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MEMBER, THE 8TH AIR FORCE HISTORICAL SOCIETY WAS PROMOTED TO OFFICER IN A CAPACITY OF YOUR VETERAN OF THE 8TH AIR FORCE, IN ORDER

"TO HONOR AN INDIVIDUAL WHO HAS CONTRIBUTED TO THE HISTORY OF THE 8TH AIR FORCE HISTORICAL SOCIETY THROUGH THE DONATION OF HIS/HER SERVICE RECORDS AND/OR OTHER HISTORICAL ITEMS AS WELL AS HIS/HER OWN PERSONAL COLLECTIONS OF 8TH AIR FORCE RELATED ITEMS OR DOCUMENTS TO THE SOCIETY."

JOHN HILDEBRAN

WHO PARTICIPATED WITH THE 8TH AIR FORCE COLLECTOR'S GROUP AND WAS PROMOTED AS ONE OF THE ORIGINAL FOUNDRING MEMBERS OF THE 8TH AIR FORCE HISTORICAL SOCIETY, WHO IS NOW RECOGNIZED AS THE LAST SURVIVING MEMBER OF THE ORIGINAL GROUP OF THE 8TH AIR FORCE HISTORICAL SOCIETY AND HIS CONTRIBUTION TO THE SOCIETY'S PURPOSE AND MISSION TO PRESERVE AND PROMOTE THE HISTORY AND LEGACY OF THE 8TH AIR FORCE HISTORICAL SOCIETY AND ITS MEMBERS IN THE FUTURE.

Cole Crew Honored During Dutch Memorial Day

Co de Swart

Each year, in the small Dutch Village of Beek, Roy Göttgens, Secretary of a Dutch Historical Society, remembers the story of Lt Vernon Cole, pilot, 306th BG/423rd BS (Fiery Phantoms) and the crew: 2LT Partridge, co-pilot; 2LT Charles Kuehn, navigator; 2LT Joseph Columbus, bombardier/gunner; TSGT Robert Folk, TT gunner/engineer; TSGT Robah Shields, Jr, radio/gunner; SSGT Donald Richardson, BT gunner; SSGT Frederick Zumpf, RW gunner; SSGT Adrien Wright, LW gunner/assist. engineer; SSGT Irving Mills, tail gunner; of their ill-fated B17, 42-29971, recounting the details of their final mission.

Black Thursday, October 14, 1943 would see many lives lost in the efforts to destroy the ball bearing factories of Schweinfurt. As the planes approach the Dutch/Belgian border, Cole's aircraft is hit by a rocket in the bomb rack at 25,000 feet altitude. Sgt. Richardson is killed by fire/fragments upon impact of the rocket. The plane is set on fire and Lt. Cole abandons the formation and orders a bail out immediately, while trying to keep the plane in the air as long as possible.

Folk passes out from lack of oxygen and is pushed out by Columbus, who together with Kuehn get out safely via the front escape hatch. They land near the small Belgian border town of Eisden, east of Hasselt. In the meantime Shields helps Wright with his chute harness inside the plane. The B-17 takes a nosedive, but Cole is able to stabilize the aircraft, so it does not hit the nearby Dutch town of Sittard, which would have had disastrous consequences.

The left wing of the bomber flies off and the plane explodes in the air south of Sittard at the Dutch side of the border. Shields is killed by the blast. Wright, Mills and Partridge are "fortunate". They are blown out of the plane and are able to land safely in the city of Geleen, south of Sittard, although Wright was unconscious. They are arrested and become POWs. Zumpf is not able to escape the plane, as the escape hatch is blocked by the impact of the rocket. Cole is trying to get out of the pilot seat, but is blown out of the plane as well. He does not survive the blast and lands with a (partly) open chute in a tree in Geleen. An eyewitness reports that Cole was still alive briefly



and asked for a priest before he died. Due to the explosion, the bombs fall from the plane and hit the ground between Geleen and Beek. The farm house of the Stassen family is hit by one of these bombs, which pierces through the roof and the floors, but does not explode. Fortunately, the other bombs cause little to no damage.

After this second fatal explosion main parts of the plane, tail, what's left of the fuselage, wings, engines and fuel tanks land in a meadow north of Maastricht in the village called 'Beek', Limburg. Dutch civilians and Germans witness the crash.

The airmen who were killed were first buried in Maastricht and postwar at Margraten US Military Cemetery. All survivors became POWs.

The remains of Cole and Richardson were returned to the United States after the war.

Now, 74 years after the crash during a great Dutch Memorial Day in the Village of Beek, 37 Americans, all family of the original crew, crossed the Atlantic to attend. For them, this 'trip of a lifetime' provided final closure for the families.

Photo Above: 31 of the 37 US 'Cole Crew' family members crossed the Atlantic to attend the Memorial Day for this crew in Beek, Holland. (Front row, 4th from R, Researcher Roy Göttgens with on his right Chairman of the organizing society.)

(photocredit: German Frank Zumpf, grand-nephew of crew member KIA Frederick Zumpf).

Photo Middle: Cole crew wreath
Photo Bottom: Beek Lb, Holland: Remembering Plate on former crashsite B-17- 42-29971, honoring the USAAF Cole Crew 306BG/423BS

