

# Airwar over Flevoland.

Introduction.

The following so called “Flevoland Memories” are the result of an interview in September 2009, in the so called week of history, by Lenie Bolle, with Gerrie Zwanenburg former Salvage Officer,

Lenie was born and does live on Urk, the former island in what used to be the 'old Zuydersea'. An appropriate place as it was a wellknown 'pinpoint' for many Allied Airmen flying over in WW2.

A historical interview, mainly intended for schools, and those Dutch who were born after WW2 to tell them what the aircraft, flying over night and day did mean for the Dutch, and people in other German occupied countries. The sound of freedom!

The Dutch interview has been on internet all those years, and talking it over with good foreign friends it came out that an English version also might be of interest abroad, hence this translation.

Any comments, and/or possible questions, much appreciated.

Translation: Mrs. Shelley Tietema – Price, and Gerrie Zwanenburg.

## Website:

<http://www.flevolandsgeheugen.nl/10896/nl/airwar-over-flevoland>

*A wonderful documentary about Gerrie's work in the Flevopolders:*

**‘Some of our airmen are no longer missing’**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gTpAXE4WIJM>



# Air battles over Flevoland.

## Part 1: Flight path across the IJsselmeer

"Even in the darkest of nights, the difference between water and land was clearly visible from the air".

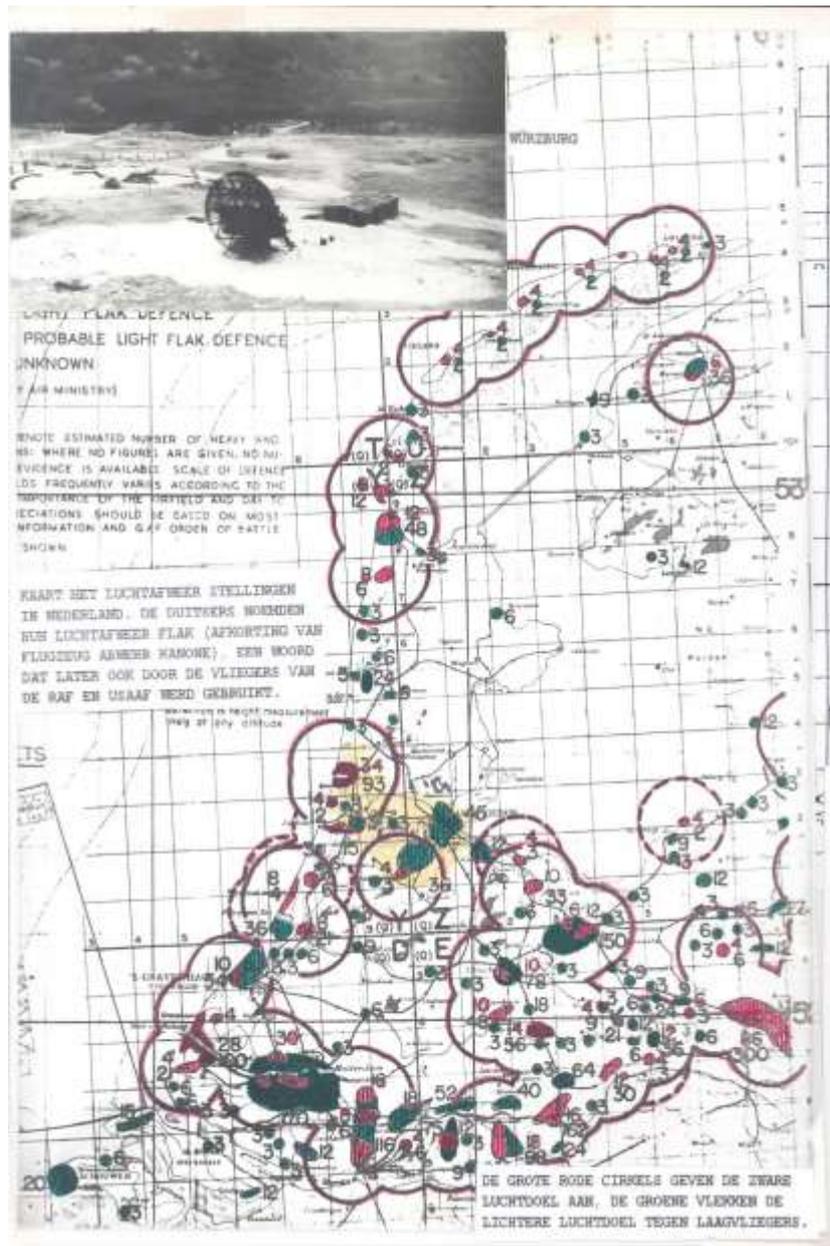
The story of the salvage officer who was involved in the salvage of, in particular, Allied aircraft wrecks in the Flevoland polders. Interview by Lenie Bolle with Gerrie Zwanenburg, 16th September, 2009.

During the war there were no lights, no street lamps, not even house lights, it was a complete black-out. However, even in the darkest of nights, the difference between land and water was clearly visible from the air. And the Netherlands, with the Frisian Islands, the Afsluitdijk (the dam across the old Zuydersea), and the rivers, were an extremely excellent and easy back-up for the navigation of the Allies. Too as the navigation at the time was completely different to the navigation of today. and in addition Flevoland, then known as IJsselmeer and Zuydersea, was in principle Flak free. The Germans had Flak defences all over the Netherlands, but strangely on the coast at Egmond, no heavy Flak. The heavy Flak defences overlapped each other but during the entire war there was always 'that hole at Egmond. I don't know why this was.

If allied airmen were in trouble, shot at or whatever, they always took the shortest route over the IJsselmeer (less Flak) and once at Egmond, they had a reasonable chance of getting home. Flevoland played an important role in the war because of the near pinpoints! Stavoren, Urk, Noordoostpolder. Easy to navigate from the air.

The land was, for most part, still under water. However, aircraft had landed in the polders area's and after the war we salvaged several planes.

The flight path often ran across the IJsselmeer. Not specifically over Urk but Urk was a well-known navigational pinpoint for the airmen. On the other hand, it was only natural for the fishermen of Urk to get involved at sea if a plane had been shot down. Picking people out of the sea and saving lives. The Allies knew that the IJsselmeer was used for fishing. The also kept an eye on the North Sea Fishery, for the Allies knew, for example, that German soldiers could be on board. Reporting the flight routes of Allied airplanes. They were well aware of this in England.



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Map showing the air defences above the Netherlands.

The hole at Egmond is clear to see.

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A B17 that was hit by a German missile but still managed to get back to England.

# Part 2: Crash above the IJsselmeer and pilots help

"It was a known fact that if you helped an airman during the war, you were lined up against the wall and shot".

The story of the salvage officer who was involved in the salvage of, in particular, Allied aircraft wrecks in the Flevoland polders.

## Crashing over the IJsselmeer

Talking about the IJsselmeer, during the war no more than some 160 aircraft crashed in that area. Insiders know about these crashes. Via the internet more information can be found. However, the internet only gives the numbers of crashes, not the exact location. If a plane crashed into the sea, they could never pinpoint the exact crash place. Oil leaked into the sea and pieces of wreckage floated to the surface but the aircraft smashed on impact. It fell from above, and on hitting the water fully disintegrated. Pieces lying scattered over a very large area. A lot of people are missing there. I have a list of the lifeboats of Lemmer, Enkhuizen and Hindeloopen, who were regularly commissioned to search for certain things including the airmen of the aircraft. The fishermen from Elburg, Harderwijk and Makkum often took men on board when they were found, and their bodies brought ashore. A lot of bodies washed ashore at Urk, but also brought to land by the fishermen.

## Pilots Help

Those crashed on land were clearly visible, the point of impact was known straight away. You could see the bits and pieces, the wreckage on the ground. In the Noordoostpolder men were already working, so they knew. The ground was softer there, but everything that ended up in the Noordoostpolder was known, and removed after the war. There have been three emergency landings in the polder. The "Dinah Might", later yet another B-17 and a B-24. Sometimes the aircraft came down into the water but the boys with their parachutes in the polder.

Airmen didn't have personal weapons. Only money and things to pay for any help they might need, for clothes and things like that. It was a known fact that if you helped an airman during the war, you were lined up against the wall and shot. The airmen became a prisoner of war. That was the difference. There never was any "but". The Germans maintained this attitude until the end.

Nonetheless, a lot of airmen have been helped by the Dutch, even in the polder. The NOP was the Dutch Hiding Paradise. People forget today but back then, that reed! I worked a lot with the reed in Flevoland It was, believe it or not, three- four meters high. All you could see was reed! You could do so many things in amongst the reed. Even the Germans thought twice before going in, for they knew only too well that found by some Dutch who might like to spirit away them without anyone noticing it, they would do. Of the boys who ended up in the polder, most were taken prisoner. The chances of escaping on land were small. Yet in the Netherlands there were still quite a lot who escaped with the help of the Dutch, but ... yes, it could have been a more. But again, as a civilian you had to be very careful.

