

DEATH OF A DUTCH TOWN

BY MARTHA GELLHORN

There is a moral to this story. And the picture of a little Dutch girl of four with big, silent eyes will help you to remember it

RADIOED FROM PARIS

THIS is a story about a little Dutch town called Nijmegen and pronounced in any way you choose. The moral of the story is: It would be a fine thing if the Germans did not make war every twenty years or so, and that way there would be no story about little towns called Nijmegen. I have no idea what Nijmegen used to look like; there was probably a sweet old part to the city, judging from the looks of some of the ruins, some remnants of roofs and a carved doorway here and there. Also, I imagine the curve of houses on the bluff by the Waal River were nice houses, but as they are all burned out, it is hard to tell. And through the center of the town where the university stood, it was also very likely pleasant and clean and untroubled, but, due to uninterrupted shelling for a month or more, the place looks now as if it had been abandoned years ago following an earthquake and a flood.

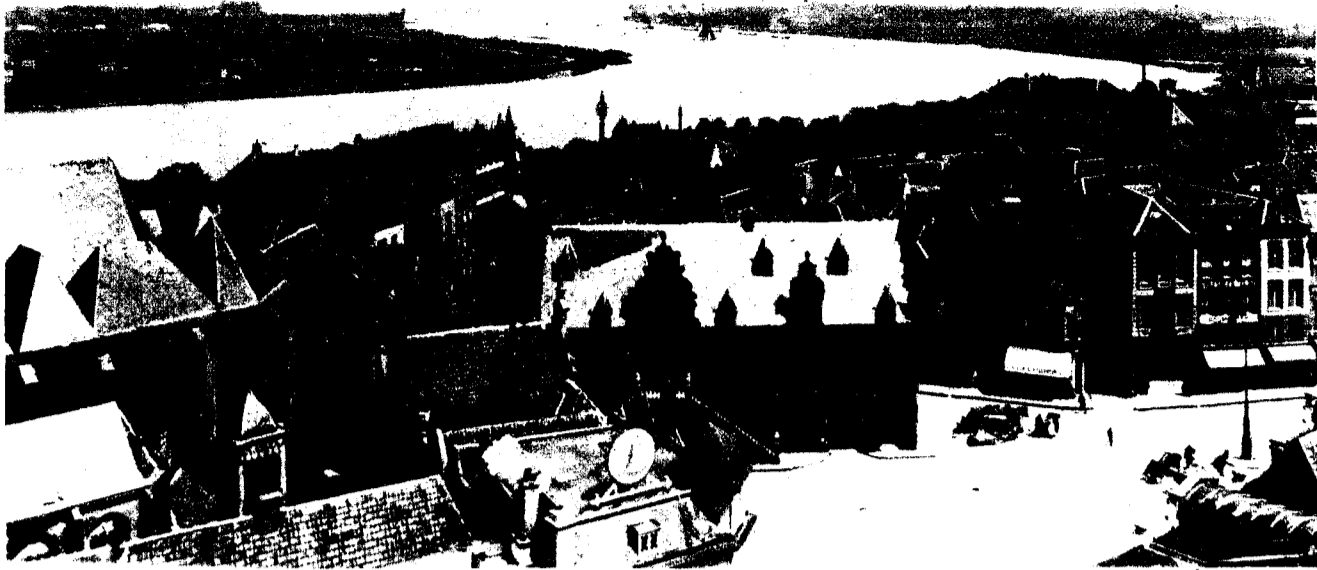
Today Nijmegen is a town where people sleep in cellars and walk with care on the streets, listening hard for incoming shells. The Dutch sweep up broken glass every morning in a despairingly tidy way, but there is no transport to cart glass away, so, under the dripping autumn trees and along the shell-marked street, there are neat mounds of rubble and glass.

The center of the town can be ignored, since it is not livable, having no windows left and too many houses burned hollow, but on the fringes of the town there are ugly unimaginative comfortable red-brick homes which are very modern and cheap to rent or own. There are no signs of great wealth in Nijmegen, and the poorest parts of the city, which are also the oldest and have the most charm, are not so bad as slums in an equivalent-sized English or American town. The people who lived in Nijmegen were obviously people accustomed to safety. They are a God-fearing folk, devoutly Catholic, who led a quiet provincial life and worked hard and neither wasted nor wanted and could count on a measure of security in their old age.

