

Humanity During War

IV- Stories from Belgium and the Netherlands

Robert Fortnam:

Robert Fortnam enlisted in Boston, Massachusetts, and graduated from the cadet program on 1943-05-24 and became a co-pilot on a B-17 crew. He then went overseas in August of 1943 and was assigned to the 305th Bomb Group at Chelveston. Robert and his crew were flying a mission to Bremen on 1943-10-08 when German fighters attacked them as the bombers had no fighter escort. One engine was on fire, another was disabled, and the pilot was shot in the abdomen. Fortnam did not know the pilot was injured at first, as he tried to steer the plane and get the fire under control. Ultimately, Fortnam had to leave the bomber group and turn back towards their base as the plane continued to lose altitude, which prompted the Germans to strafe their plane again. He tried to reach the North Sea, but the bomber did not have enough range to make it, as it was settling too fast. The crew made an emergency landing in the swampy lands of the Zuider Zee in the Netherlands; all of the crewmen walked away from the landing.

The crew encountered several people from a local village who came into their area, but a drainage canal separated them. Fortnam recalled that the crew managed to talk to the people to see if they could get the pilot and tail gunner to a hospital to treat their wounds, which the people agreed to. Once their wounded crewmates were taken care of, the rest of the crew split into groups of two and went in different directions to minimize their chances of getting caught. Fortnam and Ernie Shalander, the navigator, swam across a canal before reaching a larger one later on in the afternoon. Since nightfall was not too far off, Fortnam and Shalander decided to

attempt the swim in the morning and hid in some reeds to sleep for the night. The following morning, the two men heard a local approach their hiding spot, as he had hidden a boat from the Germans there. The man began to whistle, "You are my sunshine," making the two airmen leave the safety of the reeds to investigate.

Fortnam said that the man told them that he decided to whistle the tune because it was something that an American would instantly recognize and one the Germans would not. The man then told them to stay in the reeds for around an hour, and he would get them a rowboat to get across the channel. True to his word, the man came back and took Fortnam and Shalander across the canal and pointed them in the direction that they needed to take to get to the mainland. The airmen continued on their journey, hiking through the countryside for another two days. On the third day, the Dutch police caught them and put the airmen in a jail in Amsterdam. In his interview, Fortnam said that they were captured because the police got suspicious of them since they were wearing their GI brown clothing and brown Army shoes. Nobody on the continent wore much brown clothing, as the children in the village they passed through stared at their feet in amazement. German soldiers eventually came to the jail to pick them up and sent them an interrogation center. From there, they were put on a train and sent to Stalag Luft III, which was a prison camp in Upper Silesia at Sagan.

Robert Grimes:

During a bombing mission on 1942-10-20, in Duran, they lost power in engine four. As they began to trail behind the formation, they are attacked by German fighter planes. The tail was

shot off, killing the tail gunner, and everyone began to bail out. He circled the plane in the air to allow his crewman to jump out safely. Once the crew made it out of the B-17, Grimes jumped and landed in a field in Belgium. While he was getting his parachute disconnected, a man on a bike warned him that the Germans were nearby. The man took Grimes' parachute and hid it under a drainage pipe and, a little boy on the road took him back to the field. The boy left, promising to return, but he never did. Grimes later found out that the boy's father refused to let him get Grimes, for he was scared that the Germans would capture his son.

Around eight p.m., Grimes decided to move from the hedge and see if he can find help for his leg, which got cut by a thirteen-millimeter shell. He eventually came up to a house and talked to the woman, who would not let him inside since there were Germans inside. After finding him hiding in an outhouse, the lady took him to the barn and stashed him there, eventually bringing him some beer and bread. Once it was safe, he moved to another house where he pleaded with the man there to help him; the man was wary of helping the American because the Germans would have punished them severely. The homeowners let him stay in their kitchen until the next morning when the woman came back to move him.¹ He was moved from village to village, managing to stay a step ahead of the Germans. As he moved around, he was helped by doctors and nurses who attempted to get the shell out of his leg. The nurse that stayed with him for his few weeks of recovery was named Lily, who was in the Comet underground movement. Germans caught her parents and sister in a previous raid; her father died in a prison camp.