## Pilot lines (escape routes)

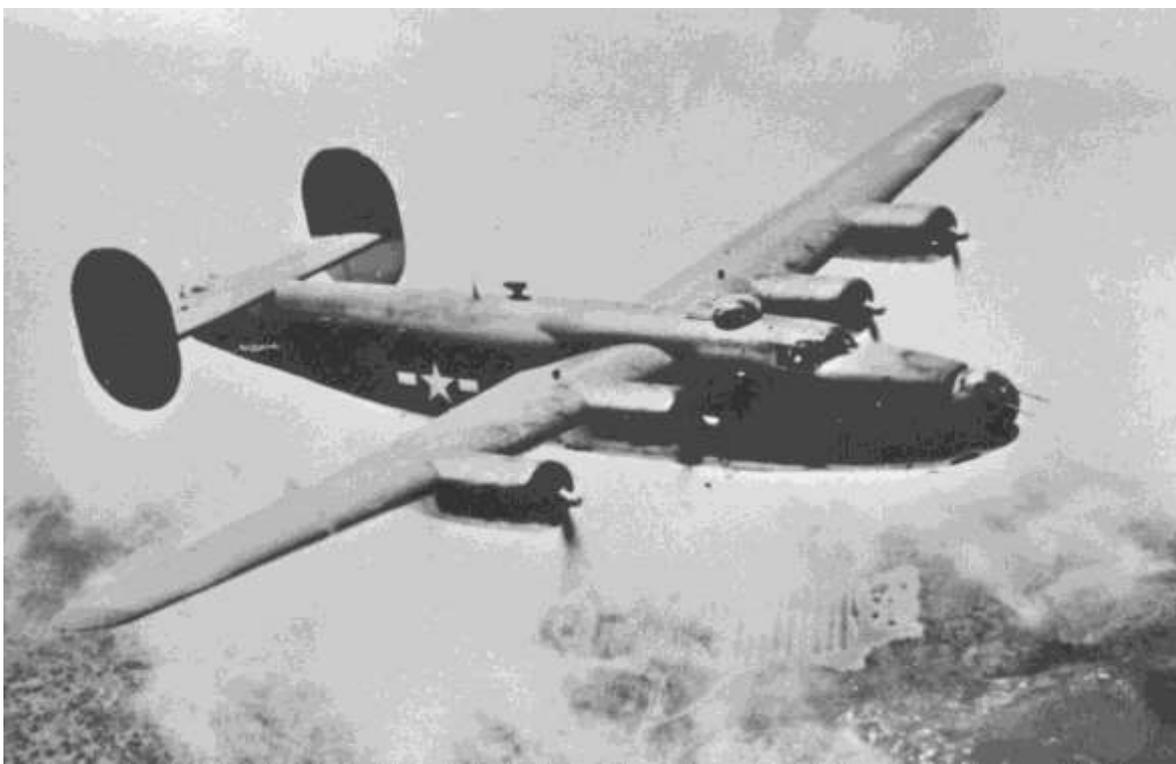
There wasn't really a pilot line in Flevoland. However, in Friesland and the surrounding area's there was. There were also contacts with people, who might be able to hide someone for a while. I'm certain they did this. But a particular route ... there was hardly anything there.

There were some places in the Noordoostpolder where the Germans didn't go to, but the difficulty was how to get the airmen out from there? A boat to Enkhuizen? Probably. I know of one crewmember from a Liberator which crash landed in the Noordoostpolder and later hid here (near Baarn). So it was possible, but it wasn't widely used. Less than for example in Friesland, but still seven men. The old country had more hide-out opportunities and connections were better. This was a problem in the Noordoostpolder. There were no roads yet. I still remember the times I went into the polder with some sort of snowboards under my boots.



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Prisoner of war pilot, Sgt. Moss, made a successful emergency landing in de Vrouwenpolder, 6th December 1942



The B 24 Liberator

# Part 3: An emergency landing on the IJsselmeer in the subsequent Oostvaardersplassen

“They thought they were higher but crashed”.

The story of the salvage officer who was involved in the salvage of, in particular, Allied aircraft wrecks in the Flevoland polders.

The British knew this water as the Zuidersea. An emergency landing on a flat piece of land is always a little better than an emergency landing at sea. The Dinah Might for example, made an emergency landing in the Noordoostpolder. This wasn't because they knew that the Noordoostpolder was an emergency landing area, but just because they had seen land from the air. The Americans once had difficulties with their navigation. They could see water quite well, but their geographical knowledge of Europe was considerably less than that of the British. A lot of the British airmen were from the mainland however, it was a different story for the Americans. There were some Americans with a Dutch name, who perhaps even spoke Dutch.

## The Emergency landing of a B-24

Let's take the example of the famous B-24 along the Oostvaardersdijk. Hit, four men had jumped and the remaining crew said, "hey, we are above water. Let's try and make an emergency landing, that way we will have the dinghy and everything with us". So they did, above water ... As your altimeter works on air pressure it doesn't work just above ground level. When taking off over land, you have references to homes, buildings, and landmarks. However, when ditching you had to fly on sight. Two pilots sat in the front cockpit and the flight engineer stood in between. He had to watch the air speed, "we are now flying this," "we are now flying that" so the other two could check to see how high or how low they were. As it was, they were flying at 120 miles per hour when they crashed. They thought they were much higher but unfortunately not, they smashed into the sea.

One survived, Charlie Taylor, the co-pilot [see section 14]. The nose of the plane broke off to the left and the pilot sat on the left, the co-pilot was sitting on the right. The pilot got hit by the steering wheel and died instantly. The other guys were sitting right behind him in the radio cabin. They died there. The radio's, ammunition, etc. all shut down with the obvious consequences.

Charlie Taylor however, found space. He bumped his head on the instrument panel, loosened his belt and drifted to the surface. The aircraft kept floating. Then he crawled on top of it, took out the dinghy and hung on to it. That's how the Germans found him and picked him up. The others were all killed. Purely due to the fact that they did not have any height reference above the water.

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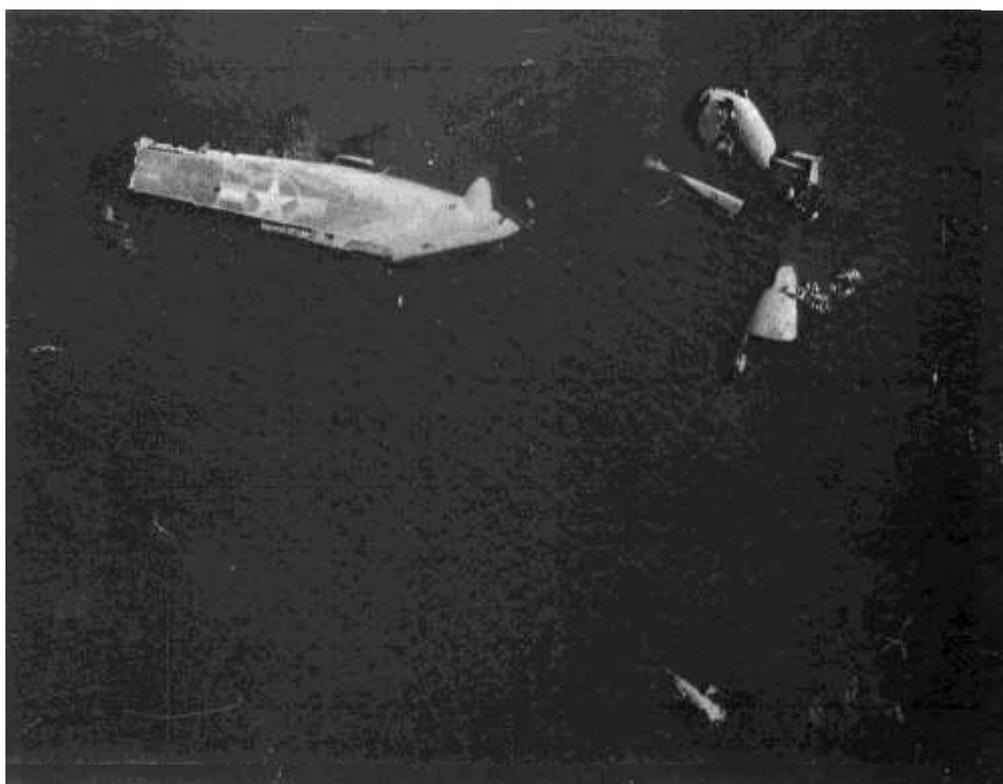
The crew of the B-24. Charlie Taylor (left bottom) was the only survivor. De pilot (white suit) and the other crew members didn't survive the crash.





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A piece of the wreckage from the B 24 surfaced during the reclamation of the South Flevoland polder.



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The wing was clearly visible.

Source: New Land Heritage, interview with Mr. GJ Zwanenburg, 16<sup>th</sup> September, 2009

# Part 4: Germany began to bombard cities

"Coventry taught the English how to do it."

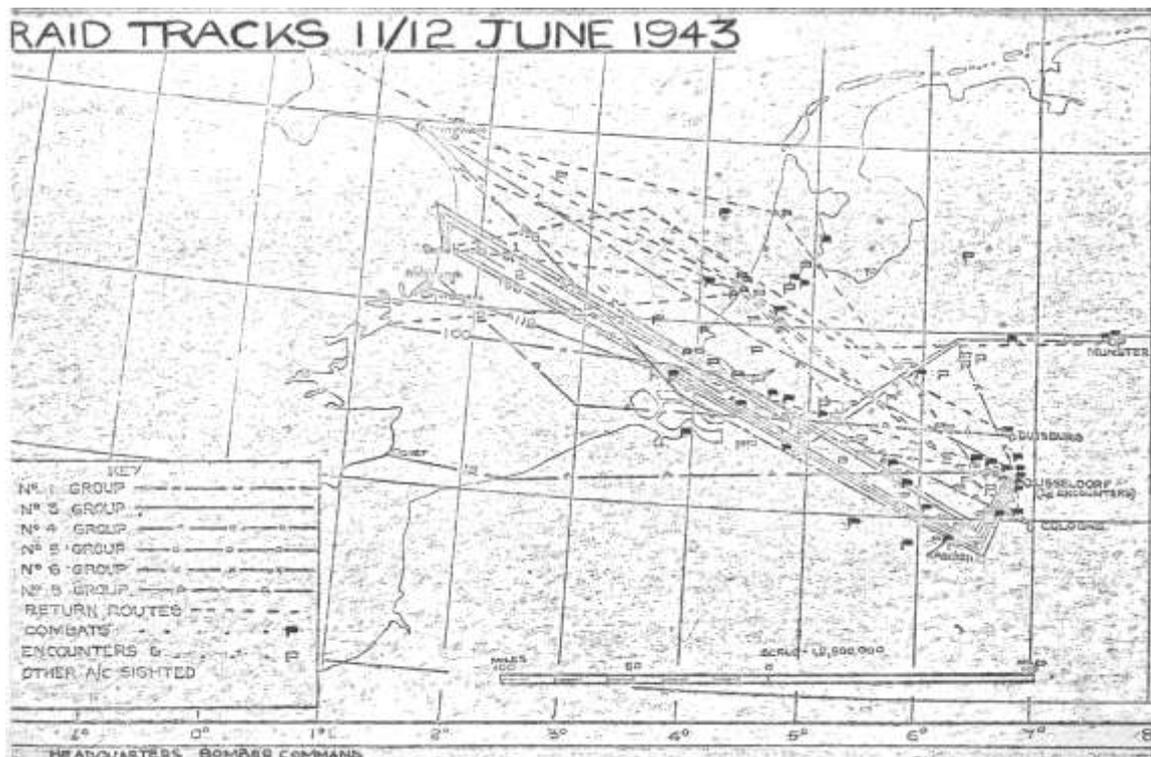
The story of the salvage officer who was involved in the salvage of, in particular, Allied aircraft wrecks in the Flevoland polders.

