

Chapter 9

The War Years

I should also mention something about what came to be known as "Dolle Dinsdag," translated as "Crazy, Frantic, Wild, and/or Mad Tuesday." Indeed, this first Tuesday in September 1944 proved to be all that, and much more. It all began with the major breakthrough and march of the Allied Armies through France and their capture of Brussels and Antwerp, Belgium.

On Monday, September 4, 1944, the BBC announced that advanced regiments of Allied forces had reached Breda in Holland! This news set into motion the widespread rumours that other Allied troops had arrived at Dordrecht and Rotterdam! There were stories about the capture of the Moerdijkbrug across the major waterway between Breda and Dordrecht. From there it was a short way to Delft and Den Haag (The Hague)! Yes, the "Tommies" were on their way to free us! Everywhere, groups of people gathered together talking about all these amazing things. No one feared any more German trucks driving around. Indeed, crowds of people blocked their way; they had to have the military police fire their guns to clear the way for them. The German military also knew that their days were numbered. However, like us, they had not expected it to be this close. Some of them traded bike tires for civilian suits to go into hiding when the war would come to an end.

But the next few days were a big let down! It all proved to be "rumor mill news," which we had been feeding ourselves. Of course, we desperately had wanted it to be this way. However, it had not only been highly exaggerated; the rumors also were wrong. Ironically, during the next days when people tried to contact the Government Offices of the Information Services and Arts, telephone calls went unanswered and doors were closed. It was the same with a number of provincial, city, and town hall offices. The people in charge, who had been placed there by military authorities because of their national socialistic sympathies, had all gone in hiding because of this "Dolle Dinsdag" business. They too knew that Hitler's day were numbered, but these things from the wild rumor mill had scared the wits out of them. Later, when the rumors proved to be wrong, these same Government Information Service and Arts published in large newspapers that "services for several days had been required elsewhere in the land." Of course, we were used to such types of lies.

Just the same, for all of us the phrase "big let down" does not adequately describe the emotional feelings of the disappointment. Among other things, it underlined the fact that the big cities of Amsterdam, The Hague, and Rotterdam, and all other smaller cities in the western part of Holland, WERE TO FACE ANOTHER HUNGER WINTER, one worse than the previous ones, when there still was a sort of "scraping by" for half of the population.

September 8, 1944, was the day that the first V-1 was fired in the direction of England. It was a highly secret weapon. And if one was found searching for a piece of the material that had come down accidentally, it meant death on the spot by a firing squad. There was a fear of resistance fighters passing on pieces to our friends and their enemies. The first launching was at Raaphorst, near Wassenaar and close to The Hague. From where we lived, it was about 15 kilometres away .

The launching and reaching of the desired height sounded like 50 trains rattling by. The next day, the RAF came looking for the place of launching. Soon, air battles with machine guns ensued, and bombs rained from the skies in the area. Orders were given by the German military to evacuate the immediate area. Within three days everyone around there had to be away, with whatever they wanted to take along. You can imagine what types of vehicles were on the roads, all stacked as high as possible with belongings, many people not knowing where to actually go. September 17 was a repeat of heavy bombers filling the skies. This time there were 30 or 40 of them. And like the other time, they were surrounded by many fighter planes firing machine guns at the German anti-aircraft below, even as there were engaged with German fighter planes in the sky. These duels were a sight to behold, if you dared to be outside. The next day was quiet, and no V-1's were fired into the sky. Two days later, people were told they could move back into their homes. We wondered what this meant. Had the RAF destroyed everything? Had the military already given up on this highly sophisticated secret weapon of destruction?

A few weeks later, we found out that it was still full steam ahead with the secret weapon of destruction. Only now they used trailers as launching pads. After launching, they immediately drove several kilometers away to hide the trailers under large trees, only to wait for an opportunity to move to some other location for launching again. Each day, during the following months, from 10 to 20 weapons were launched toward England. But as at first, many never reached their targets; instead they came down before they could climb the skies high above the North Sea, which was about 25-30 kilometres away from where we lived. Some came down whole; others exploded in the air or when they fell to the ground. It was frightening at times when they came right over Schipluiden and area.