¹ Grimes never stated the names of the helpers in the interview. The only person he tells their name was the nurse, Lily.

During his time in Brussels, he went out to celebrate his twenty-first birthday when he got held up by German soldiers on a streetcar.² After giving the first guard his Belgian ID, the second guard asked him if he had shown it already. Grimes recalled his high school French and meekly replied, “Oui, Oui.” After that close call, Grimes kept a low profile as he healed up from his surgery. In mid-December of 1943, Comet operatives led Grimes to a village near the French-Spanish border. Grimes and several other airmen then completed an overnight hike through the Pyrenees. After swimming across the Bidasoa River, the men made it into Spanish territory before dawn on December 23.³

James M. Wagner:

James was a waist gunner with the 445th BG, 701st BS. Germans shot down his crew during a July 11th, 1944, bombing raid. He initially evaded the German forces and made contact with the Belgian Underground. James was able to avoid capture for a month until spies in the underground network double-crossed him. He was apprehended by the Gestapo and taken to a civilian prison. When the Gestapo moved the prisoners in response to reports concerning the Allied advance, he managed to escape custody.⁴

² Grime’s experiences moving around with the Belgian underground is further expanded on in his oral history at the Mighty Eighth Air Force Museum.

³ Grimes’ description of his final escape from Europe can be found in his oral history and obituary.

⁴ While the research center did not have James’ oral history and transcript in the system, they had photographs from his collection with a brief description of his time with the underground.

