

ARNOLD SOMSEN, SOLDIER IN THE FORGOTTEN BATTALION

30 March 1945 – 12 July 1945

by Gree van Daatselaar-Somsen [53]

Of course everybody is right who says that the Second World War is such a long time ago. We are living now, aren't we...?

Yet it is of great importance for future generations to know a little about those difficult years of war. After all, if you are silent about it you tend to forget and chances are great that you have to learn important lessons of life all over again.

At the beginning of this year, on February 17, 2001, there was an article in the newspaper Trouw about the foundation of a museum in Aalten about people in hiding. Some say that it is a prestigious project, others say it is a homage.

In the years between 1940-1945 the largest number of men were in hiding in Aalten, seen from a national point of view, to escape slave labour in the German war industry. 2500 men were in hiding in Aalten and at the farms in the various surrounding hamlets.

The men, in the prime of their lives, did not sit still. Besides working at the farms and doing other work they also had their hidden agendas. They joined, very secretly, small resistance groups, in Varsseveld, Gaanderen, the Haart near Aalten and at the **Somsenhuis** in the Heurne, where some allied pilots, who badly wanted to join their units, were also in hiding. All these men were very eager to act.

One of these men was Arnold Somsen [50], born in Aalten in 1924, who lived in Doesburg at the time and who was in hiding in the house of the Onnink family in Barlo, who were his maternal cousins. A twenty-year-old Somsen returned to his native area to be in hiding in order not to render services to the enemy as a good patriot. That was what he had been taught at home.

Now Arnold is 77 and he relates:

"For several days we had heard gunfire and cross-fire of the approaching allied armies from

secret we knew the ropes. People from the Achterhoek and people in hiding together formed groups of underground fighters. We could draw a bead on the enemy as soon as the 'Tommies' crossed the border. (See Somsenbook, Somsen Omnes Generationes p. 103-105).

Aalten was liberated by the English on 30 March and then a battalion of underground fighters could be formed, who were scattered all over the place, though. And it was not yet safe everywhere...

For my group I had to go to Aalten on my bike to 'Aunt Mina', a pub in the marketplace, to receive orders. The Germans were still in the water tower, in several side streets and at farms.

Trying to find cover in the darkness of the verges of the road and having a narrow escape in avoiding an anti-tank mine I reached 'Aunt Mina'.

There were Canadians there!

You looked at them as if they were wonders of the world. No shining boots stud with iron, no frightful caps, no tight uniforms and no clattering of heels but an easy fitting battledress, a broad smile, chewing chewing-gum or a cigarette loosely held between the lips.

From the commander I received orders for my group and I had to go back to Barlo. 'Please give me a packet of cigarettes first', I said, 'otherwise they won't believe me.'

After that we marched with twenty to thirty men, armed with Sten guns and hand grenades, in single file to Aalten in the dark. Very alert to any possible German ambush, available for further freedom fights.

We were brought in to clear farmhouses of Germans. We conquered anti-aircraft guns and we dismantled dangerous phosphor bombs.

But the west of our country was not liberated yet. We felt it as a duty of honour to take part in its liberation." →

Germany. It was the end of March 1945. Their occupation was not long in coming anymore. They were about there and then we could take action! Because of the many arms-droppings in the past couple of months, which had been carried out in

Dutch National Battalion

When Aalten was liberated all the people in hiding emerged and also the strong-arm gangs appeared before the footlights. The underground units received the official status of Home Forces. The Home Forces had taken possession of the Juliana school in Aalten and soon they renamed it into Prince Bernhard Barracks.

Quite regularly the men marched through Aalten in their brand new blue overalls with an orange armband, their proud 'uniform'. They knew the Achterhoek extremely well and therefore they were indispensable for the Allies in mopping up the whole area.

Aalten and its surroundings were liberated by the English, the Canadian armies concentrated on the rest of the Netherlands north of the big rivers

The Canadians needed infantry very badly for the support of the flank protection of their own armies. The Home Forces were prepared for this. Within two days more than four hundred volunteers were ready to fight.

Come with tales tonight
about how the war stopped
and repeat them a hundred times
and every time I shall cry

Leo Vroman

Thus the **Dutch National Battalion** (D.N.B.) was founded on 15 April 1945 and was incorporated in the First Canadian Corps.

The Dutch National Battalion consisted of three companies of about 300 men each, staff included. Arnold Somsen was drafted into the First Company and also Jan Somsen [495] of 'De Snieder' at Lintel enlisted in the D.N.B. The blue overalls could be replaced by the battledress of the allied forces. Orders were given and Canadian trucks transported them into the direction of the IJssel. Where was the front?

