

A True Story of a Scout in Times of War

Part III

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Going Home

J.'s unit was immediately behind the frontlines in a tiny hamlet on the Gelre Valley's east bank. One of the farms had been one of the Pilot Escape Lines "safe houses" and so J. took the opportunity to visit the place and the people. He got a warm welcome, though they were surprised to see him in uniform.

One morning, J. and his mates were called for special duties and had to guard a road leading from the valley into the village. Proceeded by a Jeep some German "Kubelwagen" - Volkswagen army vehicles - displaying white flags, they approached the village and stopped at the small village school. High-ranking Canadian officers had already gone in when J., watching the Germans alighting, recognized Seyss-Inquart, the Austrian Nazi who had ruled the country since May 1940. Later he saw them being escorted back to the frontline, Arthur von Seyss-Inquart eventually to be sentenced to death by the Nuremberg tribunal for his brutality during his years as German high commissioner in the occupied Netherlands.

May 4th was a typical Dutch spring day, cold and wet; drizzling all the time, soaking everything.

J. felt miserable, by now he was very impatient and was longing to go home. The evening was very dark, still cold and wet and - having nothing to do - he went to visit his "safe house" friends again. At 8 o'clock, they switched on their battery-operated radio set to listen to *Radio Free Netherlands*, broadcasting from the Phillips Works at Eindhoven. To their astonishment, they heard the news that the Germans had agreed to surrender, beginning on May 5th at 0800 hours, local time. Flabbergasted for a moment and very silent, they listened. This was the news they had been waiting for so long. Suddenly they realized that the war with all its tensions, terrors, dangers and fears was over at last. Whilst the civilians left their homes to meet their neighbors and to celebrate, J. ran to his billet and told the men that the war was over. At first, the Canadians did not believe it but when, an hour later, they listened to the BBC's Nine o'clock News, the news was confirmed. Despite the cold and the drizzle all went mad, civilians where cheering and dancing in the streets and soldiers joined them, some of them firing their guns and letting off red and green signal lights.

J., knowing that his unit was supposed to go to Amsterdam, expected that they would be going early the next morning. He did not sleep at all that night and was up early, expecting that they would soon be on the move. But there was bitter disappointment; the orders did not come and they had to wait. Now began the longest days in J.'s life. He was beside himself with impatience to go. Aware of how bad the food situation was, he, with the assistance of his captain and the two other sergeants, had been hoarding rations for his parents and the small trailer behind their jeep was loaded with cardboard boxes full of supplies. But would his parents still be alive? So many thousands had died of starvation, that much was known from the liberated parts. He wanted to go and see.

But it was not until May 7th that orders came to go west early on May 8th. J.'s captain and his men were to lead one of the convoys to Amsterdam and he took J. to the briefing, where detailed maps were provided and the routes were discussed. J. had to study the maps and the route to follow. Of course, it was all very much familiar to him, and he was able to provide some additional information regarding the German roadblocks that they could expect, having seen them during his courier trips. He spent another almost sleepless night, and was ready to go long before the actual hour. He saw the sunrise and that there was a promise of it becoming a pleasant and warm day, so much better than the days before.

It was May 8th at 0500 hours when the convoy's engines were switched on and J.'s captain's Jeep took the lead. In order to avoid the flooded areas and the destroyed bridges around Amersfoort, the convoy had to head south first, almost to the River Rhine. When they came to the point where they had to turn west along the old main road to Arnhem/Utrecht, they found that they were by no means not the first convoy on the road that morning and the impatient MPs on duty waved them on. From the flat, flooded land they were approaching the high hill (the Grebbeberg) whose defenses had stopped the Germans in May 1940 and, more recently, the Canadians. Before going up the steep forest road climbing the hill, they saw some Canadian MPs and between two white ribbons they entered No Man's Land. A tense moment made the men take a good grip of their firearms. They suddenly faced a number of well-armed German military policemen, waving them on. Then they were in the enemy lines, still guarded by well-armed Dutch traitors in SS uniforms, who were watching them with anger - or was it despair; or fear? They knew that their days were over, the day of reckoning had come and they had every reason to fear the worst. They were a mean-looking lot, compared to the German soldiers they saw a little further on, who stood near the road, without arms, not so much cheering, but apparently very relieved that the war was over and that they had survived those five terrible years. Once through the forest, they approached the first village and saw more and more Germans and a few waving civilians, but were not hindered.

