

Bridges

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Six miles east of Maastricht, near The Netherlands's southeastern edge, is the village of Margraten. The Netherlands American Cemetery and Memorial is located there. It honors United States servicemen killed in battle. Most of them died in the effort to liberate the Dutch people from German occupation during the fall and winter of 1944-45. Margraten, the only American memorial in the Netherlands, sits on sixty-five lush green acres in the Limburg countryside, surrounded by trees and farm ground. The site is home for the remains of over eight thousand American dead representing every state in the Union, the District of Columbia, England, Canada and Mexico. Inscriptions on stone memorial walls honor an additional 1723 Americans whose remains were never found.

On a summer morning in 1999, our Dutch friend Jacqueline took my family and me to Margraten. It's a beautiful and haunting place, and the visit was a very moving experience, but the respectful, quiet hour we spent among the seemingly endless stone markers provided much more. The whispered solemnity of the site, the graves, and the battle descriptions weren't just a look at the past and its horrors. It wasn't just a story of martyrs and heroic deeds performed by average people, and even the grand strategies of powerful generals didn't seem very important. What Margraten really gave us was lessons in humanity-- its darkness and light, the evils and the salvation, cruelty and sacrifice. It had little to do with nations and their leaders. Each of us in our own way felt the world become smaller, its national borders less important. Whether we could express

it at the time or not, we began to understand a powerful link, a bridge to the rest of the world, its people and their travails.

We were humbled by the time spent at Margraten for a variety of reasons. We hadn't suffered the consequences of occupation nor did we have to undergo the terror and resignation of fighting to liberate. We weren't aware of any personal connection to the dead, but standing among the crosses and Stars of David made us feel like there could have been. Time and the passage of generations were not important. Any one of the soldiers named on the thousands of headstones might have been a brother or a father. We could also sense the feelings of our Dutch friends. They understood far better than we ever could the sacrifice their liberation required. Though our friends were too young to have experienced occupation, they understood, and their gratitude was palpable. We weren't just visiting a cemetery, but learning about the magic and power of relationships—between liberator and liberated, between friends of different cultures and languages, and between the past and the present. All converged at Margraten.

Just outside the gates of the American Cemetery lies the historic Cologne-Boulogne highway. It was built by the Romans, and has been a major commercial route and a pathway to and from war for men and machines ever since. Caesar's legions used it twenty centuries ago defending the Empire from Germanic incursions. Charlemagne used the route building his own empire. Napoleon marched on the Cologne-Boulogne highway. Troops under Kaiser Wilhelm II advanced over the route during the First World War. In May of 1940, German Panzer divisions roared down this highway, invading the Low Countries. Just over four years later, Allied soldiers traveled the same route in the opposite direction. Among them was a young man from a small farm town in

the Pacific Northwestern United States, Lieutenant Benton L. Dickinson. Few soldiers in The Netherlands in 1944 could have been further from home.

To say that Ben Dickinson came from humble origins might seem an understatement to people from anywhere else. Those born and raised in Starbuck, Washington definitely come from humble origins though few of them believe it. During its golden age, from 1889 to 1919, it was a town of some importance to the railroad. The Oregon Railroad and Navigation Company made Starbuck a terminus for Snake River shipping. Much eastern Washington wheat moved through Starbuck. By the end of World War I, though, Starbuck had mostly become a gathering of farmers, sheep and cattle ranchers and the light peripheral industries that provided for them. A few shops, a bar, a jailhouse, stables, a school, and a couple of churches made up the town of several hundred proud and tough citizens. William T., Ben's father, farmed Dickinson family land. It was a harsh place, one of the most difficult areas to farm and make a living in the country. Average rainfall is about nine inches, the hillsides are steep, the winters can be frigid, and the summers are blistering hot. All these things undoubtedly contributed to William T. Dickinson's spiral into alcohol and adventure. When Ben was only seven, his father left, never to be seen again. That was 1925, and though it must have been devastating for a young boy, Ben had a close relationship with his mother, and he had Starbuck. Starbuck was a place that insulated, where people tended to watch over each other.

