

DUTCH

the magazine

URBAN WONDERS

HOW ROTTERDAM BECAME AN AMERICAN-STYLE METROPOLIS

WATER MANAGEMENT

THE COLLABORATION BETWEEN CANADA & THE NETHERLANDS

THE VECHT REGION

CHARMING RIVERSIDE TOWNS

Rembrandt's Amsterdam

Uncovering Dutch roots in North America

Summer by the seaside in Callantsoog

In Our FATHERS'
FOOTSTEPS

A WWII DUTCH
LIBERATION PILGRIMAGE



My father, Gilbert Hunter, never spoke about the war. Like Hans Brinker, he held his finger in a private dike. As a child, and even as an adult, I never asked – though I knew that those years had changed his life, and my mother's. On his eighty-fifth birthday in 2004, my father presented the family with a memoir he'd written called, *The War Years*. For me, it opened a gate that I'd assumed would always remain closed. Then, five years later, he passed away.

Growing up, I knew very little about my parents' background, though there were some clues. A pair of small wooden clogs bearing a handwritten inscription: "With many thanks for that did (sic) the Canadian forces for our Dutch country and our people. 5-5-45." Christmas cards with unusual surnames, like 'Ingenhousz' and 'Van der Meij.' My mother's Longines watch, "from Doug." The look in her eye and the tone of her voice, told me not to ask. Years later, I learned they'd been engaged. Doug was a pilot, shot down and killed over Germany on Valentine's Day 1945.

I'm not sure what prompted my father to return to Holland in 1985 for the fortieth liberation anniversary. I suspect it was the venue: Apeldoorn, the town he helped liberate. He and my mother were billeted with Peter and Ans Van der Meij, a couple in their thirties with two young children, Ruud and Lisette. Ans's mother was living in Leeuwarden at the time of its liberation on April 15th 1945. She had told Ans about the Canadian soldiers offering her cigarettes and giving her then three-year-old son chocolate. Peter was born in Amsterdam. He had been an officer with the Dutch Army, then worked in travel, and later, logistics. Living in Apeldoorn had exposed him to the 'Welcome Again Veterans' program, so he wanted to make his home available.

My father returned from the Netherlands with stories of a grandiose parade, of being treated like royalty and of profound Dutch gratitude. The anniversary celebrations had triggered memories of May 1945 and lifted the latch on his guarded gate. And now that it had been cracked open, there was no closing it.

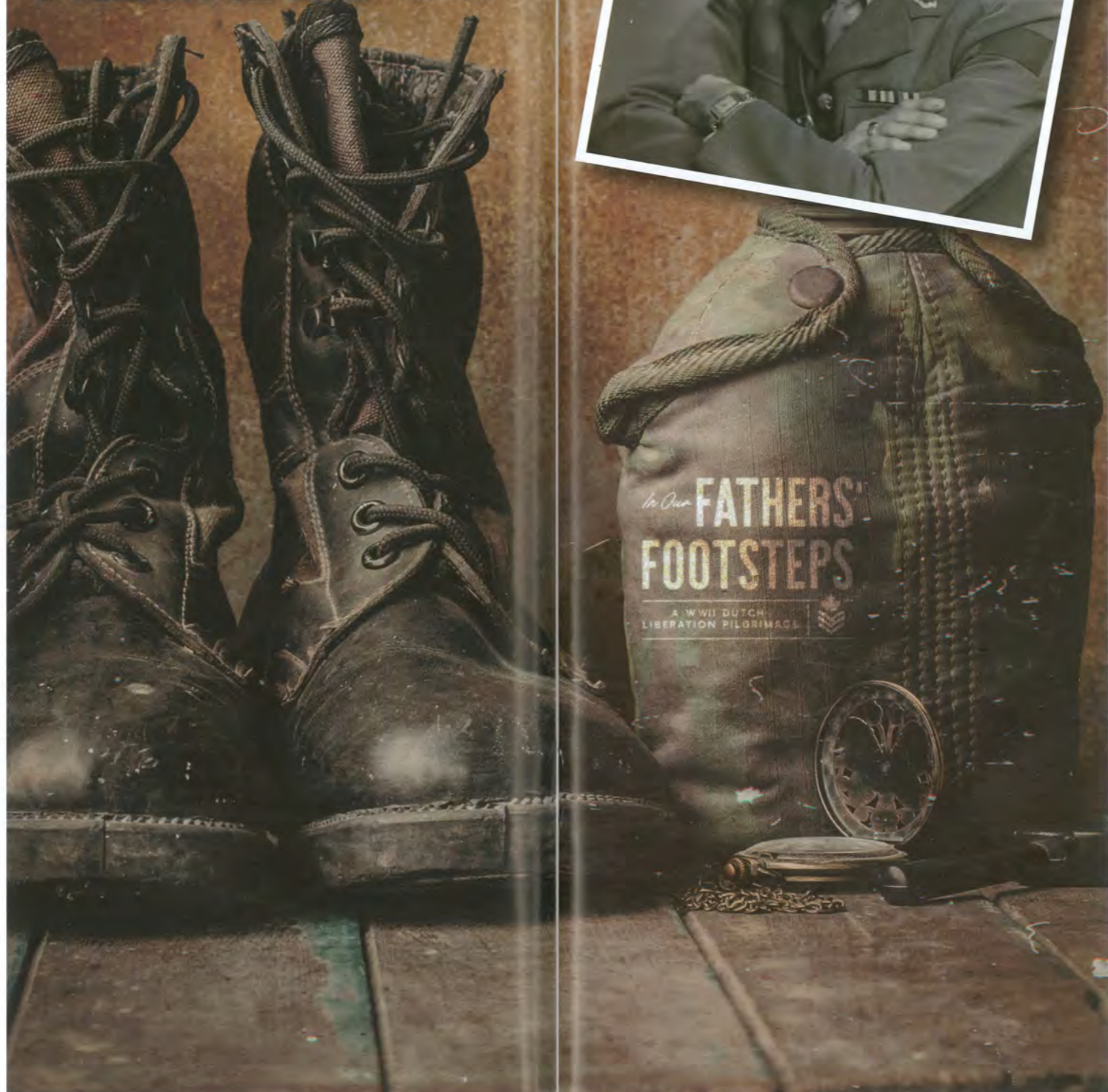
In 1995, my parents returned for the fiftieth anniversary and billeted again with the Van der Meij's, who had since moved to Uden. By then, our families were one. Ans had stayed with us in Canada many times and, over the next twenty-five years, made annual trips here to visit, becoming, in effect, my parents' fourth daughter. Her gifts of *stroopwafels* (syrup-filled waffles) and *hagelslag* (chocolate sprinkles) were both a delight and an amazement to us. Dutch children have chocolate for breakfast?

