



## Spa City native learns he's a hero abroad

DUNCAN CRARY, The Saratogian

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**SARATOGA SPRINGS - Fifty-nine years ago, on Sept. 11, Bill Clements, 79, was among the first six American soldiers to arrive in Thimister-Clermont, Belgium, during World War II. Five weeks ago, he returned to the small Belgian village to become an honorary citizen.**

"I was king for a week," he said with a chuckle.

In every widow hung flyers with his picture, reading "Retour de Bill Clements: Premier libérateur américain a Clermont le 11 Septembre 1944."

People he'd never met, or didn't remember meeting, kissed him on the cheeks and asked to have his autograph.

"It was thrilling," he said. "They love Americans."

But Clements is no ordinary American, especially to the people of Clermont.

A native of Saratoga Springs, Clements was a U.S. Army private first class in the 1st Engineer Combat Battalion of the 1st Infantry Division during World War II.

"We were the 1st Division because we were always there first," he said.

As a combat engineer, Clements was always at the front of the 1st Division. His platoon built the bridges and cleared the roads for the troops and tanks to follow.

"We made sure the Army got where it had to go," he said.

When Clements and five other soldiers drove up Rene Rutten Street in Nazi-occupied Clermont, there was not one person in sight. All the shutters and doors were closed tightly.

"Once they saw that we were Americans, every door opened and everyone came out," he said.

After years of occupation, the people of Clermont could fly their native Belgium flags again.

"We liberated them," Clements said.

Soon the jeep was flooded with men, women and children who posed for a photograph. He didn't think much of it.

"Everyone thought the war was about over and we'd be home for Christmas," he said.

Clements took a three-day leave to visit nearby Spa, where he was approached by the young man who had taken this photograph in Clermont. The man, Joseph Baguette, recognized Clements and gave him a copy of the photograph.

It was a nice token, but still Clements didn't think much of it.

"I figured I'd keep it and put it in a scrapbook if I ever made it home," Clements said.

The next day, Clements got word that German paratroopers dressed in American uniforms had landed in the area.

"That was the start of the Battle of the Bulge," he said.

For the next week, Clements and his outfit laid 30,000 anti-tank mines (under the cover of white sheets to match the snow) to slow the German advance. After suffering two wounds in the fighting, Clements returned to Saratoga Springs and put the photograph in a scrapbook, where it remained for more than 50 years.

In 1998, John Tait III, the son of one of the men in Clement's squad, contacted him for information about his father, John Tait. Clements sent Tait a copy of the photograph, which Tait took to Belgium. Four years later, Tait told Clements about what he had seen in Clermont.

"When we left in a hurry (in 1944), the people picked up all the things we left behind and started a museum," Clements said.

The Clermont Remember Museum 39-45 is dedicated solely to the 1st Division. Over the years, it grew to house large tanks and jeeps, but its prized possession has remained a photograph of the six soldiers who arrived in town first to liberate the people, Clements said.

No one could identify the men in the picture until Clements sent a letter to museum curators Mathilde and Marcel Schmetz. The couple begged Clements to contact the other men and return for a proper thank you.

He tried to contact the other men, but "I'm the last one alive," he said.

After delaying the trip for one year, he and his wife, Flora, finally made it to Belgium where they were bestowed with gifts and celebrations.

"Everywhere we went, I had to sing 'God Bless America,' " he said.

At the close of the trip, the Schmetzes asked Clements to sign a military truck that every visiting veteran signs. They had reserved one spot on the cab in case any of the six men in Clement's squad returned.

"When I signed the truck on the cab, I wish I'd put the names of the other five men," he said. "If I can make it back, I will."