When it became obvious that Hitler's days were numbered, it meant that the Dutch NSB, National Socialist Bond (Fraternity), who were our betrayers, began to "chicken out." The wives and children of the men who had volunteered for the German Army or who had been forced to join, decided that it was time to flee to Germany and other areas where people did not know them. For days on end, trainloads of these people left from such cities as The Hague, Rotterdam, Amsterdam, Utrecht, Groningen, and Leeuwarden. They had become frightened by talks of "bijltjesdag.". This saying meant, "day of the ax" and/or "heads about to roll." We are sure that this type of revenge

would not have been allowed to take place. Yet, these people felt that some of them might become victims just the same. The stakes were too high to risk staying around.

The 1944-45 winter was known as "the hunger and fuel shortage winter." People with empty stomachs desperately searched for things to burn, to somehow keep warm. Such demands for fuel not only included cutting down trees wherever they might be found, but also going out along railway lines where small pieces of cinder were dug up. Even pieces of asphalt were used for fuel. Such desperate actions as chiseling asphalt from roads took place under cover of darkness for fear of being shot if found doing so. In the inner cities, small blocks of hard wood had been used between the cobble or paving stones. They now began to disappear. Signs went up in the areas, warning people that anyone caught doing so would be shot on the spot. Fuel for stoves included wooden beds, dressers, doors from closets, etc. In large cities ads appeared requesting dry stove wood and offering to trade wine, whiskey, perfume, shaving knives, kitchen ware, steel chairs and tables, antiques, marble tops, bath towels, table clothes, china ware, linen, Persian rugs, needle work, diapers, oak dining room sets, high work shoes, riding boots, etc. The list was endless.

In the early fall of 1944, the battle that raged around Arnhem could indeed have been called "The Stalingrad of the West." However, the battle also included areas around Nijmegen and Eindhoven. The huge battle was about the bridge over the Rhine river at Arnhem. The only description that seems to fit those terrible days of battle was "hellish." It was so for those who lived there, for the Allied attackers, and for the German defenders. It started on September 17 and rapidly increased in its severity. On Sunday, September 24, the order was given to evacuate all of Arnhem. Arnhem-south was to be evacuated before Sunday at 8:00 p.m., and the rest of the city before Monday at 4:00 p.m. Some of the people went to Emde, Zutphen, Deventer and other places, but most of them headed north to Apeldoorn. It was a horrible and indescribable experience for its citizens. As a result of this evacuation, Arnhem was duped "The City of the Dead" because the day after the evacuation order, no civilians were left in the city.



Figure 1: Battle Areas in Holland

General Montgomery was plagued by heavy morning mists. He could not establish contact with English regiments on the other side of the Rhine river. Eindhoven, too, was in Allied hands. All combatants, of course, were fully aware of the strategic battle that was being waged here. Had General Montgomery been able to push through to those on the other side of the river, he would have been able to overcome "the hinderness of the big rivers Rhine and Waal," and together the Allied armies could have fought their way through, along Emde and Munster, right into the heart of Germany. But alas, it was not to be! In spite of additional parachute jumps, furious and valiant battles, masses of dead and wounded, it proved to be not possible.

It not only meant an additional half year of occupation for the Dutch, but it ultimately resulted in the setting up by the Russian Communists of the dreaded Berlin Wall. The failure of the Allied drive to keep the Communists out of Germany started with the failures at Arnhem! Therefore, as the fierce Stalingrad battle stopped Hitler from occupying all of Russia, so the fierce Arnhem battle stopped the Allied forces from occupying all of Germany. The history of the Berlin Wall was decided with the failure of the battle at Arnhem during the autumn of 1944.

Let me quote a few paragraphs from a book that a Canadian soldier from Sangudo, Alberta, Woody Bell, who fought in the Groningen area, lend US. The book is HOLLAND AND THE CANADIANS, Major Norman Phillips, Canadian Army Public Relations Services; introduction by G.H. Crone, president of the Canadian-Netherlands Committee; Secretary J. Nikerk.

The Germans in West Holland have not been sitting still. They have threatened to put the "low lands by the sea" entirely under water. To demonstrate their ruthlessness, they begin to inundate many a polder, or reclaimed land. Around the harbor areas of Rotterdam and Amsterdam, a police cordon is drawn. Explosion after explosion can be heard in the cities. Cranes tumble in the water like drunken men. Elevators and docks are smashed. The Germans plunder the great warehouses until they stand empty. Trainloads of machinery are taken away. Factories and wharves are reduced to heaps of ruins.

