

# The Liberation of Leesten

## Henk Dykman

Leesten was in those days a small rural region of approximately two square kilometres, about the size of a farm in Western Manitoba. On the west side was its centre, a hamlet with a small grocery store, a windmill for grinding grain, a blacksmith shop, a carpentry shop, a bakery and a couple of farms. Just over one kilometre east of the hamlet was the Leesten school, with a teacherage attached to it. That is where we lived. My father, Jan Dykman, was the principal of this school and about 100 children had been attending until early September 1944. Then, just before the battle of Arnhem began, German troops moved into the building and an officer ordered a room for himself in the house. That was difficult, because in the four-bedroom house also lived my mother, Harmina, the children, Kees, Antie, Henk, Jan, Diet and Hans. My father's parents, Cornells and Lamberdina had moved from Amsterdam, where food had grown scarce, to live with us as well.

Toward the end of March 1945 we heard that the Allies had finally crossed the Rhine, about 40 kilometres to the south. This time they were coming for sure. We had only two German officers in the school then who were operating a printing press. They were ordered to burn all the army maps they had been so carefully printing for the Wehrmacht for the past two months. We managed to save a few, one of which I have had framed. It is now hanging on the wall in my house in Guelph.

When the printers left it looked as if the Allies could come without a fight and we were ready to welcome them with open arms. But what a dreadful day Good Friday, March 30, became for us that year. Young enemy soldiers moved in and started digging foxholes in a crop field just south of the school. We would be in the midst of battle, after all!

These young soldiers were not always easy to get along with: An officer, who was twenty at the most, came swaggering toward us with great authority. He screamed at my mother when she did not realise right away what he wanted.

"No officer has ever screamed at me before," she gamely said to him, "but now I realise you want a frying pan, so I will get it for you."

He grunted and walked away with his bounty. A week later Mother went to look for the pan and found that he had even managed to find a small piece of carpet for his 'luxury' foxhole.

Three or four of these youngsters walked into the house. "We want food," they yelled and one held a rifle at my mother's throat.

"Go quickly to the cellar and get some eggs and meat," she said to me and my sister, looking quite pale. We did and fortunately they left us alone after that. Later, when we had fled to Vorden, Mother kept looking among the prisoners of war for that young punk who had threatened her with the rifle, but she did not find him.

On Easter Monday, April 2, an enormous racket startled us awake at daybreak. The noise was incredible. We had no idea where it came from or what was going on. All kinds of weapons were being fired at once.

"Stay in the cellar," Father roared with authority when a couple of us children wanted to go upstairs to have a peek outside. We sat down, listening intently.

"It's along the main highway," Grandfather shouted.

The adults nodded in agreement. Suddenly, the noise stopped, as quickly as it got started. We ran upstairs to look.

It was terrible. Along the main road east of us three farmhouses were burning like torches.

On those three farms, *De Rassasa*, *De Piepertj* and *Het Nijhuis*, the families had children who attended our school. Later we heard they had fled and were all safe. In the days that followed only one schoolchild died. Civilian casualties outside the Psychiatric hospital were surprisingly light. On April 4 an elderly gentleman died from a heart attack in the middle of the battle, in a house near the windmill and on April 5, another elderly gendeman was killed by a bullet on the west side of the Leesten area.

I am not exactly sure when the first bullets started flying in our area. The Canadian High Command had asked 2nd Division, which arrived in Vorden on April 1, to do reconnaissance near Zutphen. According to local residents, vehicles from a reconnaissance regiment ("C" Squadron of the 8th Reconnaissance Regiment) arrived at Vierakker that same evening and ran into trouble northwest of the hamlet on the road to Zutphen. The captain of the unit is thought to have been killed there. Two farmhouses, *Het Hekke* and *De Distelwaard*, burned as a result of the battle. However, a young woman, Miss Reintje Vaag, who was sheltering on the Bosnian farm not far away, and who kept a diary during the battle for Leesten, reported everything quiet that day and no firing until the evening of April 2. That is more logical as 2nd Division was moving north from Vorden to Almen that day and reconnaissance had been done in that direction first, likely followed by activities on the eastern edge of the Zutphen defenses, before Vierakker was reached.

Much reconnaissance was done that Monday, April 2. In the afternoon over 60 prisoners were taken in Warken, the region east of Leesten. They were mostly older soldiers who were wise enough to realise that further resistance was useless. Local Dutchmen watched in amazement as some youngsters among these troops cried in frustration when they did not get a chance to fire their rifles in combat.

The rest of that Easter Monday was quiet until heavy artillery appeared on the scene late in the afternoon. I saw Grandfather hugging Grandmother, who was crying a little.

"What's happened?" I asked. Everybody looked at me, dumbfounded.

"He was still fast asleep," Mother explained. Several voices now spoke at once. It took time to make sense of it all. Was I ever surprised! I had slept right through the explosions of two large artillery shells which landed simultaneously on each side of the house. Grandmother had been sewing on her machine under the dining room window. The explosion knocked her backward, her head just missing the edge of the table. The table top, the floor, everything was littered with broken glass. Grandma did not receive a single cut, just bruises. No one else was hurt, either. What a miracle!

The shelling moved farther north after that incident and five nights in a row we heard the shells whine their way to Zutphen. We quickly got used to it.