A summary: Warsaw. Germany needed Poland so the Germans bombarded Warsaw. Rotterdam has come a long way since the war but back then there weren't any military targets in Rotterdam, just military support, but the Germans also needed to have the Netherlands. I wrote in my book: they made their own beds to lie in making the choices they made over there, targeting civilian towns to help their own army. In the beginning during the famous Battle of Britain, they purely attacked military targets. Airports, ports and so on. That was until they made the error and took the City of London. The City of London! the heart of London. The British then said, what you can do, we can do too. The next day they went to Berlin. Hitler became very angry because he had assured the German citizens that the British would never bomb Germany. Hitler then ordered other targets to be bombed in England. They started bombing other cities. London was attacked constantly every night from the night of 7th /8th September 1940 until the night of 13th /14th November 1940, a total of 67 consecutive nights, by hundreds of aircraft. Then they took Coventry.

Coventry can be compared to Essen; a large town with a lot of factories and similar business. You wouldn't be able to hit this town without hitting the core. Just as in Coventry. In addition, they used a type of bomb that couldn't be aimed. This was a known fact. The German word "ausradieren" (erase), was changed by the Germans to "England will be coventriert (relating to Coventry being erased and therefore all of England). They knew exactly what they had done there. Bomber Harris was coincidentally in London in 1940 (he later became Commander of RAF Bomber Command) and then said: 'They're sowing the wind, they're going to reap the whirlwind. " And that's what happened. Coventry was the perfect example for the English. They knew fairly accurately how many German aircrafts had joined in the attack, they knew fairly accurately the number of bombs, etc. , and of course they knew the resulting damage. A good lesson for the English. A taste of their own medicine.

If we want to discuss numbers..... In Germany, as a result of the bombing during World War II 600 000 people were killed . Not only women and children but also police officers, firefighters, workers in the factory, etc. What about the six million Jews killed? A good friend of mine from Essen, a history teacher, put the following down on paper: On a day in Essen around 480 people were killed by the bombing, that same day in Auschwitz two Jewish transport trains arrived and 1452 of these Jews were killed . He said we didn't know this then but we know it now. Speer freely admitted that they had bombed England. Even among themselves it was obviously known. Goebbels was the propaganda minister, who talked about "terror fliegers" and it worked but it wasn't true. Speer also knew that not one factory could be targeted without touching the rest. I already gave you the example of Coventry. I had a long ongoing disagreement with the head of the German historian department in Freiburg. Not a 'little boy', a Mr Doctor Boog. He once held a lecture on the air strikes as carried out in England, stating that supporting the military front

and 'precision attacks' were of utmost important. I asked why they had then used air mines in Coventry. Air Mines are dropped with a parachute, using a parachute meant you have no control over it. He said he didn't know anything about that, so I said I would look into it for him. The following year he came to me and said: Mr Zwanenburg, you're right, they were used. His whole argument immediately fell to pieces.



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Map showing the escape routes for the aircraft in the attacks on Münster and Düsseldorf in the night of 11<sup>th</sup> /12<sup>th</sup> June 1943. The dots in the IJsselmeer indicate two bomber crashes that flew far above the prescribed routes.

Source: New Land Heritage, interview with Mr. GJ Zwanenburg, 16<sup>th</sup> September, 2009

# Part 5: Safety in numbers

“Eavesdropping. There was nothing you could do about it”.

The story of the salvage officer who was involved in the salvage of, in particular, Allied aircraft wrecks in the Flevoland polders.

In the beginning, the Allies obviously didn't have many planes. They tried to tackle as many targets as possible simultaneously. They went in small numbers for different purposes. Later, it was different. They had become wiser and after Coventry they started doing things differently.

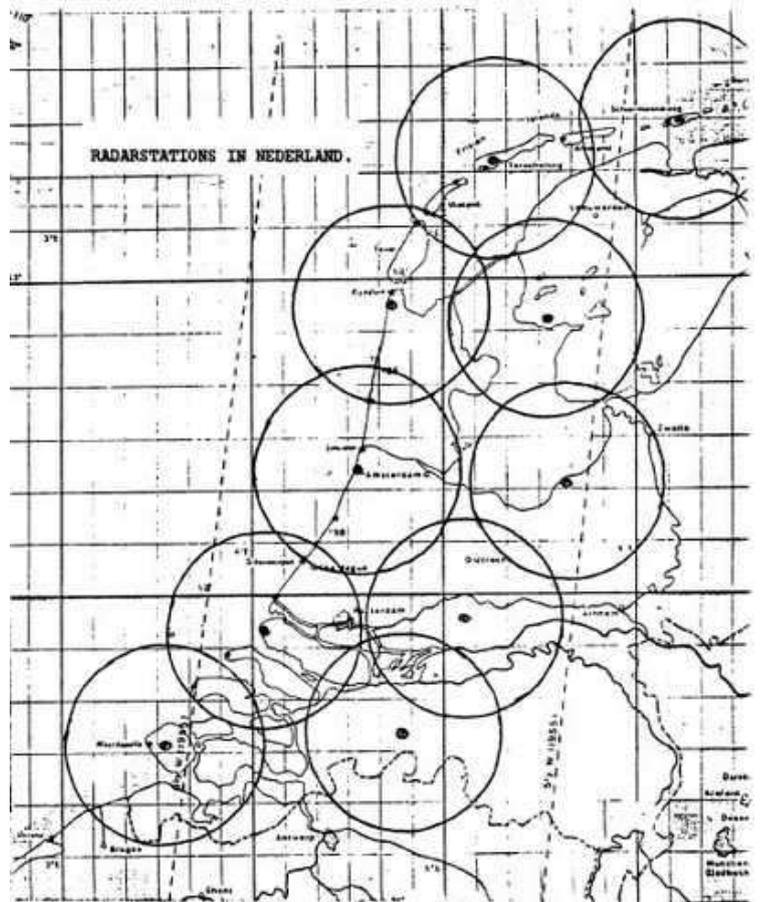
Large numbers to one target in one attack giving a good blow, so they wouldn't have to go there again for a while. The English have an expression: safety in numbers. German night fighters had support from radar stations. For instance there were stations in Harderwijk, in Medemblik and Gaasterland. Radar stations were situated all along the coast. However, each radar station could only pick up one night fighter at a time! In a very wide front attack, several radar stations could pick up various night fighters. Later it became more difficult for the Germans, when the attacks came in the smallest possible front with lots of planes attacking one target, as many of the radar stations simply were not used. They couldn't pick up the signal. Safety in numbers! That was the change in the bombing strategy of the Allies.

Coventry had been a lesson well learnt Bomber Harris became the commander of Bomber Command in early 1942 and the men literally would have gone to hell and back for him. They all liked him and still do. Nobody was allowed to get to Bomber Harris, otherwise the crews would get angry. We mustn't forget that the RAF Bomber Command lost 47 000 men. There are still 20 000 missing.

How was it possible, how could it happen? Eavesdropping. You couldn't do anything about it. Before your departure from England you always took a test flight. Radio traffic was used and both sides used to eavesdrop. The English listened to the Germans and in return the Germans listened to the English. They often knew if something was underway. The Germans didn't know the target. That they had to try and figure out for themselves as well as what way they would be coming, what course they would be using. Later the aircrafts used silver paper strips to confuse the German radar and make it look like there were more aircraft in an attack, when in fact there were only ten.

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The tail turret of a Lancaster bomber, with four machine guns manned by the tail gunner.



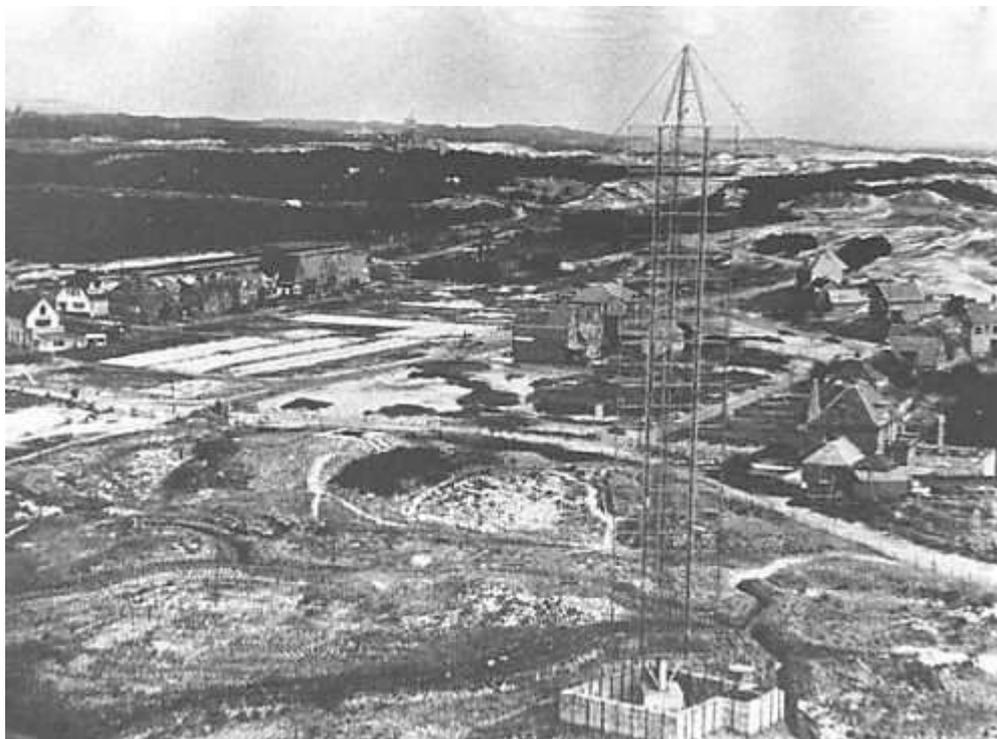
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The range of the German radar stations in the Netherlands.