Arnold continues:

"We spent one night in Duiven. Together with a friend we managed to get a bike and we tried to go to Doesburg. It failed, I would have loved it so much...What would it be like at home, how would my father be and my mother, brothers and sisters? Would our house still be there? Through my binoculars, very good German binoculars, I saw bullets flattening into the high church tower of Doesburg.

Doesburg was liberated on 16 April, immediately after we had to pass by on the east bank of the IJssel into the direction of Steenderen and Gorssel. It was the task of the D.N.B. to control bridges across the IJssel. We went further to Apeldoorn. There was heavy fighting and fierce resis-

tance. We spent the night at the royal palace 'Het Loo'. That was quite special...!

After that, in the meantime it was already late April, the liberation army went to Harderwijk, Bunschoten and Spakenburg.

We were accommodated in a school. At night we had to be on patrol. The Germans were still in Eemnes, so quite close. There were gunfights and hand grenades were thrown from both sides...

At the total surrender on 5 May 1945 I was stationed in Veenendaal. To my great surprise Lientje came to visit me; she was my fiancée at the time and now she has been my wife for many years. She had come all the way from The Achterhoek on an old bike. Right through the destroyed areas, across temporary bridges and past patrols, she stood up to all this to just see me for a very short time.

These details are still very much alive after half a century! How much can we do when we are young...

After 5 May our company was brought into action to dismantle mines, to guard the concentration camp in Amersfoort and to control civilian traffic.

On 12 July 1945 the D.N.B. was officially incorporated into the I-II-8RI (Regiment Infantry), the main body of the Royal Dutch Army, which was set up again.

*The Dutch National Battalion ceased to exist. I resigned on 26 July and was dismissed with honour as **a good patriot and an excellent soldier.**" →*

The forgotten battalion

For many years after the liberation there was not much publicity around the Dutch National Battalion. A forgotten battalion of fighters. If there was any publicity about Dutchmen who helped to liberate us from the German oppression it was about the shock troops or the 'Princess Irene Brigade'.

It was an eventful and a remarkable period. The men of the D.N.B. were of one mind and united. And they did fight!

One year after the liberation, on 8 May 1946, the battalion reunited to commemorate the time of zest, the time of the liberation of the Veluwe. But

also to have a big party together and to receive a **medal** and a **certificate**. (See picture). Arnold shows us these cherished and proud symbols of an unforgettable bygone period.

Arnold [50] still visits the reunions of the Dutch National Battalion, which were initially held every ten years and later every five years, but now every year in the barracks in De Hars-kamp.

The numbers are decreasing. The heads are getting greyer and greyer, walking is getting more and more difficult. Yet as long as the ex- D.N.B soldiers are alive, they will be present there. Every year they receive a beautiful souvenir. Last year the veterans got a fine sculpture of a proud young soldier in battledress.

That is what they used to be like. And that is how they will be remembered.

Sources: * Aalten in Wartime. Messink and Prinsen, Aalten
* The Forgotten Battalion, Staring Institute

USA-2002: JUST A LITTLE MORE PATIENCE PLEASE.

by Theo Somsen [227]

So far about 40 Dutch family members have announced that they are interested in taking part in the new worldwide reunion in Baldwin, Wisconsin, USA, in August 2002.

That is a nice number of people, but of course more people are welcome.

We have already informed our American relatives in the Baldwin area about this. We have also indicated that many of us are interested in staying with a host family. Many Dutch visitors will seize the opportunity to visit other parts of the USA after visiting Baldwin for a couple of days for the reunion activities.

At the moment the initiators are still brooding on the dates, the way all the activities will be given shape and the kind of activities that will be organized. And according to an old Dutch proverb: *One should not disturb a sitting bird*. So a little more patience please.

Since we would also like to contribute to the merrymaking (who doesn't remember the fantastic *line-dance* of the USA-Somsen-girls at the Great Reunion of 1977?!) we have made a number of suggestions and asked if there was any interest in these.

I mention a few:

- Football match against Dutch descendants
- Somsen wagon in the Street Parade
- Old Dutch children's games
- Showing the movie *Somsen Panorama*
- Genealogical presentation
- Preparing Dutch meals
- Singing and drinking in the Dutch way

You may understand: the minds are in a ferment.

But we will have to be patient for a while. In the meantime you are very welcome with any other ideas!