About midnight a jeep stopped in the yard. One of our divers spoke good English. [Many farms in the area, especially the most isolated ones, had "divers," people who were there illegally hiding from the occupying forces]. The Canadians wanted to know where the enemy was dug in. They knew we had divers from the Dutch underground.

On Tuesday, April 3, early in the afternoon, the 7th Reconnaissance Regiment appeared in Leesten, scouting for the Highland Brigade. Close to Noon firing began from the north side the house. It was German artillery fire directed toward the *Leestense Weg* [the road from Vierakker to Leesten]. When it slowed down, we peeked to see what we could discover and, yes indeed, we saw carriers going toward the windmill. Then somebody came to get Gerrit Jan [the farmer]. A girl of the neighbouring Hoogkamp family was hit by a piece of shrapnel. He came back, very upset. He did not think she would survive. She died a few days later.

Around midnight the first Glens arrived in Vierakker. Headquarters was established at the farm, *Huis Vierakker*. It had been a long evening

on the trucks for the infantry men, but there would not be much chance for a rest, at least not for "B" Company. It was debussed about 800 meters north from Vierakker on the road to Leesten, at the corner with the *Hekkeler Dijk*, a dirt road to the east. "C" Company was unloaded one kilometre further on the *Hekkeler Dijk*, near the farm, *Het Hekkeler*.

About 500 metres west of the debussing point of "B" Company there were enemy soldiers in trenches near two farms, *Bosman* and *Het Graffel*. A barn of the first farm was encircled by a trench, while a branch of that trench ran in a north-westerly direction towards and half-way around the second farm. The men in trenches like this would very likely have had machine guns, mortars, bazookas (panzerfaust) and rifles available to them, and possibly one or more 20 mm guns.

However, a wooded area between the two farms and the debussing point made it impossible for these Germans and the Glens from "B" Company to see each other. The first small arms fire aimed at the men from "B" Company came from another set of trenches about 800 meters further north and a little to the west, near the farm *Het Lansink*.

*Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry Highlander (SDG) War Diary: "0320 hours - "B" Coy is under SA [small arms] fire from [Map reference] 973925 [Lansink and Overdijkink farms] and are to use the 50 [calibre machine gun] carriers.*

*"0420 hours - Quite a lot of SA fire is coming from 973925 where civvies [civilians] report "SP" [self propelled, 75 mm] gun.*

The Glens made contact with a Dutch family in the cellar of one of the farms. Guus Vanderhoven, then a young boy, recalled what happened:

As the fighting increased during the night a short burst of gunfire came into the cellar of our farm [*Het Overdijkink*]. It was directed from the outside..through the window. One bullet grazed my brother's forehead and burned a hole in the blanket. My father seemed to have thought my brother was killed. At that moment of commotion everybody screamed. It was, of course, pitch dark in the cellar. Opa [Grandfather] thought he was wounded but the

poor old man had only wet his pants...When the commotion stopped we heard cautious and heavy footsteps upstairs and our parents started to call out, my father being the only one who knew English. However, there was no reason to expect...that whoever was upstairs should be addressed in English, rather than German.

Next I remember a sooted, English-speaking soldier stepping down into the cellar with a tommy gun at the ready and a waxine light in his hand...He commanded us to raise our hands..In the ongoing communication he said that the Germans had shot into the cellar, but that everything was O.K. now. After having looked around the crowded space and giving us his small light, he left us, warning us to leave the light burning.

It is this one man who has often been on my mind. Undoubtedly he was covered by someone else keeping an eye and barrel on us through the hole [where the gunfire had come from]. But still he had courage. He was a stocky guy in battle dress; he was friendly and efficient. I have often wished I could meet this guy and thank him.

*SDG War Diary, April 4: "0550 hours - The patrol which went to a group of buildings at 973925 returns. They checked buildings and found nothing. "*

Apparently this patrol did not realise the presence of enemy soldiers west of *Het Lansink* and at *De Bosman*.

*SDG War Diary, April 4: "0800 hours - "B" Coy moves off with tanks to 'Betty.'"*

"Betty" was the code name of Leesten centre and the enemy fortifications there. However, this announcement was premature. Before the men get further north to Leesten, the *Bosman* trenches had to be dealt with.

*SDG War Diary, April 4: "0900 hours - "B" Coy have met with unlocated MG [machine gun]fire and sniping. It is being dealt with but have suffered three casualties in the process. They are being joined by 2 snipers and one section of scouts. Forward troops had reached 977921 before being held up. "*

That map reference number is actually very close to "B" Company's debussing point. They had not progressed very far yet.

Sherman tanks from the Sherbrooke Fusiliers came up from Vierakker. Their headquarters had been established at the farm, *Het Groot Lemmink*. The tanks swung into action, first in the *Bosman* area. Bud Livingstone, an officer in the Sherbrookes, recalled:

As usual we were operating in support of the 9th Brigade. We were held up for a long time by a German fortification [near *Het Lansink*]. We poured in a lot of rounds but it had little effect. Crocodiles finally overcame the enemy...

At one point three tank men had to go to the bathroom so they jumped out of the tank and got into some wood together. No sooner had they disappeared when, "bang," a shell hit among the trees. One man came running out while pulling up his pants. The others did not. I was called in because as an officer I had control over the morphine. The second man was already dead when I got there, the third dreadfully wounded. The poor fellow did not last long either.