Nestled in a narrow valley surrounded by vast fields of winter wheat, native bunch grass, rabbit brush, and dust, Starbuck's most significant geological feature is the Tucannon River, winding its way through the middle of town. In winter and early spring after a heavy snow and quick thaw upstream in the watershed, it can be a hair-raising

monster, rumbling with the thunder of rolling boulders. In summer, the Tucannon becomes a gentle playground for the children of town. Fishing, swimming holes, and tree swings occupied the kids of Starbuck. Ben Dickinson participated in all these things. He also enjoyed playing baseball. He became a good catcher and hitter and participated in town teams.

In the early 1920's horses were an essential cog in the northwest farming machine. Widespread use of crawler tractors in wheat fields was still years away, so horses and mules were an important part of Starbuck life. Everyone had them and used them for work, transport and recreation. Like most of the kids, Ben was nearly as comfortable bareback on a horse as afoot. He enjoyed long rides alone or with friends along the Tucannon, in the hills overlooking Starbuck, and to the Snake River, a few miles away. Life was good for a boy growing up in Starbuck. There were myriad opportunities for adventures, and interesting, eccentric people to share them with. There was also a lot of work and responsibility, and though exposed to little that society might deem "worldly," Starbuck kids grew up strong, resourceful and self-confident. They were well prepared for anything life presented them, even sitting at the controls of an M4 tank in Western Europe facing off against the Wehrmacht.

After graduating from high school in 1936, Ben Dickinson worked for local ranchers and wheat farmers. One, Carl Penner, a man who farmed in the Alto area south of Starbuck, would have a powerful influence. He operated a sizeable pioneer family farm that required dawn to dusk determination and aggressiveness. It was no place for wavering or any degree of inconsistency. Carl Penner was also a man who required no more of anyone than he required of himself. He taught Ben the best way to insure

someone does a job the way you want it done. No matter how nasty the job, you do it first yourself. Ben also came away with the roots for two of his lifetime mantras, “do it even if it’s wrong,” and “field expedience.” That is, make a decision and stick with it, and get by with what you have at the time. Fix it the right way later. The overriding concern was to keep the machine going, the job progressing. Though Carl Penner continued to cling to many old farming ways and relied on dozens of mules to pull his tillage and harvest equipment, he was an excellent mentor for a young Starbuck man learning modern farming and finding his way in a pretty hard world. Ben later worked for other farmers, learned to operate crawler tractors, and spent several years with the Union Pacific Railroad where he did line and grading work, some of the hardest physical labor imaginable.

It began to seem a little lonely in Starbuck and other local haunts after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Men were either volunteering for military duty or being drafted in large numbers. On April 21, 1942, the largest contingent of military selectees to ever report at one time from Columbia County arrived at the Spokane, Washington induction center. Among them was Ben Dickinson. He was twenty-four and though certainly apprehensive, he was excited and ready for an adventure. It was the first time he had been away from home. He wanted to drive a tank, and felt the best opportunity he had was with the army. He also considered his chances of survival. Ben had some experience with Caterpillar 50’s and 60’s. They were relatively new to the Pacific Northwest wheat fields, but he understood how to operate them and repair them. He also realized that one might be better off in war surrounded by ten to twenty tons of steel.

After basic training at Ft. Callan, California, Ben found himself at the Armored Force Officer Candidate School in Ft. Knox, Kentucky. He graduated as a first lieutenant on February 27, 1943 and was assigned to a unit just activated, the 739th Medium Tank Battalion. Training at Ft. Lewis and at the firing range near Yakima, Washington began on March 4. It was a time when the allies were learning their way in Europe and the Pacific. Units were constantly being tweaked and retrained for specific actions overseas. Ben's unit was no exception. The 739th was redesignated several times over the next sixteen months. After exercises in Washington State, special training followed in Ft. Knox and Camp Bouse, Arizona. Ben's unit eventually arrived at Ft. Kilmer, New Jersey, the port of embarkation, and on July 25, 1944, set sail on the weeklong trip to Britain. After its arrival in Liverpool, the 739th received training and outfitting in Wales and Wiltshire, England. It was now a Medium Tank Battalion (Special), signifying their mission as a mine-exploding unit.