In those days, there were no motorways and the old provincial roads were used to cut through the many villages along the main road to Utrecht. The starvation had not been so bad in the country and farmers and villagers stood in front of their houses cheering and waving. Every house had a red, white and blue flag and people lined the streets, welcoming their Liberators, but when they entered the city of Utrecht, things were different. There had been starvation and shortage, but nevertheless those who could be were out in the streets and the cheering crowds greatly hampered the advance, at least in J.'s opinion.

Instead of taking the shortest road from Utrecht directly to Amsterdam, they had to go to the north-east again and, by-passing Amersfoort, they then turned west to Hilversum. The reception in Hilversum was such that the convoy almost came to a complete standstill. Hilversum was decorated with Dutch national flags and the starving population, beside itself with joy, gave the Canadians and Brits a welcome that beat all they had so far experienced in France and Belgium. When for any reason the convoy had to stop, everybody wanted to shake hands and the men - even the ugliest of them - were kissed by all the attractive (and less attractive!) girls and women. J. was not interested in the hugging and kissing, all he wanted to do was to push on, so often he stood upright in the Jeep and, at the top of his voice, asked the people to please let them through. The fact that he did so in Dutch came as a surprise to many. At long last they were on the last stretch of road to his hometown, the road from Hilversum to Amsterdam-East. German soldiers were everywhere, still manning their massive concrete roadblocks and guarding the many bridges spanning the many waterways. But then, at last, from the high bridge spanning the Amsterdam-Rhine Canal, impatient and eager, J. saw the familiar Amsterdam skyline on the horizon.

Almost Home

He saw the huge concrete German roadblock when the road came to the outskirts of Amsterdam, still manned by armed Germans. The next roadblock was in the hands of armed soldiers of the Underground in their brand new blue uniforms and black steel Dutch army helmets. A man dressed in blue, who turned out to be an officer of the emerged Underground, raised his arm and the convoy stopped. The man addressed J.'s captain in English, bidding them welcome and asking whether he could provide the unit with a Scout to guide them to their destination. The officer, pointing at J. said he had his own Scout. This was the moment when J. and one of the Scouts flocking around the vehicle, suddenly spotted each other and they recognized each other as former patrol mates. Before the convoy moved again, the Scout was just able to tell J. that his parents were still alive, an enormous relief.

At last, they were on the move again and crossed a bridge into Amsterdam-South. But their progress was slow, almost at walking pace. The Amsterdammers, starved, feeble, hardly able to

stand on their feet, wanted to see, to cheer and to thank their Liberators. Some hung out of the open windows of houses, all decorated with the Dutch national colors, others stood in the middle of the road. Some of the younger ones managed to climb on the vehicles. The surprised Canadians were hugged, embraced and kissed and they distributed cigarettes, chocolate bars and chewing gum, though this had been forbidden in order not to endanger the lives of the starving.

Now and then the convoy came to a complete standstill. There was no other traffic on the streets, but a well-manned German Police vehicle was spotted, which stopped abruptly. The crowd seemed to shiver and dispersed, but the German car reversed and disappeared at great speed. The convoy was rescued from the masses by a group of Underground soldiers in their blue uniforms and black steel helmets, armed with Sten guns. Surprisingly, they had one of the typical open-topped German army *Kubelwagen* (a Volkswagen built for the Army), which they had painted dark blue and provided with the White Star of the Allies. The occupants, told by J. where the convoy was heading, cleared the road and took the lead - everywhere there were civilians, some cheering, some weeping, some others waving small flags.

At last, they reached the street in which the building they had to take-over was located. It was a school that, in May 1940, had been confiscated by the German Police and had been used since then by them. When they turned into the street, the Underground car withdrew and J. and the other men noticed a distinct difference in the atmosphere. Not a civilian was to be seen, none on the pavements, none on the balconies, none sticking their heads out of the windows. No flags were visible either. There was only a deserted street, in the middle of which was the school that the Germans had fortified and surrounded with barbed wire entanglements and concrete pill boxes. Some German policemen, carrying Schmeisser sub-machine guns, were on guard, their faces like stone. A German sergeant raised his hand to stop the convoy. J. and the captain got out, covered by the sergeants and a brengun carrier. J. told the Germans (in German) to take them to their commanding officer. The German soldiers stood aside (and to attention) and their sergeant escorted them through the entanglements and into the building. In the Commandant's office it was a rather one-sided affair. J. simply translated the Canadian orders. The Germans were told to pack their personal belongings, to leave everything else behind, including their arms, and to be ready to march within two hours. J. felt like a translating machine, but was on top of the world. The tables had turned and at last he was able to tell the Germans what to do and what not to do.