I believe the tank men were in the same wood which shielded "B" Company from the Germans in the first trenches. The German resistance from those particular trenches did not last long. Both *De Bosman* and *Het Graffel* farms were not destroyed in the fighting, nor any barns nearby. On the way there from the main road, however, was *Het Heuten*, another farm, which burned, as well as a barn or a house behind it. This phase of the battle is described in Reintje Vaag's diary:

We heard machine gun and tank fire. It was incredibly noisy and we [in the cellar] had no idea what was going on. It finally slowed down and we went upstairs to have a look. There were holes in the walls and we found that a calf had been killed and a heifer was crippled.. Then the firing really started, very close now. It was a nightmare, fortunately it did not last long. Suddenly it stopped again. It became very quiet, except that Grandma was fussing; she had forgotten to lock the back door. A little later we heard running around the house. It sounded like horses. We did not say a word, but Zalla, the dog, began to bark. We raced out of the cellar and looked. In the hallway we found our liberators, heavily armed. "Are there any German soldiers?" "No." (What incredible emotion!) One of us was white as a sheet, the other beet red, a third laughed, a fourth cried. We went outside with the Canadians and asked many, many questions, but they were not very talkative. I think there might have been as many as forty around the farm. We pointed out the German fortifications to them...Suddenly I heard the crackling of fire. I looked and saw that the farms

of the families Ribbink and Bosman [?] were burning. These families had been forced to evacuate. The house of the Rood family was badly damaged.

In the meantime the scouts had moved off to the centre of Leesten near the windmill. Their approach was carefully observed by Dina Vink-Jimmink:

In my mind's eye I still see them coming in the meadow, from the cellar window of our farm, *Het Bettink*. With their faces blackened, they came running and crouching through the pasture straight to our house. They entered through a side door and we got ready to greet them. Then all hell broke loose above our heads. It wasn't just rifle or machine gun fire, no, there were much heavier explosions as well. We were dreadfully frightened. Thank God it did not last long! But then we saw smoke drift past our cellar window. "We have to get out," Father said. Hand in hand we left the house. Outside, the barn behind the farm had its door opened and inside, there they were again, the Canadians. They were tying up each other's wounds. One of them waved to us. Flames were now shooting up from the farm roof and we ran a long way into the pasture. Then Father stopped. We turned and watched our family farm of many generations burn furiously and listened to the bawling of our dying cows. Then Father cried and cried, like a baby.

The Scouts were lucky to surprise the German patrol on this farm. It must have been the lack of experience of these very young soldiers that led to their demise.

*SDG War Diary, April 4 - "1225 hours - The scouts have returned and confirm the report of an 88 mm gun in Betty. "*

The gun was situated behind *Molenzicht* [Millview], the farm where the Cornegoors lived, about 300 metres north of the windmill. This whole farm was surrounded by trenches.

Another large fire erupted nearby. Father shouted, his voice in an unusual high pitch.

"The windmill is on fire!"

I quickly climbed on a chair in the kitchen to look. There was still some glass left. I peered through a high, small pane where once die whole

window had been. I could see our beautiful windmill. But now it was a naked frame of glowing wooden beams. The thatch had already burned away, yet the mighty arms still proudly pointed in four directions. It was the last time I saw them that way.

Who set the windmill on fire? The local people were sure the Germans did it. The Sherbrooke Fusiliers decided it was the artillery. The artillery said it was the tanks. I think the artillery was right. It is very likely that the Germans had a look-out in the mill.

*14th Field Regiment War Diary, 4 April: "1300 hours - Fire plan in support of SD&G targets 203-202-201-207-204-206. 1400 hours SDG 202s500 & 20ls400 -now attacking 202. "*

The Glens were glad the 25-pounders were finally firing. The FOO, the forward observation officer of the 14th Field Regiment Royal Canadian Artillery, had installed himself on the second floor in the farm, *Het Loo*. All the targets mentioned above were attacked in support of "B" and "C" Companies. Target 201 was the 88 mm gun behind *Molenzicht*. This artillery regiment fired a total of 3,768 shells in support of the 9th Brigade that day. The Glens also had their own anti-tank platoon with six guns. The 14th Field Regiment's guns were located in batteries near Vierakker and Wichmond, with headquarters at an estate, *Het Suderas*.

In total, five artillery regiments, plus one anti-tank gun and one light anti-aircraft gun regiment fired at targets in and near Zutphen for five days. The gunners worked long hours every day.

*SDG War Diary: "1330 hours - An advance has been teed up to Betty. "B" Coy reports one platoon on objective."*

Sergeant Cecil Scott recalled how difficult this advance had been:

I'm pretty sure it was in Leesten that we were called upon to help with a platoon that got into trouble. They were pinned down along a road which had a raised bank on one side. Perhaps about 12 feet high. I saw one man clamber up that bank to look over the edge. He tumbled down again with a bullet in his head. We then made smoke and the platoon retreated behind that smoke screen.