A few kilometers from Maastricht is the village of Mamelis-Vaals. Twenty-one year old Joseph Spierts helped run a family farm and produce business there. He was a miller, living and working with his mother Caroline, father Alphons, and four brothers and sisters. The Spierts family was nearly self-sufficient. They raised cattle for milk and meat, chickens, grass hay, grain and fruit. They produced their own cheese and flour, and traded for things not produced on the farm. The Spierts' were dairy farmers and no strangers to short nights, so Joseph and the other members of his family were either getting ready for work or already at their chores in the predawn hours that Friday morning. Five kilometers away in the town of Simpelveld, Fientje Rameckers was awakened by the roar of planes. Her father was shouting, "The Germans are invading!"

The impassioned radio broadcasts he was hearing made it all too clear. Simpelveld was only a few kilometers from the border, so within hours German soldiers and artillery were rumbling through town. Life had suddenly become very uncertain. It was May 10, 1940.

After Germany's invasion of Poland in 1939, The Netherlands proclaimed its neutrality as it had during the First World War. Adolf Hitler, in a speech to the Reichstag a few weeks later, promised to honor Dutch neutrality. Privately, though, he was ordering his generals to plan a German invasion of France and the Low Countries. He said at a secret conference the day following his speech, "The violation of Belgium's and Holland's neutrality is without importance. Nobody will question that after we have conquered." The ease with which The Netherlands fell was astonishing but inevitable. It took only five days. Afterward there was a great deal of second-guessing--the Dutch government should have known and been better prepared; mobilization should have taken place much sooner; the military should have been modernized. The Dutch, however, with an ill-equipped army of fewer than two hundred thousand, no armor, and no modern planes, could do little to slow down the German Wehrmacht, the most powerful armed force the world had ever seen. The official German justification was that they had been forced to enter Holland to protect the Ruhr valley from an impending Allied attack. They now were urging the Dutch to offer no resistance. In exchange, the Germans would provide the country with "protection." The Dutch military, however, defended their country as best they could until the Germans promised, on the fourth day, to systematically bomb Dutch cities. Negotiations were moving ahead and Holland was near to accepting terms for surrendering when the German Lufwaffe, at 3:30 in the

afternoon of May 14 began bombing Rotterdam. The bombing and the fires would destroy much of the center of the city, leaving 80,000 homeless and thousands more killed and wounded. The Germans announced that Utrecht would be next. The Supreme Commander of the Dutch Armed Forces, General Winkleman, issued this order to his field officers at 7:00 in the evening:

Germany has bombed Rotterdam today, and Utrecht is threatened with destruction. To save the civilian population and prevent further bloodshed, I believe justified to order the troops under your command to stop fighting.

The first few months of occupation, while Germany consolidated its gains throughout Western Europe, were relatively normal for the Dutch. Though a sense of dread and tension permeated life, people went to work and children went to school. Holland had been violated, and its citizens were full of fear, disbelief and humiliation, but life went on. The Dutch people were to discover that things were to become much worse. As the Nazi civilian government under the direction of *Reichkommissionar* Arthur Seyss-Inquart took hold, things began to change. Seyss-Inquart, in an early speech to the Dutch people, announced that Germany was not intent upon annexing Holland, nor did it plan to force Nazi ideology upon it. It was soon clear, however, that Germany was instead intent upon bleeding The Netherlands dry. Executive orders began pouring out of the *Reichkommissionar's* office. The Dutch were ordered to surrender things like their radios, silver, and items made of copper. Food ration books were issued, and though initially daily diets were adequate, shortages gradually became a terrifying reality.