My father returned home from his second trip with a secret plan. He was approaching eighty and wanted, perhaps needed, to share his story. I still remember that special birthday when he announced that anything we might want to know about his war experience could be found in the pages of his memoir.

I learned that, in 1941, my father enlisted as a gunner

IN OUR FATHERS' FOOTSTEPS: A DUTCH LIBERATION PILGRIMAGE

KAREN HUNTER



with the Royal Canadian Artillery after his graduation from the University of Toronto. He was twenty-two. He joined the 30th Light Anti-Aircraft Battery and began training with a new friend, Harry Bockner, who had joined the unit at the same time. Following Pearl Harbor in 1942, they were sent to British Columbia and later Alaska to man anti-aircraft positions there. After officers' training in Brockville and Petawawa, their time together ended. My father was shipped to England where he was put in charge of a motorcycle school. Later, he was posted to the Canadian 1st Division in Italy where, as an Artillery Officer, he commanded a heavy mortar platoon. Then, in June 1944, D-Day changed everything. The 1st Division left Italy to join the remaining Canadian Army divisions in action. My father was given the responsibility of managing the battery's troop movement and convoy traffic during the long trek from Italy through France, Germany, Belgium and north into the Netherlands. It was during this long convoy that a most unexpected but joyous thing happened. As a large gun tractor passed by him, someone waved. It was Harry. What's more, they discovered they'd been reassigned to the same unit. However, their good fortune was short-lived.

In the spring of 1945, the battery arrived in the Netherlands. Then, on April 11th, near Zutphen, my father overheard a radio message. Harry had been killed. By jeep, he raced to Harry's gun position, arriving "just as the men completed sewing him up in one of his blankets." Harry (being Jewish) was given an appropriate ceremony and buried in a nearby field along with thirteen others. Years later, their remains were moved to Holten Cemetery.

Fast-forward to January 2009. I had just turned fifty and was about to climb Mount Kilimanjaro to celebrate. That's when my father died, aged eighty-nine. It wasn't unexpected; he had cancer. But, after his death, I seemed to see the world differently. My father had always been my guiding light, my mentor and my champion. Now, I needed to rely on his lessons and values to forge my own path.

