

SHOT DOWN IN '44, CREWMATES REUNITE

Mark Hornbeck / The Detroit News

LANSING -- Sixty-three years after they last saw each other in a bullet-riddled B-17 over Germany, the bombardier and the waist gunner met Monday in the near-empty black-top parking lot of a restaurant, an inauspicious reunion place for two aging heroes from the greatest generation.

Louis Gill of Livonia and Edward Schuitema of Holland circled each other for a moment, smiled nervously and then shook hands.

"Here's my buddy though I'm not sure we're buddies anymore," Schuitema said, alluding to the six decades of separation.

"I'd know you anyplace," Gill said.

"No you wouldn't," Schuitema replied with a laugh.

There were no tears or mushy phrases for these old-school World War II bomb squadron veterans, now in their 80s, who are forever linked by a brutal ordeal played out in the skies over Germany on Jan. 11, 1944. On that day, their B-17 Flying Fortress bomber, Patches, was shot down behind enemy lines.

Both were badly injured: bodies riddled with shrapnel, bones broken, an eye lost. Gill spent the next 16 months in prisoner-of-war camps and other outposts across Germany. Schuitema was laid up for a year in hospitals in Germany and Poland.

Neither knew the other had survived the war until several years later and only recently learned they were living in the same state. Gill told his story for the highly acclaimed Ken Burns PBS series "The War," and that indirectly led to Monday's reunion at Clara's Restaurant in Lansing, a midway rendezvous spot.

A 17-minute segment Gill did for the "The War" Web site on the stories of Michigan soldiers sparked the interest of two World War II researchers, who got in touch with Gill's daughter, Susan Baker of Northville. Information relayed by the researchers included Schuitema's phone number. Baker called him and arranged the reunion.

Burns' series was aired so Americans may never forget stories of courage like the one recounted over coffee and old photos on an unseasonably warm October day at Clara's.

A COLD JANUARY DAY

First Lt. Gill and Staff Sgt. Schuitema were in the 381st bomb group of the 1st Division of the U.S. Army 8th Air Force, flying missions out of Ridgewell, England. On that cold January day, Gill was flying his 24th mission, Schuitema his 13th. They're not sure how

many of those flights they made together. Gill pulled double duty as a bombardier and navigator. Schuitema was a waist gunner, meaning he operated mounted guns near the middle of the plane.

Gill remembers vividly what happened the day they were shot down. Schuitema remembers almost nothing.

"I remember getting hit and that's about all," he said. "Thank goodness I don't remember it."

Gill recalls being awakened at 2 a.m. and receiving orders to bomb an aircraft factory in Germany. During the sortie, the 10-man crew was attacked at 22,000 feet from 12 o'clock high by five German fighters, flying abreast. Bullets ripped across the chest of one of the gunners. Gill -- who was serving as a navigator and bombardier -- was preparing to give him a shot of morphine and throw him out of the plane with his parachute open in hopes German doctors would pick him up and treat him.

Then Gill's oxygen mask was shot off and he noticed the escape door behind him was gone.

"The next thing I knew I was in midair," he said. "I found out after the war that they had shot the wings off the plane."

GERMANS CAPTURE GILL

He managed to pull his chute open and landed in the treetops. He unbuckled his parachute and fell into the snow, where he was quickly captured by German soldiers. He had a broken ankle due to the fall from the tree, his right toe was blown off and he had a half-dozen chunks of shrapnel embedded in his head and back.

Gill was interrogated and eventually treated, although he didn't get a cast on his leg for a month. Over the next 16 months, he was moved from prison camp to prison camp, eventually winding up in Moosberg near Nuremberg. The camp was liberated by Gen. George Patton's Third Army in April 1945.

During the interview for "The War" segment, Gill choked back tears when he described Patton driving through the camp in his Jeep, and American tanks rolling through.

"I was never so happy to see a GI," said Gill, whose weight had dropped from 185 to 113 during his imprisonment.

SCHUITEMA LANDS IN HOSPITAL

Schuitema said he was unconscious for three days after Patches was shot out of the sky. He awakened in a German hospital with a broken back, broken ankle, a knee cap

smashed by a bullet, and a shattered pelvis. One eye was missing; the other was damaged. He had to be moved when the Allies bombed the hospital.

Schuitema spent six months in a German hospital and another six months in a Polish hospital, treated by Germans and captured English doctors. In early 1945, he was exchanged for a wounded German soldier and sent home.

"I can't say I was treated badly by the Germans," he said, adding there was a severe scarcity of food that afflicted the prisoners and their captors.

Gill and Schuitema later learned two crew members were killed when their plane was gunned down. The pilot, who kept in touch with Gill immediately after the war, died in 1949. Four other crew members also have died and one can't be found.

'A GOOD FEELING'

Schuitema, 87, went on to work at Holland Furnace and later was employed as a machinist. That fateful day in 1944 left him with a glass eye and deep bone aches throughout the left side of his body. He continues to get treatment for his leg and back. He still has the spectacles and the glass eye the Germans made for him.

Gill, 85, ran a bakery, worked as a carpenter, drove a truck and had a real estate business in Redford. He built his own home in Livonia shortly after the war and he still lives in it. Some days, the shrapnel in his head causes excruciating pain that he fears will never go away.

He only turned his head and blushed when asked what it meant to him to meet up with Schuitema after all these years.

Responding to the same question, Schuitema said: "I don't know. I didn't recognize him at first. Well, maybe a little bit. But it was a good feeling."

You can reach Mark Hornbeck at (313) 222-2470 or mhornbeck@detnews.com.

<http://www.ajlambert.com>