Afterwards, he was kept busy translating and explaining to the Germans that it was all over now and that they had better obey and not complain. Later, he honestly admitted that he thoroughly enjoyed every minute of this glorious moment. He was now on top of those who had been ordering him and his compatriots around for such a long time. The Germans, he noticed, had lost most of the arrogance they had displayed during all those long years of occupation. Being told that they were to leave the building unarmed, one of the German officers walked up to J. and - standing to attention - complained to J., explaining that he was afraid of Dutch vengeance, and that J., being a Canadian, could not and would not know that all these Dutch Resistance men were really no more than communists, murderers and terrorists and that they could not be trusted. If they left unarmed they might be killed by those bandits. J., explained to him, in perfect German and in no uncertain terms, that that was bullshit, that he himself was a member of the Underground and was certainly not a communist, a terrorist or a murderer and no bandit. And would the officer mind very much shutting up.

One of the finest tasks J. had to perform was ordering the lowering of the German Nazi flag, which, because of the Führer's death, was still flying at half-mast. Gradually, the civilians had ventured into the street and others stood on their balconies or were leaning out of their windows. When the hated flag with the black Swastika came down a roaring howl emerged from hundreds of throats, a sound of immense pent-up hatred, released at last. But silence fell when a Canadian sergeant stepped forward and hoisted the Canadian Flag. Whilst the Canadians saluted the flag, the Dutch civilians sang their national anthem for the first time in almost five years. Many civilians had tears in their eyes. Almost immediately, windows were opened and Dutch flags were put out of the windows.

At last, the Germans were lined up and disarmed, an excited J. telling them all the time to hurry up. Some were put apart and ordered to help in unloading the trucks in the convoy, but the bulk of them were formed into a column led by a Jeep, with a Jeep in the rear and with Canadian and Underground soldiers not only guarding them, but protecting them too. Their own officers shouted the orders to move and they left the street to march to the docks where they were to stay until they were to be taken to their new destination. They were booed and shouted at by the people living in the street and others who almost blocked the only recently deserted street. The Unit took possession of the building and had a quick meal.

Home at last

It was not yet dark and J.'s officer decided that he could take no more of J.'s impatience. So the four manned their Jeep again and, arms at the ready, drove through the darkening and by now almost deserted streets.

Apart from a few stray bombs and some crippled planes that had crashed into its houses, the city had not suffered much damage in the war. Yet J., driving through the streets and later when he walked in them, could hardly believe his eyes, seeing how the city had changed. Suddenly he noticed where he was. The streets used to be lined by trees, but almost all of them had vanished, cut down by the people wanting wood for their fires, on which to cook their scarce, small meals. Wooden fences and wooden benches had also disappeared, as had the tarred wooden blocks, set between the tram rails. They came to the area where most of the Jews had been living. Many of the three or four storey houses had been destroyed. Later he learned that during the "Starvation Winter" the empty apartments had been stripped of everything that could be burned, so much so that the buildings had collapsed, sometimes killing those who were cutting and sawing the wooden beams. There was this strange, unfamiliar smell. Later he found that, as there was no electricity, the sewage system had not been operating for many months and people had dug holes to let the sewage escape, the refuse covering the pavements, causing a terrible stench.

Arriving at last in the street where he used to live, it looked pretty normal although all the trees had gone and there were these sewage holes. By now, it was almost dark, but the arrival of an



May 9th, 1945: A Scout distributes British biscuits to the hungry survivors of "The Starvation"

Allied Jeep in this quiet street attracted attention when it stopped. J.'s parents' apartment was on the second floor and, when his father opened the window to watch, all he saw was four Canadians. One of them, to his surprise, came up his stairs and knocked at his door, which he opened, a candle in his hand. It was not until then that he recognized J. and he had, of course, never expected to see him in a Canadian uniform. Meanwhile, the other men carried in some jute bags that they dropped in the living room by the light of that one candle. J., after embracing his surprised parents, introduced the men. J.'s officer told him that J. could stay for the night and that next morning at 6 am he would be sending a Jeep to collect him.

