

GROWING UP IN HOLLAND
Address to the Revelstoke Drive Garden Club
Wednesday, May 12, 2010 – 10:30 a.m.
By John Kruithof

Marianne Scott telephoned me yesterday, asking “John, would you like to see Nancy and Clair’s new apartment?” I jumped at the opportunity. Then she attached a condition: “Could you speak for a few minutes about your growing up in Holland”. I considered that a small price to pay for the opportunity of addressing this well-established and esteemed Club, so here I am. Thank you for having me.

(Explain scope of talk: five memories, followed by why they remained in my mind, questions, if any).

I was born just south of Rotterdam two weeks before the Germans invaded Holland, and five years old when the war ended. Therefore, it is the period just before liberation of which I have vivid war-time recollections. Five events I experienced as a child come easily to mind.

- 1) Hiding in our home basement during bombing raids;
- 2) Strafing of a train by an Allied fighter plane;
- 3) Allied air force bombing of a local German V-1 rocket launching site;
- 4) Skeletal Rotterdam citizens coming to our village begging for food;
- 5) Retreating German soldiers passing through our village.

Item one: Hiding in the basement during Allied air raids. Our house was modest, so while I may say it had a basement, it was little more than a small concrete bunker for storing coal and the odd potato or two. Whenever aircraft were overhead, the drill was to hurry to the shelter and stay put until Mom or Dad said it was OK to come out. Quite often I found myself alone in that shelter. My older sister may have been at school, and Mom and Dad ventured outside, waving white towels to cheer on the Allied airmen. As a child, I had at first thought it must be the bad Germans causing my discomfort. It wasn’t until after the war that it dawned on me it had been the good guys. Obviously Mom and Dad knew, and they showed their appreciation even before liberation.

Item two: Strafing of a train. Holland is flat, so we could easily see the railway track just over a kilometer from our home. Nothing obstructed the view. Quite unexpectedly a plane dove from the sky, barely skimming over the grass and daisies, heading straight for a passing train. I don't remember the sound of firing guns, but immediately the train stopped, smoke pouring from it. Uniformed figures could be seen scurrying about. Our family never mentioned it. It was just one of those things.

Item three: Allied bombing of a rocket launching site. Dad took me up the dike for this show. Several Allied bombers were attacking a German rocket launching site located in a sugar beet factory just across the river from us. I could look straight up, into the open bomb bays of the planes, just as the bombs were being released, gradually descending towards the target. Speaking of V-1 buzz-bombs, I distinctly remember seeing, and hearing, one droning on towards England.

Item four: Beggars from Rotterdam. This one haunts me the most. Mostly on week-ends, they would come to our village. Walking skeletons, scrounging for any scrap of food from any source. Waste dumps sometimes provided apple or potato peels, or if one was lucky, a rotting carrot. Mom and Dad were very resourceful. Although the Germans forced Dad to work at a nearby steel mill, he somehow provided the wherewithal to keep our family fed. I don't know how Mom did it, but most week-ends she would cook a large pot of porridge, and ladle it out to beggars as they came to the door. Dad, ever the business man, would trade a potato or so for a tin of tobacco that beggars brought from the city. He knew only too well that the tin was filled 99 percent with sand, with only the slightest covering of tobacco on top.

Item five: Retreating German soldiers. As the end of the war neared, Germans were in full retreat. Small groups of soldiers came through our village. The Germans had a food depot in a barn just two doors away from us. One day, three or four of us village boys happened to wander into the barn while Germans were eating. We did not have much food, nor did they. Their food supply consisted of a heap of moldy chunks of dark bread, nothing else. Seeing us, the soldiers offered us a small chunk. We declined, and hurriedly left the barn. I don't remember ever telling my father about this. (The subject of war was hardly ever talked about in my family, to this day). Shortly after the war I heard that the Germans were actually quite mean during their retreat. If you crossed them in any way, they'd shoot you dead.

Those were some of my childhood memories. I wish I could add to these remembering glorious Canadian liberators entering our village. I don't think it happened that way in our village. We were free when the last German soldier had passed through.

Sixty-five years have passed since those events. A much clearer picture can be drawn from accounts of Canadian veterans detailed in numerous books. In 2008, a book appeared entitled "The Occupied Garden", 'recovering the story of a family in the war-torn Netherlands'. It mirrors what happened to my family to a tee.

When you read about how grateful the Dutch are to Canadians, I can tell you without hesitation it is all true. Now thankfully living in peace, Canadians are, and forever will be, welcome in the Netherlands.

Food I remember most: slices of bread, spread with lard, and covered with sugar beet syrup. On Saturdays, just before going to soccer games, we'd have a sandwich with cold cuts. Quite a treat. My wife Kawsar doesn't like this story about shift cheese. The idea was to shift the narrow slice of cheese back on the bread as you were eating, in order to have it last the entire sandwich.

Just because the war ended did not mean we were prosperous overnight. It took years to get over the devastation of the war. With a growing family, Dad decided on emigrating, which we did in 1951, joining tens of thousands other families who came to Canada during that time.

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