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Rene Menzel, 97, One Adventure After Another in WW II, Later a Darien P&Z Chairman

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Rene Eugene Menzel, Age 97 of Williamsburg, Va. and formerly Darien, died peacefully on May 10.

After fleeing Europe with his family at the start of World War II, Menzel fought behind enemy lines, then in D-Day invasion, and then sometimes found himself behind enemy lines again. The much-decorated veteran later lived in Darien for two decades, serving on the Planning & Zoning Commission as its chairman.

He was born on Nov. 22, 1919 in The Hague, Netherlands to Jean and Erna Menzel. He recently survived the passing of his lovely wife Marjory on Nov. 18 of last year. The two had been married nearly 60 years.

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Rene and his younger brother Georges spent their formative years growing up in Brussels, Belgium. Rene's father, Jean was an industrialist, art collector, and champion horse owner. The family traveled frequently throughout Europe.

Rene graduated from the University of Brussels just as WW II was breaking out in Europe. He and his family were forced to flee Belgium during the Nazi blitzkrieg. His family escaped through a perilous car journey to the Pyrenees Mountains in the South of France. Eventually making their way to Spain and Portugal and finally catching a steam ship to the U.S.

While his parents and Georges were evading the Nazis by sleeping out in remote farm houses, Rene enlisted in the Free French Army. He was subsequently injured during a skirmish by shrapnel and convalesced in a hospital in Nazi occupied France.

He escaped through falsifying a pass that allowed him to travel freely throughout German occupied France. He eventually made his way to Casablanca, Morocco, which at that time was not under Vichy government control. From Morocco he made his way to the U.S. through a ship that was going to Guadeloupe, where he was reunited with his parents, who were living in New York City.

Rene immediately enlisted in the U.S. Army and rose to the rank of first lieutenant. He became a naturalized U.S. citizen while stationed at the Military Intelligence Training Center in Camp Ritchie, Md.

Rene was assigned back to Europe where he was part of military intelligence interviewing people fleeing across the English Channel to insure they were not spies.

He was part of D-Day and landed in Normandy under extreme conditions. He participated in the liberation of France where his detachment assisted in the freeing of over 50,000 prisoners of war.

One of Rene's favorite war stories detailed how he and his sergeant got ahead of the other allied troops and much to their surprise would arrive in their jeep in towns that hadn't been officially liberated yet.

Rene was awarded the highest honors for his performance throughout the war. From the provisional French Government under General Charles de Gaulle, Rene was awarded the Croix de Geurre for his contribution to the liberation of the French Republic. From the USA under the orders of General Eisenhower, Rene was awarded the Purple Heart, the Bronze Star and the Oak Leaf Cluster.

At the conclusion of the war, Rene reunited with his family in Manhattan. Soon after arriving back in the States, he went to work for IBM.

Rene met his future wife Marjory Diemer at a formal dance at the Anchor and Saber Club in New York City. After a courtship that included frequent trips to Europe, the two professionals married and resided in Manhattan. Rene would rise to become a top executive at IBM World Trade where his linguistic skills came in handy — he spoke French, German, Spanish, and English.

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After starting a family in Manhattan, Rene and Marjory moved to Tokyo with their two young boys. It was a fascinating period in their lives as they traveled frequently throughout the Orient.

After several years, Rene and Marjory returned to the States and called Darien home. They resided in Darien for over 20 years, becoming active in the local community. On the volunteer side, Rene became very involved in the local town government; heading up the Planning and Zoning Committee as well as becoming a Power Squadron instructor.

Upon his retirement Rene joined SCORE (Service Corps of Retired Executives). Rene was awarded the SCORE Connecticut Chapter executive of the year award. He was very fond of helping small business succeed.

Rene and Marjory moved to Williamsburg over 15 years ago where they lived in Fords Colony and were involved in many different social activities. Rene heartily enjoyed his classes at Christopher Wren including the language tables.

Rene is survived by his two sons: John of Alpharetta, Ga. and William of Tucson, Ariz. Funeral services will be at 2 p.m., Friday, May 19 at Bruton Parish in Colonial Williamsburg. In lieu of flowers, donations may be made to the Meals on Wheels Program of Williamsburg.