In the Rameckers family, sharing an elegant yet simple three-story red brick house in Simpelveld, edicts from the Nazi government had to be dealt with reluctantly in their turn, but the family was together and that made the experience more bearable. Fienje was seventeen and had finished high school. She had decided to stay home even before the German invasion because the situation in all of Europe was so unstable. Helen, nearly twenty, had recently completed her training to become a teacher. The economy and the war provided for few job opportunities, so aside from occasional part-time work and substitute teaching jobs, Helen spent most of her time at home. Felix was fourteen and still in school. Fienje's father Jacques was an educator. He helped run and was head teacher at the boy's school in Simpelveld. Fienje's mother Josephine ran the household.

Little by little, life changed for the Dutch people. Holland was a nation with few natural resources. Now it had been conquered and the enemy's occupied lands surrounded it. There was no sea trade, and many canals had been ruined. Thousands of acres of agricultural land had been flooded by the Germans. The Dutch were in a virtual prison. They could only count on those necessities held in reserve, and their German "protectors" were helping themselves to those. Dutch food reserves, 1.2 million tons at the start of occupation, were at first rationed, and then began to disappear altogether. A flourishing black market emerged that, if anything, only hastened the inexorable shortages. Gas and coal were rationed until they ran out, so eventually there was no heat or light. The timing of nighttime meetings and other activities was determined by the phases of the moon. Trees and abandoned houses were disappearing all over Holland, as people desperately searched for fuel. Western Holland underwent a terrible deforestation. Amsterdam, for instance, lost over half of its 42,000 trees during just a few

months late in the war. There was little material for clothing or leather for shoes. A nation known worldwide for wooden shoes, where virtually no one actually wore them, found its people scrambling to find wood for making shoes. Mostly, however, the scavenged wood ended up in stoves.

The daily food ration in Holland during the war dwindled to near starvation levels, particularly in the urban areas of the west. By the fall of 1944, the average daily intake in many parts of the country was lower than 900 calories. People said it was “just too much to die on, but certainly too little to keep you alive.” By comparison, English people were receiving 2500 calories a day. Later in the winter known now as the “Hongerwinter,” many Dutch people had to resort to eating nothing but starches like sugar beets and tulip bulbs. For some, the daily intake sank to 400 calories or less. Life was better for those in the rural areas such as the province of Limburg in the south, where the Spierts and Rameckers families lived. There were shortages of everything, but the area had a lower population density, fertile ground, and was not reliant upon canals and dikes. When things became scarce, those in the cities and towns could walk or push carts or bicycles (often only on the wheel rims) to the outlying farms and fields to glean or trade for food. These “hunger trips” usually netted something of value like bread, milk, or grains sifted out of field residue. During the war, the Rameckers were able to acquire milk a couple times a week from the farm of Josephine’s sister near Simpelveld. They were also able to keep a few chickens hidden at their home. They could enjoy an occasional egg. For many Dutch, these were luxuries only dreamed of.

Helen Rameckers remembers the ration office and the weekly trips for coupons distributed for provisions. Different provisions were offered each time, flour one week,

and a meat ration the next, for example. None of the rations, of course, were adequate. Everyone tried to supplement the official diet. Thus “hunger trips” and clandestine visits to the wholesalers were common, but dangerous. Such activities had to be done late at night. NSB members (Nationaal-Socialistische Beweging, or Dutch Nazi Party and sympathizers) were constantly on guard for violations of ration laws and curfews. If one was caught the best that could happen was confiscation. Much more serious was any kind of resistance to the occupation. In Simpelveld alone, a village of only about 5000 people in the 1940’s, five members of a local resistance cell were captured and shot by the German Gestapo. The NSB, Germany’s puppet police force in the country, monitored most daily activity, including education. Helen twice had to listen to lectures by NSB school inspectors when she accepted part time teaching positions. She was warned not to try and turn the children against the Germans and not to use any pro Holland rhetoric.

Even though it was wartime and conditions were deteriorating, the Dutch people tried to manufacture for themselves some semblance of normalcy. Social clubs, meetings, classes and parties were organized. The Catholic Church in Simpelveld held a course for those interested in becoming youth leaders. Fienje Rameckers attended the course in 1942 where she met a cousin of Joseph Spierts. They became fast friends and exchanged visits. On a trip to Vaals and a gathering at the Spierts farm, Fienje met Joseph and a relationship developed.