It was a splendid reunion with mom and dad after so many months of uncertainty. They were especially pleased when he told them of having met his eldest brother. He found that he had won the race home. J. opened the bags and showed all the wonderful food to his parents. Neighbors

came to see and were also presented with food as well as cigarettes. J.'s father, who always had been a pipe smoker, was delighted with the large quantity of real pipe tobacco J. had obtained in exchange for his cigarette rations and hoarded. A first pipe was filled, lit and enjoyed. It was very late before - for the first time in many months - J. crept in his own bed again and slept.

The next morning his mother wanted to give him breakfast, which he refused, not wanting to eat the little they had. The Jeep, guided by a Scout in uniform, arrived at 6 am and it was back to base.

These were busy days and J. and his officer had much on their plates, but, whenever possible and when off duty, he went home, sometimes on a bike that he had found in the school building and had confiscated. He also "liberated" a German typewriter and both served him well during the years to come.

Members of his own Scout group were meeting again and J. went to see them. He found that only a few of his original troop mates were there. Of course they were now all too old to be Scouts again and were registered as Rover Scouts. But though Scout and Rover activities were few, there was so much to do to serve the community. Some were in Scout uniform all day, being of service to the Red Cross, the hospitals and the distribution of food to the starving. Some worked as couriers for the Underground Forces, or the Canadians, others were in the Underground Forces' blue uniform and some, like J., were in Canadian uniform. Other former members of his Troop were not in Amsterdam, they had been in hiding in other parts of the country and were now serving there or on their way home again. Of others, their whereabouts were unknown. They had been arrested by the Germans, taken to prison or concentration camps or they had simply been picked up off the streets to be deported to Germany, to work in the war industries. It was known that some of these would never return at all. Some of those J. met were in impeccable, well-fitting Scout uniform, but these uniforms had mostly belonged to elder brothers who had grown out of them and who now wore something else with just a neckerchief and sometimes a hat. They were all so pleased to meet again.

In the days that followed, J. paid many visits to the Amsterdam DHQ.

The Underground, now the NBS or *Nederlandse Binnenlandse Strijdkrachten* (Netherlands Forces of the Interior), were dealing with the Dutch Nazis and locking them up. The Canadian Army dealt with the Germans and J. was busy all day when the captain and the sergeants were interrogating them. The SS were separated from the normal Army soldiers, checked and double-checked, to find the non-Germans amongst them. The Dutchmen were handed over to the NBS, the other nationalities, such as Frenchmen, Belgians, Norwegians and Danes were immediately sent back to their own countries and others from Eastern Europe were bundled into lorries and taken to camps in Germany. But the other Germans had to be checked as well. Many Gestapo and SD men (the *Sicherheitsdienst* or Security Service), who had been operating as plain-clothes agents, had got themselves false army identification documents, put on German army uniforms and had hoped to disappear into the crowd. They had to be found, and were found, and separated for further treatment. These were hectic and long days.

Everything was done to provide the civilians with food. But it had to be done with care. They had gone hungry for so long that it would be irresponsible to let them eat too much fat, so for starters they received English biscuits and porridge made of biscuits and only when they were used to that, were other things added to these rations. The Canadian soldiers were told not to give food to civilians, as it might make them very ill, as indeed it did when soldiers, seeing hungry children, could not stand their hungry looks and gave them bully-beef sandwiches or chocolate bars. J. visited his parents as much as possible and was there when his brother arrived home, but he never had a meal at home, as he did not want to eat their meager rations or the army rations he brought them. So he enjoyed good meals either in the school/barracks or in the NAAFI clubs and used to go and watch films in the ENSA cinema, for Allied personnel only.

A decision was taken that the 100,000-plus German prisoners would have to march home. From all over the western part of the Netherlands they went north on foot. They had to walk down the long Enclosure Dyke to the northeastern provinces and from there to the Dutch/German border. En-route their possessions were checked many times, all Dutch money was taken, and any items they had looted were also confiscated. Some tried to use Dutch bikes, but had to hand them over, and carts drawn by horses, presumably Dutch, had to be left behind at the frontier. From the border, they were marching to camps in Germany. J. had the pleasure of accompanying some of the groups and very much enjoyed the experience.

