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Operation Market Garden

In September 1944, my father, Ray Olson, was in England recovering from a gunshot wound received in Carentan, Normandy. There being no rest for the weary, it was time to head off into battle again—this time in the Netherlands for Operation Market Garden.

My father and two others who landed near each other on September 17 were not sure of the way to their rendezvous location. They saw a nearby farmhouse and, having been assured that all Dutch people could be trusted to help, decided to ask for directions. The patriarch of the family took them in and, despite the language barrier, used my father's maps to point out the best route to their destination.

Suddenly, a young boy came running into the house shouting. The patriarch hustled the three paratroopers into a back bedroom, pushed the bed aside, pulled the floorboards away, shoved them into the crawlspace, and put the floorboards and bed back into their original positions. With backs in the dirt and faces nearly touching the floorboards, my father and his fellow soldiers wondered how this would end.

The Nazi soldiers the young boy had seen coming down the road entered the house to have a meal and rest. For hours, my father and his new friends worried that even a sneeze might be heard—hoping and praying that they would not be discovered. Eventually, the Nazis left and the patriarch returned to bring the GI's out. After effusive and genuine thanks, my father and his colleagues headed to their planned rendezvous.

In September 1959 (as they had done in 1954), the Dutch government hosted 101st Airborne veterans of Operation Market Garden and their families in heartfelt thanks for the liberation of the (at least Southeast) Netherlands. At age 11, I accompanied my parents on this two week trip. We stayed with a family (the Neeteson's) in Eindhoven. During one official dinner, my father told the story of the farmhouse and the family who had saved his life, but he had little information where the farmhouse was. Our wonderful and motivated hosts found the farmhouse (I never had any idea how they did this).

A Dutch driver brought us to the farmhouse. In the field in front of the house, there were many cars curiously parked in haphazard fashion. We knocked on the door and a man in a suit answered, speaking Dutch to our driver. The man then turned to my father and happily and proudly said “I was that little boy 15 years ago!” My father expressed his appreciation and asked if, by chance, he could personally give thanks to the patriarch. The man's face darkened and he said “he is here, but he is receiving his last rites from the priest.” My father gave our condolences and apologized for our intrusion. We turned to leave. The man asked us to wait and then went into the house. A few minutes later, he came back and asked my father to come into the house with him. As fate (was it just fate?) would have it, the patriarch, although near death, was alert enough to remember. My father had the incredibly moving opportunity to thank this dying man for saving my his life fifteen years earlier. Even at 11 years of age as I stood outside the house, the enormity of the situation hit me and tears streamed down my face.

I am wondering if my father's two soldier friends survived the war and if they told their families about the farmhouse. Does anyone recognize the story?

I do not know the name of the family that not only saved my father, but also made my life possible. It would be a meaningful moment in life to meet them. Their ancestor—the patriarch in this story—was a true hero who risked himself and his family to save my father.

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Since this story first appeared in limited distribution, I have been contacted by numerous helpful and kind people: a Dutch journalist who had the story printed in the Eindhoven Dagblad; a Dutchman who works tirelessly to make sure his country remembers and celebrates its liberation in September 1944 (through the stichting 18 september foundation); the Market Garden Veterans Association which is publishing this story on its Facebook page; and, several Dutch and American people whose family members were part of Operation Market Garden—including the son of one of my father's fellow soldiers and one of his lifelong friends who is writing a book about Company I and including a Dutchman who is about my age and went with me to an amusement park in Eindhoven in 1959.

Remarkable efforts led to the discovery of the property where the farmhouse (owned by the Raaijmaker Family) was once located, but no longer. Regrettably, the man who met us at the farmhouse door in 1959 has passed away. No one else in the family knew this story. I have not yet found any of the Neeteson family. The 75th anniversary of Operation Market Garden is in September 2019. I plan to be there for at least part of the celebration.

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