

WWII Pilot From PEI Saved A Dutch Village

Daria Valkenburg

If you saw this headline on today's social media, it would be accompanied by eyewitness video, and pilot Elmer Bagnall Muttart from Cape Traverse would be hailed a hero. It didn't happen today, but at night in 1941 in Nazi occupied The Netherlands. No one was there to film the event, no one celebrated him as a hero, and no medals were awarded. But there were eyewitness accounts, which Borden-Carleton Legion's Branch Service Officer, Pieter Valkenburg, uncovered during his research into Muttart, one of the names listed on the Legion's Cenotaph.

Elmer Bagnall Muttart, son of Louis (Lewis) Muttart and Annie Bagnall, was born in Cape Traverse on March 14, 1918. After receiving his elementary education on the island, he went to Horton Academy in Wolfville, Nova Scotia for two years, and then on to Acadia University, also in Wolfville, where he graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Engineering in 1939.

Upon graduation, Muttart worked for a construction company that was involved in a major renovation of Charlottetown Airport. In November 1939 he applied for a position with the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) in Moncton, but his application was put on hold due to changes in the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan. As of June 21, 1940 he was in the service of the RCAF, receiving his pilot wings in Saskatoon on January 28, 1941.

By March 1941 he was in England and assigned to the 10th Operational Training Unit in Abingdon, where he trained to fly a Whitley, a twin-engine medium bomber known as the 'flying coffin'. On May 19, he was transferred to the 78th Squadron at the air base in Middleton St. George, and flew his first flight, as co-pilot, into enemy

territory on May 27. After 8 flights as co-pilot, he was appointed First Pilot on July 22.

As First Pilot, he flew 12 more flights to enemy territory with Reg Alexander, his permanent navigator, by his side. The rest of Muttart's crew changed continuously. After a promotion to Flight Sergeant, Muttart transferred to 76 Squadron on September 24, where he re-trained to fly on the new four-engine Halifax plane, a heavy bomber with a 22 foot bomb bay.

Muttart, with Alexander, and 6 new crew members, began his first mission on Halifax L9561 on October 12, his 21st into enemy territory and 13th as First Pilot. At 7:30 pm, a hundred bombers, mostly Wellingtons and Hampdens, plus Muttart's Halifax, left the base in England and headed east. Their target: a bombing raid on Bremen, Germany.

On the way to Bremen, they flew over the northern part of The Netherlands, where they were met by German night fighters. Two Allied planes were shot down, a Wellington, with only one survivor, and Muttart's Halifax.

Muttart's plane was fired on at 10:15 pm. He tried to escape the attacking plane and sent his plane south. He passed the town of Harlingen on the east and was fired upon a second time. The crewmembers safely parachuted out, leaving only Muttart in the burning plane. The plane was too close to the village of Wons, and Muttart was determined to steer the plane to a place of safety outside the village.

Muttart succeeded. According to eyewitnesses, the plane passed Wons and crashed a few hundred metres south of the farm of Johannes Politiek. In saving the village, Muttart sacrificed his own life. He was only 23.

In a diary kept by schoolteacher Mr. De

Boer, and published as "History of Van Wildering" in Dutch, he recorded the events of October 12 on page 110 as one of the eyewitnesses: "Sunday, October 12 was cloudy and calm, weather wise. In the evening, there were many Allied planes flying overhead, heading towards north-west Germany. Around 10 o'clock there was an aerial battle, high in the sky, in the direction of Harlingen. A deep red glow was visible against the very cloudy sky and came closer. An English bomber, which was on fire, came gliding and zig-zagging through the clouds, past the Mountjewier farm, flying parallel to the Noorderlaan (North Lane) towards the village. Before the village, two bombs fell. The plane lost a piece of its wing at the Noorderlaan, flew over Abbema's farm, passed the Politiek farm, crashed 100 metres past it, and was on fire." (Translated from the original Dutch by Pieter Valkenburg)

Because of the fire and explosions on the plane, it wasn't possible to reach the wreck until the morning. That's when Muttart's body was found. He was put in a coffin and buried on October 16, with military honours by the Germans, in Harlingen.

All of Muttart's crew survived and spent the rest of the war years in prisoner of war camps. Muttart's crew, all British, were: Co-Pilot Flight Sergeant Norman Frank Trayler, Flight Engineer Sgt David Cotsell, Bomb Aimer Sgt Leslie Albert Roberts, Navigator Sgt William Reginald Purchase Alexander, Wireless Operator Sgt William Herbert Hunt, Gunner Sgt George Henry Patterson, and Gunner Sgt John William Duffield. The oldest was 28 and the youngest 20.

In the diary kept by schoolteacher Mr. De Boer, he went on to note that: "The physician summoned, Dr. Kroon

(anti-German), of Witmarsun, told me later that the crew was treated humanely by the Germans. People who witnessed this event with me on that evening, and there were many, stated that Wons was spared disaster." (Translated from the original Dutch by Pieter Valkenburg)

As he is fluent in Dutch, Valkenburg was able to contact various researchers in The Netherlands. He also discussed the plane crash with the Missing Airmen Memorial Foundation, a non-

Elmer Bagnall Muttart (Photo from Canadian Virtual War Memorial at www.veterans.gc.ca)



Navigator Reg Alexander and his daughter Pam visit Muttart's grave in Harlingen in 2004. (Photo: Richard Merckx)

profit organization in The Netherlands dedicated to preserving the history of Allied planes shot down during the war. The Foundation plans to honour the Halifax L9561 crew with a memorial plaque in October 2018 at the crash site, and is raising funds for that. Valkenburg also contacted the Dutch branch of the Canadian Legion (yes, there is one!), which is supportive of this project.

Valkenburg thought a Canadian contribution to the project would be a fitting way to remember Muttart. The Tryon and Area Historical Society (TAHS), of which Valkenburg is a member, agreed, and has launched a fundraising project "Muttart Memorial Fund" for anyone wishing to help in funding this tribute. Funds raised will be transferred to the Miss-

ing Airmen Memorial Foundation.

If you'd like to donate, cheques should be made out to Tryon & Area Historical Society (TAHS), PO Box 38, Crapaud PE, C0A 1J0, and in the subject line, identify your cheque as being for "Mut-

tart Memorial Fund". A charitable donation receipt will be sent to all donors.

If you have further information or photos, please contact Valkenburg at dariadv@yahoo.ca

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