

## **The Wonderful Netherlands American Grave Adoption Program**

Of the deceased service members from the Prince George – Hopewell area, four are interred in the Netherlands American Cemetery at Margraten. They are as follows:

- Leroy D. Burkett
- Douglas D. Johnson
- Hilliard C. Leatherwood, Jr.
- Raleigh C. Powell, Jr.

This is the background of the Netherlands American Cemetery and the wonderful adoption program of the graves there by the citizens of the Netherlands.

As was the practice in World War II, the deceased were first buried in temporary cemeteries in secure areas near the combat theater where they were serving. One of those temporary cemeteries was established just east of Margraten in the Netherlands. The small town of Margraten is located in a farming region the southeastern corner of the Netherlands which, in September 1944, was one of the first areas in the Netherlands to be liberated from German control.

At that time, Captain Joseph J. Shomon from Richmond, Virginia, was with the 611<sup>th</sup> Graves Registration Company. He was directed to establish a temporary cemetery in the Netherlands in anticipation of American battle casualties in upcoming months. With assistance from a Margraten town official, Captain Shomon obtained a location for the cemetery in the farm fields outside of town and began building the cemetery in October 1944.

Soon afterwards, in November 1944, deceased Americans began to be brought from surrounding combat zones for interment at the temporary cemetery at Margraten, and continued to be brought there from other temporary cemeteries and isolated graves for re-interment for months after Germany surrendered in May 1945. Shortly after the first Americans were buried in the temporary Margraten cemetery, families in Margraten began to adopt the American graves. An adoption system was established that continues to this day in which the adopting Netherland citizens regularly place flowers on their adopted graves. Many have made contact with the deceased's next of kin back in the United States and continue to correspond through one or more generations of adopters and American families.

In October 1946, the cemetery was selected to be one of several new permanent American cemeteries in Europe and was named the Netherlands American Cemetery. By this time, there were 18,764 American graves in the cemetery. Then in 1948, the U.S. Government gave the all the deceased's next of kin the option of having the remains of their relatives that died in World War II around the world to be re-interred in one of the permanent overseas American cemeteries or returned to the United States for burial in a cemetery of their choice. More than 10,000 of the Americans buried at the Netherlands American Cemetery were brought back to the United States, leaving 8,301 Americans in the cemetery.

The formal adoption program that was established in February 1945 continues to this day in which the Netherland citizens regularly place flowers on their adopted American graves. All of the 8,301 graves in the cemetery have been adopted by the citizens of the Netherlands, as well as 1,722 American names engraved on the Walls of the Missing at the cemetery.

The organization that coordinates and maintains the adoption system is the **“Foundation for Adopting Graves at the American Cemetery in Margraten”**. The Foundation will provide the name and contact information of the adopting Netherland citizen for each grave. This can be done by going to their website at <http://www.adoptiegraven-margraten.nl/en/> and opening the “Register” page. The name of the American service member can be entered in the form located on that page. (Note: if the website opens in the Dutch language, click on the American flag to convert the text to English.)

Of the four American service members given above from the Prince George – Hopewell area that are permanently buried there, the Netherland citizens that currently have adopted their graves are listed next to their name:

- Leroy D. Burkett – Adopted in 2004 by the Dragstra Family of Hoensbroek.
- Douglas D. Johnson – Adopted in 2007 by the Laugs Family of Ohé en Laak.
- Hilliard C. Leatherwood, Jr. – Adopted in 1947 by Mrs. Elly Hutschemakers-Schreurs of Margraten.
- Raleigh C. Powell, Jr. – Adopted in 2004 by Mr. H. D. Rijpma of Haaksbergen.

As mentioned above in 1948, the U.S. Government gave the all the deceased’s next of kin the option of having the remains of their relatives that died in World War II around the world to be re-interred in one of the permanent overseas American cemeteries or returned to the United States for burial in a cemetery of their choice. Over 10,000 service members were returned to the United States from Margraten under this program. About 220 were brought back to Virginia, of which four of them are known to be from the Prince George – Hopewell area. However, before they were returned the United States, their graves were also adopted by Dutch citizens. Based on the pre-1948 cemetery adoption card records, those individuals and their adopters are as follows, along with the location of the cemetery in the United States where they were reburied.

- Pierre Bontecou – Adopted by Louise Frederiks of Heerlen. Re-interred in the United States Military Academy Post Cemetery, West Point, New York.
- Michael H. Burchell – Adopted by L.H.M. Hakewessel of Geleen. Re-interred in the Waverly Cemetery, Waverly, Virginia.
- Preston E. Temple – Adopted by Miss Br. Thoma of Berg en Terbijt. Re-interred in the City Point National Cemetery, Hopewell, Virginia.
- John H. Tomko – Adopted by Miss Dora Evers of Klimmen. Re-interred in the Tomko Homeplace Memorial Garden and Cemetery, Disputanta, Virginia.

Of the eight total service members listed above, the original post-WWII era adoption cards included the names and addresses for next of kin for Douglas Johnson, Michael Burchell and Preston Temple. Douglas Johnson’s step-sister, Janice Baird, recalled that the Dutch family that adopted his grave wrote to his family to let them know they were taking care of his grave, which was possibly the original adopter of his grave. Since the adoption records for Michael Burchell and Preston Temple also included the addresses for their next of kin, it is possible the adopters corresponded with the Burchell and Temple families, although it is not known if they did. In the case of Michael Burchell, his wife’s contact information was on the 1947 adoption card and for Preston Temple, his mother’s contact information was given on the adoption card.

Below is a photograph of the Netherlands American Cemetery. The town of Margraten is in the upper left corner of the photograph. The cemetery is still surrounded by beautiful Dutch farm lands as it was when it was formed in October 1944.



### ***The Netherlands American Cemetery at Margraten, the Netherlands.***

*Photograph courtesy of the Foundation for Adopting Graves at the American Cemetery in Margraten*

Numerous yearly events and observances are held at the cemetery as follows:

- May 2 – 6: Faces of Margraten when photographs of the deceased service members are displayed next to their headstones and beside their name on the Tablets of the Missing.
- May 4: Commemoration Day when the Netherlands grieves for the people killed in war.
- May 5: Liberation Day to mark the end of Nazi Germany occupation of the Netherlands.
- May 27: American Memorial Day honoring those that died while in the service of the United States.
- September 9: Liberation Concert in remembrance of the liberation of the Netherlands that began in September 1944
- November 11: Veterans Day honoring veterans of all wars.

The photograph on the next page is from a recent Memorial Day when the graves were decorated with American and Dutch flags by American children from the nearby American military base and local Dutch children, respectively. Flowers were placed on many graves by citizens of the Netherlands that adopted individual graves.



***Netherlands American Cemetery decorated for Memorial Day***

*Photograph courtesy of the  
Foundation for Adopting Graves at the American Cemetery in Margraten (by Roger Caelen)*