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Radar station

Source: New Land Heritage, interview with Mr. GJ Zwanenburg, 16<sup>th</sup> September, 2009



## Part 6: The flight crew

“Flying towards the Netherlands, the flak over Germany could already be seen . And yet they carried on”.

The story of the salvage officer who was involved in the salvage of, in particular, Allied aircraft wrecks in the Flevoland polders.

A bomber aircraft needed a pilot, a navigator, a wireless operator and the gunners, the boys who operated the turrets. In larger aircraft, the four-engine bombers, seven people were needed; one pilot, a navigator, a bombardier, a flight engineer, two gunners and a wireless operator. Some joined the Royal Air Force as military service but you had to personally choose for the Air Force. It was not compulsory to join the airline crew. They didn't force it on you. The choice was your own. It was also an adventure for those young boys. I think England compared a lot to the

First World War, the trench warfare. That was not good. Anything was better than that. The infantry really suffered in the First World War, and the horror of that still lingered. These Young men had heard the stories from their fathers who had been in it. Due to this there were a lot who thought not me, let me fly. I personally think flying is nice, but I would never join the submarines. If you wanted to be pilot or navigator, you still needed a reasonable education. The American pilots and navigators were all officers but the British had pilots who were just sergeant. They were still young men, who had a bit of training and perhaps had learnt to fly. The gunners were just regular men who wanted to fly anyway. That was something they could do. If you were lucky and had talent for being a wireless operator you could do that. This was often a dual function and the wireless operator was also trained as a gunner. And also some gunners as a wireless operator. They were very ordinary, everyday young men. Some veterans were just twenty years old. You were classed as a veteran once you had the necessary war flights behind you. The "V" actually indicates that you had been in combat.

I have a very good friend that flew in a bomber during the war, as an air gunner. The British aircrews had to fly thirty flights over Germany before they could rest. Rest meant taking part in a training or something like that. And then they went up again. The losses on average were five percent per flight. Do the count, what were your chances? Statistically you would make twenty flights, so there was no way you would reach the thirty flights. I know some men who have flown double that but I also know of men who went down on their first flight. Resting somewhere under a cross. The Americans had to fly 25 flights. The difference was that the English flew at night and the Americans during the day. I have spoken to many men, air gunners who came to the memorial in Dronnten. Once they realize that you too have taken part in the same war, they are willing to talk. Flying towards the Netherlands they could already see the flak above Germany. They still carried on. Why? This was the enemy. The enemy that had conquered Europe, killed millions of Jews and more. That gave them the motivation to carry on. It was the enemy that had flatten London and Coventry.

There was a difference between the English and the Americans. The Royal Air Force included a lot of men from the occupied territories. There were Dutch, Belgian and French squadrons who flew with them. America had never been occupied. Neither had England but England was directly involved with being a 'bomber target' and most certainly the 'Battle of Britain. That was touch and go.

## **It doesn't happen to you**

They Americans were sent there and they knew what they were getting into. Whether they were sitting here or in Afghanistan, they were sent. And as long as they were busy ...! There was one day, later known as Black Thursday, 14th October 1943, when the USAAF went to Schweinsfurt and lost sixty aircraft (B-17s). That's sixty times ten crew members. It's impossible to imagine being in the same formation and seeing your friends crashing; It doesn't happen to you.



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Pilot in the cockpit of a Lancaster.



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A hit B 24 crashes.

Source: New Land Heritage, interview with Mr. GJ Zwanenburg, 16<sup>th</sup> September, 2009

# Part 7: Don't get caught with your pants down

“There wasn't any cosy chit-chat over Germany”.

The story of the salvage officer who was involved in the salvage of, in particular, Allied aircraft wrecks in the Flevoland polders.

## Long flights full of tension

I'm am lucky to have once flown in both a Lancaster and a Flying Fortress. A flight to Berlin was ten hours flying, of which eighty percent over enemy territory. You had to keep your eyes open. You could never get around the air defence. You could see everything around you and you felt the aircraft shaking. In addition the night fighters, sometimes you saw them, sometimes you didn't. Often going back with a damaged kite, flying on with some blown engines. The mid upper gunner, sat on a linen strip with a piece of leather in the middle, with a pair of stirrups to put your feet in not directly an 'easy chair'! This is how you had to sit for ten hours. Peering into the dark. Can you imagine, you can't do anything else but respect these men. They just did it!

Of course there was a chemical toilet on board. If you are going on a holiday, they say to you Mr. Zwanenburg you drive two hours, then take a stop, some steps, and do your business. That wasn't possible for them. The English have a very old saying: don't get caught with your pants down. Let's face it: running with your pants halfway down your legs is impossible. It's as simple as that. You had to be really desperate if you were going to use the toilet during a flight over Germany. For the simple reason you really had to look out. The tail gunner was in a small compartment and couldn't move at all. The pilot had to remain seated almost all the time. The only one who sometimes walked back and forth, was the flight engineer. I once found some shoes in a Stirling in the polder. High shoes with laces. How could this be, airmen always wear flying boots. I asked a friend of mine who used to be an air gunner. 'Oh, if anybody had shoes on, that would be the flight engineer. They sometimes had to walk through the whole aircraft and then the flight boots could be tricky, but not shoes'.

The aircraft was so big, you couldn't see each other. You sat alone. You knew the others were there, you just couldn't see them. They all had radio contact but this was only used in emergencies as they needed to keep as quiet as possible. The rear gunner, sat at the back, would instruct the pilot which way to fly if they were being attacked by a night fighter from behind. This was a special teamwork, the pilot and the rear gunner were tuned in to each other. There wasn't any cosy chit-chat above Germany. It was imperative that you kept your eyes open. No time for chit chat!

If at all possible, they were given a flight path around the air defences. However, there was always so much flak that this was hardly ever possible. When they flew back in a damaged aircraft, they took the flight path over the IJsselmeer and the gap at Egmond. It was a known fact. In between the take off and the landing the real work started. Work indeed, those flights

sometimes lasted several days. That all depended on the weather. If, for example, they had two days of bad weather, they stayed inside but they still certainly flew enough. Some have had three or four consecutive flights to Berlin. Well, thank you very much! Today if they have to work ten hours a day, they say, 'ten hours, you must be joking'.

Every time you took off, you didn't know whether you'd be coming back. Of course everyone thought of this but everybody also thought I'll be coming back. With this optimism they started their journey. I think you needed this optimism, otherwise nothing would have happened. It's the same with a lot of dangerous things. "It'll be alright." That was the attitude these men had too. They had a phrase for if someone didn't return: "he is gone for a Burton". Burton was a brand of beer. He is gone for a beer.

Some were able to make an emergency landing, they were lucky. The Americans flew during the day and during the day you could see more than during the night. They had proportionally more chances of making an emergency landing. It was always said, any landing you can walk away from is a good landing. Unfortunately you had no chance above sea



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A Lancaster bomber

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Emergency landing of a Wellington shot down above the IJsselmeer. The New Zealand pilot F / Sgt Gilbertson and two of the crew did not survive. The other two crew members were rescued on 28<sup>th</sup> -29<sup>th</sup> July 1942



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A B 17 Flying Fortress with painted pin-up.

Source: New Land Heritage, interview with Mr. GJ Zwanenburg, 16<sup>th</sup> September, 2009



# Part 8: Surviving after a crash landing

“They were given clear instructions not to fight as they were never armed”.

The story of the salvage officer who was involved in the salvage of, in particular, Allied aircraft wrecks in the Flevoland polders.

The crew always had money with them, Dutch, Belgian and French money. This was to pay for any help they might have needed. It was a known fact that there was a shortage of clothing in the Netherlands, so they could pay people for that at least. They were given instructions not to fight as they were never armed. They were always encouraged never to start any fight on the ground as they would lose. Even so if possible, they had to try to escape. They had all kinds of tools for that purpose. For example, a small compass concealed in a button. In the seam of the jacket. They assumed they would manage with English, in the Netherlands they mainly had no trouble. I don't know how it was in France or Belgium. They had a fairly good map with them. A silk escape map! On the one side the Netherlands and Belgium and the other side Italy and the Balkan Area, Poland. The map was in a particular packet with money in it. That money had been signed by Rost van Tonningen, who was then head of the Dutch Central Bank. The infamous Rost van Tonningen, well known and hated at the time It's all connected somehow or other.

They had a make shift survival kit for if they should crash. Even so they were ordered not to take



great risks. Later some fighter pilots had a gun with them but in general, the bomber crews didn't carry weapons. Some did have a bowie knife with them but this was more for cutting themselves free from the parachute in awkward situations rather than doing any harm to anyone else.

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Sgt Rutherford, one of the two crew members who survived the crash landing

of the Wellington [see Photo part 7] but was wounded on both legs 28<sup>th</sup> /29<sup>th</sup> July 1942

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Two fallen airmen  
who were found  
by fishermen and  
brought ashore.



## **Part 9:** **A failed and a successful emergency landing**

“Those guys just jumped out in the hope that they would fall over land”.

