

Trenches to Foxholes

Americans and Belgians get to thank their WWII heroes

By Cis Spook
USAG Benelux Public Affairs

The 424th Air Base Squadron from Chièvres Air Base joined the city of Silly, the local community and family members of the downed B-17 in honoring the Royal Flush crew members, April 13, in Fouleng, Belgium.

On this day, 70 years ago, the crew members of the Royal Flush were heading back to their base in England after a successful bombing mission over Schweinfurt, Germany.

"I remember the navigator saying it's ten more minutes to the channel," recalls Troy Hollar, the sole living survivor of the Royal Flush crew who came from the United States to attend the ceremony. "Getting to the channel was getting real close to being home," Hollar added.

It was not going to be a smooth flight back to their base as getting over Chièvres Air Base Belgium, which was occupied by the Germans during WWII, the airplane got hit by anti aircraft defense.

Hollar who was the top turret gunner on the plane, was able to bail out on time. This was not the case for six members of the crew who were killed in the crash: 1st Lt. Robert Lavin, the pilot, 2nd Lt. Louis Bendon, the co-pilot, 2nd Lt. Calvin Anthes, bombardier, Staff Sgt. Lloyd Brady, ball turret gunner, Staff Sgt. Raymond Marz, waist gunner and Staff Sgt. James Malone, tail gunner.

Family members of Lavin, Anthes, Brady and Marz also made the trip to be present at the 70th anniversary.

Four of the crew were able to make it out and parachuted down to earth. Staff Sgt. Charlie Johnson was too injured and was taken prisoner by the Germans. The other three, navigator 2nd Lt. Harold Ashman, whose son and step daughter were also in attendance, radio operator Tech. Sgt. Edward Price and waist gunner Tech. Sgt. Troy Hollar were whisked into hiding.

"A new mission had begun for all involved," Lt. Col. Christopher Kuester, Commander, 424th Air Base Squadron, Chièvres Air Base, said during the ceremony. "For the citizens of Fouleng it was their way of ensuring the men who were fighting for their freedom would continued to live. For the three airmen, it was to stay alive and try to return to the fight."

"This is not the end of the story though," Kuester continued. "The people of Fouleng have not forgotten and these family

members of the airmen have not forgotten...We all stand here today to show that even though we come from different countries, we come to honor the sacrifices by all those involved," he added.

As Mayor Christian Leclercq mentioned in his speech : "The reason why we are here in Fou-



Americans and Belgians gathered in Fouleng Sunday, April 13, 2014 to pay tribute to the Royal Flush crew. Seventy years ago, their B-17 crashed in the field next to the farm house, the site marked by an American flag (right). Only four of the 10 crew members survived the crash; one of them, Troy Hollar, attended the ceremony with more than 20 other family members of the Royal Flush crew.



leng is that we all have a duty to remember. For you, Americans, it is to show your affection towards the service members who defended the country. For us, Belgians, it is to thank the American support against the invasion of the Nazis, during Worl War II."

After the remarks, wreaths were laid at the plaque on the wall of the farm next to the field where the plane crashed and at the memorial near the the farm.

"This memorial is the marker of so much more than a crash. It is a spot that notes where heroes fell and other heroes were born," Kuester concluded.

Eric Daniel

Donovan Abrassart

Trenches to Foxholes

WWII B-17 crew member returns to crash site

By Keith Houin

USAG Benelux Public Affairs

“You’re not getting any flak; you’re not getting any fighters. You’re just hurrying back home, that’s all it amounts too,” Troy Hollar said while at Chièvres Air Base, the very base that’s flak batteries brought down his B-17 on April 13, 1944.

Seventy years later, the WWII Tech. Sgt. and top turret gunner is back at the site where the Belgian resistance helped him and fellow Royal Flush crew members escape the Nazis. Hollar was recognized at a commemoration for his aircrew and later was made an honorary citizen of the town of Silly where he safely parachuted to after his plane was hit.

April 13 was just like any other mission day for a member of the 384th Bomb Group, he said. “You get up at 4 a.m., breakfast at five, go to the gun shack, wipe your gun dry, put it together, get your parachute, go to briefing at six and go to your plane,” he said. But that day it wasn’t just another mission for the crew of the Royal Flush.

