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A Dutch Boy's View of the Liberation of Holland Achterveld and the end of the war

Jan Boersen

Jan Boersen was a lad of 6 living in the Dutch village of Achterveld when German troops invaded Holland. His memories of the role Canadian soldiers played in the liberation of his country remain strong and are, in part, recalled in the following article.

Night of Two Patrols (20 April 1945)

For a period of time in late April 1945, my family's home village of Achterveld in central Holland found itself in "no-man's-land." During the daytime hours, we were safely in the hands of Canadian soldiers. But at night, the Canadians would pull back a few kilometers within their lines, allowing Germans to take up their positions. It was only logical that the two sides would come into contact at some point. We never imagined that meeting would come so close to our farm.

One damp April night we retired to our basement bomb shelter for the night. In the shelter were my parents, five brothers and sisters and our hired help, as well as various refugees and even some neighbours. Only a small lantern, barely visible from the outside, was lit.

Suddenly, there was a knocking on the outside door. Mother, who was a light sleeper, got up to answer the call. Despite their reputation as "barbarians," Germans remained somewhat respectful of women, and most soldiers would not mistreat or take females hostage, as they would a man.

As Mother opened the door, she saw the dim outline of several German soldiers silhouetted in the faint light. Face painted black and wearing camouflage gear, the commander of the group

barked: "Haben Sie Tommies* gesehen?" (Have you seen any British?) Keeping her wits about her, Mother calmly answered: "Nein."

Unconvinced by her denial, the German pressed: "Who do you have in your basement?" Without listening to her response, several soldiers pushed Mother out of the way and headed to our basement shelter. Meanwhile, the remainder of the patrol – about ten soldiers – had entered the house.

Satisfied there were no "Tommies" in the basement shelter, the commander asked my Mother's permission to light a fire so they could warm themselves. She agreed (what choice did she have have?) and directed them to a pile of kindling in the corner of the room. Seeing a coffee pot on the stove, the Germans then asked if they might have a cup.

My Mother was a cool customer and knew that the more pleased the Germans were at their reception, the sooner they would leave our family in peace. She agreed and poured each one a cup of the warm beverage.

More than an hour later, now warm, dry and pacified with several cups of coffee (with real milk in it), the troop departed. They left no sign of their visit, save a trail of muddy boot prints in the kitchen.

* The Germans called any Allied soldier who wore the flat English-style helmets "Tommies." Most Dutch picked up this name – much to the dislike of the Canadians.

Only when she was satisfied that her visitors had moved along, did Mother return to her bed. Within a matter of minutes, we heard a pounding once again on our door. Grumbling, she headed upstairs to answer the call.

Expecting another contingent of Germans (or even the same group returning to the warmth of our kitchen), my Mother was shocked to find Canadian soldiers outside her door. The Canadians had only arrived in Achterveld two days before, and most residents had had little interaction with our Canadian liberators.

Speaking in English, the Canadian leader questioned her: "Have you seen any Germans?" She immediately pointed in the direction of where her German visitors had disappeared. The soldiers departed quickly in pursuit of the enemy.

Again Mother returned to our shelter, hoping that there would be no more delegations of lost, cold or hungry soldiers that night. By this time, most of us were wide-awake as we anticipated a confrontation between our two sets of visitors. We waited for the sounds of gunfire but heard instead yet another "Knock, Knock, Knock" on our door.

By now exhausted and testy by the events of the night, Mother made her third climb to the kitchen and found the same Canadians. Having lost the trail of the Germans, the soldiers had decided to return to our warm and dry home. After asking permission to enter, the soldiers dried their socks by the fire and warmed their bellies with a cup of strong Dutch coffee. They then departed.

We often wondered after the events of that night, what would have been the outcome if one group had arrived just as the other was leaving? What we were certain of was that none of us would likely be returning to sleep that night.

The next morning, Father walked into Achterveld to report the previous night's events. A Canadian soldier recorded his story and the location of our farm. At the same time, Father learned that the phone lines between Achterveld and neighbouring Barneveld, where the dispatch base was located, had been cut. Mother's German visitors were no doubt responsible for this act of sabotage.

Several days later, the Canadian line had advanced enough so that Achterveld remained under total Allied control – both night and day. Soldiers increased their patrols of the countryside and while we could still expect German attacks, our small village slept more soundly at night

The Longest Kilometre

22 April 1945

Religion, prayers and church were integral parts of our family's daily life. We attended St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Achterveld. My father Jan sang in the church choir, and I served as an altar boy. At different times of the year, special events were held at St. Joseph's – one being the Feast Day of St. Joseph. In 1945, this celebrated day would be held on 22 April.

But with combat between Allied and German forces right on our doorstep, many people of the congregation remained safe at home on the Saint's day, despite its importance. But given the integral roles played by both my Father and I, we were expected to be present for the ceremonies. Little did any of us who arrived at church that day imagine what the next few hours had in store for us.