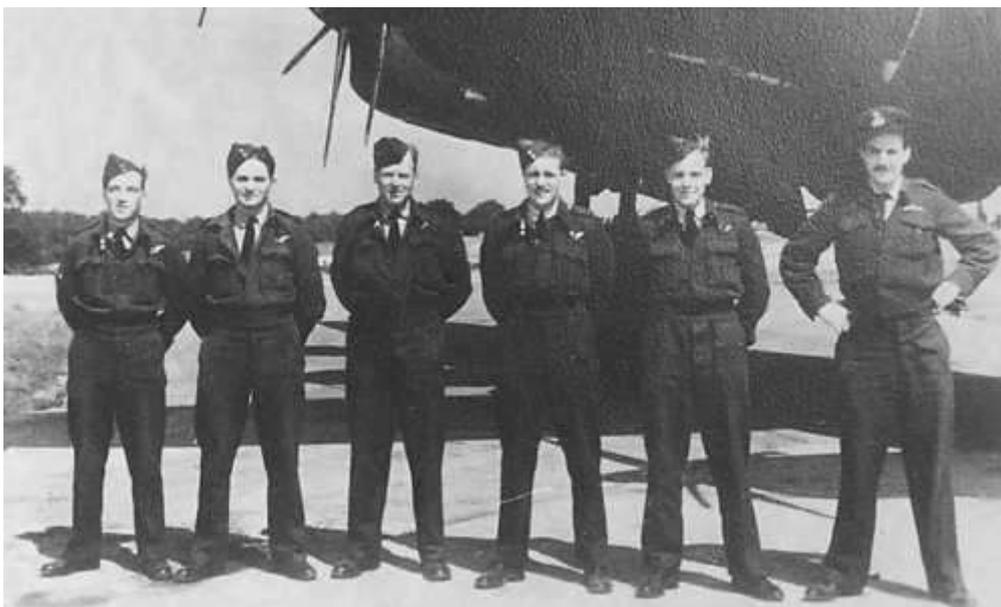
The story of the salvage officer who was involved in the salvage of, in particular, Allied aircraft wrecks in the Flevoland polders.

### **Jumping above water with poor visibility**

The men had been to Italy. That too was a seven or eight hour trip. It was bad weather when they came back. Poor visibility over the Netherlands, meaning the ground wasn't visible. They hardly knew where they were. They thought they were over the Netherlands. At one point they realized that they didn't have enough fuel to make it to England, so they decided to just try and jump out above land and see what happened. The aircraft was still flying, it wasn't actually damaged, they just didn't have enough fuel. They had put the aircraft on autopilot, so it was still flying on. The men jumped. One is buried in Harlingen, one is buried on the islands and a few are still missing. They fell into the water with their parachutes. They might have landed on a sandbank if the tide had been out but then the tide came in. The aircraft continued flying, coming in at IJmuiden and it got shot down in Amsterdam by German flak. It crashed at Landsmeer. For years it was thought that the crew was still on board but that wasn't the case. Without visibility the crew just jumped out in the hope of landing on solid ground. Unfortunately they jumped to their deaths. Just plain bad luck.

### **Allies in hiding at Gaastmeer**

A nice story about a Halifax that had to drop weapons over Friesland. They had to ditch off Stavoren in the water of the IJsselmeer. They managed to get into their dinghy. The navigator became nervous and drowned but the others managed to get ashore. They arrived in Gaastmeer. They stayed here all winter. From October until the end of the war. The wireless operator still had contact with England through, and for the Frisian Resistance Forces. That's a different story. A monument is situated on the dike at Stavoren. A film has also been made by the television channel Friesland, 'in hiding at Gaastmeer' The same wireless operator returned to the Netherlands a few year ago and that was when the monument was unveiled at the place where these men came ashore.



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The crew of the successful emergency landing in the IJsselmeer at Stavoren, 14<sup>th</sup> /15<sup>th</sup> October 1944

# Part 10: Innocent civilians bombed?

“They weren’t planning to bombard women and children, they went out to bomb the German industry”.

The story of the salvage officer who was involved in the salvage of, in particular, Allied aircraft wrecks in the Flevoland polders.

As commander, you had to be prepared to give the order for a bombing attack, even though you knew there would be losses, and innocent civilians might die. This is difficult for any commander. An American airman later said: “you give your orders for a particular purpose, even though you know that some will not return. The losses are the sacrifice one has to suffer to ensure the necessary damage can be made to ensure the end of the war”. With that in mind.....The invasion of France, the Longest Day, they knew beforehand that a lot would not be coming back. They could have said that they weren’t going to do anything but then we wouldn’t be where we are today. Were women and children bombed? No, the pilots didn’t see women and children. They saw England and what had happened there. They knew very well what was going on and they were literally prepared to go to hell and back for Bomber Harris. They didn’t have an issue with these citizens, they had targets. You have to realize, they knew that it could happen but they did not go out with the intention of bombing women and children. They went out to bomb the German industry. But at that time a lot of people lived in and around every industrial city. You couldn’t dwell on it. Your life would have been very restricted if you were to think about this all the time. They had a kind of built in protection mechanism.

They didn’t bomb civilian targets, they bombed military targets. Their targets were in the cities. A legitimate target in war is the war industry. For example the railways, roads and ports. These are all legitimate military targets and they were attacked. That people often lived close to these military targets (often the factory workers) and that the bombs fell here too, is another story. There wasn’t any other option at the time.

The bombing at Dresden was in part at the request of the Russians but they forget to mention this. Dresden was not an 'open' city, there were air defences. Where there's smoke, there's fire. Dresden was bombed by the British and the Americans, partly at the request of the Russians who were fighting there. However after the war, the Russians constantly tried to deny this because they didn’t like the English. This became a political affair. They did exactly the same on the other side! What about the devastation in the City of London. We are talking about 1940. That area of the city

was according to neutral reports completely flattened. The English were only allowed to bomb Germany after the bombing of Rotterdam.



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The Polish crew of the Lancaster LL801, which crashed into the IJsselmeer on the night of 12<sup>th</sup> /13<sup>th</sup> June 1944. The entire crew died and washed ashore by Urk. At the front Captain F/Lt. Rozanski.



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Een Lancaster bommer

Source: New Land Heritage, interview with Mr. GJ Zwanenburg, 16<sup>th</sup> September, 2009

## Part 11: There wasn't a simple solution

"Let's put it this way: if they hadn't attacked, Germany would have been unbeatable".

The story of the salvage officer who was involved in the salvage of, in particular, Allied aircraft wrecks in the Flevoland polders.

There wasn't a simple solution. Let's put it this way: if they had not bombed the Germans, then Germany would have been unbeatable. Can you imagine! Still people forget. Bombs also fell here in the Netherlands; the Germans stored and started V2's next to a hospital! This was no accident, they did this on purpose! 600 000 civilians, if we want to call them civilians, as a result of bombing. Not just women and children but also policemen, firemen and factory workers. Of course we mustn't forget the six million Jews. Need we mention the two million Russians and two million Poles that they literally hunted down.

I was once in Germany, where I had to help the Americans with salvaging. I was in my Dutch Air Force 'working clothes', the odd man out, if you know what I mean. The stranger in their midst. Then an elderly German approached me: Wer sind Sie? (who are you?) I told him I was a Dutchman. He then asked, "why do the Dutch hate us so much? I was with the occupation forces and we tried to behave ourselves". I told him 'listen, in my hometown there were fifty Jewish families and not one came back.' He looked at me: "oh" and he was gone. If you have not experienced it yourself: the story told by the song "heavenly music ", that is how we thought about it at the time. Only after the war they told us ..... Goebbels started the use of the term 'terror flieger' (terror flyers) when talking about the airmen. That won't go down with me, that nonsense.

### The air gunners

We once went to Putten with some air gunners and then the retaliation occurred. We told them the whole story there. When we boarded the bus again, one air gunner said to me:



"Gerry, having heard this, I don't regret any of the bombs I dropped on Germany. These guys were run down by Goebbels and that influenced how people looked at them in their homeland. There are still journalists in Germany that use this term for the English air gunners. In England a monument was erected for Bomber Harris. Didn't this cause a stir. Bomber Harris said: "The Germans thought they could bomb anybody they wanted but nobody would be able to bomb them. They're sowing the wind, they're going to reap the whirlwind. Coventry had been the example as the Germans found out. Coventry is an important part in the history. Look, it wasn't fun for anyone! People in the Netherlands were also killed by bombings.'

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The engine of a crashed Wellington bomber.



© Nieuw Land, collectie G.J. Zwanenburg –The stirring of a German BF-110 night fighter, which was gunned down by a night fighter of the RAF.

© Nieuw Land, collectie G.J. Zwanenburg

## Part 12: Salvaging aircraft wrecks during and immediately after the war

"I cycled through the Wieringermeer and there were aircraft wrecks everywhere".

## The story of the salvage officer who was involved in the salvage of, in particular, Allied aircraft wrecks in the Flevoland polders.

The Germans salvaged during the war. To remove human remains and the weapons of course. These were not allowed to fall into the wrong hands. They also wanted to see what information they could find on board. Radar information or things like that to see what the plans were. That's why the aircrafts were salvaged.

The scrap metal merchants came after the war. Old metal was worth money. The fishermen also brought it ashore. This was only allowed on the condition that if they found weapons or human remains, they would report it. That they did quite well. The wrecks in the Northeast Polder were cleared up. The majority of the aircraft in the Netherlands also were salvaged then. Except for in the polder.

Aircraft were salvaged from the IJsselmeer in 1945 and 1946 by the navy, and/or by the 'North Star', a cable ship for the PTT. Fishermen had been searching for aircrafts still at the bottom of the sea for a long time. The Navy had been searching too. I remember it very well. We got married in 1951 and when I shortly before went home from Amsterdam to my old hometown Harlingen across the Afsluitdijk on my bike, to pick her up, I cycled through the Wieringermeer and saw on a field a lot of aircraft wrecks.

They were laying in the field of the Department of Public Works (Rijkswaterstaat), so I went to have a look. Some aircraft were torn in half, some were still in one piece, so to speak. All these wrecks were salvaged from the IJsselmeer. The fishermen had trawls, which dragged the bottom of the sea. Later you could follow the tracks in the ground to find them. The Department of Public Works was responsible for keeping the 'sea bottom' clean, so if the fishermen's nets were damaged, they claimed by the DPW. These positions were then immediately noted on the map, the well-known map. All through fishermen fishing there. On all those places they had already taken out the smaller 'bits and pieces' lying on top.

