



Jasmijn Derckx

PAX44- Arnhem's gift to the world by a message in a bottle

"If, in years to come, you meet a man says he was in Arnhem, 'raise your hat to him and buy him a drink"

Alan Wood, war correspondent for the Daily Express

Magical moments in history

In the darkness of wartime, people look for a glimmer of hope. Small gestures or seemingly insignificant events sometimes turn out to be the greatest magical moments in history after the end of the war in the context of the battlefield.

Many people know the story of the legendary World War I football match. On Christmas Eve 1914, the guns in Ploegsteert in West Flanders were silent. On both sides of the front line, German and Allied soldiers climbed out of the trenches. They wished each other a happy Christmas and exchanged gifts. Here and there, games of football were played mainly between the Belgians and British. It was the ultimate Christmas spirit, a glimmer of humanitarian hope in dark days.

The Netherlands now also has such a magical story. I take you on a journey to Arnhem in the September month in 1944.

Oosterbeek

We start near Arnhem in the lovely artists' colony of Oosterbeek, a beautiful and green village on the Rhine. My cradle was at Paasberg 3 in Oosterbeek in 1970. The house

was a 1906 semi-detached with a high pointed red roof and large windows on the front facade. It was the first real house my parents bought as twenty-somethings.

My father came from Meijel, Limburg. There, as a child, he had experienced the 'Battle of Meijel' in the Peel where Meijel was completely destroyed. My mother, whom he met in Nijmegen, experienced the surprise bombing of Nijmegen as a child in which my grandparents' house burned down completely. They lost everything and fled with their family of seven children to a farm in the Ooijpolder.

As a child, I grew up with the shadow of war. Not only because of my family history but also because I grew up in an environment where the war past was still so clearly visible and tangible.

My mother walked with me as a baby in the pram through park Hartenstein; we lived around the corner from this park. In the middle of the park is a large white villa, the former headquarters of General Urquhart during World War II, today's Airborne Museum. There, hundreds of soldiers were nursed in the basement, many of them dying in the vaults of this stately villa.

In the room at the back of the basement, General Urquhart decided on the Battle of Arnhem. As divisional commander in chief, he was responsible for Operation Market Garden.

The battle for the Rhine bridge in Arnhem

In August 1944, the Allies realised that only one more major action was needed to drive the Germans out of the Netherlands, victory seemed achievable within weeks. British Field Marshal Bernard Law Montgomery, Viscount Montgomery of Alamein, simply called 'Monty', decided on Operation Market Garden in September 1944. This would allow the British to advance into Germany's industrial heartland, the Ruhr. After some hesitation, Commander-in-Chief General Dwight D.

Eisenhower, agreed to this bold plan on 10 September.

From Nijmegen and Eindhoven and from the air, several American and British divisions were to capture the bridge over the Rhine. General Urquhart, stationed at Hotel Hartenstein, which today houses the Airborne Museum, became responsible for the Airborne Operation. In just a few days, this plan was drawn up. In retrospect, this proved to have been too carelessly short.

Operation Market Garden was scheduled for 17 September 1944. The Americans and the British 1^e Airborne Division were to reach Arnhem via Nijmegen and Eindhoven. The weather forecast was not good.

The Germans fighting in Arnhem saw a long line of aircraft appear over Arnhem. The first Parachute Brigade jumped over Ginkel Heath near Ede. Nearly 400 gliders landed on Dutch soil. Meanwhile, the Germans were already hastily mobilising their troops. By a stroke of stupidity, they had got hold of an original battle plan that allowed them to mobilise in a targeted manner. House-to-house fighting ensued. The Germans tried to set fire to the houses, total chaos ensued in Arnhem and Oosterbeek. The area became one big battlefield

On Sunday 18 September, another large number of aircraft flew from England towards Arnhem, the weather was good and there was little resistance along the way. A second drop followed on the Ginkelse hei. Because they had the plan, the Germans were able to wait for the drop and shot many paratroopers out of the sky. Gliders were shot out of the sky. Paratroopers were shot out of the sky like birds or ended up wounded in the trees. There was heavy fighting from house to house, garden to garden.

Ammunition ran out and every street corner became a trap.

The British lost their grip on the bridge. The men hid in the houses near the bridge and the

St.Elizabeth Gasthuis in Arnhem. Meanwhile, Allied troops were waiting in Nijmegen.

In a last desperate attempt, Polish general Sosabowski ordered his men of the Polish 1^e Independent Parachute Brigade, together with the British, to cross the Rhine from Driel to Oosterbeek in small boats.

The few soldiers who made it across found their way to General Urquhart's headquarters via the so-called 'White Ribbon' route, a white ribbon stretched in the Rosandepolder. Many wounded and survivors were brought into the old rectory next to the Old Church in Oosterbeek, where the 'Angel of Arnhem' Mrs Kate ter Horst and her family cared for them. Next to the house was a mass grave in the garden, later the many fallen soldiers would be reburied at the Airborne Cemetery in Oosterbeek.