By the latter days of April 1945, the Dutch allowed themselves to hope that liberation might be only a matter of weeks – even days away. Given the pull-back of the Germans from many areas of Holland by this time, we prayed that before too long, the Nazis would be sent packing by our Canadian saviors. But after five long years of observing the Germans' behaviour, we knew that they would never give in without a fight. We also were aware, despite being in Canadian territory, that we could never count ourselves or our homes safe. Pockets of Nazis were still holed up around the village.

To this end, the Canadians had dug a series of foxholes and trenches around the village. On the west side of Achterveld, several anti-tank guns had been placed. Never underestimating the Nazis, the Canadians were leaving nothing to chance

My parents and I walked the short distance to our church in Achterveld. The rest of the family remained safe at home. I recall our nervousness

during the journey to church. Foremost in our minds was the possibility of finding ourselves in the line of fire. Father remarked, "we were crazy to be on the streets – Feast Day or no Feast Day!"

Fortunately, our trip was uneventful and we reached St. Joseph's safely. But just as the choir had begun singing "Adorate Devote" and "Regina Caelie," with the congregation reciting the Rosary, the all too familiar "looming" warning of an incoming shell was heard. From long experience, we knew that this deceptively benign sound would be followed by an ear-shattering explosion.

For a brief minute our Pastor interrupted his prayers, but quickly continued. No sooner had he resumed, than a second explosion occurred, followed by the rattling of shrapnel on the church roof. Quickly, the priest approached the altar, blessed the congregation, and returned the Blessed Sacrament to its customary storage place.

Taking this as a cue to seek shelter, the congregation, including my mother, scattered and took refuge in niches and behind pillars in the nave. We choir boys ran into the building's sacristy and were followed by our priest. Quickly, we removed our church garments and scattered to various hiding places. While we did not know this at the time, when the first shell had exploded, the choir, including my father, had run out of the church and headed for their homes.

As we cowered in the church, shells were regularly exploding outside, but none hit St. Joseph's directly. In the midst of the barrage the side doors of the church suddenly opened and several Canadian soldiers entered. They had been sent by their commander to calm the frightened members of the congregation who were cowering inside. They came in calmly, and immediately gave us a feeling that they had charge of the situation as they led several people to more secure areas of the building.

Unexpectedly, another visitor from the outside then arrived, in the person of our hired man. On Father's arrival home, realizing that Mother and I were still in the Church, he had become hysterical with fear. In an effort to quell his fears, our brave employee volunteered to run to the church to relay news to us of Father's whereabouts.

As daylight began to fade (we had been without hydro for months), we remained sheltered in St. Joseph's. I had become bored by our lengthy entrapment, and when there was a lull in the shelling, I impetuously left my niche and opened the church doors to see the view outside.

The scene that greeted me was a frightful one. Large clouds of dust and smoke blocked out light from the setting sun, and cast strange shadows over the town. Through the haze, I spied several Canadian soldiers – one on a motorcycle – making their way through the mayhem.

This is the famous St. Joseph's Church in Achterveld. The left tower was demolished by the Germans as the platform at the top was an ideal observation post. People from neighbouring villages would refer to this church as the "Cathedral of Achterveld" – whether it was out of jealousy or envy, the author likes the sentiment.





Canadian soldiers and Dutch civilians pose for a photograph in Achterveld, April 1945.

As I recall the scene that greeted me outside St. Joseph's Church that day, I know that no action motion picture, which I have seen since then has ever had the same effect on me. My child's eyes saw a scene that would never be duplicated throughout the rest of my adult life.

Coming to my senses, I quickly closed the door and sought out my mother who was still crouched in the church nave. I told her what I had done and what I had seen. She scolded me for my foolishness and for putting others, and myself, at risk.

At last the shelling stopped, and the soldiers allowed a few to leave, but only in small groups, one group at a time. In the meantime, others who were waiting to be released, waited in the church basement

Finally, Mother and I, along with our hired man climbed the steps to the main floor of the church and walked into the open air.

No sooner had we taken a few steps, then we heard the telltale sound of "looming." We quickly scrambled into the moat that surrounded the church property and prayed that the explosion would miss us. Our prayers were answered, as the shell hit several houses a fair distance away.

Immediately, we were up and running, but within minutes, we needed to take shelter once again, as another shell came our way. In this fashion, we covered the one kilometer distance from the

village to our home, running a few meters, then diving for cover in ditches, behind walls, or other protective landmarks. Ironically during this journey of fear, we hid in a dugout that had been built by the Nazi invaders some years before. On one dive for shelter, I became separated from my mother and our hired man. Panic welled up in my young boy's throat.