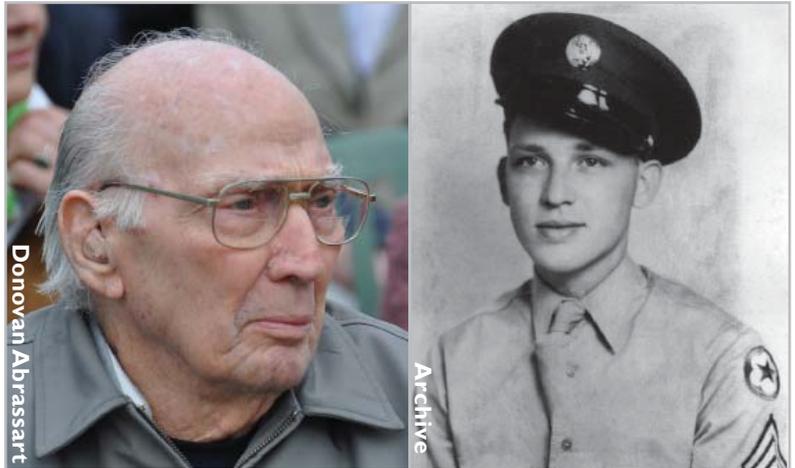
At the briefing, Hollar found out the targets were ball bearing plants in Schweinfurt, Germany. The parts were critical to German tanks and aircraft. “That was one of the hardest targets to get,” he said. Additionally, they were flying a different aircraft that day as the Royal Flush was in for repairs, it was a newer model and that small difference would come into play later in the day. “In loading my gun, I hit the wrong switch that I didn’t know was there and about 20 rounds of ammo piled up on top of the gun. It had to be put back one round at a time. We were almost to France by the time I got that right,” he said.

When they got close to the target “fighters hit us hard. Sometimes fighters would attack three abreast. Sometimes from the rear they would attack rolling while firing to confuse the gunners. There was no damage to our group though,” he said. “When we turned in to make the bomb run, you could



B-17s of the 384th Bomb Group on a bombing run.

see the flak all over the city. A solid wall of flak just like a heavy cloud. And you wonder how you can fly an airplane through all that and still come out the other side, but when we got in it wasn’t quite that bad – wasn’t near that bad. As



Tech. Sgt. Troy Hollar now and then.

we were coming out, I looked back and watched the wing behind us come out of the flak. It was like they would just pop out of it like from heavy clouds.”

The trip back was calm. “You’re not getting any flak; you’re not getting any fighters. You’re just hurrying back home, that’s all it amounts too. When the navigator called over the intercom that it was 10 minutes to the channel, very shortly after that (the Germans at Chièvres Air Base) started firing at us with four guns. They had us zeroed in right away. We always flew what is known as the number four position which is the center of the formation,” Hollar said. “Two flak burst in front and back, one on our right wing tip and one on the left.”

There was nothing he could do but watch, he said.

“It was like that for a few burst then one hit the tip of our left wing. It knocked us way up over on our right wing. That scared me because I thought it might fall into a tailspin and I would have a real hard time getting out,” he said. The pilot got the plane level but their wing was on fire and they were in a flat spin, Hollar said.

Hollar went to the bomb bay doors to parachute out, but the release cable for the doors wasn’t there. The new model had some changes. Fortunately one of the other crew members knew about them and Hollar was able to jump. “The pilot was still at the controls with the wing on fire. I just put my hands out, one to keep my head from hitting the bomb bay doors and the other held over the rip cord so it wouldn’t catch anything.”

The trip was 20,000 feet to the ground. “After the rush of the air after you leave the plane, everything is dead calm, there’s no sensation of movement or falling or nothing. You could have gone to sleep if you had enough time,” he said.

Only four of the crew members were able to parachute and escape the explosion and ensuing crash.

Antonio de La Serna, 11-years old at the time witnessed

Continued on next page

Trenches to Foxholes

WWII veteran I continued

the crash. "We were playing at the chateau when we saw the plane coming in. I still remember the sound as the plane was heading down," he said. "Then there was the explosion. A few seconds later we saw two parachutes coming down. We didn't see the others, but heard about them later."

After the jump, "I thought they were shooting at me, but found out it was just my ears popping," Hollar said. Then he started looking for the best direction to go to quickly get into hiding. Being farm country there wasn't many choices. He saw a larger tree and thought he could get past it, but with no surface wind his chute got caught on it, Hollar said.

