

# War and remembrance

*Canada became my home in 1953 when we emigrated to the land of our liberators.*

By Willem Hart

Life-changing events don't happen often, but the liberation of the Netherlands by Canadian and other forces in 1945 was such a change for me. I was 7 years old in September of 1944 when Operation Market Garden sent the British 1st Airborne Division and the Polish 1st Independent Parachute Brigade to secure a bridge – now known as 'John Frost-bridge' after the commander of the paratroopers – at Arnhem. The event was later dramatized by the movie, *A Bridge Too Far*, but my memories are more personal. We saw the paratroopers in the air and German 9th and 10th SS Panzer divisions parked their tanks in front of our home in Velp under the leafy cover of mature trees. Velp was just a few kilometers north of Arnhem and very much part of the action.

Across from our home was a house occupied by German soldiers. Without guile we dropped in and befriended some of them. My father, a Reformed Church pastor, was part of the underground movement and an inveterate smoker whose supply lines were clearly compromised. We asked our new friends if they might roll a cigarette for our father. They gladly obliged and we took the result and presented it to our dad. He lit it up, inhaled deeply several times and then asked, "Who licked the paper?" We had to admit that it was one of the German soldiers. He took the cigarette from his mouth and smacked it into the sink. "Bah!" he said. We noted that he picked it up and finished it later.

Also across the street was a convent which had been commandeered by SS staff for their own use. When Operation Market Garden began its occupants were extremely nervous, a fact that did not escape a gang of young boys including me. We stood in front of the building as they were preparing to beat a hasty retreat and leered at them using whatever technique seemed appropriate.

The SS officers didn't like it much and began to shoot at us. We scattered. No one got hurt but I can still hear the bullets whizzing past my ears. After the panzers and the SS had left the gang decided to explore the now empty nunnery. What treasures we found. But the best was a slender device that activated a German grenade. If you pulled at it a hissing sound indicated danger and tossing it was a good idea. One day we activated one of these lethal devices and dislodged an iron railing on a local bridge. It fell on my toe and the inevitable results are still with me.

A doctor was called – they made housecalls in those

days – and my face was covered by what looked like a lampshade loaded with chloroform. Repairs were affected but I suffered with that toe for years to come.

Shortly after these events our family was repatriated via horse-drawn farm cart to Ermelo where an aunt and uncle owned a capacious residence. Ermelo is about 30 miles North/West of Velp and it took two days to make the journey with the adults often walking alongside. This was the beginning of the hunger winter of 1944 when many people in the Netherlands starved because of lack of food. Tulip bulbs were consumed, and sugar beets were part of the daily diet. My uncle owned a soup factory and a by-product of the process of manufacture –

based on soya beans – was converted to duck food. We ate duck food morning, noon and night. Initially the adults had no idea of what to do with this product. Cooking it in scarcely available milk was unpalatable. But water proved to be a successful medium.

Children, 12 of them, ate separately from the adults. I always thought it was to disguise the fact that the adults ate better food. Not so, the separation was related to complaints by the adults who wanted to spare

the children from hearing their vociferous complaints.

Ermelo was a precious experience in learning to live together under tough conditions. Every morning the children were sent out to gather pine cones to feed the furnace. My aunt's home did not only harbour three families, but Jewish refugees as well.

But nothing was more exhilarating than the arrival of Canadian troops in Ermelo. It was May 5, 1945. We ate duck food for months, but the Canadians tossed chocolate bars and the whitest bread we had ever seen from their conquering tanks. The chocolate bars were probably Hershey and the bread is now known as Wonderbread. Neither product holds my current interest but the events of May 5, 1945 remain etched in my memory as a life-changing event.

Canada became my home in 1953 when we emigrated to the land of our liberators. On both sides of the Atlantic the Dutch are eternally grateful for the sacrifice of Canadians who died for the cause of freedom. All I can say is, "Thank you for your service, your sacrifice saved more than a generation."