*A funeral procession passes by the windmill in Leesten centre in 1940. It is along this same stretch of road that "B" Company of the Glens was trapped on the afternoon of April 4, 1945.*

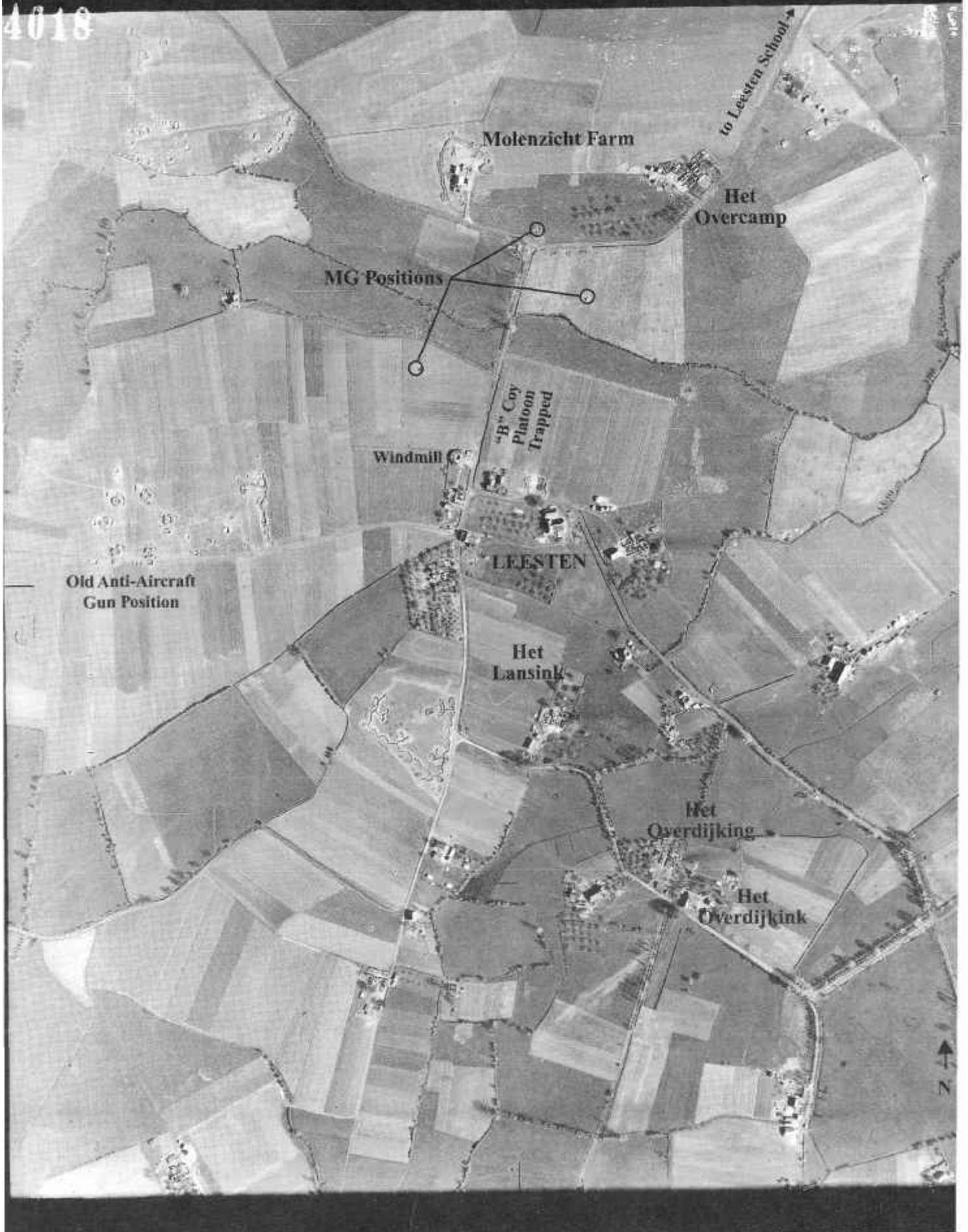
This section of the road is just north of the windmill. Two isolated machine gun positions in the fields nearby, one on each side of the road, did most of the damage. It may very well have been this platoon that accounted for most of the eight dead and 13 wounded "A" and "B" Companies suffered that day. It was a long, bitter afternoon for the company.

*SDG War Diary: "1507 hours - "B" Coy is meeting heavy opposition. They have 9 PWs [prisoners of war] from 11 Battalion 53 Regiment RASCHEM JAEGER [Fallschirm Jaeger - Paratroopers] who came 8 days ago from central Germany, ages 17 to 19."*

Actually most of these "men" were no more than 16 years old. This was their first battle experience. Eighteen and 19 year old men were

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long gone from among the new German recruits at this time.

*SDG War Diary, April 4: "1600 hours - "B" Coy is being held up by very heavy machine gun fire, which is being engaged by artillery. They report the place ahead quite a stronghold with the enemy well dug in. "*

Around the location of the SP 75 mm gun at *Het Lansink* the defenders in their extensive trenches resisted stubbornly, even after the gun had been put out of commission. Along with the Field Artillery, the Sherman tanks of the Sherbrooke Fusiliers had been lobbing many shells into the fortification, using some farmhouses for cover, including the farm, *Overdtjink*, from which the Gotinks and the VanderHoevens had now fled. It is amazing that that farm and another one nearby, *Het Rusthout*, did not burn down.

"B" Company was probably trying to get around the trenches near the 75 mm gun to attack from the north, when it ran into more problems. West of the windmill was another trench with defenders, near a deserted six gun anti-aircraft position. These guns had fired all winter, but in March they had very likely been taken south to the banks of the Rhine River in Germany to help defend against the crossing by the Allies. The trench here had been dug after the guns had been taken away.