On 19 September, there was heavy fighting around the bridge at Arnhem and in Oosterbeek. Eventually the road to Arnhem from Nijmegen lay open but the Germans had regained control of the Arnhem bridge. The British ran out of water and food in Arnhem and were almost out of ammunition.

During a brief truce, the British wounded in captivity were handed over to the Germans, including Luitenant Colonel Frost. There was heavy fighting in the perimeter formed on 19 September around Oosterbeek. On the morning of 20 September, of the ten thousand landed troops of the 1^e Airborne Division, only three thousand remained in Oosterbeek and five hundred at the bridge.

On 21 September, late in the morning, the Germans shot away the last British resistance at the bridge near Arnhem. There was heavy fighting in Oosterbeek with help from the Poles. All hell broke loose in Arnhem, Nijmegen and Oosterbeek. After the so-called Conference of Valburg (24th of september) general Sosabowski was forced to put a part of his Polish troops under British command. At the same time this was the beginning of making Sosabowski and his heroic troops pointed out as the scapegoat of the debacle of Market Garden.

The operation plan for Market Garden was forced to an end on the 24th of september at Valburg, already the 21st of that month Frost, commander of the 2nd Parachute Battalion, had to surrender to the Germans on the Arnhem Rhine traffic bridge.

In the end, the plan failed and on 26 September 1944 the bridge at Arnhem turned out to be 'a bridge too far'. As Winston Churchill put it, 'it was a heroic failure'.

The losses were high. On the Allied side, there were between 15,000 and 17,000 casualties in one week, on the German side an estimated 8,000 to 13,000 dead.



The intertwined history in my heart

My first breath as a baby was in the delivery room at St Elizabeth Gasthuis. This hospital is close to the aforementioned bridge in Arnhem. In the room where I breathed my first air as a baby in May 1970, many British and Germans breathed their last in September 1944. The hospital was run by German nuns during World War II. Germans, Dutch and British all worked there. The hospital was first

in British hands, later recaptured by the Germans. Both the British and the Germans and Dutch brought in the wounded. Here there was no time for war, only time to save lives.

I was baptised at Tafelberg in Oosterbeek, where the bloodstains on the tiles testified to its function as an emergency hospital. I learned to walk on the narrow paths in Hartenstein between the trees wounded by shrapnel. As a highly sensitive girl, I 'spoke' to the still wandering souls of the fallen soldiers I encountered daily in the Oosterbeek woods. It was the most normal thing in the world for me.

The big Protestant school, the Paasberg School, which was right opposite our house, was an emergency hospital during Operation Market Garden. As schoolchildren, we put wads of paper in the many bullet holes in the walls of the classrooms. Around the corner from our street was the hotel 'Schoonoord' where many wounded were also cared for during the September days of 1944.

Still every year in September, I try to make time to walk the Airborne March and go to the annual commemoration at the Airborne Cemetery where I used to be flower girl. And every year I still get goosebumps when the first words of the hymn 'Abide with me' are sung.

Last year, I was at the Airborne Cemetery on Christmas Eve, in an icy cold. In the mud and rain, young and old from Oosterbeek came to place a candle on the graves. The thoughts of the many fallen are still kept alive.



My parents used to always host Airborne veterans in their house like Harry Westwood and Bill Hewitt. In 1999, my parents built a new house right opposite the former Hotel Dreijeroord ('The White House'), where there was heavy fighting by the 7th Battalion of the King's Own Scottish Borderers (KOSB). As the name suggests a battalion-sized unit that took part in the fightings as a part of the 1st Airlanding Brigade. A plaque on that house read: 'Last stone laid by Marc Gijsbers (my son) and Airborne Veteran Harry Westwood'.

When Charles Brussee, friend of John Howard Davies asked me to write this article on PAX44, of course I did not have to hesitate for a moment. The history of Arnhem and Oosterbeek is intertwined with my heart. He suggested I enter into conversation with John.

In the first conversation with John, my feelings were immediately confirmed by the special story behind this whiskey. Soon I knew that really was a message in a bottle that the world desperately needs at this time.

Compassion

I try to imagine what it looked like during the bloody September days of 1944. I only have to think of a war film and I can already see the image of the deserted streets, the chilling tension of looming troops, the sound of planes in the distance, the fear, destruction and utter dejection of people on the run. But the smell of fearful sweat, the damp cellars where Arnhemers took shelter, the smell of gunpowder vapour in the streets, the rotting bodies, I thankfully cannot imagine. It must have been hell on earth to have to fight in Arnhem in those September days.

The story of PAX44

A patrol of Waffen-SS soldiers led by SS Sturmbahnführer (Major) in 9. SS Panzer Division Hohenstaufen Hans Möller and a group of British Paratroopers were trapped in a house between Urquhart's headquarters at Hotel Hartenstein and Table Mountain in Oosterbeek in the September days of 1944 as

they retreated from the battle for the Arnhem Bridge. It was a witches' cauldron (the Germans named it the Hexenkessel). Then the streets fell silent for a moment, the sound of machine guns stopped. Instead of fighting, both sides proclaimed a moment of truce 'PAX'.