"I climbed down to the last limb and then just hugged the trunk and slid down the next 20 feet or so. I decided which way I could go and when I got on the ground, I just started to cross the pasture to those other trees and I heard people calling and I looked back and these two civilians were frantically calling and waving for me to hurry back," he said.

"I rushed back and they started walking real fast toward the house. The (German soldiers) reached my landing site and started firing at us and we got a little more speed out of our running," he said.

"We run around the house and there's a big hay stack there with a hole in it at the bottom. I jumped into that and they stuffed it closed," Hollar said.

His head was only about six inches under the straw and he could hear the German soldiers talking to the Belgians. Turns out they were asking where the American went, he said. "I could hear them shouting at the people as they left."

After a couple of hours the Belgians brought him some warm milk and a sandwich, but he only ate half the sandwich and put the other half in his pocket. "I didn't know when I would get anything else," he said.

Later that night he was whisked across pastures to another house where a big supper was waiting for him, he said. After about a month in Fouleng, Silly they moved him to Brussels where he spent five months in hiding with numerous Belgian families. He was provided a fake passport with the name Camille Juanau and on his work card he was listed as an editor.

"We didn't stay with the same family for long. A couple of weeks. Maybe three weeks and they moved us along. They didn't want word to get out there was a stranger in the neighborhood. If you wanted to see outside you stood in the middle of the room. You didn't get near the window. We moved fairly often from one house to another," he said. However Hollar and Tech. Sgt. Edward Price did spend two months with the Brichart family.

Hollar and Price spent their time playing cards and board games or listening to the radio, he said. "Occasionally we would get to go out."

On September 3, 1944 British troops liberated Brussels and soon Hollar would start his trip back to the U.S. Army. "They loaded several of us into the back of a truck and brought us to Paris where we were interrogated for four days," he said. After Paris they were flown to London for more interrogations. Finally, after days of paper work, he was heading back to the U.S. He landed at Presque Isle, Maine where they received travel papers and missing uniform items and then it was off to New York where they put him and other Soldiers in a hotel. They were driven to La Guardia Field for interrogations daily. Shortly afterward, he was given leave paperwork and went home for 45 days.

Hollar doesn't remember the resistance members much but has fond memories of the members of the families he lived with, he said. "They were real nice and kind and did just about anything for my wellbeing."

His return is emotional. Not that he actually says it, but his eyes tell the story. "The Europeans seem to place more emphasis on remembering and honoring history than we do back home. They seem more grateful," he said. "I guess it is because they felt the horrors and lived through the bombings and it was more personal."

Hollar enlisted in the regular Army on November 19, 1941 and was discharged November 1, 1945. He served for the entire U.S. involvement in the war.

The 384th Bomb Group

Tech. Sgt. Troy Hollar's is just one of many little known stories of downed airmen.

During its time in England, the 384th Bomb Group undertook bombing missions to the airdromes at Orléans, Bricy, and Nancy, the motor works at Cologne, an aircraft component factory in Halberstadt, the steel works at Magdeburg, oil storage facilities at Leipzig and Berlin, railroad marshalling yards at Duren and Mannheim, the ports of Hamburg and Emden, and ball bearing plants in Schweinfurt.

The 384th Bomb Group flew 9,348 combat sorties in 316 missions, dropping 22,416 tons of bombs on enemy targets. The unit lost 159 aircraft and 1,625 men in combat, while destroying 165 enemy airplanes (with 34 more "probables") and seriously damaging 116 others.

The men of the Group earned three Distinguished Service Crosses; 15 Silver Stars; more than 1,000 Distinguished Flying Crosses; hundreds of Purple Hearts; and more than 5,000 Air Medals. In addition, six ground crew members were awarded the Legion of Merit, and others received the Bronze Star. For the Group's efforts they received Distinguished Unit Citations for missions flown on January 11, 1944 and on April 24, 1944.

Twenty-five other B-17 bomb groups flew out of England and another six out of Italy. More than 10,000 B-17s were used in Europe and more than 4,000 were lost. More than 250,000 Americans flew in them, of them 46,500 were either killed or wounded.

Trenches to Foxholes

Royal Flush crew survivor and relatives get to know each other at the 70th anniversary of the crash

By Cis Spook

USAG Benelux Public Affairs

The sole survivor of the Royal Flush and twenty three family members of the crew came to attend this year's ceremony.

