

INSIDE AURORA: Ready for my closeup?

By Scott Johnston

Sometime next year movie-goers throughout Europe could be visiting their favourite theatres, sitting down with a large popcorn, or whatever they snack on over there, and seeing up on the big screen not Sandra Bullock, or Brad Pitt, or Johnny Depp, or some other Hollywood superstar, but? well? me.

I know, you ask, ?what did those poor Europeans ever do to deserve that??

It all started several years ago, when I started looking into the fate of my late uncle. He was killed in the Second World War, when his Wellington bomber was shot down over the North Sea.

Of the six crew members, three bodies were recovered and positively identified, but the fate of the other three, including my uncle, was unknown. They were eventually officially identified as lost at sea.

Two of the crew washed up, and were subsequently buried, on the island of Schiermonnikoog off the coast of The Netherlands.

Through my research I learned that another body had washed up there at about the same time.

This one remained unidentified and was buried in Grave 60 in the island's tiny cemetery, called Vredenhof, or ?Garden of Peace?.

Through a series of fortunate happenstances, the occupying German forces kept meticulous records of the men who were buried there, and these records had survived the war, ending up in the hands of the man currently overseeing the cemetery.

When I contacted him, he shared this information with me, and although the details were not definitive, the doctor at the time thought the unidentified body was from my uncle's plane, and the general description of the body and clothing sounded right.

This, along with some other circumstantial evidence got me thinking; could this be my late uncle?

I'm continuing my research, but since the remains will not be exhumed for DNA testing, I realize I'll never know for sure.

So, how does that result in me being up on the big screen?

Here's where fortunate happenstance ? except perhaps, for those movie-going Europeans - kicks in again.

It turns out that over the past few years, a German crew have been filming a documentary about the cemetery, which has a fascinating history.

It was started in 1906, as a resting place for victims of disasters at sea, who had washed up on shore.

During the Second World War, the Germans quickly occupied the island. The Commander who was in charge agreed with the local Dutch authorities that any bodies that washed on shore, whether they be Allied or German, would be buried together in the cemetery with full military honours.

Apparently, this was the only cemetery in the Third Reich throughout the war in which this occurred.

Following the war, the current overseer of the cemetery had inherited all of the related documents, and had spent decades researching the men buried there, contacting relatives, and meeting with family members who had come from all over the world to visit the graves.

The German crew had filmed a number of these stories from families on both sides of the war.

They heard of our research, and wanted to include that angle, which has the added twist of us being one of at least three families who believe their relative is buried in Grave 60.

Although our potential participation in the documentary was first raised a few years ago, as time went by we never really thought it would happen, especially since the documentary is to be completed this year, so that it can premiere in theatres next spring for the 70th anniversary of the liberation of The Netherlands.

Then last month, everything fell into place within a few weeks, and before we knew it, the producer, a cameraman and sound man were here in Aurora with all of their equipment filming in our house.

Were we ready for our close-ups? Did everything go without a hitch?

Well, no, and no.

But more about that in my next column.

Feel free to e-mail Scott at: machellscorners@gmail.com