

MISSION 414

A letter from a little known friend in France took our family on a journey that will be forever in our hearts. The letter from Paul Lafon informed us of a celebration commemorating the liberation of France by Allied Forces and the rescue of our dad, Simon Wilczek, along with his crew by the French Resistance after their B-17 crashed near Bazas France, June 15, 1944. This rescue and a second rescue of a B-24 crew are subjects of a book written by Jean-Michel Tenez, Paul Lafon and Les Amis de la Cite de Bazas. Our trip began in Bazas, a town of 4,000 in southwestern France where we saw a large columned library with the French and American flags flying side by side. This celebration became a saga of the journey of the B-17 crew to return safely to England.

On their first mission to bomb Merignac Airport in Bordeaux, the B-17 was hit by flak and lost function of two engines. Unable to reach their target or the Spanish border, pilot Charles Kelly ordered bombardier Wilczek to drop the bomb load and the crew parachuted from the plane. Six of the crew jumped at 16,000 ft., leaving Wilczek, Kelly and co-pilot Robert Disbrow. When the plane banked making it impossible for them to jump, Disbrow went to the controls to slow the plane's decent, then bailed, followed by Wilczek and Kelly.

The nine airmen landed at various locations around Bazas and were soon discovered by members of the French Resistance (Maquis). Jean Lafon, in charge of the Villandraut Resistance group spotted 3 men dangling from parachutes and set to organize their recovery. The Germans had also seen the parachutes and dispatched SS to the site, causing Lafon great concern. Wilczek was alone for nearly 24 hrs. Before being met by the Maquis and on June 17, was reunited with Kelly and Disbrow then with the remaining crewmembers. We visited the B-17 crash site where a once young man told of seeing the burning plane follow a U shaped path before crashing into the forest.

Our next stop was a farmhouse where Ginette (Meric) LeGall, as a girl of 15 gave up her bedroom to hide the nine airmen for over a week. We later met Ginette who has kept a photo of the crew in her home for 70 years. Here the aviators sometimes helped with farming chores and helped to hide supplies dropped by British and US planes. From this time to July 15, the crew were hidden and continuously moved by the Resistance, often walking 20 mi. at a time and evading the Germans along the way.

Two of the crew, Harold Brooks and Ralph Workman, left without warning June 26, headed toward the Pyrenees. With help from the Resistance they evaded the Germans for one month, obtained false papers and boarded a plane to England. On July 15, Frank Champ, Charles Disbrow and Alfred Campbell escaped, but lacking a guide they were forced to turn back. After three weeks they made it out through the mountains of Comminges where they found the US Army.

Kelly, Wilczek, gunners Donald Graham and Charles Brasher were the last to escape. We met Guy Sicre who as a boy of 17 peddled his bike to a nearby farm to bring food to these four. Guy, his father Louis Sicre and Guy's cousin Pierre Bezolles looked after the aviators for several days. On day eight Guy arrived with food to find the airmen gone. For 70 Years he recalled with sadness not being able to tell them good-bye.

On July 12, 1944, near Fargues, France Kelly, Wilczek, Graham and Brasher began a dramatic journey by car with the Resistance, led by Emmanuel Lasserre who was riding a motorbike. Unfortunately the Germans were expecting them and ambushed them on the road. The Americans escaped to the woods, but Jean Guerin who rushed to help his wounded friend Lassarre was killed and savagely mutilated along with Lassarre. Wives of both men were earlier sent to German concentration camps where they died.

We met Veronike Lasserre, granddaughter of Emmanuel Lasserre and Monique Gauzes, daughter of Jean Guerin. We placed flowers on a monument for Lasserre and Guerin. This was a very moving event for us, knowing that these two brave men died helping save our dad. We thanked Veronike and Monique for the service of their father and grandfather. They responded with "No, we thank you. Without the help of the Americans we would be Germans."

After the ambush at Grignols the Americans were handed to a Spanish communist. The suspicious Spaniard had them write their serial numbers and call them orally. Dissatisfied with the answer he had them arrested and ordered shot as German spies. Kelly objected, asking for the paper with their numbers, noting that the 7 in his number was written without the European cross-stroke. The Americans were again saved!

For the next month the aviators' escape was stalled as fighting disorganized the escape routes. They worked with the Maquis receiving/organizing supplies dropped by the RAF by night, evading the Germans by day. On Aug. 18, Kelly went alone toward Agen where he met Lt. Guy of the US Army. Kelly was advised to go back north, but in Saint-Cere he broke an arm during a fall. He was able to board an air convoy to Naples, finally reaching England Sept. 11.

Wiczek, Graham and Brashear chose a more direct route through recently liberated Bordeaux. On Sept. 15 they went on to Biarritz where after eight days they boarded a C47 Dakota chartered by a Belgian Resistance worker in charge of repatriating allied airmen shot down over Europe. After 3½ months and four exit routes all nine airmen were safe in England!

Jean Lafon was the key organizer of the Maquis of Villandraut, a village near Bazas. Lafon's oldest son Paul is one of the authors of the book "1944 TOMBES DU CIEL: Missions Alliees en Bazadas" and a principal organizer of the celebration. Simon Wilczek, Charles Kelly and Jean Lafon corresponded for over 65 years until each left this world. Thanks to this correspondence and friendship we were able to finally meet families of the French Resistance who saved this B-17 crew and many others during WWII.

During the course of this celebration we heard the American and French national anthems played with French and US flags flying in tandem. We saw the US flag carried from Bazas cathedral by four young French citizens and heard testimony honoring our fathers and the US military. We left France with a renewed sense of the meaning of being an American and of the value of forming strong friendships with those who value peace around the world.

Carolyn Dalbow
Fort Collins, CO
405-699-1212

John & Kathy Wilczek
Austin, TX

Julie & Robert Huber
Stillwater, OK