

Central High School Omaha Alumni and Friends Soar Overseas

Written by Brett Comstock

This summer, in early June, Scott Wilson, longtime Central History teacher, took a group of twenty-three “alumni and friends” on a trip across Europe. This group included a Central graduate from every decade starting in the ‘60s and through the 2010s, friends and family of Central grads, and even some staff members. John and Tammy Williams are both CHS graduates and parents of Central alums, and say they had been waiting for years for this opportunity. After hearing about their kids’ experience on this trip, they begged Scott to plan one for parents, and their wish finally came true this past summer.



Over the course of thirteen days, this group of Eagles travelled across the U.K., France, Belgium, and the Netherlands, making plenty of stops along the way. Scott described the theme of the trip as being about the World Wars, and specifically Central’s connection to them. While highly educational, Scott said they were also able to go on some excursions just for fun. He said, “We had a balance of touring and doing historic things, but also doing kind of some traditional European traveling.”

The trip began with an overnight flight to London, where the group was greeted with a welcome dinner. Their time in London featured lots of sightseeing, including visiting the Imperial War Museums, St. Paul’s Cathedral, and the Churchill War Rooms. Once they were finished sightseeing, they made their way to Portsmouth where they caught a ferry to the Normandy region.

The Normandy region was the first (but not only) place that the group was greeted by the mayors of a town they were visiting. The group went to Colleville-sur-Mer to visit the American cemetery, and were graciously welcomed by the town, including the mayors themselves. This was the first American cemetery in Europe for World War II soldiers, and most of those buried there died on D-Day. Andy Haggart, CHS alum and Foundation representative, said the cemetery “was quite a bit more moving than I was expecting it to

be.” From there, the group was able to visit Omaha Beach, Pointe du Hoc, and Arromanches, before heading to Paris.



The group is welcomed by the Mayors of Normandy



Omaha Beach



Arromanches

The group's time in the City of Light was a slight respite from the heavy, though enlightening, experiences learning about the World Wars. Their time in Paris included walking down the famous Champs-Élysées and visiting the Eiffel Tower. They also took a Seine River cruise just like the Olympic teams did a month later. Because the Paris Olympics began later in the summer, the group had the unique experience of watching the set-up for the games. Tammy Williams recalled seeing the Olympic rings from the Eiffel Tower, an experience she said she will not soon forget.

From Paris, the group then headed towards Reims. On their way, they were able to visit the Glade of Armistice in the Forest of Compiègne, which is where World War I ended.



The group at Marion Crandell's grave

In Reims, they stopped at the Musée de la Reddition, which is where German forces surrendered, ending World War II. Their next and final stop in France was the Meuse-Argonne cemetery, which has a deep connection to Central High School. This American cemetery is where Marion Crandell is buried.

Many Eagles will know that not only was Crandell an 1889 graduate of Omaha High School (now CHS), but she was the first American woman to die at the front in WWI. Scott recalled that the last time he took a group there, they noticed that Marion's name was misspelled on her headstone. He was delighted to discover upon returning that they made a new headstone for her, rectifying their mistake. Here, the Central group was able to meet playwright Chris Chenel, who wrote the play *As a Soldier* about Marion Crandell's life and death, honoring the sacrifice she made dying at the front in the war. The group then paid their respects and said goodbye to dear Marion Crandell, and then moved on to the Bastogne region of Belgium.

While in the Bastogne Region, the group was able to do some sightseeing where they visited the site of the Battle of the Bulge, and they then swiftly moved on to the Netherlands. The Netherlands is where the group found their deepest connection with Central, and where many of them felt the most moved. The main event for them was visiting the Netherlands American Cemetery in the small town of Margraten.

As hinted at earlier, Normandy was not the only town to provide the group with a warm welcome. In Margraten, the mayor arranged for the group to be greeted at City Hall, which was an experience that the group raved about. John and Scott both noted that they felt like the city “rolled out the red carpet” for them. “They treated us like visiting dignitaries,” said Scott. The warm welcome was just the beginning of their unforgettable experience in Margraten; their next stop was the cemetery.

The Netherlands American Cemetery is where 8,000 Americans who died in WWII are buried, six of whom were Central alumni. As a show of gratitude to the Americans who helped liberate the Netherlands from the Nazis, Margraten has instituted a grave adoption program for nearly 80 years. This means that on birthdays, holidays, and anniversaries of death, families who have adopted these graves leave flowers and celebrate the soldiers as part of their own family.

When the group arrived, they were shown a documentary about the history of the grave adoption program; something Scott called “a real tearjerker.” Also in attendance were Dutch documentary filmmakers who had made a film called *Hope* about the Dutch people in the area who had taken in and hid their Jewish neighbors to protect them from being seized in the Holocaust.

The group then visited each of the six graves, where the adopters were able to give a few words about the Central alums they have taken so much care to honor over the years. In return, the Central group was able to gift some documents and keepsakes to the grave adopters, along with putting up a Fallen Eagle flag that Beth Wilson designed. John Williams was deeply moved by these Dutch people’s dedication to the American soldiers.



Dutch Royal Marines who have adopted the grave of Phillip Horan (CHS 1936) at Netherlands American Cemetery in Margraten

“We’re generations past that now and they still take it as serious to the point where someone places artifacts from a dead US soldier from decades ago on their mantle in their

home as a tribute to the sacrifice that was made; it changed my perspective tremendously on the loss that those countries paid during that war.”

John Williams

The grave adoption program has existed in Margraten for so long that the care of these graves has been passed down through generations, the weight of which made a profound impact on our Eagles. Tammy noticed this, saying, “It was very special to actually get to observe not only how the town of Margraten has really embraced this as a part of their heritage, but the families who have passed down this adoption program through their generations. We had generations of Central connections that were there experiencing that.” On meeting these families, John said, “We have this common connection with Central High School that’s hard to put into words. When you’re present and experiencing it, it feels very strong.”

In continuation of their education on WWII, they moved on to Amsterdam for their final stop of the trip. The group was able to experience a guided Holocaust walking tour of the city and had the pleasure of taking a canal cruise. The trip ended with a goodbye dinner, which gave the group an opportunity to reflect on their experiences and share a few more moments together before heading back home.

Scott recalls feeling nervous for this trip beforehand, anxious that it wouldn’t meet everyone’s expectations. He acknowledged that it was a big undertaking, but from what others on the trip said, it ended up a success. Tammy said, “The trip would not have been the same without Scott and Beth Wilson. Scott is so passionate and knowledgeable, and that passion has come through in how our children learned from him.” She continued, “The connection that Omaha Central has across the Atlantic is something that’s just so unique. It was the trip of a lifetime.” Scott fondly recalls, “We did a lot of smiling and laughing together. The Central vibe was really strong.”