The Dutch were forced to endure many shortages and humiliations, but clearly for all, the worst were the *razzias*, the unannounced visits by German Gestapo, NSB searches, and the deportations. Lurking in everyone’s consciousness was the dread of footsteps

and a knock in the middle of the night. The fear of one's husband or father being whisked off the street and disappearing was not paranoia in wartime Holland. *Razzias* generally consisted of soldiers going door-to-door confiscating whatever the Germans wanted at the time: bicycles, clothing, printing equipment, silver, and even sewing machines. People were given some warning of these raids by a network of street messengers, and some managed to hide or bury their possessions. The raids used for grabbing people were not so tolerable. The Germans succeeded in maintaining a level of terror in The Netherlands that no one could escape. There were few exemptions. Boys and men were taken in raids and imprisoned at impromptu facilities in Holland, like one at a boy's seminary in Brabant. Once there, they were kept as hostages, insurance against the Dutch population revolting. Many were executed in public following resistance acts of sabotage. Most of the hostages, though, were allowed some communication with family members and often came back home after a few weeks or months. Worse were the *Arbeitsensatz*, the rounding up and deportation of Dutch men for work in Germany. The work was often far away, and the family left behind rarely learned the location. Some were never heard from again. The Rameckers and Spierts families were very fortunate. Several family members were able to avoid working in Germany.

Young men and boys from Simpelveld and Vaals were used by the Germans to dig trenches. Older men worked in German factories. Many tried to avoid the raids by "diving" or going underground. Others managed to escape during deportation. Feinje's father Alphons, and little brother Felix, were deported but able to get away. Forced to hike with a large group of fellow Dutch deportees, they escaped in the confusion created by an Allied air raid. They hid in an orchard. Running to France, they lived for several

days under the home of an old invalid woman, beneath a trap door. Eventually, Alphons and Felix were able to make their way back to Simpelveld. One can only imagine the anxiety Josephine Ramecker and her daughters suffered until the two returned. In Vaals, Joseph Spierts and his brother learned of a pending *Arbeitseinsatz* gathering and chose to flee instead. They lived in the fields during the daytime and sneaked back to the hay mown in the family mill to sleep. One night two soldiers from the German SS came demanding places to sleep. The Spierts women provided beds for them on the lower floor of the mill, directly below Joseph and his brother. It's likely nobody in the Spierts family slept well at the farm that night.

The streets of Dutch cities and towns were taking on a different look than they had before. Seldom were men and boys seen. Many were in hiding from prior raids, and the rest knew it was too dangerous to go out, so women did all the errands, all the hauling and scrounging for extra rations. Mostly, Dutch women filled the lines queuing for what few rations remained. Jewish people were also mostly gone. Many had left The Netherlands immediately after the invasion. A few were hiding in attics, closets or barns. Helen Ramecker knows of one Jew from Simpelveld that survived the war by hiding. The Germans had been systematically jamming the remaining Dutch Jews into the Broad Street ghetto in Amsterdam before deportation to the east, to Auschwitz, Buchenwald, Theresienstadt, and Mauthausen. Today, Dutch people who went through the war remember exactly what happened to the members of Jewish families living in their villages. Did they come back or not? Are they living in America? Most did not come back, and it is a tragedy and a national humiliation all share.

By the latter months of the war, Holland had become a gray and joyless place. The streets were virtually empty. Commerce had stopped. Few schools were open since most of the male teachers and administrators were gone or in hiding. There was nowhere to go and nothing to buy. Only German military vehicles were seen on the roads. Even the look of the occupying soldiers was different. Because of terrible losses on all fronts, older men now patrolled streets. Dutch citizens stayed home and wondered what the next day would bring. People were tired, and weary of constantly being on edge. Most were hungry, and some were falling victim to epidemics related to diet and sanitation. Though optimistic reports could be heard daily on the BBC and Radio Oranje (from the exiled Dutch monarchy outside London,) the German forces seemed to only be further tightening the vise around the Dutch people. The closer the Allies came, the more frantic became the Nazi occupiers. Things that might have been overlooked prior to 1944 were confiscated and shipped east. Reprisals for resistance of any kind, especially acts of sabotage became more brutal and widespread. It seemed to the Dutch that the world might soon end.