Donna Schurman and Jeffrey Lavin



Donna Schurman (left and right) with Jeffrey Lavin at the Netherlands American cemetery in Margraten, the Netherlands where their uncle, 2nd Lt. Robert Lavin (middle) rests. The 8,301 graves in the cemetery have all been adopted by Dutch families. The committee managing the graves adoption program now has a waiting list of people who want to adopt a grave.

It is the fourth time Donna Schurman is coming to Fouleng to honor her uncle, 1st Lt. Robert Lavin, pilot of the B-17 that crashed April 13, 1944.

On her fourth trip, Donna is accompanied by two of her sons, Bill and Brett and their spouses Kelly and Elizabeth as well as Jeffrey Lavin, nephew of the pilot and his daughter, Jami.

"I knew about my uncle Bob from my mother. She had told me that there were four survivors. We knew they crashed in Belgium but didn't know it was in Fouleng," Schurman said.

"I always wondered what my uncle's last words were. I knew the name of one other crew member, Charlie William Johnson, waist gunner of the Royal Flush who was able to bail out but got injured and was taken prisoner by the Germans. When I got internet at home, I started looking up the name." She found his phone number and one day in March 1999, she decided to call him. When she introduced herself and asked whether she was talking to the former crew member of the Royal Flush, he replied "You got him" and then, there was silence. His demeanor changed and he said "I just want to tell you that your uncle was a great pilot and I was never afraid when I was flying with him."

Johnson sent her copies of all the memorabilia he had in relation to the Royal Flush. In the paperwork, Schurman found a letter signed by the Mayor of Fouleng which was sent to Johnson's mother. The letter mentioned that all the 200 residents of Fouleng attended a special mass for the Royal Flush crew after the crash and it also mentioned the plaque on the farmhouse wall.

After finding out that Fouleng was part of Silly, Schurman decided to address a letter to the Mayor of Silly. Christian Leclercq, Mayor of Silly, quickly replied there were still five

witnesses of the crash and that they still had parts of the plane.

In September 2000, Schurman and Johnson made the trip to Fouleng to attend a ceremony organized by the city. "The ceremony was very emotional because Ghislain Bonnet who had tried to save Charlie after the crash, was also there." Schurman recalled. Bonnet was also the one who found the dog tags of Schurman's uncle in 1947 while plowing his field,

Ever since, Schurman continued her research on the Royal Flush crew and found other relatives. Through her efforts combined with the research done by Cookie Samuel, 24 family members of the Royal Flush crew came to attend this year's ceremony.

Lois O'Keefe



(right) Lois O'Keefe at her dad's grave at the Netherlands American Cemetery in Margraten, the Netherlands where five of the Royal Flush crew members are resting. (left) O'Keefe's dad, 2nd Lt. Calvin Anthes.

Second Lt. Calvin Anthes never knew his daughter was born the day after the crash of the Royal Flush in Fouleng. Anthes, bombardier on board of the B-17 was killed in the explosion of the plane.

Seventy years later, his daughter, Lois O'Keefe, visited his grave and attended the commemorative ceremony. "I am here to honor him," O'Keefe mentioned.

O'Keefe had to look for information on what happened to her dad as she didn't have any relative that could tell her about him. "I am glad I got to talk to Troy Hollar and find out more about who my dad was," O'Keefe said.

Al Brady and Cookie Samuel



Al Brady and Cookie Samuel (left) at the Netherlands American Cemetery, Staff Sgt. Lloyd Brady (middle) and Staff Sgt. Raymond Marz (right). Brady and Samuel have a special link through what happened to their father and uncle respectively, just prior to the B-17 crash in Fouleng.

Cookie Samuel, niece of Staff Sgt. Raymond Marz, also

Continued on next page

Trenches to Foxholes

Royal Flush I CONTINUED

made the trip to attend the ceremony honoring the crew members of the Royal Flush. Her uncle didn't survive the crash. She thought she would never find out what happened in the plane before the crash but that was prior to meeting another crew member's relative, Al Brady, Staff Sgt. Lloyd Brady's son.

Brady was able to get copies of the reports that were made up after the crash of the Royal Flush. One of the reports mentions the reason why Staff Sgt. Lloyd Brady didn't bail out of the plane. It turns out that Brady, the ball turret gunner, didn't have time to bail out because he was helping waist gunner Raymond Marz.

Unfortunately, Brady didn't get enough time to help Marz and they both were killed in the crash.

"Now I finally know what happened," Samuel said.