But there is a great road bridge at Nijmegen crossing the Waal River, and this part of Holland bears a strategic relationship to Germany and the construction of the Siegfried Line and the course of the Rhine, and for these reasons—to put it very simply—Nijmegen found itself in the path of the opposing armies. So Nijmegen, in modern times, becomes a besieged citadel, which means that the Germans are a few kilometers away to the east, a few more kilometers away to the west, even more kilometers away to the north, and behind the city the road stretches back to Belgium through a long,

“There is a great bridge crossing the Waal and this part bears a strategic relationship to Germany.” A British soldier guards it. The Germans left Hitler's picture

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Here is an idea what Nijmegen used to look like (above); there was a fine solid part to the city; but now (below) “the center part can be ignored, since it is not livable, and has too many houses burned hollow”

ACME



narrow Allied-held corridor. Any town within range of artillery is an unlucky town.

There is no heat in Nijmegen, and the small and dwindling supply of coal is used for electricity. So at night behind all the blackout curtains, people can at least look at one another while they listen for the shells. The food-ration tickets are the same as those issued by the Germans, only now the tickets are honored and the people can actually buy the basic foodstuffs allowed them.

This is not to say that the stores are open; it is impossible to have a neat system of shops working on fixed hours when half the shops are blown apart by artillery and, at given times, quite unpredictably, not even a cat would want to slink through the shopping district. But some stores are open, and the housewives tell one another of these, and here one can buy a very little food. What the careful Dutch are really living on is the reserves each woman somehow managed to get together during those years.

Instead of a dowry, families gave preserved vegetables and fruits or great stone crocks of eggs or butter to the marrying daughter. The communal kitchens which feed the great bulk of people who have no homes left and, therefore, no reserves are not spoiling or fattening anyone. A regulation day's diet is ersatz coffee or pallid tea and two black-bread sandwiches in the morning, a plate of potatoes at lunch and the same tea or coffee and sandwiches at night.

Life is not exactly dull in Nijmegen, though I do not imagine life was ever really gay there. It is not a town that has a café or a bar or a dance hall, and I never saw a sign of a movie house. But needless to say, none of these pleasure spots would function now anyhow. However, while riding one's bicycle, one can watch a dogfight over the city, between one Messerschmitt and three Spitfires, in case one is the hardy type and is not looking for a likely doorway for shelter.

One can also watch with interest the tanks and the guns rumbling through the town, and the children adore this. It is also easy enough to see gun batteries and machine-gun emplacements and foxholes. And at night there are always the fires—huge roaring fires that eat out the center of a house. At night the streets are very empty and there is no sound except the artillery—our artillery and the German artillery. On one street there will easily be three sets of double houses burning wildly and the small, dark figures of the firemen spraying a weak stream of water onto a blaze that obviously will go on.

As most of the buildings have been opened by high explosives, there are great signs all over Nijmegen saying: “Do Not Loot: Penalty Death.” But I do not feel that these signs are necessary. The British and American soldiers like the Dutch and respect them, and because Nijmegen is what it is—a small, not very rich town—the soldiers recognize it and find it understandable and like home, and they know what (Continued on page 58)



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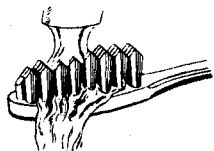
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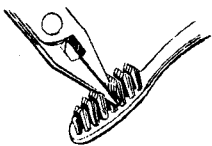
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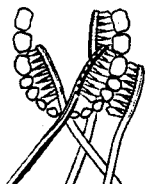


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cow boulevards with his boots. Why? Well, Red Army men wear boots. They don't care for shoes.

Still, none of this explains the Red Army's problems of command and tactics.

Let's go back to those traffic-control officers. They sent the combat troops to camp in a forest to await orders while more and more combat units poured in. Perhaps a week or two passes, and then one day a caravan of staff cars rumbles down the highway and reports to the control officer.

"We," a major general says, "are the staff of the — division. Do you have some troops for us?"

"Yes, sir," is the reply. "Up in that clump of woods you will find your unit."

Properly speaking, the staff will not find a "unit" but, rather, the cadre of a division. The staff will be made up, in part, of officers from various divisions, newly promoted, possibly around the core of command left from a division shattered in heavy fighting.