The 739th Medium Tank Battalion arrived in France on November 30, 1944. Their mission was to clear mines and abandoned vehicles from roads along the northern European front, which now was near what the Dutch call the “big rivers,” the Lower Rhine, the Waal and the Maas in southern Holland. British General Montgomery’s brilliant but ill-fated Operation Market Garden in September had been a dramatic attempt to put the Germans on the run and open the path to the Ruhr Valley. Montgomery’s 21st Allied Army Group had been making astonishing progress through France and Belgium. Paris was liberated August 22, and Brussels on September 3. Antwerp fell on the next

day. The Allied forces could practically smell the smoke from the industrial heart of Germany.

The reasons for the September 17th Market Garden airborne landings through the heart of Holland were many: to divide the German forces and secure Dutch harbors, to find and destroy the German V1 and V2 rocket bases, to capture key bridges spanning the major rivers before they could be destroyed, and to help ease the suffering of the Dutch people. They were all important reasons, but clearly the bridges were the focal points of the operation. Capturing them was essential for subsequent Allied entry into Germany. The landings went well but the ground forces could not reach the airborne troops for support in time. The Allies also suffered from bad luck, poor timing, and marginal weather. The operation failed with terrific civilian as well as military losses. The German forces were still very powerful and managed to recapture the bridge at the Dutch city of Arnhem, the principle avenue across the Rhine. The Allies were forced to retreat and consolidate. Hopes of ending the war in 1944 had ended, and the front settled into a line through the south of Holland. Limburg, North Brabant, and parts of Zeeland had been freed and remained in Allied control. The Dutch people north of this line had to wait, and for them the winter of 1944-45 would prove to be a terrifying ordeal.

The 125th U.S. Cavalry liberated Simpelveld and Vaals in early September. For Helen Rameckers and her family it was a time of tempered joy. During the previous several weeks, the war had intensified for them. Allied bombers had not only been targeting cities in the Ruhr valley, but also German military sites in Holland and cities as close as Aachen, across the German border only ten miles east. Air raid alarms were going off night and day. The family slept in the cellar and darkened all the windows in

the house. Bombs were falling quite close, so for a while Jacques Rameckers took his family to live in more safety some thirty kilometers away. In Vaals the bombs were also coming down. The Spierts' cellar became refuge not only for the family, but also for some of the neighbors, including one family with seven children. The Spierts' cellar was home for several weeks to as many as twenty people.

When the first American soldiers began trickling into the villages of southern Holland, the people were festive but cautious. After all they had been through, they couldn't hope for too much, not yet at least. Germans continued to resist and some remained nearby, but as more and more Allied soldiers marched in, the people of Simpelveld and Vaals could finally, after nearly five years, let down their guard and celebrate freedom. Four and a half million of their countrymen to the north remained under the Nazi yoke, however, and it was a bittersweet time. In late November an entire battalion of Americans rumbled into Simpelveld raising the spirits of everyone. The village filled up. *Kloosterstraat*, the Rameckers' street, was lined with American trucks and other vehicles. No one minded of course, things were bustling again. There was movement and noise. People were out in the streets, and though they were hungry and the shops were empty, it seemed like an awakening. Life would go on after all, and it was good. The 739th Medium Tank Battalion had come to their village.

As an officer Lieutenant Dickinson could billet with a host family. The enlisted men in the battalion were housed in schools and large buildings, like a local convent. Empty businesses in the village were used as repair shops for light artillery and other equipment. The Rameckers house, at 56 *Kloosterstraat* was near to the battalion mess hall where the men shared the evening meal. The house would be Ben's home for the next few weeks, a

place of refuge, warmth and friendship in a world that for him was growing increasingly dangerous and frantic. The Allied forces were gathering strength for a spring offensive up the Ruhr valley to Berlin and an end to the war. Through the winter of 1944-45, the 739th operated out of Simpelveld on daylight missions exploding mines, clearing disabled vehicles, and plowing snow from roads, often under fire. Evening brought the battalion back to the village for dinner and sleep.