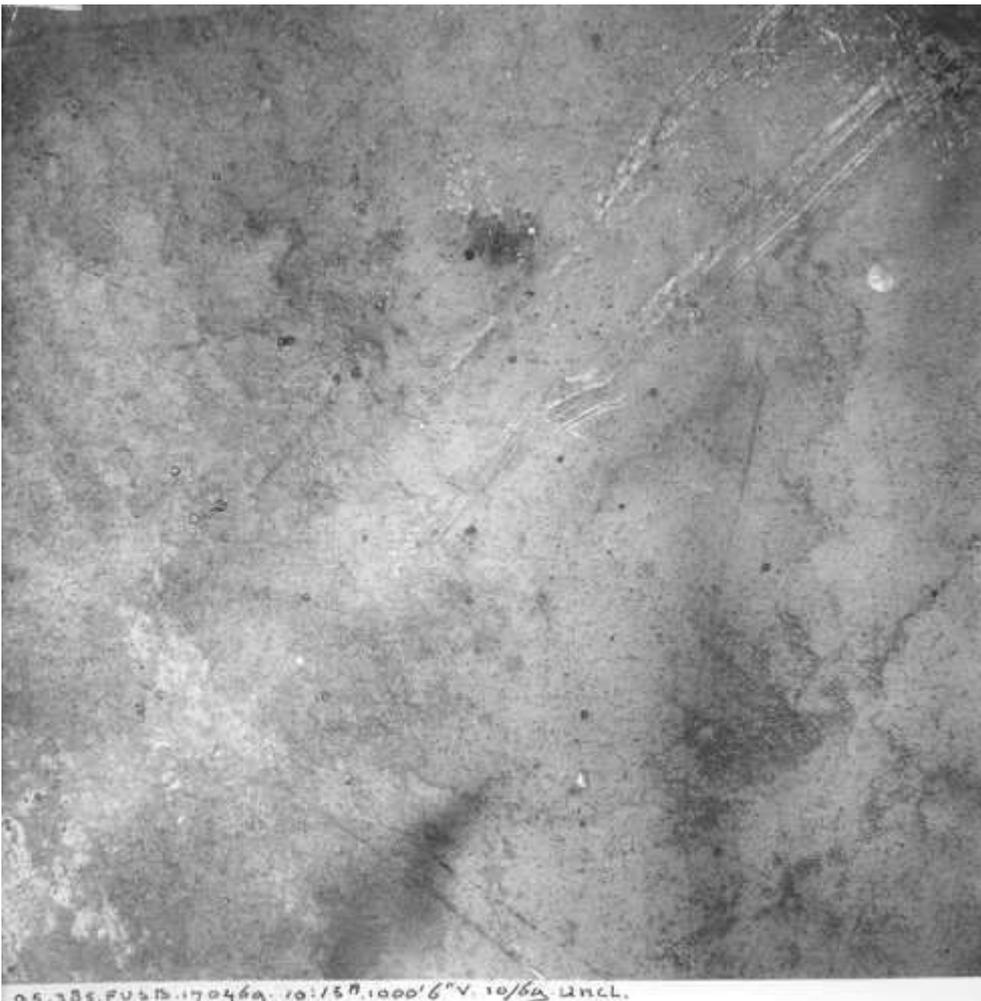
When the polders were drained, the salvaging of aircraft wrecks began. In 1958 it began in Eastern Flevoland. First to arrive was the foreign affairs relief team. I truly believe they approached the matter the wrong way. There was a lot of mess to clear up so they thought let's blow it up. That was quick and easy but most certainly not the best way, for a lot of invaluable information needed for identifying the aircraft got lost.

At one stage an aircraft of the Dutch Air Force was found, and the Air Force called in. They had a real salvage team and that's how the two sides met each other, from "there are more over here." That's when The Hague decided that the Air Force, which had its own salvage team, should be responsible for the salvage of the aircraft wrecks in the new polders.



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Near the bridge at Nijkerk parts of a Stirling were dredged up. The Stirling was salvaged in 1972, along with the human remains of some of the missing crew.



• © Nieuw Land, collectie G.J. Zwanenburg –

The trails of the fishermen's trawl are clearly visible in the dried soil.

Source: New Land Heritage, interview with Mr. GJ Zwanenburg, 16<sup>th</sup> September, 2009

## Part 13: How do you approach the salvage of an aircraft wreck?

“You took a shovel and looked to see if you could find anything with a number on it”.

The story of the salvage officer who was involved in the salvage of, in particular, Allied aircraft wrecks in the Flevoland polders.

Thanks to the DPW's maps showing the wrecks, we knew in advance where we could expect to find something. Obviously you kept that in mind. I was in close contact with the people in the polder and if they were going to cultivate somewhere, we would watch. You then went with a 'locator'. Ditches were dug with large machines and of course you didn't want anything to lying there. Once the ditches were dug, you went to work. Draglines were used and all kinds of heavy equipment. But in the beginning, it was a case of using your shovel.

### Reed

The wrecks were hidden among the reeds. The whole polder was covered in reed. It was only when they started to mow and cultivate, that everything became clear. Once the reed had been burnt down items became visible. That's when you started looking. The helicopter pilots of Soesterberg had to have regular flying exercises so they went to look. I'd get another call telling me something somewhere had been found. So I'd go too. You came upon a piece of metal sticking out of the ground. Took a shovel and looked to see if there were any markings. I was looking for part numbers to identify the type of aircraft. We knew from research what planes had crashed into the IJsselmeer. You could start eliminating. Searching for more numbers. An aircraft could be clearly recognized by the metal. Therefore it was important to know all the aircraft types from that period. I knew my stuff. If a wreck was located, you went there.

Everything was recovered according to the cultivation schedule in the polder. In 1968 the B-24 at the Oostvaardersdijk came to light, and at the time I had already been there. However, we only managed to salvage her in 1975, with the help of the Department of the IJsselmeer polders and the Zuidersea Works.

## Cleanup or storage

Everything was cleaned up. Things that even your everyday man could recognize shouldn't be thrown away, but had to be kept. When we go to the schools in Dronten (or elsewhere), we always take a box of recognizable wreckage parts along to show the children. An RAF mug was found by me among the wreck parts of a Stirling. It was in pieces but it is now one piece again.

There was an old fashioned shaver, and a toothbrush in the mug. Should you have to divert to another base due to fog on your own base, you at least had these two familiar things with you.

They sometimes used a ladies stocking as a scarf. They had stiff leather flying clothing which got really hard in the high altitude cold. Something soft around your neck was also functional. And it might be a keepsake to someone you loved or liked very much, but also practical. Boys together, that's soldiers. Even the name of that plane: Dinah Might. Perhaps "Dinah might", and then you would have "dynamite". A little bit of humour amongst the boys. They needed that to help them through those difficult and dangerous times!

## Identifying aircraft Wrecks

I was a wireless operator of profession and very good with numbers. You had to know frequencies and things like that. I could recall phone numbers off by heart.. That was really easy. Then at a certain moment it became clear to me that for instance cars, boats, planes, all have their own part numbers. When I started noticing this and was confronted with these numbers. I sent them off to get the relevant information. That's how it all started, the identification. You could instantly recognize the type of aircraft and you knew right away it is a fighter, bomber, night-fighter, and /or both. We had to figure out which aircraft it was exactly. Each aircraft, like a car, had its own (serial)number. That's what you looked for, and that's what you found.



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Junker 88 S-1



© Nieuw Land, collectie G.J. Zwanenburg -

Wreckage of a German Ju-88 that crashed in the night of 21<sup>st</sup> /22<sup>nd</sup> April, 1944 salvaged in June 1973.



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During the salvage of the Ju-88 British military and air attachés visited (right Mr. Zwanenburg), 1973



© Nieuw Land, collectie G.J. Zwanenburg -

The switch box to the radio antennas.

Source: New Land Heritage, interview with Mr. GJ Zwanenburg, 16<sup>th</sup> September, 2009

## Part 14: The unique salvage of the B24 at the Oostvaardersdijk.

“That was an emotional moment for him, after 32 years he saw his aircraft again”. ‘Oh boy, oh boy’.

The story of the salvage officer who was involved in the salvage of, in particular, Allied aircraft wrecks in the Flevoland polders.

I think the B-24 at the Oostvaardersdijk has always been the largest salvage operation. We had one of the survivors on scene, the co-pilot Charlie Taylor. He was the only survivor of that failed emergency landing over sea [see section 3]. As I had identified the aircraft on the basis of the

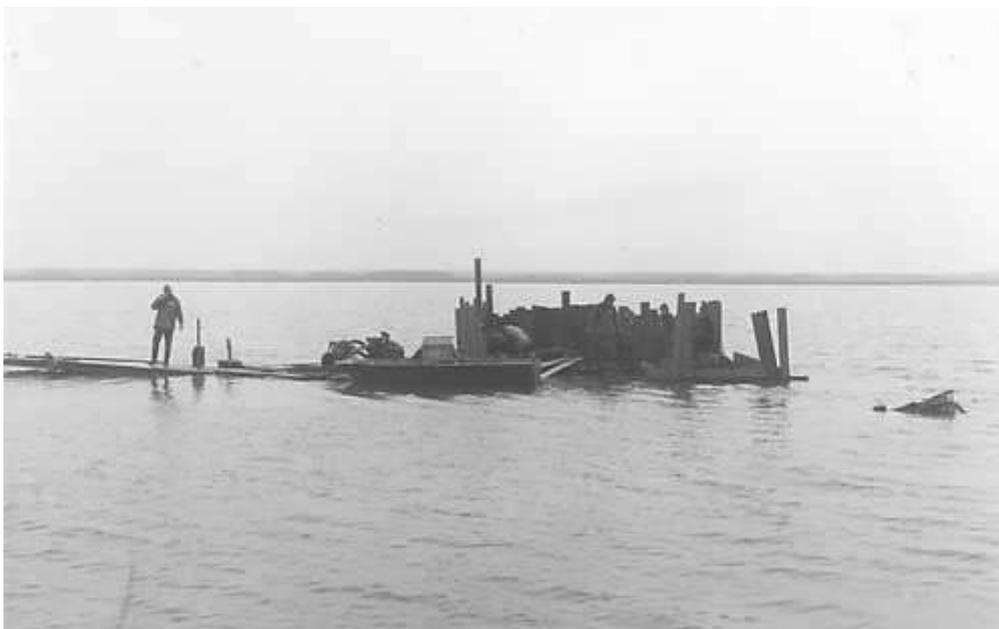
serial number on it , I tried to find out more about the bomb load etc. through America. That was when it appeared that the survivor was still alive. They searched for him and the NCRV (Dutch TV organization) made a movie about it, 'Liberator above water ' in a series called 'Time stood still'. Charlie Taylor then came to the Netherlands at the expense of the NRCV and he visited us at the wreckage sight. I welcomed him and we talked. It was an emotional moment for him, after 32 years he saw his aircraft again. At that moment he realized that his mates were still inside. He didn't see this even though the aircraft hadn't yet been drained. We had to make a complete sand dam and a large building site to get the human remains of the five men out. Then we pulled the aircraft out with the help of tanks. He was with us when we were working on emptying the cockpit. He didn't see any human remains himself, I didn't want that. All he could say was "oh boy, oh boy". I think he was aware of the fact that his mates must have still been inside. Friends and family always have a picture of how a loved one was when he was alive. It has always been my rule that you shouldn't disturb that image by showing human remains. He was very emotional. I think due to the fact that he was the sole survivor. They were his friends after all. The men you'd shared everything with good and bad, you formed a unity. They knew each other and went through thick and thin together, that creates a bond. Together they experienced things. So when after 32 years the whole story comes up again ...

