

Memoirs from Holland

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My World War II memories. Some, I would rather forget.

Drafted in August 1939, I became part of the Royal Netherlands Army, Second Regiment Anti-Aircraft Artillery. Basic training with guns of all sizes, among them World War I German machine guns, took place in the old town of Alkmaar, famous for the traditional cheese market.

Sufficiently trained, I was to join an AA-battery somewhere in the country. Fortunately, I found myself added to a small outfit on the remote island of Vlieland. Three two-centimeter canons in the dunes and a dozen soldiers under a second lieutenant. The atmosphere was relaxed. Reveille was a gentle shake from the corporal to wake me up, followed by a lighted cigarette stuck in my mouth. In the evening, we played cards, I learned an astonishing number of card games, or three of us would play bridge with the lieutenant. It was a nice winter with some hard freezes. We went skating on the freshwater canal or I was on my long-distance wooden runners.

Things were quiet, duty was light and there was plenty of free time. I could study for my BSC degree, and I took walks on the long and wide beaches of the island. I enjoyed nature, the fresh air, and I took great photographs with my Leica.

At night, we heard the Allied bombers fly over on their way to Germany.



One night, our lieutenant decided that some planes were coming too close to our still-neutral country and that some shooting was in order. One of the two-centimeter canons fired a couple of dozen shells straight up in the air as a warning. Beautiful fireworks. Of course, they never came close to the much higher flying planes. The pilots probably didn't even notice. Anyway, it was exciting! The next morning, we had to collect all of the cartridges; every one of them had to be accounted for and reports had to be written.

As the war went on, it got a little boring on that remote island. So I decided to apply for officers training. I was accepted and started in March 1940, again in the town of Alkmaar. It did not last long.

I remember that day well. On May 10, standing on the field in the morning sun, the commanding officer told us that the Germans had invaded the Netherlands and were rapidly advancing. We were at war. An unforgettable moment. The more so because at that same occasion it was announced that I was promoted to corporal.

As the Germans came closer, we were ordered to pack our belongings and be ready to march. We marched toward the railway station, but about halfway the company was brought to an abrupt halt. We were turned around and marched back to the school. The Germans had bombed and burned Rotterdam, and the Netherlands had capitulated. That was May 14, 1940. The end of the war. Five days. That march to the station, we later heard, was to ship us to England to complete officers training there and to fight the war from abroad.

Instead, we began five years of German occupation and gradual starvation. Of course, we were diligent in underground activities, doing things the Germans didn't like.





In September 1945, the Americans were advancing rapidly from the south, liberating the southern provinces of the Netherlands. We thought the war was almost over, and we became restless, more daring and careless. But the American advance was too rapid. They got stuck, one bridge too far.

I, too, became careless. I was captured October 15, 1945. It happened at our student house. Late in the evening the doorbell rang. Somebody downstairs opened the door. Two SS men burst in and started to search the house. I was in my bedroom, heard the commotion downstairs and tried to hide by slipping under my bed. As an underground worker, I had an extra set of food coupons, a dead giveaway. I had to hide them. In my haste, I pushed them under the mattress above me.

One of the SS men came in and started to search the room. He took his time and managed to swipe (among other things) my grandfather's old, fat, silver pocket watch, which I never saw again, of course. I hardly dared breathe under that bed. He finally lifted the mattress and saw the coupons. He could use those coupons. I could see his face clearly through the bedsprings. But he still didn't see me. I knew the game was up anyway, so I said, "Hallo!"

He jumped back and drew his revolver. Shakily, he told me to get out from under the bed. He then thrust the barrel of the gun in my mouth.

Strangely enough under the circumstances, I sniggered. This was so melodramatic! He started questioning me about other people in the house, which I couldn't answer with a revolver barrel in my mouth. The man was flustered, a bundle of nerves, and very angry that I caught him by surprise.

Now, with the gun on my back, we went downstairs, where I received a thorough flogging in the kitchen.

The beating injured my arm, which became severely infected. I went to prison for a week, and then to a concentration camp near the Dutch town of Amersfoort, where after seven miserable months we were liberated by a Canadian army unit.

My badly swollen arm got me in the hospital barrack of the camp. After full recovery, I volunteered to be a Sanitäter, at first as a carrier of urinals and bedpans, and later as the dispenser of pills and injections and changer of bandages. The head of the barrack bedded dysentery cases. Every morning we nudged the patients and carried the dead ones out on a stretcher to the burial

grounds. When rigor mortis had set in, it was rather awkward to get them through the door.

On one of these carry-out trips, we passed the body of a Dutch resistance fighter. He was shot in the liver. In agony and realizing the hopelessness of his situation, he had cut his wrists. He was lying there, naked in the shower room, body swollen from infection of the bullet wound, amidst the fragments of a urinal. Images.

One frightful night in the concentration camp I remember only too well. On Christmas Eve, the SS guards got drunk and took it out on us. They knew the war was not going well for them, and they resented immensely to be stuck there on Christmas Eve! In the middle of the night, the guards beat us out of the barracks and ordered us to lie face down in the trampled snow and slush of the field. Scantily clothed as we were, we shivered from cold and in fear. They proceeded by walking over us and on us, beating us with their clubs on our heads and backs. They stepped on us drunkenly with their heavy boots, on the thin, undernourished and mostly ailing bodies. The thrashing and slashing right and left went on until they got tired. Cold, wet and aching, we were ordered back in bed.

I was lucky they missed me, but some poor souls did not survive the ordeal.

The day of liberation, May 11, 1945, a day hard to forget. The Canadians were advancing, the Germans retreating. The Red Cross took over the concentration camp, and we inmates in no-man's land were lying outside in the sun, listening to the Canadian and German cannon shells crisscrossing overhead. What joy.

The Canadians took over. Canadian nurses fumigated us thoroughly with DDT, and necessary that was! We were huffing and puffing in a dense cloud of DDT dust.

After that, there was food again, and life in the Netherlands turned slowly back to normal.

There they are, my World War II recollections. I got my Ph.D., taught geology in Holland, seven years in Indonesia, was invited to teach a year in Berkeley, then 18 years at Syracuse, retired early and am now an American full-time RVer.