His room was just off the narrow stairway on the third floor. A window overlooked the Rameckers' long, narrow garden. In quiet times, Ben probably imagined himself back in his own room in his own village of Starbuck, Washington. The longing for home may have been overpowering, but living with the Rameckers family made it more than tolerable. Ben became a part of the family. He enjoyed his time in Simpelveld, was very grateful and never forgot. For their part, the Rameckers thought Lieutenant "Dick" (as they called him) was a marvel. He was a lanky, handsome man with piercing blue eyes. His confident swagger belied the innate humility and politeness instilled in him by his mother. Ben's wit and country charm were ingratiating and genuine. Evenings together in the parlor smoking cigarettes and drinking ersatz coffee were full of laughter and fun. Music was even played on an old upright piano. The Rameckers were amazed at Ben's Starbuck stories and they in turn shared details of their culture and lives, before and during occupation. They all became fast friends. The Rameckers had little to offer but their home and their companionship, but to Ben, that was plenty. He shared with them his humor and optimism, and what he could from the army mess hall. It was a relationship of benefit to everyone. The Rameckers saw in Lieutenant "Dick" after all those harrowing years, hope and light—there was still a great deal of humanity left after all.

Fienje wrote to Ben's mother after the war (at the time she did not know whether he had survived or not): "He was a kind and cheerful man, so we all liked him very much. But he was a brave man too. For every day he had to go up to the frontlines, and when he came home at night, he was laughing, kidding, and telling stories." Much to the delight of the Ramecker family, near Christmas time, when they most needed reassurance, Ben brought home from Germany a small evergreen tree and colored balls with which to decorate it. To Helen, it remains to this day one of her most memorable times. Another was the time Lieutenant Dickinson became ill and could not leave the house for a few days. Josephine Rameckers nursed and soothed him. He cried and called her "Mama."

The German Ardennes Offensive, known as the Battle of the Bulge had begun on December 16. The Germans unleashed three entire armies intent on recapturing Brussels, Liege, and the port of Antwerp. If successful, the offensive would have completely cut off the Allied forces in southern Holland and the war might have been extended for years. The people of Simpelveld and other southern Limburg villages were terrified the Germans would return and their streets become battlegrounds. Ben's presence seemed to give the Rameckers confidence this would not happen. Fortunately, on December 23rd the weather turned bitter and one of the coldest, snowiest winters in recorded European history began. In the face of fierce resistance, the German offensive ground to a halt.

As the winter began to break, the men of the 739th were operating further and further from Simpelveld. By early March, they were gone. The Ruhr Offensive had begun. General Eisenhower had decided the Allied war objectives could best be met by focusing on the heart of Germany and bypassing northern Holland. It was an issue much debated at the time and undoubtedly led to the deaths of many Dutch people due to disease and

starvation. On the other hand, battling against the entrenched German army in northern Holland would have caused even more catastrophic destruction and mayhem in the country than it had already seen. Furthermore, the allies were trying to end the war the quickest way, to save perhaps hundreds of thousands of lives, soldiers and civilians. The shocking rumors of the Nazi death camps were becoming more and more impossible to ignore and the Allies were in a race with time for a number of reasons.

Two or three times during the spring Lieutenant Dickinson found a way to return and visit the Rameckers family. He never failed to entertain them with his teasing and light-hearted stories from home, no matter what he had recently seen and been through. In May, the Germans surrendered. Time and circumstances put an end to the visits between the Rameckers and their young Lieutenant "Dick." Ben found himself in Nuremburg. His job became organizing athletic events for the American occupation troops, some of which were guarding the Nazi leadership in prison prior to the trials. The venue, perfect for a young man from the wide-open spaces around Starbuck: Hitler's giant Nuremburg stadium that seated 400,000. It had been the scene of Nazi Party rallies since the late 1930's. Ben managed several major events there, including baseball and football tournaments. He enjoyed the job and did it very well, but no one in Europe longed for home more. He once said that if he could have found a sage brush plant, he would have run out and rolled in it like a dog.