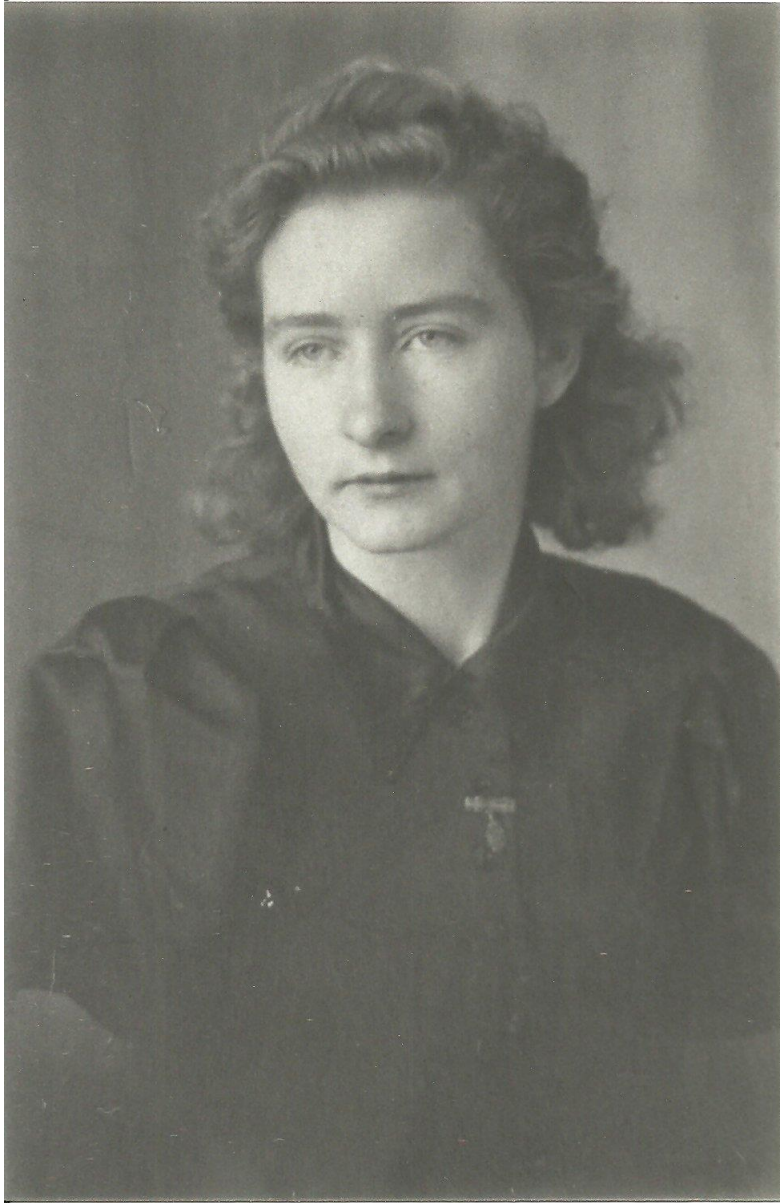


Figure 1. Reproduction Photograph of a woman associated with the Belgian Underground. Posed as James' "Fiancée."

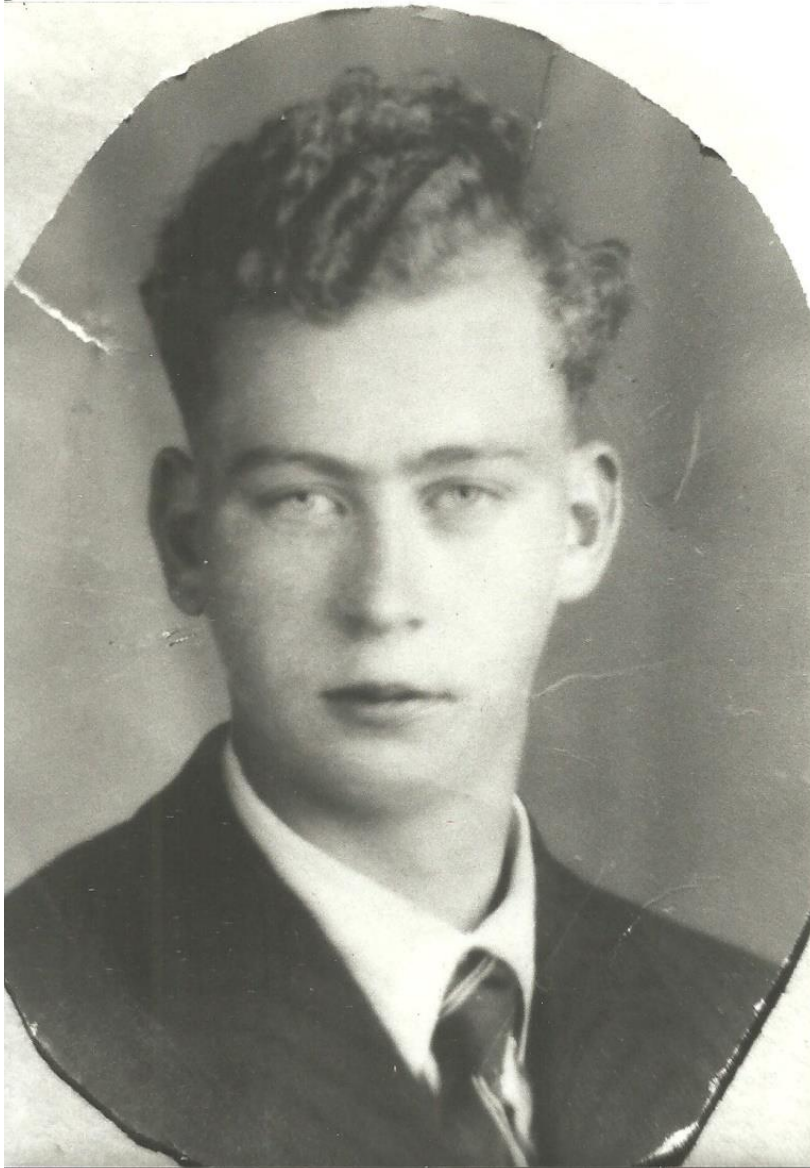


Figure 2. Reproduction photograph of Leon, member of the Belgian resistance who helped Wagner.

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Figure 3. Reproduction photograph of a young woman associated with the resistance. She was the daughter of the family that housed Wagner in Templeuve.



Figure 4. Reproduction photograph of a young woman associated with the resistance. She was another daughter of the family that housed Wagner in Templeuve.