At each explosion a pain goes through the hearts of the people of both cities. Everyone realizes that this means that ten thousand hands who once manned this proud port are now rendered idle by one destructive gesture, that liberation is going to mean that Holland will be a land of destroyed harbors and widespread poverty ...

The Nijmegen area was filling with men, guns, tanks, and the supplies of war. The long convoys continued to come until it seemed than not another man nor another

shell could be stored away. Liberated Holland was rapidly becoming a vast storehouse of everything required for the next thrust to the west.

The Ruhr (Germany's industrial heartland) remained the supreme target. Field Marshal Montgomery nominated the First Canadian Army for the assault which would establish his forces on the Rhine in readiness for the next thrust into the North German plains. The First Canadian battle line already extended over 179 miles from Westkapelle on Walcheren to Venlo. Ever flexible and cosmopolitan, its ranks were now strengthened for the winter push by the addition of Allied formations. When the attack began, close to half a million men were under Gen. Crerar's command. The task called for the clearing of the great Reichswald Forest, the breaching of the Siegfried Line, clearing the Hochwald defenses, and closing up to the Rhine ... (The "Siegfried Line" was on the mind of every Allied and German soldier, every Dutch resistance fighter, every German and Dutch citizen. It stood for impenetrable.

Royal Canadian and Royal Air Force bombers, 700 strong, attacked on the eve of the assault. For eleven hours, the artillery kept up a murderous Bombardment. Then on 10.30 a.m. on Feb. 8 (1945), the British and Canadian Troops of the First Canadian Army assaulted. Seven battalions of German infantry stood ahead of the Siegfried Line. By night of the first day, six of the seven had been decimated. The next day, the West wall had been breached, and on the sixth day, the Reichwald was cleared.

At the end of the month, the Hochwald was taken, and on March 3, the British 30th Corps joined forces with the American troops who had been attacking northward. The 30th of March saw the enemy withdraw to the east bank of the Rhine after blowing up the bridge of the Wesel. General of the Armies, Eisenhouwer, in praising the work of the Allied soldiers in this ferocious battle said: "Probably no assault in this war has been conducted under more appalling conditions of terrain." Field Marshal Montgomery began setting the stage for the dramatic assault across the Rhine. The work of the First Canadian Army had provided the base for these operations. Canadians took the place in the host which stormed this mighty barrier to the heart of Germany. Emmerich, the Rhine ferry town, fell to the Canadians. This was yet another German hinge position hammered apart.

The First Canadian Army was to drop the role of conqueror and resume the task of liberation. Instead of striking across the German Reich, the Canadians looked north to Holland ...

Throughout the liberation of Holland, the Canadians were ably served by members of the Netherlands Resistance groups. At each divisional headquarters, a Netherlands Liaison Officer provided contact with the local leader of the Resistance Forces. Courier reports brought constant flow of information about German dispositions and plans. Some of those had been stolen from waylaid enemy couriers, others had been copied, drawn, or photographed from originals. Even telephone service was maintained between occupied and unoccupied territory.

The areas, towns, and rivers mentioned here mean of course far more to us than to our children, grandchildren, and great grand children. However, I am passing on this information from military experts to give a wider perspective of the layman way of writing I present in terms of our occupation experiences.

On the same Sunday that the battle around Arnhem began, Radio Orange, which was the Dutch Government News Radio in England, announced a nationwide railroad strike to begin in Holland. It was easier and safer for them to announce what was to take place in German occupied territory than it was for us to carry the instructions out. However, the following day, Monday, September 18, 1944, not one train was moving in Holland. Mind you, at this time there were not too many left. As one man, 30,000 labourers and officials left their work. Never had there been such a total strike; not one person tried to keep working. All this, too, in spite of the frightening things that took place in the May days the previous year, when there had been another strike. Then the brutal German powerhouse machine shot many Dutch strikers on the spot. Thus, the question now rising up in everyone's heart was, "What will happen this time?" Every one of the railway personnel had gone in hiding on the Sunday evening before, out of fear for their lives. So, strike as one man they did just the same.