Brady came to the 70th anniversary with his three children Timothy, Alan and Ann and four of his grandchildren Madison, Julie, McKenzie and Maria.

Harold Ashman and Wanda Wirthlin



Archive



Eric-Daniel



Eric Daniel

2nd Lt. Harold Ashman, navigator of the Royal Flush crew (left), Harold Ashman, Jr., the navigator's son (middle) and Wanda Wirthlin, the navigator's stepdaughter (right).

The navigator's, 2nd Lt. Harold Ashman, son and step daughter attended the 70th anniversary of the crash in Fouleng. Ashman survived the crash and was rescued by local resistance fighters. That is about all his children knew about what happened to their dad who since, passed away.

While meeting one of the eyewitnesses of the crash at the commemorative ceremony, Ashman's son and step daughter were able to find out more. Michel Willand was a teenager at that time and worked with his dad on the field. When they heard the explosion, they ran for shelter. That is when they saw one of the chutes coming down.

"I saw one touching ground near the Fouleng school," Willand recalls. "He was a tall guy and didn't waste a minute to bundle his parachute, put it under his arms and run to the close-by woods to hide."

The Royal Flush navigator was indeed a tall person and it was most probably the aviator Willand saw touching ground near the school. Later, Willand found out that the local resistance fighters rescued the aviator.

Ashman and Wirthlin came to the ceremony with their spouses, respectively Diana and Bill.

Troy and Ghislaine reunite after 70 years



Eric Daniel

Troy Hollar (left) and Ghislaine Mohr-Brichart (right) reunite 70 years after they first met when Hollar arrived at her house and stayed hiding for several months.

"I am Ghislaine, you stayed at my house with Ed Price, 70 years ago. I was 19 and you were 25. I didn't speak English," said Ghislaine Mohr-Brichart when meeting Troy Hollar in Fouleng, April 13.

"You are Ghislaine? Ghislaine Brichart? You were very very nice to us... you helped us out...," Hollar recalled.

After having spent time hiding in Fouleng and area, local resistance fighters brought Hollar to Brussels. Being in a larger city made it easier to hide the airman from the Nazis. It was at Brichart's house that Hollar linked up with the Royal Flush radio operator, Edward Price.

"I remember very well the first day they were here," Brichart said. In 1944, 19-year-old Brichart lived with her mother in Brussels. Her dad was in a sanatorium for medical treatment. The two aviators were hiding upstairs while Brichart and her mom lived downstairs.

"I am sure Troy remembers the story on the jelly," Brichart stated. In order to hide the stairs leading to the second floor, the Brichart's had moved a cupboard in front of the stairs. On top of the cupboard, Brichart's mom had her stock of home made jelly. During WWII, it was not easy to make jelly. To buy sugar, you needed a ration card. Brichart's mom was able to get some sugar on the black market to make jelly for the next couple of months. When Hollar and Price moved the cupboard to get access to the stairs, they didn't know jelly pots were on top of the cupboard. As a result, all the pots smashed to the ground and broke. Jelly was all over the floor. Brichart remembers she and her mom had to carefully remove all the glass and recoup the jelly. "Food was too precious to throw away," Brichart added.

Hollar and Price stayed with the Brichart's for several months killing their time playing cards, until British troops liberated Brussels September 3, 1944.