There was also the matter of the War in the Pacific. For soldiers in Europe after May 1945, there was a strong possibility of reassignment there. Plans for an invasion of the Japanese mainland had also been made. Such an operation would have required a force much larger than that of the Normandy invasion in 1944. It also would have taken a

terrible toll in casualties. Ben, in a letter to the Rameckers in July said he was certain he'd be going to the Pacific. It was the last they heard from him. Japan surrendered a month later, but the Rameckers' knew nothing of Ben's fate for almost nine months. A letter arrived from Ben's mother Jennie (who continued to correspond for years) explaining that Ben had come home safe and was back farming. He was discharged from the army March 22, 1946.

Joseph Spierts and Feinje Rameckers were married in July 1949. They would live in and operate the mill at Mamelis-Vaals and have four children together. The first, Jacqueline, born in 1951, was followed by daughters Julie and Jose, and son Alphons. Helen got a teaching position in a neighboring town and taught until retirement. She continues to live in the red brick house at 56 Kloosterstraat in Simpelveld. Feinje and Helen's brother Felix attended university in Delft, 250 kilometers from Simpelveld where he studied civil engineering.

Ben met a young teacher, Susan Harris, from Idaho who was working at the elementary school in Starbuck and boarding in the Dickinson home. They were married in August 1948. They lived mostly in Starbuck where Ben worked for farmers and did some custom farming on his own. Susan returned to teaching after her children were older and taught until her retirement. In the late 1960's, Ben rented 10,000 acres of bluebunch grass and sage along the Snake River a few miles from Starbuck, and turned it into a flourishing wheat and cattle operation. He ran the Bar Z Ranch until his death in 1988. Ben and Susan had four daughters, Zena, Dallas, Lois, and Jennie. Dallas, at an early age, began corresponding with Jacqueline Spierts. The two became friends and continue exchanging letters to this day. Dallas visited Jacqueline and the Spierts family

in the early 1970's during a trip to Europe. Later, in 1999, with her husband and children, she was able to travel to Holland again and stay with Jacqueline's family in Maastricht, visiting the house in Simpelveld and the Spierts mill in Vaals, now a feed store operated by Jacqueline's brother Alphons. Now, Dallas' twenty-one year old daughter Robin maintains a regular correspondence with Jacqueline's son Joost.

It's all an amazing circle of acquaintances, friendships and memories stemming from a chance wartime encounter. A homesick country boy from America and a Dutch family numb, tired and hardened from years of Nazi occupation. How full of gratitude they must have been for each other. How important and symbolic was the nature of the relationship: the young lieutenant representing sacrifice and the return of confidence and freedom, and a Dutch family embodying security and the comforts of home. We can only wonder at the meaning of it all, the power of the impact we have upon one another. Relationships in the past as well as the present are forever weaving threads through our lives. They affect us in ways large and small. We may not even be aware of the effects, but they are with us, linking us together with bonds that we constantly try to weaken and dull with hectic lives. In spite of us, the bonds cannot be broken. They become part of who we are and go with us, our bridges to who we become. For better or worse, we are humanity and extremely resilient. We can love, share, experience pain and cause pain, but we move on. We can take the horror of a worldwide conflagration, store some of that away and rebuild on pleasant memories taken from a red brick house in a village in Holland.

“Behind our house we have a nice garden. One half is flower garden and the rest

kitchen garden. We are having nice spring weather, and our famous Dutch flowers are in full bloom now. Next fall I send you some bulbs, you put them in your garden and in spring you gather. Dutch flowers in your own garden.”

Fein Rameckers April 1946

excerpt from a letter to Ben Dickinson's
mother Jennie

[This piece was written in 2003. Several of the Dutch people in the story have since died. Jacqueline, her husband and children still live near Maastricht. She maintains communication with Dallas.]

Michael McQuary