The daily newspapers, too, were being forced into a tight corner. They were ordered to publish articles about "this dangerously irresponsible and foolish act," telling the Dutch population "to realize that they were only fooling themselves since it was they who would be without food." Editorials had to make it clear to the strikers and the general public that, "No trains running means no transportation for hungry people. Know what you are doing to yourselves, and above all think of your wives and children. Do not make their suffering harder than is necessary. Do not endanger their lives. Wake up! Resume your task! Gentlemen, your fellow country people plead with you to go back to work for the sake of your poor wives and suffering children."

However, none of the daily newspapers published any of this nonsense, in spite of threats against all editors of major newspapers. And it was because of a further announcement by our Prime

Minister in London. On October 9, 1944, Dr. Gerbrandy stated unequivocally that the risks and dangers to end the strike could not be compared with the struggle and dangers to continue. Above all, he pointed out that Allied planes would then be forced to bomb all railway stations and railway lines. As a result, the national railway strike carried on. And yes, it was kind of surprising that the German Army did not repeat the severe measures as in May the year before. More and more thoughts, words, and actions developed into "a war of nerves."

The German military only would strike hard when there was sabotage of locomotive engines and/or rail lines. For instance, when in October 1944 resistance fighters sought to derail a train around Rijswijk (between Delft and The Hague), which was operated by German engineers and headed for Germany (never to come back like so many others), they immediately shot to death 12 resistance fighters who were arrested the day before. The "war of nerves" became a "roping of hands behind our backs." The pillaging of the country on a very wide scale had been going on now for nearly five years. And, yes, it also included the rolling stock of the Netherlands Railways. Take a look at the figures below:

<u>ITEM</u>	<u>BEFORE THE WAR</u>	<u>AFTER THE WAR</u>
Locomotives	800	165
Wagons	30,000	1,050
Passenger Coaches	1,750	284
Electric Trains	300	5
Diesel Trains	57	1

(Information from *Holland and the Canadians*, p. 19)

Holland's farming operation and economy was also hit hard. The number of milk cows fell by 28 %, pigs 67%, poultry by 87%. When hostilities ceased in May 1945, approximately 500,000 acres of the country's fertile soil was inundated, or as we called it "drowned." This represented 5.5% of arable land. And to make matters much worse, in the south western part, it was saltwater from the North Sea that covered fertile farms and land. All this damage on top of looting, pillaging, and seizing of our manpower to work in German war factories.

During the autumn months, when Hitler's armies hurriedly retreated from France and Belgium, German soldiers literally escaped just with their lives. They had to leave everything behind, including tents, clothing, and bedding. This in turn meant that large yellow posters went up, ordering our people everywhere, under the threat of widespread house-searches, to turn in their blankets, winter and rain coats, underwear, socks, scarves, sweaters, vests, etc. And with it went the promise that ample payments would be made for the turning in of any of these goods.

After already having taken for military purposes in Holland and otherwise shipped to Germany, our food, clothing, bedding, furniture, 'kitchen wares, radios, bikes, copper, tint iron, fuel, etc., how much was left to still turn in to the German occupiers? Yet, what could the financially better off, who been hoarding such stuff, do but turn in a few of these items? They must avoid the military coming around for house searches. Furthermore, they and many people on the lower end of the economic scale were hiding people who, when found during such house searches, would end up in a concentration camp in Germany. Also, the population soon found out that the "Feldgendarmerie," who was appointed to do house-searches, often just asked a few questions at the door. The most likely reason was that they were scared that once the inevitable loss of the war had come, some of the Dutch citizens would take out their revenge on them. Following such visits and/or the turning in of clothing and bedding, the owner of the house received a signed sticker to place on the window, stating that they had done their "loyal duties". Within two days, the resistance fighters' press ran off stickers, complete with the German commandant's signature, making them available to households that never had turned in any clothes nor had such a house search.

During this same time of the year, an order went out to all dog owners (which there were not many left) to bring them in for "inspection." People soon found out that they were after only certain kinds of dogs, such as German Shepherds, Bouviers, Labradors, Great Danes, and the like. They were needed to help the Germans fight their losing war. The owners of small dogs were given stickers following this inspection. Again, local people used tricks to mislead the enemy: small dogs that were rejected were given temporarily to the owners of large dogs, who presented them for the "inspection" as their own. The larger dogs were hidden until their owners came back with the required stickers.

(Some of the above 'has come from "Van DOLLEN DISTAG tot de BEVRIJDING, door J.G. Raatgever Jr., Uitgeverij "De Telg" Amsterdam.)