In the meantime, "A" Company of the Glens had joined the action and attacked the trenches at *Het Lansink* from the south. Reintje Vaag noted a lull in the battle:

Towards one o'clock the fighting stopped for a while. We left the cellar for a respite. Then it started again and we had just got back to the cellar when Zalla barked again and another Canadian stood in the living room, asking immediately again if there were any Germans around. Then he asked us for eggs. We gave him a small basket full. That was returned full with chocolates and cigarettes. They were now generously handing out all kinds of things. Of course we asked where they had been fighting [locally], but they had no idea. They came from Zeddum.

[Outside] we were astounded by their activity and material. They drove through everything. Right next to our house they fired, it was

deafening. More and more fires started, including the windmill, the pride of the Leesten landscape. At about three o'clock it became quiet enough for us to make some coffee...What a miracle it was that we survived all this so well!

Some of the carriers Miss Vaag saw in action may have been from a company of the Cameron Highlanders of Ottawa, a motorized regiment, which operated with 50 calibre machine guns and mortars. Their War Diary is not very informative about this particular battle, but they were in action in Leesten.

The headquarters of the Highland Brigade had to find an answer to the stubborn resistance of the enemy.

*SDG War Diary, April 4: "1700 hours - "B" Coy now at 974934. [T-crossing Leestense Weg and Kerkhofweg]. Brigade reports that the Crocodiles are on the way up. "*

Meanwhile a platoon from "B" Company had gone forward again past the windmill, after the machine guns had been taken out, and were close to the location of the 88 mm gun near Molenzicht. No opposition was encountered from the position.

*SDG War Diary, April 4: "2135 hours - Brigade headquarters located at 989913 [Hackfort Castle]. Our hardskins [Crocodiles] have left after having done a good job..."*

*SDG War Diary, April 5: "1520 hours - "B" Coy have killed about 35 enemy on left. "*

There were no more signs of life now in the trenches of the fortification at *Het Lansink*. The tanks from a British Armoured Regiment, First Fife and Forfar Yeomanry, had finished the job. Crocodiles were Churchill tanks with extra large flame throwers. They towed their jellied gasoline supply, an early form of napalm, in trailers. It would take many hours before things had cooled off enough so "B" Company could investigate.

## The Liberation of the Dykmans

The fighting had brought the Glens close to our farm. By noon on April 4, "C" Company was clearing three farms, *Het Barghege*, *Het Loo* and *Het Hummel*, a short distance away. In the meantime, we had a visitor.

"*Wel heb ik van mijn leven*," Mother cried out in the kitchen in utter amazement.

We all came running. In the doorway stood old Mr. Gotink, from *Het Hummel*, with our regular supply of milk in a blue can. He had walked right past the Germans in their foxholes as if there was nothing to worry about.

"You got to have your food," he said.

Mother just shook her head. She was obviously deeply touched by such loyalty to our wellbeing.

Mother and Father decided that morning to try to get their children away to safety to an isolated farm further south. The children would have to go by themselves, because on a previous try, Mother, with all six of us, had been stopped. We would go two by two. First, my eldest sister left with my youngest brother on a bicycle. Then my other two brothers on foot. Everything went well. My turn came next, with my younger sister. But the Canadian artillery opened up and we did not get away.

At the farm *Het Hietink*, where the Bouwmeesters lived, my sister and brothers were received with open arms. There were more refugees there. Some Leesten folk had been ordered to leave by the Germans. Others had fled under shell fire.

Then cannons started firing close to the farm. Farmer Bouwmeester went out to have a look. My brother Kees followed him, back in the direction from which he had come. They came to an open spot from which you could normally see our house and school. They saw only flames, dirt and smoke, from the exploding shells. "I'll never see my parents again," Kees thought.

Meanwhile, at home, there was a new surprise. The outside door of the kitchen was

opened without warning and a German soldier walked into the house with a rifle in his hand. We froze.

"*Guten tag* [good day!]," he said politely. "Have you got a pair of pliers for me? My rifle is full of sand. I've got to fix it."

Father just stared at him. It was obvious he was thinking hard. Finally he said: "There are pliers and other tools in the shed outside. Help yourself. We are going to take shelter."

The crash of artillery shells landing grew increasing louder.

"Oh well," the soldier said, "I may have to hit them over the head with the butt, I suppose." He chuckled. Then he saw we didn't think that was funny. "Where are you going to shelter?" he asked.

"In the cellar," said Mother.

By now we had slowly edged into the hallway of the house, on the way to the cellar. The German looked around.

"That looks like a solid door at the far end of this hallway," he said. "On this end it's well protected by the bathroom. If you go into the cellar, you may not be able to get out if they set the house on fire. I would stay in the hallway. Well, I've got to go. *Auf wiedersehn*V"

He disappeared.

"He's right, you know," Father said. "Let's lie down here in the hallway."

I have often thought about that crazy young soldier. While facing death he still had the presence of mind to care for our safety. Us, his enemies. He was not a fanatic. He was looking to save his own skin. He very likely saved ours.

Lloyd Crate, of the Glens support company, described the next phase of the Canadian advance:

I was driving the lead carrier that day. We came under small arms fire. I drove up behind a building [*Het Loo*], jumped out and walked

between two buildings to have a look. Bullets were whistling around my ears so I ran back. An Infantry soldier was already lying on the ground, wounded. I got back into the carrier.