Trenches to Foxholes

B-17 Royal Flush 70 years later, they still remember

Photo story by Donovan Abrassart
USAG Benelux Public Affairs

Years are passing by but for some, memories are still alive and forever set in stone. It was the first time in 70 years that Troy Hollar (picture 1, bottom) came back to the site of the crash and as he was sitting in his chair, here came Ghislain Bonnet (picture 1, top). The latter witnessed the crash and helped rescue Staff Sgt. Charles W. Johnson. Hollar hasn't forgotten anything either. As he was hiding in a haystack, he remembers he could "hear the voice of the Germans," he said. Family members of the B-17 crew also want to remember. They made the trip from the United States to honor and remember their relatives. This is how, seventy years later to the day Staff Sgt. Lloyd G. Brady lost his life in a field of Silly, his son Al Brady, his three grandchildren Alan Brady, Timothy Brady and Ann Klemm, and his great-grandchildren Maria, McKenzie, Madison Brady and Julie Brady are standing by a U.S. flag marking the place where the plane crashed and where Staff Sgt. Brady died (picture 3). (Picture 2) Tech. Sgt. Michael W. Skonetski and Lt. Col. Christopher Kuester, Commander, 424th Air Base Squadron, pay respect during the playing of the Belgian and U.S. national anthems. (Picture 4) Mayor of Silly, Christian Leclercq shows respect after laying a wreath at the commemorative plaque while the 424th Air Base Squadron Color Guard presents the colors. (Picture 5) After the ceremony, Hollar was made honorary citizen of the city of Silly and received his certificate from the hands of the mayor surrounded by his daughter Ann Picou-Hollar and son Ronnie Hollar, Lt. Col. Christopher Kuester, Staff Sgt. John Reeder, Tech. Sgt. Michael W. Skonetski, Cis Spook the local officials. (Picture 6) Hollar shares anecdotes with Harold Ashman Jr., Dianna Ashman and Ronnie Hollar as they visited the MaquiStory, the museum of the local resistance in St Marcoult, Silly, after the ceremony. (U.S. Army photos by Donovan Abrassart unless otherwise specified)



Cis Spook

Trenches to Foxholes

Commentary Unexpectedly overwhelmed by Fouleng ceremony

By Keith Houin
USAG Benelux Public Affairs

Living in Europe and getting to see so many historical sites is an amazing opportunity. Living in Belgium and witnessing the respect the people of this country still hold for our veterans is even more so.

I have been to Bastogne, Flanders and more. I am filled with emotions at every event. As a 25-year veteran of our modern Air Force and having lost many friends and colleagues in the last decade and more, I am bound to recognize some of my friends in the faces of the fallen from decades ago.

I knew the feelings of loss and pride would hit me, but I never expected to be filled with so many emotions as I watched the commemoration at a farm house in Fouleng, Belgium for a downed B-17 crew unfold. After all, I had been here before.

Maybe it was because I got to speak with the veteran and crash survivor the day before. After all these years he would meet the families of his fellow crew members, the people that initially rescued him and some of the people that helped him evade capture for five months.

It might have been the turn out of the local Belgian community or the 24 family members of the crew that came in to mark the anniversary.



A wreath was placed below the original plaque of remembrance for the Royal Flush.

I can't really say why this event hit me so hard. I have been to them all over the world, but something was special here.

Perhaps it was the effort my Belgian co-worker Cis Spook put into making most of this happen, or the fact that our entire office gave up a weekend to take care of the visitors and make sure everything went right. That a squadron from my Air Force commits to this event each year, may have had something to do with it as well.

It might be all the messages from friends on Facebook that appreciated what our office is doing this year to capture all of the ceremonies.

I'm still not sure. What I do know is that Troy Hollar is an amazing man, the people of Silly are just as amazing, and the Belgians I work with make these events happen.

This year was naturally special due to the marking of 70

years, but there were significant moments that made it even more amazing. The then young girl whose family housed Troy and another crewman was there to see Troy for the first time in 70 years. She had been married to his fellow hide-away after the war when he returned to find her.

I wanted to interview her, but she told me it was just too emotional to talk about. Just hearing about this commemoration ceremony and the return of Troy Hollar made her so upset, she almost didn't attend.

Seeing Ghislain Bonnet with tears in his eyes when he met Troy was enough that I needed to stop shooting photos and walk away. Bonnet was just 12 when he witnessed the crash.

Listening to Antonio De La Serna talk about the day with youthful excitement as they watched the parachutes come down, made me feel like I was there.

He was eleven at the time but can tell you almost precisely where the parachutes hit. As he speaks you can imagine the thoughts of an 11-year-old as he watches a plane downed and survivors floating through the sky. The excitement shines through, but so does the fear of the Nazis. Something he is quick to tell you.

Later as the city of Silly made Troy an honorary citizen, I could only wish all of our veterans could be remembered this way.

The people of our greatest generation are few now. The war seems long forgotten to many back home. It is not forgotten at all in Silly, Belgium. A few of the residents met a few men from a single B-17 70 years ago, and perhaps got to know them for two weeks, but most only heard the stories, yet today they all remember.

It is like this in a hundred villages throughout this country. I only hope our memories will last as long as theirs.



Keith Houin

An Airman from the 424th Air Base Squadron salutes the colors during the memorial ceremony for the crew of the WWII B-17 Royal Flush April 13 in Fouleng, Belgium. Each year the squadron provides a color guard and formation.