In January 2011 this column ran an article about the search for an airman, Jack Copper, who after his B-24 had crashed in northwest France, had been hidden and sheltered by French patriots. People of the village of Fillievres had contacted me in their search for Jack Cooper or his family with whom they had lost track. A history of the village was being compiled, and they wished to learn more of Cooper's postwar fate. The Harlingen connection was that Cooper had gone through the Harlingen Army Gunnery School (HAGS).

Using what information had been furnished to that time, Art Cohan and I concluded that a Jack Cooper in the Columbus, Ohio area was the one sought. We suggested that the people in France write the editor of the Columbus newspaper for help. A short time later new information, including Cooper's correct birth date of July 25, 1923 and his middle name, Lavern, was furnished. The expertise, persistence and networking of Art Cohan turned up the man sought. He was from Dalton, Ohio and had passed away February 26, 2010 at age 86. He apparently had never married. The names and addresses of his surviving brother and sister in Ohio were uncovered by Art and furnished the people in France.

Mary Joyce, an English retiree in the village, was kind enough to furnish us a chapter in the book being compiled. Jack Cooper's HAGS photo graces the cover of this section. We learn that French Resistance forces were very active in the area. They even captured German soldiers and surreptitiously imprisoned them. The Germans, in turn, captured some of the Resistance fighters. After the Lille Military Tribunal was held at the Loos prison, 68 of them were shot at Bondues. This is indicative of the dangers the villagers faced in hiding the downed airman. "Members of the Resistance trusted no-one, not even their closet neighbors. Fear of arrest was always there and people certainly weren't going to broadcast their actions."

Crud Wagon tail gunner Jack Cooper parachuted to safety after his B-24 had run low on fuel. Later, also to be hidden in the village was Illinois American Melvin Bachman, a navigator, from another B-24. Stan, a Polish immigrant to the U.S., was another downed airman taken in by the villagers. Lastly, there was an unidentified English airman. Not only were the protecting adults sworn to secrecy but the young family members tasked to do the same.

With food being rationed, feeding these extra mouths was often difficult. With help from the anti-German network, illicit ration books were obtained to ease the burden. While generally hidden in houses along with the French families, on occasion the airmen had to hide in the barn in a cavity behind sacks and bales of hay and straw. When conditions allowed Jack and Melvin helped the family with field work in the haying operations.

By 1943 some airmen were being smuggled out of France with a system of the underground that took them south from village to village and eventually across the border into neutral Spain. Between January 1943 and September 1944, 56 allied airmen escaped France "from right under the Germans' noses."

Unfortunately the area in northwest France was in itself the target of allied bombing. This was because it housed strategic German military sites. Near Fillievres itself was an
important launch site. Here VI and later V2 missiles were being launched against England. Thirty Germans manned one launch site adjacent to the village while in the village itself was a school to train technicians in missile operations. The people soon came to recognize the distinctive sounds of the heavy bombers, the American B-17s or English Lancasters, and also the lighter fighter planes providing cover protection—the Spitfire or Mosquito and the American P47 Thunderbolt. "These planes passed overhead relentlessly, day and night, throughout 1943 and 1944." Naturally the Germans countered with their mobile anti-aircraft batteries and their own fighters—Junker JU 87/88 and Focke Wulf FW190. Frequent warning sirens sent the residents into cellar shelters or nearby hillside cave shelters with timbered galleries that they had constructed. At night the citizens frequently slept in their cellars.

The 513 inhabitants of Fillievres were for four years under the thumbs of two companies of German soldiers. It was the Raymond and Lucienne Merchez family that hid Jack and Melvin. They were able to relieve the tension one July day when they all celebrated Jack's birthday with a special meal and even opened some champagne. Jack, one day, even took the risk of bicycling to another village to see another downed American. He was accompanied that day by Mlle Hugues, a young lady active in the Resistance. One time she even smuggled guns in a basket load of laundry. Although the Americans tried to lean to speak some French their accents made villagers laugh.

It was on September 3, 1944 that liberation came in the form of the arrival of allied troops and a Polish battalion. Some months later Jack wrote the Merchez family to let them know he had made it home. At the end of his letter he had written I will never forget you! Melvin too was to was to correspond that he had made it home. The Resistance members and everyone were delighted to learn this good news.

The Army Air Corps had Jack fill out a standard debriefing form on September 10, 1944. The reason for the form was apparently to glean useful information for later airmen training. The questions and his answers are informative:

Date, time, and approximate location of plane crash or landing
April 1, 1944, 1:30 P.M. Near St. Pol, Pas de Calais, France

Nature and extent of damage to plane when source bailed out. Was it on fire, etc?
No fire—ran out of gasoline

At what altitude did source bail out?
13,000 ft.

Were any of the crew killed before the plane crashed?
I don't know as 2 ME 109s attacked us about 30 seconds before I bailed out.

What number of the crew bailed out? Did their parachutes open?
2 waist gunners, bombardier, ball turret gunner, tail gunner—all chutes opened.

Did the plane explode on striking the ground?
Don't know.

Did the source see any other members of the crew dead or alive after reaching the ground?
Yes.

What is the source's opinion as to the fate of the other and the reason for his opinion?
I know that two of them were hidden by French patriots as I saw them later on. The ball turret gunner was captured as I saw him captured and the two waist gunners landed safely but don't know if they were captured or not. The others I know nothing of..
Cooper then went on to give a narrative of subsequent events. "I bailed out on 1 April and landed near St. Pol in the Pas de Calais area. Within two minutes a girl brought me civilian clothes and helped me hide my equipment. She led me to St. Pol where I talked to a member of the underground, the tobacco controller for the area. I was taken to Fillievres on 2 April, I stayed with M. & Mme Maurice Doulon in this village from 2 April to 13 April. Two of their three children were at home at the time. M. Doulon was a tobacco grower. From 13 April to 9 September I stayed at the home of M. & Mme Raymond Merchez, also at Fillievres. While there I knew there sons, Daniel and Gilbert, as well as an old lady named Mlle. Alice Hughes. The farm worker was named Roger Vermotte. Mr. Merchez was a farmer as well as a tobacco grower. S/SGT Melvin Bachman joined me here on 26 June. On 9 September, the FFI members took us to Arras where we contacted the English forces. We were sent to Vitry and flown to the UK on the same day."

After his 20 months of active duty was over Cooper returned to civilian life as a mechanic. He had been awarded the Air Medal-Oak Leaf Cluster. From what we have learned from our new French acquaintances, the villagers of Fillievres were indeed unsung heroes for the roles they played during World War II. They too deserve to be honored.