This farm was built in a T-shape, as most larger farms in Leesten were. The cross bar of the T was the living quarters, the stem of the T was the large cattle barn. The second building Lloyd refers to is the side barn, often used for keeping pigs. The second storey of the living quarters on this farm offered an excellent view over the Leesten landscape. The FOO, Major Archibald, arrived not long after Lloyd Crate. After 1900 hours on April 4 the officer in charge of the War Diary was located here as well. Early on the 7th of April, the SDG Battalion Headquarters was also established at *Het Loo*.

Lloyd Crates' narrative continues:

We had to wait for some time before the artillery began pounding the enemy ahead of us. After the barrage was finished we moved up a little way and stopped. An officer stood beside our carrier. Then, just as the order came to move up, he collapsed like a pudding. We drove off, shooting flame. Suddenly I noticed out of the corner of my eye a projectile coming towards us from the right. A thing with a little piece of pipe on it [panzerfaust], tumbling end over end. I stomped on the brakes as hard as I could. We nose dived and just in front of us, between the tracks, it blew up. The carrier reared, smacked down again and we moved on.

When we came to the next building I jumped out and ran into the house. At the end of a long hall way I saw a group of civilians standing...

Inside we heard the carriers roar up.

"They're here, they're here!" Father yelled at the top of his voice.

Father opened the door once more and then I was looking straight into hell! A large orange curtain of flame roared from left to right past the door. The grass on the ground, the barbed wire fence across the road, an apple tree in the neighbours orchard, everything was burning fiercely.

"Close the door!" I wanted to scream, but I found no voice.

Father walked out instead! He turned to the left, put his arms up and yelled. This tall, lanky man silhouetted against the fire looked like a prophet, like Moses, exorcising this horrible evil.

He yelled, "Dutch, Dutch!"

The fire stopped!

Then I could not take it any more. I just stood there, sobbing and sobbing, trying to get some kind of control over myself again. I looked around.

We were all standing there, crying together. All of us, even my stoic grandfather. And there, behind us, stood a soldier in a very strange, green uniform. He opened his mouth but he too was all choked up. Tears were running down his cheeks as well.

Captain Keeler of the Glens Support Company established Tactical Headquarters of the regiment at the teacherage. Signaller Ivan Gilchrist set up his radio on a small portal, from which the cellar steps descended. The Dykmans were told to go into the cellar.

The platoons moved up behind the carriers from *Het Loo*. Lieutenant A. Monette, commanding 14 Platoon, was the one hit while standing beside Lloyd Crate's carrier. He was badly hurt, but survived. Corporal John Coulthart took over the platoon and followed the carriers along the road to the house and school. The others spread out over the crop fields of the *Looer Enk*, then moved up beside each other. They soon ran into machine gun and sniper fire.

Corporal Aime Periard led 15 Platoon, advancing next to 14 Platoon. He had not gone very far when he was hit by a bullet. Aime was the first to die from "C" Company that day. His body was lying beside the road for some time.

On the right, furthest away from the road, Sergeant Ernest Baker led his platoon along some bushes at the eastern edge of a field. This experienced soldier guided his men forward about 200 metres, but then a hidden machine gun suddenly opened up and Ernie and another man [probably Norman Hannon] fell down, dead.

*SDG War Diary: "1345 hours - "C" Coy are now at 982938 [school] and meeting opposition. The*

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*left platoon has requested hardskins and are on the outskirts of 'Betty.' "*

But, it was not 'Betty,' Leesten centre, that "C" Company was now approaching but *Het Groot Graffel*, a heavily defended psychiatric hospital north of the school. Somehow the Glens seemed to have been unaware of its threat. It had not yet been shelled by the artillery. From a trench in the hospital garden and from the highest building a lot of bullets were now pinning down the platoons of "C" Company.

Lloyd Crate recalls:

In your house we ran quickly upstairs to see where the machine gun fire was coming from. But it wasn't very clear. When we got into our carriers again we were stopped by a deep ditch with a steep, high dirt bank on the other side, so we couldn't get across. We asked the artillery for a 'Priest' and when it came it opened up on the hospital at point blank range.

The attack on *Het Groot Graffel* was witnessed by Mrs. Gerda Christie, a nurse:

It was around two o'clock when the first shell hit the women's section. We were sitting in the Chapel where we ate in those days. Everyone jumped up and flew to the area of the main building which had been hit. There were quite a few victims. I grabbed a green blanket, lifted up a little old lady and, with her in my arms, I ran down the steps through the long hall way. I put her to bed in the men's section. I still don't know how I was able to do that so quickly.