As I climbed toward the summit, it may have been the altitude. Kilimanjaro became the Italian Alps, and I began to reflect on what it must have been like to be exhausted yet on constant lookout for mines, snipers and whatever other dangers lurked there, with life and death at stake. Years after the climb, I walked the Camino de Santiago and similar questions of physical and mental endurance surfaced. My father's memoir had planted a seed that, before long, sprouted into what would become a new spiritual journey, a pilgrimage to the Netherlands in May 2020 for the liberation's seventy-fifth anniversary. Using my father's memoir as a guide, I would walk in his footsteps to better understand his war experience. Or so I thought.

I hadn't noticed that the memoir's 'Holland' chapter began with my father's unit entering the country

via Rumst, Belgium. By the end of that same page, Apeldoorn had been liberated, and he was now on his way to Leiden. The rest of the chapter describes his post-liberation adventures in the university town with the Menten family. He'd left out all the details: where he'd been and what he'd done, including any 'messy' bits. The omission wasn't a surprise. My father, the optimist, had always focused on the positive. But, if I intended to walk in his footsteps, I needed a new plan.

I set off for the Netherlands in 2019 for reconnaissance with Peter and Ans. In my suitcase was a government envelope I had just received containing my father's service records and his unit's war diaries. My heart fluttered when I saw his initials, GLH, beside some of the journal entries and skipped a beat when I read:

"04.11.45 1700 hrs Sgt. H.J. Bockner was killed in action by enemy shell fire."

On that trip, I walked in The Four Days Marches in Nijmegen. As I neared the finish along the Via de Gladiola, the cheering, clapping, singing and bouquets of flowers were just like my father had described the liberation anniversaries the veterans were no longer able to attend. The huge outpouring of love gave me an idea. Instead of walking alone, I would invite these veterans' descendants to join me. That's when "in my father's footsteps" became 'In Our Fathers' Footsteps.'

Using the media and social media, I sent out the rallying cry: "Together, as the next generation, let's carry the torch of remembrance!" Before long, over 150 Canadian descendants of those who had served in the Netherlands had registered for the not-for-profit pilgrimage, In Our Fathers' Footsteps (IOFF). Peter's background in travel, logistics, and the military, together with Ans's energy and enthusiasm, made them the ideal planners. What's more, they were determined to "make the IOFF dream come true."

For the next ten months, on both sides of the ocean, we worked non-stop on IOFF's thirteen-day itinerary, registration and logistics. In addition to travel, accommodation and meals (managed by Verstraete Travel in Canada and BDL Travel in the Netherlands), the trip included a thirty-seven-mile-walk (over three days) along routes taken by the Canadian troops, including commemorations, celebrations and immersion in Dutch culture. Peter researched every step for historical accuracy and arranged the necessary licenses, guides, crossing guards, rest stops, bathrooms, chairs, first aid and back-up transportation. He organized ceremonies, pipe and drum bands and community involvement. Then, he recruited an army of Dutch volunteers and many sponsors. Behind-the-scenes, Ans managed necessities like signage, participants' mess kits, raincoats and red safety vests. Their daughter, Lisette, a graphic designer, built an impressive website, created guidebooks and managed social media. Even his grandson, Jort, was involved.

By April 2020, emotions were at a feverish high! Then,



by May 2020, a feverish low, thanks to COVID. *In Our Fathers' Footsteps* was delayed four times and, with each postponement, the itinerary and arrangements required a full overhaul. By September 2022, when IOFF finally happened, the original '1945 liberation itinerary' now included 1944 and the Scheldt. And, according to Peter and Ans, there would be some special surprises for me.

COVID's gray cloud actually had a silver lining. During what turned out to be a 'seventy-five plus two-and-a-half-event,' we created a physical torch – The Canadian Remembrance Torch – to serve as a reminder of the sacrifices that have been made for peace and freedom and of the need to be grateful, year-round, not just on November 11th. Designed and built by a team of engineering students from McMaster University, the torch's Dutch-themed column features maple leaves and tulips (for friendship), doves (for peace) and waves (representing the significance of water).

On September 5th, I traveled with the McMaster students to Ottawa where The Canadian Remembrance Torch was lit at the Centennial Flame on Parliament Hill with the help of the Dutch embassy's Yaap Yan Spielman. Then, Air Canada flew our group of four to the Netherlands with the torch in a special case and its flame in a lamp designed for travel. What commotion we caused at Toronto airport and at Schiphol!

Each day, our itinerary was posted as 'Marching Orders' in the hotel lobby. While in Nijmegen, we visited locations in Germany: the Reichswald Forest, Kleve, Rees, Kalkar and Emmerich. Then, we relocated to Almen where Landgoed Ehzerwold (a former Canadian field hospital) became our 'barracks.' For the walks, we assembled in platoons (according to our fathers' units), wore distinctive red IOFF vests (the Dutch volunteers wore blue), strapped on our camo-colored belt with canteen and drinking cup and carried our detailed guide books. Each platoon had a commander, a signaler and a medic.