The starving Britons lowered bottles of cognac and whisky down a rope, gave them to the German troops and received German chocolate in return. For a moment there was a moment of humanity and fraternisation. A gesture of peace could be that simple.

This scene is described in 'It never snows in September. The German View of Market-Garden and The Battle of Arnhem, September 1944' by Robert J. Kershaw (1990). In chapter 20, The Witches' Cauldron, Kershaw tells about Hans Möller who remembers how horrors could be interspersed with lighter moments, as when an occasional 'bottle of whisky lowered on a string' was exchanged in a deadlocked position between the floors of a jointly occupied house, with 'my engineers sending up chocolates in return'.)

A bottle with a message

When the founder of Portafortuna heard this story, he wanted to capture this special moment and came up with a cognac that incorporates this story in all its elements. With notes of dark cocoa sparkling in your mouth, it keeps the memory of this story alive. Portafortuna's VS Cognac is made with a blend of at least eight years and is matured in Limousin oak barrels and finally aged in Port barrels before the raw, fermented cocoa nibs are added. The cognac has an alcohol content of 44% and bottled in 500ml handmade bottles.

A limited edition of 44 bottles was released in 2023. Each bottle of this presentation edition comes in a collectible box, encased with parachute silk and a World War II bullet found near Arnhem and Oosterbeek. These bottles have since been presented to Major Marco Kroon, General Peter van Uhm, the Airborne

Museum Oosterbeek, Schoonoord in Oosterbeek, the VC Gallery in Wales, the Loggerhead Cocktail Bar in Kyiv, FC Vitesse, Café Unibar, Airborne Tulip Memorial and others.

There will also be an Arnhem edition in the summer of 2024. This is an Irish whiskey. A powerful, premium whiskey with soothing hints of smooth, rich chocolate. This whiskey contains the so-called Warrior Spirit, a flavour forged in the fire of the Witches' Cauldron. The brand represents morality, positivity, standards of behaviour, humanity, brotherhood and sisterhood.

Major Marco Kroon: PAX44 is a symbol of the humanity of every warrior who has correctly calibrated the moral compass.



PAX, the goddess of peace

When my son Marc was studying at Keio University in Tokyo in 2019, I visited him and we travelled around Japan together for a week. A few months before I left, we talked about the upcoming trip and he asked me the question: 'how were those residents of Hiroshima actually able to rebuild their city after something so terrible. How is a human being able to overcome something so terrible?' I pondered this question and decided to put it to the mayor of Hiroshima. I received a response from his secretary within a week. The mayor was out of town in the week after New Year but of course we were

welcome at the 'City Planning and Peace Promotion Divisions' for a lecture.

We were welcomed by a delegation and given a two-hour presentation with stories about and photographs of a totally destroyed city, 92% was destroyed by the all-destroying fireball of over a million degrees of heat. A photo of just a shadow of a human being, a melted bicycle, a watch that stood still at the hour of the atomic bomb's impact were fierce witnesses of total destruction. It made quite an impression to hear how the people of Hiroshima were helping each other, the mothers who baked little pancakes on the streets (called okonomiyaki) and how the human spirit of surviving build the foundation for the rebuilding of the city. After this presentation, we were asked if we wanted to be ambassadors in the fight against nuclear weapons. A resounding 'yes' was our answer.



2024

It is extraordinary to realise that now in 2024 there is still an arms race going on. Why don't we learn anything from our history?

More than 100 wars have been started since 2013. The number of conflicts worldwide has increased by more than a quarter in the past year. One in six people live in a war situation. It is estimated that there are currently 13,000 nuclear weapons in the world, of which nearly 4,000 are operationally deployable.

Peace is a precious asset. In the coming decades, our moral compass will increasingly be called upon when it comes to distribution of food, water, land, fuel and respect with regard to religious beliefs. I believe the role of

women is essential when it comes to conflict management.

PAX, 'mercy, peace' is a concept that everyone could learn from an early age. More than ever, women could play a role when it comes to promoting world peace.

The mission of PAX44

A 'message in a bottle' is the mission of PAX44. The story behind this cognac and whiskey is so much more than just socialising at the bar.

It is a gesture of peace. Part of the proceeds will go to charitable organisations dedicated to the recovery of PTSD of war veterans.

Every sip of PAX44 goes from your mouth straight to your heart and soul.

Full circle

While writing this story, I was looking for historical material. And to my great surprise, I found a photo of the house in Oosterbeek where I grew up, Paasberg 3. A house close to where the story of PAX44 took place. As it turned out, it used to be divided into two shops. In the right half of the house, where I lived, there was a liquor store. On the left side, now Paasberg 5, there was a tobacco shop with a big sign on the facade saying 'Van Houtens' cocoa'.



My cradle was between booze and chocolate, surely that cannot be a coincidence.



Lest we forget

Jasmijn Derckx, Den Haag augustus 2024

Met dank aan Marcel van Hemert voor de aanscherping van de militaire details

Bron: *It never snows in September, Robert J. Kershaw. I Da Capo Press september 1996 ISBN-10-1885119313