Anton Denkers, the caretaker and gravedigger of the Warnsveld cemetery, also found himself at the hospital during the shelling:

We were not allowed [by the Germans] to go back to the cemetery and approximately 15 patients at the hospital had died [from natural causes]. The doctor [Van Bork] asked me to dig a mass grave on the grounds of the hospital. Five of us were busy doing this when the first shell whistled through a tree. It was about two o'clock. We ducked, then carried on digging, until I heard the whine of another shell. I jumped towards a wall and dropped down. It exploded into a corner of the pavilion. A piece of shrapnel hit the wall a metre above me. Fortunately, none of us were injured. Quickly we ran into the engine room [of the hospital heating system]. There my wife was waiting anxiously to tell us that everyone else had fled to yet another pavilion. We followed them. The shells kept coming now. Just after

we got inside, a shell dropped on the doorstep. All windows were shattered. Two nurses were knocked to the ground, but again, no one was hurt. All patients who were not physically ill were standing in the hallways. The shells were hitting first one pavilion, then another... Every minute was like an hour. Finally it stopped. What a job the nurses were doing! Each nurse had seven or eight female patients holding on to her arms. These poor women trusted the nurses completely. There was no panic.

According to one source, 12 patients died during the shelling. Anton Denkers, however, mentions the death of only two patients in one pavilion. The presence of the corpses that were ready for burial may have given rise to the news that many patients had been killed by the shell fire.

Were there really German soldiers in those buildings? On top of the middle section of the main pavilion was a small clock tower. Many years after the war it had to be thoroughly cleaned and fixed. A workman found there a letter from a German soldier to his family, dated April 4, 1945. He wrote in the letter that he felt he would not survive the battle.

During the barrage, the director of the hospital, Dr. Van Bork, risked his life to stop the shelling. I was sitting on the steps of the teacherage, cherishing my Canadian chocolate, when I saw a most unusual sight. Above the tops of the neighbour's apple trees, from the hospital garden, a huge white flag was being waved back and forth. It came closer and closer. I turned around. My father stood in the hall way, trying to converse with Earl Alberico, the soldier who had given me the chocolate.

"Dad, come here. Look, quick."

Father came running. The man with the flag, dressed in a white uniform, was now walking quickly over a path among some trees and came to the road.

Father waved and shouted, "The Canadians are here, Dr. Van Bork."

The man dropped his flag and ran toward us, totally ignoring the chocolate I held out to him. He brushed past my father and started yelling at the Canadian signaller [Ivan Gilchrist] on our cellar steps.



*Left: Dr. Van Bork, Director of "Het Groot Graffel," who braved the bullets to walk to the Dykman house to stop the shelling of his hospital.*

*Below: The Main Pavilion, Het Groot Graffel, photographed in 1994. The little clock tower where the letter from the German soldier was found can be seen on top of the building.*



"Stop firing at my hospital, stop firing at my hospital," he shouted.

I thought he was rather rude and not very smart shouting that way at a soldier who had a gun, but the signaller quickly started talking into his microphone. That seemed to satisfy the doctor.

"They will stop the guns soon," Father said. "Stay with us, Dr. Van Bork. It's safe here and there is plenty of food."

But the doctor shook his head. "I have to be with my patients," he said curtly, picked up his flag and walked back to the hospital, still in German hands.

Both sides must have held their fire when the doctor approached and when he returned to the hospital. The "Priest" was probably withdrawn immediately.

Meanwhile, our neighbours had also been waiting anxiously for the Canadians to arrive. Bert Harmsen remembers it this way:

It was crowded in the vegetable cellar of our farm house [*Nieuw Poppink*] where we were sheltering. Apart from our family, there was a refugee family from Arnhem, a teenage diver who had fled from Germany and the son of a farmer in Warken, who had been fired at when he tried to cross the German lines on the way home. The diver and the man from Arnhem could speak some English. When the shells finally stopped falling, the diver was the first to leave the cellar. We had agreed he would wave to us if he could see some Canadians. Well, he simply disappeared.

After a while, the man from Arnhem followed and he waved before he went away. Father and I went outside. We found the big barn doors at the back lying on the floor, knocked out of the walls by a couple of shells. [A precaution by the Glens. Sometimes the Germans would hide a heavy gun in a farmer's barn]. We all went to the school. When we got there we saw the mortar platoon which had shelled us. The men were sitting inside the carrier in the garden in front of the teacherage. One of them was handing the others mail from home. Some soldiers came from the school yard, carrying a badly wounded soldier on a stretcher. "Go home," they said to us. "It's much too dangerous to be about. We'll be at your place in ten minutes." Father went over to see if he could rescue anything from the burning shed and 'Meester' [Master] Dykman saw him and motioned to him to come into the house. "Harmsen, we have four children at Bouwmeester. Could you get a message through to them that we are alright, if you think it is safe to do so? We haven't got bikes anymore."

"Sure," Father said and we all went home, where Father grabbed his bike and drove past the teacherage and across the *Looer enk* to get to Bouwmeester. On the *enk* we had a piece of cropland. There, just off the road, my Father saw the body of a Canadian soldier [Aimee



*Men from "B" Company of the Glens celebrate with Dutch citizens shortly after their liberation on 7 April*

Periard]. At Bouwmeester he delivered the message, to the great relief and joy of the Dykman children. Then he cycled back again. On the Looer *enk* this time he saw the Canadian infantry men clearing the young Germans out of their foxholes and he realised that on his way to Bouwmeester he had cycled right past them. He sure was lucky they had not shot him!

While father was away we told the Canadians that there was a machine gun position on a sandy rise south of our farm. A carrier followed by a group of men on foot headed in that direction. When they got fairly close, the men formed a half circle and fired over the position. Nothing happened, so the carrier let go with a big burst of flame. Then the soldiers investigated, but there were no bodies. The Germans must have fled during the shelling.

