts that was the first stop for visitors Friday night.

Cole's great nephew, who closely resembles the flier, was in attendance.

BOMBARDIER LT. JOSEPH COLUMBUS pulled Sgt.

Robert D. Folk's parachute cord and pushed him through the nose hatch, then pulled himself out. Sgt. Irving Mills of Bridgeport, like Zumpf a replacement that day, emerged from the tail section when the plane broke apart.

Zumpf, Adrien H. Wright of Maine and Sgt. Robah C. Shields reached for chest-pack parachutes, but they couldn't open an escape door, according to Wright's account, as told to his son, William. The rocket that had struck the plane's right wing strut smoldered before exploding. The metal melted in the heat as the men failed against G forces to open the hot door. Wright survived when he was miraculously blown through the flames.

The bodies of Zumpf, Shields, Cole and Sgt. Donald Richardson were retrieved from the crash site and



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A contest among Dutch schoolchildren resulted in the words inscribed in a bench beside one of the sculpted wings in tribute to the American B-17 bomber crew. The translation is, 'Airplanes and soldiers on the ground, so that we can walk around.'



A plaque on a memorial in Beek, Holland, lists Army Air Corps Sgt. Frederick W. Zumpf.

buried beneath simple, stark white crosses at the American Cemetery in Margraten, where each of the American fliers for many years has been assigned a set of caretakers. Eventually, the remains of Richardson and Cole were returned home.

Kuehn and five other crewmen, including Mills and Folk, were taken prisoner. Folk managed to remain out of German hands for three days before a farmer's wife turned him in when he asked for food.

Wright, who landed in a flooded pasture with a broken wrist, didn't return to the U.S. to see his unborn son, Bill, until the boy was 2 years old, and then hardly left him. The two went into business together at a bait shop in Maine.

Bill Wright also was in Holland for the ceremony, as was Folk's daughter, Susan Linton; Partridge's 93-year-old wife, Lois, and Shields' 89-year-old sister.

Also in attendance were relatives of Zumpf's German grandfather, William, who arrived in Washington Depot with his Swedish-born wife to take up dairy farming on Church Hill in the 1800s.

"IT'S OVERWHELMING," said

Linton, who returned letters that had been written to her mother from relatives of crew members, including Mary Zumpf. "It's been very emotional. Many tears have been shed. We are learning things they went through we didn't know about, and how much they were a family. Mostly, the survivors came home and didn't talk about the war."

For the American guests, the outpouring of support from the Dutch people, and especially the city of Beek (population 17,000), has been overwhelming.

"It has made me realize how much these men enabled freedom," Linton said. "They were so often on suicide missions. They really were the greatest generation."

Said a raspy-voiced Ed Zumpf, "They were all heroes."

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