He had been in captivity, returned to America and went to work. Perhaps forgotten everything a bit. You pushed it to the back of your mind. Not everyone could talk about their experiences after the war but that wasn't always necessary. If you had a job, it was OK. However, afterward that, as you get older, it all comes right back. Especially if you were confronted with what happened just like Charlie. Whilst he was in the Netherlands, they took him and his wife to Margraten. Then they visited the graves of the men who had already been buried there. They had been washed ashore. Three men. We still exchange Christmas cards together. He has now heard the full story and knows what went down. He now has some peace of mind.



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The bridge and sand dam to the wreck of the B 24, created by the engineering corps of the Army, 1975



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© Nieuw Land, collectie G.J. Zwanenburg –

Around the cockpit an excavation site was made as people expected to find human remains of the crew, 1975



© Nieuw Land, collectie G.J. Zwanenburg -

A machine gun from the B 24, 1975

## Part 15: Personal objects in aircraft wrecks

“Being missing in action is worse than death”.

The story of the salvage officer who was involved in the salvage of, in particular, Allied aircraft wrecks in the Flevoland polders.

Being missing in action is worse than knowing if someone is dead . That’s just the way it is. If you don’t know what has happened to a loved one, it’s feels a lot worse. We often thought we were re-opening old wounds but that clearly wasn’t true. The men found during the salvage, were brought to America to be buried there. Americans still have the choice of whether they want their loved ones to be buried in Europe or in America. I still have a piece of the newspaper ‘Airman finally comes home.’ In the movie ... ‘Some of our airmen are no longer missing’ the brother of the airman talks about how he experienced it when someone knocked on his door to tell him that his brother had been found. These are emotional issues. It was not always easy.

If you can change 'missing in action' to 'he is buried there' it is a kind of liberation. It is quite common for people, especially in Germany, to visit the grave of an old friend once a year or more to tell them what has been happening over the last year. If you don’t have a grave to visit, you can’t do this and that makes it even worse.

We found lots of things. Everyday things. A mug for example. The simple fact of finding a pair of shoes with something in it, means you’d found someone. Now you had to find out who among the crew wore those shoes? They all had boots on. The flight engineer. You could figure it out.

I was also responsible for looking to see what part of the plane had been found and with whom. If you found parts of a tail-turret, it couldn’t be the pilot or if you found parts of the cockpit, it couldn’t be the tail gunner. You had to pay attention to all of this. They had coins on them, gold rings, keys to a locker, all these things. However you had no idea what lockers, how many lockers were there?? You found English money of that time but you can’t trace this back to a person.

A piece of paper from a wireless operator. Whilst you were listening, you would draw. That way you had something to do. I did the same myself. He, however, drew himself. It is an Indian. There were a lot of Indians in the U.S. signal service because they spoke their native language among themselves and the enemy wasn’t able to understand them. That’s the way it works.

We found a little angel made of tinfoil in the purse of an airman. He was married a few months earlier and it had been sitting on the wedding cake. That silver-paper angel went to the widow. If you found personal things and you knew who’s it was, it was always given back. We never had personal contact with the people. We only had contact with the Army Grave-services and they passed it on to the official authorities. I had to sign for the identity of the aircraft, then it went to the embassy and they arranged it further. We never came into direct contact with the family. I did

only once talk with families. For example, I went with a woman from England to the spot where the aircraft of her brother had been recovered.

# Found

## Airmen Coming Home At Last

The remains of a New Martinsville man and a Paden City man were found in the wreckage of a World War II bomber which crashed 32 years ago in the Netherlands' Dutch Sea.

Eugene Miller, president of Viking Glass Co. in New Martinsville was notified by the Department of the Army that the remains of his brother, Flight Officer Kent Miller, pilot of the aircraft, were found in the wreckage.

Also recovered from the wreckage were the remains of former Paden City resident Second Lt. Frank A. Passavant. According to an advisory from the adjutant general's office, Passavant was listed as navigator on the B-24 bomber which crashed into the Dutch Sea on Dec. 22, 1943 while on a return trip from a bombing mission over Munster, Germany.

The wreckage was discovered by

the Dutch government which, in the past several years, has been in the process of draining the Dutch Sea in order to reclaim the land for its use.

Records show that the B-24 aircraft had 10 crew members when it went down, with one crew member, the co-pilot, surviving the crash and the remains of four other crewmen washed ashore at various times during the next six months. This left five crewmen to be accounted for — Miller, Passavant, the bombardier, ball turret gunner and the radio operator.

Miller was a 1940 graduate of Magnolia High School in New Martinsville.

Arrival of the remains and subsequent services and burial will be within the next two weeks.



KENT F. MILLER

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Newspaper article: 'Found Airmen Coming Home At Last'



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The shoe of one of the crew

Source: New Land Heritage, interview with Mr. GJ Zwanenburg, 16<sup>th</sup> September, 2009

# Part 16: One big bang and everything went quiet

“You see an aircraft crash into the sea but you can’t do anything”.

The story of the salvage officer who was involved in the salvage of, in particular, Allied aircraft wrecks in the Flevoland polders.

How did it happen? As the aircrafts crashed from the skies you could hear the engines howl and then in a split second it all went quiet. As boys we always went to look, it interested us so that’s what we did. I went to a field, a few days after an aircraft had crashed and it was just all small bits and pieces. There were even body parts lying there. I remember finding a 'Pilots Wing' there with RAAF on it. Back in 1943, but at the time I did not know that it meant Royal Australian Air Force.

The aircraft was totally disintegrated. Later, when I began my salvage work, we also found German 'crash reports' and in the German crash report on the above mentioned aircraft was said 'remains of 7 men in one coffin'. This meant that on crash she had been smashed to smithereens. You wouldn’t find anything anymore there.

These men are buried in what is called a 'collective grave'. Any remains that have been found, are buried there. Their names engraved on the grave stone. Some people still believe there must be something left at the scene of the crash but when they go and look, they find nothing. Not surprisingly, but they do not know anything anymore about these circumstances of war. I’ve seen it in Harlingen, the aircraft (a B-17) came due to battle damage in trouble over the Wadden sea (old Zuydersea) but crashed on land. Three men of the crew bailed out already over sea, but the two survivors waited until the aircraft came back over land again before bailing out and came down on land. The three who bailed out over sea had no change at all, with a strong eastern wind they drifted out further over sea but in the cold winter weather (December 1943) would not have a single change after getting down. Against German orders the Harlingen lifeboat sailed to search for them, but had no luck and came back to the harbour without them. Those three boys are still “missing” today but will never be found again, most certainly not at the crash place of the aircraft.

## Childhood memories

Was the war was an exciting time? In a way it was a bit. I was twelve when the war began. Old enough to remember what happened but still young enough to roam around here and there. You entertained yourself. Moreover, we lived in Harlingen, a port city. They fished in Harlingen. The German Navy was also in port. They (confiscated) stole a lot of our fishing boats, but oddly

enough, just your average German sailor was on board, not your typical Nazi soldier. I saw it all myself, and I've also seen bodies washing ashore. Things like that attracted us.

I remember in 1934, when I was six, we were out in The Hague. I was allowed to stay up in the evening because an aircraft would be flying over and I could see the lights. Ten years later, there were two thousand aircraft flying overhead on a daily basis!

Civilians were constantly involved; as the air war was that part of the war they were directly confronted and connected with. They saw air combat, and see aircraft crashing. I saw several air combats myself.

Walking on a dark winter evening you could hear the aircrafts, the night fighters, their tracer... you saw the aircrafts catch fire, burning pieces flying to the ground ... You saw aircrafts crash into the sea. And you couldn't do anything about it. That's the way it went in those days. The Netherlands was full of night fighters. Leeuwarden, Gilze-Rijen, Twente and Venlo, these were the four night fighter fields..

### **He couldn't be there, he didn't have the range**

We were skating in February 1941. We skated from Harlingen to Bolsward, from Bolsward to Makkum and from Makkum back to Harlingen. It was the afternoon of Saturday the 8th, as Saturday morning we had to go to school. I was thirteen. We had just passed Bolsward on our way to Makkum and we heard a plane. It was lousy weather, drizzly. We thought how could you be flying in this weather? We saw him, it was an English fighter, I recognized the type, a Hurricane. If I close my eyes, I can still see him. So very low. He waved, we waved. Something very special. We talked about this for months. After the war I went to investigate. A British friend of mine said: Gerry, he couldn't have been there. He didn't have the range. He couldn't have flown so far. He had been chasing a German aircraft from England and lost his way due to bad weather. Above Friesland he was back on a west course towards England but he didn't have enough fuel. Halfway over the North Sea, he transmitted that he couldn't make it. He is still missing. (He was F/O. Laurie Cryderman, a Canadian Battle of Britain pilot, one of the last things he did, was wave to some Frisian boys.!) If you have seen and experienced it, it's something you will always remember, for the rest of your life. That's one of the reasons I started working on air warfare . It started with research around Harlingen, and later on the whole Netherlands. When I joined the Air Force as a salvage chief in 1967 I was fairly well informed on the air war subject.