Close to our destination, I heard an unfamiliar "gargling" sound in the air and wondered what new weapon had been lobbed? Suddenly, sand and smoke clouded the way, and above me, leaves and blossoms from some overhanging trees rained down. I never did learn what this instrument of war was. But to this day, whenever I am mowing my own lawn and move under the spread of a large shade tree in my back yard, my childhood memories come flooding over me.

How many times that day we took cover as the shells continued to explode around us, I will never know. At last our house was in sight. It seemed so close and yet so far. But we were not yet safe. A final shell landed close to where I had taken cover in one of our farm outbuildings.

My nerves were raw from fear. I threw myself in a corner and prayed: "Please Lord, do not let them take me. I'm almost home." Whether the Lord heard my plea, or German technology failed, I will never know. What I do know, is that the shell did not explode. I found it later – lifeless and impotent – in the field close to the shed.

With lightning in my veins, I raced to the house and headed immediately to the basement shelter. In my hurry, I forgot to duck for a low beam, and hit my head. Crack! I gave a loud cry in pain. Hearing the commotion outside, my family thought me mortally wounded. When I opened the door with only a fair-sized goose egg on my head, a cheer went up. We were all safe.

The next day my brothers and I ventured out of doors and found three other unexploded shells on our farm property. But many live shells had made their mark. The trees in our orchard were badly damaged, and craters scarred the fields.

I walked to town the next day. The fears that I had felt only yesterday remained in the past. For a young and carefree lad, only the present mattered. However, as a grown man, remembering the events of that day, 22 April 1945, remains for me the time I ran the longest kilometre of my life.

The End of the Reich (May 5, 1945)

It was Friday night, and in our farm home, we had just finished supper. The talk at our table centered on the war – as it had so often over the past five years. However, this time optimism had replaced despair in our conversations.

As we talked, several Canadian soldiers, members of the Signal Corps, tinkered with radio receivers and other communication equipment in the loft of our barn. Like thousands of Dutch families, we had opened up our home to our Canadian liberators. These soldiers found the roominess of our loft above the horse stables ideal for setting up their radio equipment.

Wearing headphones and small patches on their throats that acted as microphones, several Signal Corps members did the important work of facilitating communication within the large Canadian “war machine.” Meanwhile, other Canadians, acting as sentries, kept watch for suspicious activity around our farm. Their weapons remained at the ready. Every so often, a jeep would careen into our yard, stop, and a soldier would run to the loft, leaving as quickly as he had arrived. We didn’t know the details, but we were sure it was “something big.”

In Achterveld, top-level talks between Nazi officials and Allied representatives had taken place some days before. Rumors were rife that the war would be over in a few days. In Achterveld, as it was throughout the rest of the country, we prayed that the rumour was true.

Canadian soldiers share the experience of listening to their radios with some local children.



Photo by Ken Bell, Library and Archives Canada (LAC) PA 130264

After supper, my brother Simon and I climbed the stairs in the stable to visit our Canadian liberators. The good-natured Canadians tolerated us (so long as we did not get in the way). To our delight, one of the soldiers placed earphones on both Simon's ears and my own, allowing us to talk to each other. Our delight was infectious as the Canadians seemed to be having as much fun as we were.

We were always fascinated by the radio equipment and strained to understand the conversations that were taking place over the receivers. As I recall, the only words we could ever discern were "over and out" and "hello." No matter – the drama taking place thrilled us.

On that memorable day, as we watched our Canadian friends from a "staying out of the way" distance, suddenly one of them leapt to his feet. One hand held on to on his headphone; the other was raised into the air, as if to silence the room. Listening intently to the words coming through his receiver, the soldier tore the earphones from his head and began dancing for joy. While Simon and I could not understand the words, which we were hearing between the soldiers, their actions spoke a universal language. We knew that the war was over.

The soldiers' joy was contagious, and Simon and I joined them in celebration. One of the men ran over to a doorway in the loft and shouted the news to the sentries in the yard. Like us, they were elated and fired their rifles into the air as celebration. Hearing the commotion from

outside, the remainder of our household ran out and broke into cheers at the news.

As darkness fell, the night sky was alive with the sight and sound of rifles being fired in victory. Never had we realized how many soldiers were living in our midst as we did that memorable night.

As I look back 60 years to that memorable day – 5 May 1945 – when the sounds of victory replaced the sounds of death and destruction, I realize that, as a lad, I had little understand of the true import of the celebrations that were taking place in our farm yard. For on that never-to-be-forgotten day, I was witnessing history in the making. In the midst of the Canadian soldiers who fought for our freedom, I was part of the end of the Second World War.

Bedtime came early for our family. After weeks of uncomfortable sleeps in our basement bomb shelter, we would pass this night in the serenity of our own beds. Never had my own small space felt so welcoming as it did that night.

Before we closed our eyes, each Dutch citizen surely said a prayer for our Canadian friends – those who had freed us from the detested yoke of Nazi tyranny. We prayed that their sleep would be as sweet as ours.

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