*SDG War Diary, April 4: "1725 - "C" Coy is almost firm except for one platoon which is having a lot of trouble. "D" Coy is to pass through "C" Coy."*

It had been more than enough for one day. But the battle was not over yet. In the evening enemy patrols became active again. Bert Harmsen recalled that:

As darkness fell suddenly the bullets were flying again. We were standing outside. "Inside, quick," the Canadians said. A carrier behind the barn started its engine and took off in a hurry.

The area to the east of the school and the hospital now became a battlefield for the North Nova Scotia Highlanders. The battle lasted all night but the Dykmans were exhausted and slept soundly through all the noise. The Glens were just as tired. Bert Harmsen relates that:

Father woke me up early the next morning. "Quiet, come and have a look, but don't make a sound!" He opened the door into the cattle barn area. It was quite a sight. The floor was covered with wall-to-wall bodies: snoring Glens.

Even on top of the potato-sorting machine, a most uncomfortable piece of equipment, a soldier was sleeping soundly.

The Glens moved through Leesten for the last time on April 8th, past the school where a faded, but well-cleaned, red, white and blue Dutch flag was blowing proudly in the wind for the first time in five years. The carriers and the trucks swung northward toward Bathmen, near Deventer. The Dykmans watched them go.

The SDGs left behind 15 dead in Leesten and Zutphen, more than the other regiments who participated in Zutphen's liberation. In Leesten they also suffered 19 wounded. The people of Leesten would never forget their liberators!

### Lest We Forget

Eleven Glens died in Leesten on April 4, 1945. They were first given a temporary grave near the north wall of the Roman Catholic Church in Vierakker, close to the village of Wichmond. Presently their graves can be found in the Canadian War Cemetery at Holten, in the province of Overijssel.

Three men from "C" Company died near my home. The names of two of these men I know well:



C-2954 Sergeant Ernest Wifred BAKER, MM. Born 17 January 1922 at Brockville, Ontario. Ernie received his Military Medal for bravery during a battle in Germany in February of 1945. Enlisted 9 February 1942 in Ottawa.



C-54294 Corporal Aime Pascal PERIARD Born 20 April 1919 at Alexandria, Ontario. Enlisted 5 July 1940 in Cornwall, one of the first volunteers among the Glens to do so.

At the time of writing I am still trying to make sure, but it seems very likely that the third man who died near my home was:



C-118693 Norman Harold HANNAN. Born 24 Nov. 1921 at Tichborne, Ontario. Enlisted 22 December 1942 in Kingston, Ontario.

The others are mostly from "B" Company, some possibly from "A" Company:

F-32224 Douglas Angus BEATON. Born 5 January 1923 West Bay Road, Nova Scotia. Enlisted 2 September 1942 in Sydney N.S.

C-103294 Harry Louis GERVAIS. Born 21 November at La Passe, Ontario. Enlisted 8 April 1943 in Ottawa, Ontario.

C-79318 Sergeant Alfred Walter HAWKINS. Born 26 April 1921 at Peterborough, Ontario. Enlisted 21 May 1942 in Connaught Range, Ontario. Sgt. Hawkins was killed in the yard of the farm *Klein Haveke* with two others, close to the main enemy fortification in Leesten.

C-92100 Corporal William Leslie HEMMING. Born 12 July 1912 at Ottawa, Ontario. Enlisted 24 September 1940 in Ottawa.

B-36649 Charles Edward William Joseph HOUSE. Born 16 April 1920 at Hamilton, Ontario. Enlisted 5 September 1939 in Hamilton, Ontario.

C-612664 Marshall Noah LAWES. Born 27 January at Frankford, Ontario. Enlisted 21 October 1943 in Kingston, Ontario.

G-1 153 Hazen Henry PAGET. Born 2 July 1922 at Coldstream, New Brunswick. Enlisted 24 November 1942 in Fredericton, N.B.

C-40620 John Elvin POTTS. Born 24 February 1918 at Campbellford, Ontario. Enlisted 11 October 1939 in Lindsay, Ontario.

### Dedication

This story is dedicated to my grandson, Nathan Hendrik Peeling, with the fervent prayer that he will never ever experience war.

## Acknowledgements

I wish to thank all the veterans of the Canadian Army who have been a help in speaking to me about their wartime experiences in a frank and forthright manner. Without their contributions this story could not have been written. I also wish to thank those people who were in the Leesten area in those incredible days in early April 1945, who are now living in many parts of the world and who have most willingly written and spoken to me about their experiences.

I am grateful to my wife, Lorraine, and my daughter, Dineke, for their encouragement and the many hours they have spent editing the script.

Finally I wish to thank Professor Terry Copp at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario, who encouraged me to write this story and who provided me with access to some very helpful resources.

## Sources

This account is based *on* the War Diaries of the regiments involved in the battle and interviews and correspondence with many veterans of the Glens as well as citizens of Leesten. The diary of Miss Reintje Vaag is in the keeping of H. Rossel of Leesten.

The Reverend Henk Dykman grew up in Leesten. He emigrated to Canada graduating from the University of British Columbia. He began researching the liberation of Leesten in the 1980s and has made frequent return visits to Holland. Reverend Dykman is Assistant Minister at Christ the King United Church, Kitchener, Ontario.



*Henk Dykman puts a rose on the grave of Sergeant Ernest Baker, MM in May 1994.*