After four weeks or so, J.'s unit was ordered to take one of the last groups to occupied Germany. Once again, he said his goodbyes to his parents, his friends and relations. After a long trip of many days, the convoy arrived in a camp near a small German town. They took over the Town Hall and a school building. The German local police was placed under their command and J. enjoyed himself ordering the Germans around, speaking to or shouting at them in his perfect German. Then the unit received orders to run-to-earth stray German and other Nazis and to arrest them. J. found it strange to find that they hardly ever met a German who had been a member of the Nazi party. Where had all those Germans gone that had cheered and admired Hitler so much? Attention had also to be given to the Displaced Persons' Camps, mainly harboring people from Eastern and Central Europe, who could not or would not return to their homelands. These too had to be interrogated and those who had collaborated with the Nazis were put into separate custody under heavy guard.

In Garrison

The war was over and from fighting forces, the Allied armies were changed into occupation forces. Garrisons came to being and the routine changed. The Scouts in the British and Canadian Armies, now in garrison, formed Rover Crews, one of which J. joined. Working in the Displaced Persons' (DP) Camps, J. also came across the Guide International Service, founded and run by the British Girl Guides, and the Scout International Relief Service, run by the British Scouts Association and doing relief work in the camps. It was soon found that among these DPs there were Scoutmasters and Scouts who founded Scout troops to keep the kids busy and out of mischief during their miserable camp life. Of course assistance was given, as it was to the German Scout groups that, though not officially permitted, were founded again for the first time since 1933. This was not easy, so much had happened that even the Scouts amongst the Allied military, in particular those who had had to suffer the German occupation, had to overcome a barrier, but in the end No. 4 of the Old Scout Law (A Scout is a brother to every other Scout, no matter what country, class or creed to which he belongs) helped them to solve the problem. Later, when the Allied soldiers were allowed to let their families come to Germany, the Rover Crews extended to normal groups.

The Canadians, in their zone, founded their 'Red Patch' Scout District in Germany and the many British districts united in one county named British Scouts in Germany, later to be re-named British Scouts in Western Europe. In all this J. was very much involved and he made many friends, some of them friendships for life.

Back to normal

In the summer of 1947, J.'s unit was told that it was to return to Canada to be disbanded. At this point, J. made a mistake he was to later regret. Like the Canadians, he could have been demobilized in Canada and, having served in its army, he could have obtained Canadian citizenship and permission to stay and live in Canada. But he wanted to go home, back to Amsterdam, so, three days before the Canadians were to be repatriated, J.'s officer drove him all the way from Germany to Amsterdam, where they said their goodbyes, not to meet again until in 1995, when J. crossed the Atlantic for the first and last time ever and visited Canada. Officially, J., still a sergeant, had been transferred to the Dutch army, but he failed to pass his medical, as it was found that he was color-blind and no one understood how he could ever have served in the Canadian Army.

So he was back in 'Civvy Street'. Home at last after so many years. But too much had happened and like many he did not find it easy to adjust to normal life again. People fluent in English and German were in great demand and he found himself a job in a Dutch shipping company, which also had offices in England and Sweden where he worked for some time.

Back home he rejoined his pre-war group as a Rover Scout and an Assistant Scoutmaster. When he was sent to England, Sweden and later to England again, he also got involved in Scouting in those countries, made many new friends, and also met again many old friends that he had served with.

His Canadian officer offered him employment in the export department of his fish cannery in British Columbia, and J. tried to immigrate to Canada. But again, he was denied permission, for the same medical reasons that had barred him from the Dutch Army. He raised hell, but even the fact that he was able to prove that he had been serving in the Canadian Army would not move the authorities to change their minds.

In 1954 his traveling years were over, when the shipping line called him back to their head office in Amsterdam. He met and married an Assistant Cub Scout Leader. In Dutch Scouting, thanks to his foreign experience and the many foreign Scout friends he had made in Germany, England and Sweden, he was soon involved in international work and was to remain involved for the rest of his life. He also remained in contact with the Displaced Persons' Scouts - later Scouts in Exile - and was involved in the revival of their movements in their home countries when the Cold War ended and the Berlin Wall came tumbling down in 1989.

But that is a different story that would take many more pages to tell.