We began our first walk in Megchelen (near the German border) where the village's mayor was scheduled to launch our journey by lighting The Canadian Remembrance Torch from the lamp's flame. That's when it began raining ... pouring. With the locals' help, encouragement and umbrellas, the mayor succeeded and, after a community-organized snack break at the local Moeseköttel museum, we set off. For three days, we followed the troops' routes – in sunshine, rain and fog – across farmers' fields and along forest paths, stopping to hold flower ceremonies at Canadian monuments along the way. The occasional rain, we all agreed, made our journey even more authentic.

At Groesbeek, Holten and Bergen op Zoom, Canadian war cemeteries, we wandered among the rows of headstones, mesmerized by the heartfelt epitaphs and youthful ages. With the flame of The Canadian Remembrance Torch raised high, we laid a bouquet of flowers, shared a moment of silence, listened to the

piper's Lament, then recited our pledges to remember. At Holten, I placed a stone on Harry's grave marker and reflected on some special events that Peter and Ans had arranged to honor him.

Near Zutphen, we had detoured to a farmer's field where they had placed fourteen white wooden crosses (that they had hand-crafted). One, with a Star of David, marked Harry's original grave. A Dutch woman in her nineties was there with her grandchildren. As a schoolgirl, she had laid field flowers on these graves. Now, the youngsters who were the same age she had been in 1945, placed fourteen bouquets for our ceremony. Days later, in Gorssel (near the Canadian monument commemorating the IJssel River crossing), we met the family who still live on the farm where Harry was



killed. The grandfather, a boy at the time, remembered that fateful day. The commotion, the jeep, the blanket stitching.

One evening after sunset, we walked one mile behind the Apeldoorn Pipe and Drum Band carrying the torch (and forty candles) to the village of Almen. The community was assembled there and placed our candles in the ground in the shape of a heart, one for each Canadian who had been temporarily buried there. Under the stars, their band played our countries' anthems; then we listened to a beautiful ceremony.

In the same way that May 4th transforms into May 5th, we also celebrated! Led by the torch and the Pipe and Drum Band, we walked through villages liberated by the Canadian troops and received a celebrity-style welcome. Dutch residents lined the streets, clapping and cheering. Canadian flags were everywhere! The smaller the town, the grander the reception!

The 'singing town of Etten' entertained us around each corner with a series of talented choirs. Doetinchem's Fort Garry Horse welcome included a grand reception with Dutch cheese, refreshing drinks and a sing-along. Almen's Our Royal House committee greeted us with glasses of *oranjebitter* (orange liqueur) and delicious *bitterballen* (deep-fried, ragout-filled meatballs). In

Warnsveld, the community unveiled a plaque beneath a maple tree dedicated to "In Our Fathers' Footsteps" and to my father as the journey's inspiration.

Then came the highlight: Apeldoorn. It was a beautiful sunny day as we held our flower ceremony in front of *The Man with Two Hats*, then followed the band along Loolaan to the palace. Ans cued me to "look right." There, up high, a banner of my father in his military uniform appeared to be watching over me, and smiling. Together with Princess Margriet, we held a 'passing of the torch to the next generation' ceremony. After high tea and a meet-and-greet, we gifted a replica of The Canadian Remembrance Torch to the Dutch Orange committees for their community commemorations.

We continued on to Zeeland where we learned about the Scheldt battles, which are relatively unknown in Canada. We visited reconstructed villages, German bunkers in Groede and the landing beaches of Walcheren. Led by the Inter Scaldis Pipes and Drums Band, we walked the memorial routes through Hoogerheide and Woensdrecht and held special ceremonies. We ate *pannenkoeken* (pancakes) and *Zeeuwse bolus* (sweet buns). We visited Bergen op Zoom and Antwerp. Then, soon after we rang the Liberty Bell in Welberg, our journey ended.

Months later, I'm still processing everything I saw, heard and learned on this incredible pilgrimage, made possible by a special Dutch family. Their love, passion and determination not only fulfilled the IOFF dream, but strengthened the bonds between Dutch-Canadian friendship and ensured that the torch's remembrance flame will continue to burn brightly in both Canada and the Netherlands.

Karen Hunter is the Founder and Executive Director of The Canadian Remembrance Torch, a registered charity dedicated to engaging the next generation through year-round initiatives. Learn about the charity and donate at www.canadianremembrancetorch.ca, or email hello@canadianremembrancetorch.ca.



Students with Princess Margriet at Paleis het Loo