

## Memorial Day – 2013

Kenneth ‘Tuck’ Belton didn’t give much thought to tulips while he was growing up in rural Tallula, Illinois. They were just a sure sign that summer would soon arrive in central Illinois. But his perspective changed in the bitter winter of 1945. He was a downed B-17 pilot hiding out with the Dutch Underground, and now tulip bulbs were the thin thread between his survival and starvation.

Tuck was no stranger to hard times. His father was a coal miner before he was seriously injured on the job early in the depression. From that time forward, life was tough for the Belton family; they lived a day-to-day existence, often depending on hunting to put meat on the table. Tuck joined the Army Air Force in the summer of 1942, and married his sweetheart, Virginia Atterberry, while going through training.

By 1945 he was piloting a B-17 on bombing runs over Germany. On January 20th, while returning from his fifth mission, Lieutenant Belton’s aircraft was hit. He bailed out over northern Holland, the only crewmember to survive. He was immediately taken in by members of the Dutch Underground, who initially hid him away in a chicken shack, with little more than tulip bulbs to eat.

For the next few months Tuck lived life on the edge, sharing the precarious existence of his fellow Dutch Underground members, masquerading as William Shank, a deaf and mute bookbinder. Since he could not speak the language, he wore a placard on his shirt proclaiming that he was *doofstom*. It worked, most of the time. If caught, the Nazis would not look kindly on a downed pilot masquerading as a Dutchman, who worked with the Underground.

Belton and his comrades got around mostly on bicycles, traveling throughout the countryside and occasionally venturing into Amsterdam as well. One of his closest calls occurred when he and another Underground member were riding their bicycles toward a bridge when they spotted guards posted on each end of the bridge. It called for very quick thinking. *“Let’s hit the river,”* barked Belton’s comrade, *“So off we go,”* recounted Belton over sixty-five years later. *“We drove those bicycles off in the river. Man—you talk about cold. There’s ice in that river. And the river was fairly swift, thank God. And I remember grabbing a chunk of ice and trying to hold my breath and get under in case they were firing at us. ... We went down that river half a mile.”*

Harassing the Nazis was a very dangerous game, and Tuck shared those risks as he accompanied the Underground on several missions. Once, Tuck’s group staged a daring rescue of an injured Underground member who was recuperating in a local hospital. Armed with an English Sten gun, Tuck found himself face to face with a German soldier and Dutch quisling while the others were inside the hospital rescuing their comrade. He instinctively fired, *“and when I did, all hell broke loose. The guys came pouring out of the hospital. We got Steve and I just took off. ... I went out through a field of snow and hid on the ground. There was a small group of trees and I ran into there and stayed there for quite a while. ... It was January...and I thought, oh, man, what have I done? I was all by myself. And about that time this dog came along; this big old shaggy dog. I guess he was probably as frightened as I was. I called him and he came over to me. I petted him, you know, and I stuck him underneath that overcoat and he was one reason I kept alive that night. He helped keep me warm.”*

On another occasion his group blew up an electrical sub-station providing power to the Gestapo headquarters in Amsterdam. Two days later, Belton observed German troops round up ten men off the street at random. *“They were trying to get back at the Underground for bombing their substation,”* said Belton. *“They lined those ten guys up against the wall and the firing squad shot them—just shot them.”* His instincts and training almost kicked in, but his companion that day *“laid her hand over on my arm with a pretty strong hold; you know, not to do anything, which is very difficult not to have some kind of a reaction.”*

In April of 1945 Tuck snuck across a river into Allied territory. He still recalls the moment his ship steamed into New York City harbor. *“Outside of my wife, [the Statue of Liberty] was probably the greatest thing I’d seen.”* Then he struggled a bit before regaining his composure. *“I still get a little emotional.”*

Tuck Belton has a unique perspective on Lady Liberty.

Mark DePue is the Director of Oral History at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. You can listen to Tuck Belton’s entire story, and those of many other veterans, at the program’s web site,

<http://www2.illinois.gov/alplm/library/collections/oralhistory/VeteransRemember/Pages/default.aspx>