



**Carla Gleason**

[Photograph courtesy of Tom Philo]

## **8<sup>th</sup> AFHS OREGON CHAPTER NEWS**

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**Joan E. Hamilton**

An introduction is in order as I will be the new “reporter” of the 8<sup>th</sup> AFHS, Oregon Chapter news. Clint Gruber has been doing a spectacular job, but wishes to retire from this position though I fully intend to consult him. After several years of volunteering as a Veterans History Project (VHP) interviewer, I discovered the 8<sup>th</sup> AFHS.

Sadly, I must begin by a mention of the passing of a truly good and kind man, Lt. Col. Joseph “Joe” Conroy, who served as a ball turret gunner with the 306<sup>th</sup> BG, 368<sup>th</sup> BS. I interviewed Lt. Col. Conroy for VHP. When asked about gunnery training, he said, “They taught us to disassemble a machine gun and then assemble it again. What I remember most about that, you had to do it blindfolded, just feel the parts and work away. Then, we had skeet shooting, back of a pickup. They’d go along and then fire clay pigeons up there and we’d aim and fire. I got kind of good at that.” This dedicated and gentle man will be dearly missed.

Our February 13th speaker was Carla Gleason who is currently researching and writing a book detailing the life of her father, Johannes “Jan” van Breemen, a member of the Dutch resistance during WWII. The book is tentatively titled *Destined to Survive*.

The following are excerpts from Carla's moving speech: "I have great respect and admiration for all of you courageous men and women who have served our country and risked your lives to liberate others as you have liberated my home country of the Netherlands. I'm here to talk about my family to give honor to my father and my grandfather, Jan van Breemen Junior and Jan van Breemen Senior. I feel that I need to be the voice of those who cannot speak. I also feel that it is my duty to write, preserve, and perpetuate their legacy."

Carla and her family immigrated to the United States when she was a ten years old. Over the years, through her research and interviews with her father, she gained an understanding of the challenges her father and grandfather faced during WWII after the Germans invaded Holland in 1940. Of the invasion, she said, "The Dutch fought back for four days gallantly. My grandfather was a police captain at that time and was forced to work for the Germans. If he did not comply, he would be executed and the family executed or sent to camps.

The family lived right on the North Sea in the city of IJmuiden. All the Jewish were swarming in droves trying to get out of Holland. My father saw the people leave their belongings on the pier trying to get passage out to England. One of the ships, the *van Rensselaer*, hit a magnetic mine and it blew up. He saw everything. He and my grandfather were both enraged. They pulled as many people out as they could with ropes, with anything. He decided to help resist the enemy. He began with illegal newspaper articles and helping Jews escape and warning Jews like my grandfather did. My father got caught at seventeen years of age and was forced to work building bunkers on our dunes. When the British *Lancasters* bombed the Ruhr Valley in Germany in May of 1943, they send my father to Germany. He was first working in a munitions factory in Kassel where he tried to sabotage the munitions. Finally, he was sent to Minden, Iserlohn, Essen, Mülheim, and Hagen where the British bombed the Mohne dam. It was a horrible disaster. My father was picking up trees, rocks and garbage and later had to dig trenches and place the dead bodies in them.

He ran away. They caught him very shortly after and made an example out of him by beating him in front of others. He ran away a second time and made it all the way through Germany and Holland and finally reached the island of Texel where there was a Dutch resistance movement. He was hidden underneath bales of hay. He did missions with downed paratroopers, signaling them and getting them out of there as quick as possible. He did more sabotage and military maneuvers on the island."

With D-Day came the Dutch hopes of Allied success and many felt safe enough to travel including Carla's father. He was caught by the SS as he was traveling on a train with a false ID. She related, "They took him to their headquarters in the Hague for three months where they tortured and interrogated him.

When Operation Market Garden began, they sent him to Kamp Amersfoort. Here, he was tortured and became number 6750. He also had to wear a big red ball on his back to show that he was a condemned man. It resembled the bull's eye. They could target shoot him anytime, they told him. He had to eat off the shovel. He was tortured there and put to hard labor. Finally, with Operation Market Garden in full force, they decided the Americans would be coming soon and find the evidence. So, they sent him on a train from which a German guard allowed him to escape. He was 215 pounds in the beginning of the war. Now, he was ninety pounds, a walking skeleton.

He stole a German *Kriegsmarine* uniform and traveled ending up in Arnhem. He saw the carnage. In Capelle aan de IJssel near Rotterdam, a young couple hid him underneath their floor boards for seven months. It's the hunger winter in Holland and people are starving to death because the Germans cut off all food and fuel supplies to the Dutch in retaliation for a railroad strike trying to help the Allied force.

After the war, he was twenty years old. He still felt compelled to go fight for others. He trained with the British commandos becoming a Special Task Force member in Aldershot. He went to Ceylon, Egypt, Singapore, Malaysia, and ended up in Indonesia where he almost got killed three more times. One time in Indonesia, his entire camp was shot and killed. He looked at his buddy on the ground and he just happened to move his head down and a sniper bullet went right past his ear. He was the only one living from that stunt. He kept the lucky bullet in his pocket for the rest of his life." **We look forward to Carla's book, tentatively titled *Destined to Survive*. Carla Gleason can be reached at [carlagleason@msn.com](mailto:carlagleason@msn.com).**