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Mustang



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Piece of the wing from a Mustang



• © Nieuw Land, collectie G.J. Zwanenburg –

Part of the armament of a Mustang



• © Nieuw Land, collectie G.J. Zwanenburg –

Wreckage of a B 17 Flying Fortress

Source: New Land Heritage, interview with Mr. GJ Zwanenburg, 16<sup>th</sup> September, 2009

# Part 17: That humming in the air gave courage

“It was those men that you heard, and it was those men you saw die”.

The story of the salvage officer who was involved in the salvage of, in particular, Allied aircraft wrecks in the Flevoland polders.

America was at war because of Japan. There were a lot of Americans who knew who the enemy was in Europe. That was Germany. We all know that the Americans crossed the ocean to help in the fight against Germany. These guys in their aircrafts came from everywhere, from all walks of life. The American pilots, navigators and bombardiers were all officers.

They were well educated. The others were non-commissioned officers. The aircrew were at least sergeants. They had higher wages because they were more at risk than a sergeant with the ground staff. The Germans used this against the Americans saying “Sie fliegen für Dollars” (they are only flying for dollars). It was a magnificent sight, seeing them flying during the day. At night you could hear the English but not see them, you only saw the day flights! We counted two thousand in August 1944. Difficult to imagine. At the time it was something special. The Germans said we were not allowed to wave to them or anything, so you had to be very careful. In the beginning, the Germans tried to win the Dutch over by saying things like go with us. we have defeated England. Except ... each night the English men were back again! The sound of the aircraft saying: We are here and we are doing something about it. It went on more and more. That gave us courage.

Where did this interest come from? From the fact that you'd experienced it as a boy. I already told you about the aircraft we saw flying. Three weeks later, in the afternoon of Sunday the 2nd of March, we heard an aircraft and a bang. Boom. Bomb in the harbour. No air raid, so everyone went to the harbour to look. The whole harbour was crowded with people. And twenty minutes later, a British aircraft flew over. I recognized the type, a Beaufort. He was quite low. Everyone was waving and they waved back and then they were gone! After the war, I got in touch with the pilot. He told to me: “You were a couple of bloody..... I might have dropped my second bomb”! He didn't and that's what I told him. (then F/Lt. Later Wg/Cdr Tony Gadd DFC & Bar of Coastal Cmd. We became good friends, and when he visited Harlingen became 'citizen of honour'!)

These were the parts of the war that you had to deal with in the occupied territories. It were those men that you heard and it were those men you saw die. You saw them killed. It was forced upon you, the young boys had nothing to do. They couldn't go anywhere and the air warfare was the only exciting thing happening for them. The schools were occupied, as Harlingen was a port and the military had taken over and occupied all the schools. I knew all the aircrafts at that time. That interested me and the other boys too. In Friesland we had a pole vault, so we could cross the land

no problem . I can still remember that we were at an aircraft crash site picking up stuff when we heard "Was machen Sie da?" (what are you doing there?). A German sentry. We said, 'nur gucken " (just looking) as we were not really allowed to be so close!



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The streaks in the sky were always a beautiful sight

Source: New Land Heritage, interview with Mr. GJ Zwanenburg, 16<sup>th</sup> September, 2009



Co-pilot Charlie Taylor (left) sees his aircraft again after 32 years. Beside him salvage officer Zwanenburg, 1975

Source: New Land Heritage, interview with Mr. GJ Zwanenburg, 16<sup>th</sup> September, 2009

# Part 18: Aircraft wrecks as tangible history

"When many years later you find the remains of someone, you have to stop and think for a moment."

The story of the salvage officer who was involved in the salvage of, in particular, Allied aircraft wrecks in the Flevoland polders.

## The First salvage

I rolled into it automatically. I was a wireless operator with Naval Intelligence. Something completely different and I was working in Amsterdam. In 1962, a plane was salvaged at the Volewijck Park, and of course I went to have a look. The Grave Service and Air Force appeared to be working there together. I had already checked to find out what type, and which aircraft might have crashed there, so I knew this inside information in advance. Then I saw certain pieces that I recognized for this type of aircraft, and so able to put two and two together. As my knowledge was fairly good, this wasn't too hard. The Air Force then asked me if I wanted to help them, too as I already had files on almost all aircrafts that had crashed in the Netherlands. In 1967 I transferred to the Air Force as a salvage officer.

That switch to the Air Force took five years as at the time of the Cold War, the Secret Service was also an important profession. I was in the Navy as a civilian and stayed that when I went to the Air Force. When in the Air Force my time in the Navy always was a great help, for if we had lost one of our own aircrafts, which I also had to salvage I often went along with the 'Mineservice' for the search at sea. So I also got some 'sea legs' while going along in a necessary and very interesting part of the big job.

## Tangible history

It didn't matter. I could do this very well. It wasn't a problem for me. As a interception wireless operator you were constantly turning the tuning. Listening, listening, listening. To another part of the world. You could concentrate well and I didn't mind browsing through books and ancient history. Not everyone can do that. It just wouldn't work. We bring the men back home. These men are missing in action. They gave their lives for us and I could give something back. It feels good to do something in return. I could handle it even so it was still quite emotional every now and then. What I had to do, and what I always tried to do, was to reconstruct what had happened. Only then could you prepare yourself for what you might find there. At the time of the salvage, I was the only one who knew the identity of the aircraft. We didn't talk about it. I had a good team that wasn't the problem but you couldn't talk about it as I felt if you found some human remains you had to be 200% certain before talking about it. You certainly shouldn't talk about it until after the funeral once everyone had been informed. After everything had been officially completed.

## Human remains

When after so many years you find the remains of someone, you take a moment. You know this will happen. The grave service team puts the remains in a row, I put the bits and pieces from the aircraft in a row. If you find an aircraft with four or five people, you have to figure out who is who. We all have a skeleton but all skeletons are different. Just like DNA but that wasn't available then. So they checked the skeletons. I always made sure that the grave service team had all the necessary papers, then they could say: this is .... And this is .... It was only later that all was sent to the embassies, and they made sure it was known on the other side. It's wasn't always just the skeleton that remained after all those years. That depended on the type of soil. If it was peat you found more. Once it was pulled out of the ground it quickly disappeared. I once salvaged an American P-38 fighter at Hoogeveen and there was more than just a skeleton. In the polder you only found 'clean' bones. If we did find human remains, it was to some extent reassuring: we weren't doing it all for nothing. The reason for everything became clear again. It gave us courage to continue. You got used to it a little bit but never entirely.

## Motivation

I was an outsider. You rolled into this profession because you had such an interest, you could do it. The salvaging wasn't easy, even so. Being able to identify people was the motivation. If your wife wasn't behind you, it was impossible to do. Of course my wife never went to a salvage but years ago an aircraft was salvaged in our neighbourhood and my successor asked if we wanted to come and have a look. That time she went with me. The first time she came, she sniffed and said: that's how you smelt when you came home. It was a mixed smell of oil, gasoline and ground. You couldn't help but smell it.



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The salvage of a Lancaster, where also the human remains of the missing crew were salvaged, September 1973



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The crew members were buried with military honours at the War cemetery 'Jonkerbos' in Nijmegen, 1973.

source: New Land Heritage, interview with Mr. G.J. Zwanenburg, 16<sup>th</sup> September 2009

## Part 19: Should we continue to commemorate?

“If you forget the lessons of history, they will repeat themselves”.

The story of the salvage officer who was involved in the salvage of, in particular, Allied aircraft wrecks in the Flevoland polders.

### Education in schools

We both find giving the background information to the children of the schools in Dronten fun. Everything about the air warfare and things like that. If you have to maintain a monument, you should know what it stands for. We tell them what these old men, who come every year, have done. That they flew in the skies above. You have things with you that you can show. Most children find it very interesting. Once we received a notebook from the class as each child had been allowed to write down something after we had gone. They often have a project week before we come. How they experienced it and what they thought about it. Air warfare is a little adventurous and this appeals to them. You also talk to them about the downside, that these men had to sit for ten hours and things like this.

## **Continue to remember?**

People now no longer understand how it was then. These people [in a booklet, LB] were all captured in Harlingen, in January 1945. I knew them well. Our next door neighbour, the father of two good friends. I still correspond with the son of one of them. They all went to Neuengamme and not one came back. They were supposedly with the underground. By accident. They were often religious people. Did they do strange things, no. I knew them all! And that affects you. These are things you should take into account. And then you ask how long should we remember. As long as there are people who have consciously experienced the Second World War. As long as that? And after that? I think you then have to leave it with the children. Today kids learn more about the war than in previous years. Then they didn't learn anything at all about the war. They probably do it a bit better today. If children no longer learn anything about the war, there's no point in remembering. If the children are going to learn and they are going to delve into it, then of course remembering is important. A sophisticated famous saying: "If you forget the lessons of history, they will repeat themselves." For this reason alone you should remember!

## **Airmen's Memorial**

The monument in Dronten, dedicated to all allied airmen who lost their lives in WW2, came about at the request of the people of Dronten. Throughout the Netherlands, in every small village, a monument has been dedicated to the victims of World War II. In Dronten they said: "Thanks to the men you find here, we can live and work here". And so in 1965 the monument was erected. I have not missed one commemoration and have been to everyone on the 4th May since 1965.

In the year the B 24 was recovered at the Oostvaardersdijk, Mr. Zwanenburg sent a Christmas card to all his friends and relations with a picture of the landscaped Zanddam and the following text: Road to the past as a remembrance to the future.



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The airmen's monument in Dronten

Source: New Land Heritage, interview with Mr. GJ Zwanenburg, 16<sup>th</sup> September, 2009