Naturally, a division formed in this manner is not a first-class fighting outfit because it lacks training and *esprit de corps*. But the Red Army has an answer for that, too.

In addition to these "mass" divisions, it has a hard core of elite troops. These are the Guards divisions, the outfits of battle-tested tankists, veteran artillerymen, demolition experts, sappers, specialist troops of all kinds whose experience was forged at Stalingrad, Leningrad, Kursk-Orel, all the key battles. These are the break-through troops who have cracked the toughest German positions and are thrown at them time and again. They know how to crack Nazi pillboxes and pulverize Nazi hedgehogs. They create the openings and drive through into the clear behind the fortified zone. Behind them follows up the "mass" army which subdues the Germans by sheer numbers.

I interviewed a Nazi colonel who belonged to one of Hitler's crack infantry divisions—an outfit with a record in France and in the early Russian blitz.

"Why did you retreat?" I asked him. "Didn't Hitler give you orders not to yield an inch? Did you disobey that order?"

"Our general," the colonel said, "regarded us as one of his best divisions and he wanted to save us for later battles. In spite of Hitler's order, he told us to retreat!"

"What happened?"

"We could not retreat. The Russians were too strong. They broke our perimeter defenses. Then they poured down on us like a flood. They seeped through everywhere. Before we knew it, there was no place to retreat. They were ahead of us, on both sides and behind us. We were drowned."

If you go to a Russian front four or five days after a break-through, you probably won't find any of these specialists there. Once they have opened up a hole for the "mass," they melt away into the void. They are no longer at the front. Actually, as you come up to the lines, you have met them, trundling their katushas, their M-34 tanks, their Russian "Long Toms" off to another assignment. A week later, a hundred miles away, the Red Army will make another break-through. The attack will be led by the same troops that made the break-through a fortnight ago, but now they will be a hundred miles away, either north or south.

These are the techniques which have enabled the Red Army to weather enormous losses and still keep pushing back a foe which has an army that any technician will tell you is better organized, better equipped than the Red Army.

Most Important Factor of All

There is one more factor which the Red Army has exploited to the fullest. This is the fundamental on which every army has been based since the Stone Age. It is courage.

I met a Russian Partisan once in a hospital in Moscow. He was telling me how his unit operated.

"It's not hard to kill Germans," he said. "You watch them and see when they leave their headquarters and where they go. Then you find a spot where you can wait for them, and when they come out, you aim your rifle and shoot. Sometimes you miss, but with a little practice, it's not too hard. I got eleven."

"When do you expect to go back to your outfit?" I asked.

"Well," the Partisan said, "it will be a month or two. They say it takes that long to get used to these artificial legs. Of course, it may not be so long for me. They say the younger you are, the quicker it heals. I'm only fourteen, and that gives me a big advantage over the others."

THE END

Death of a Dutch Town

Continued from page 21

it means to these people to watch their city and their safety being destroyed. In the most literal sense the people of Nijmegen have no choice but to take freedom or death. They have been freed, and that freedom has not been cheap.

The civilian side of this war is in many ways the most pitiful, though everyone becomes hardened to suffering, and finally to be combat troops is really harder than anything else; to be young and long away from home and always uncomfortable and with no immediate future except dealing with death and trying to avoid it.

The Dutch folk of Nijmegen, to whom this now routine life of war came as a grim surprise, do not complain. They are ignorant of all the techniques that soldiers learn; it takes a while to gauge shellbursts and to know what is dangerous and what is not. The old people and the children have been pretty stationary in cellars for the last month. And that is no fun, whether it is the small cellar of your own beaten-up house or the communal cellars under the hospitals or the town hall. For no one likes to live in fear, and, if anything, it is more bewildering than cowardice which seems so to numb the people now.

But the members of the underground organizations, the police, the Red Cross, the doctors, the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts and the civilian volunteers have no time for cellars and no mind for safety. Among other activities, the police and the underground have been busy rounding up the collaborators and tracking down German agents in the town. They put the collaborators in a big school-

house, which is pock-marked with shell holes, and they feed them as they feed themselves, and they await the return of the Dutch government so that proper trials may be held. The schoolhouse jail has the awful, familiar smell of dirty bodies, and the rooms full of arrested people look like the sad rooms I once saw in Prague where the refugees from the Sudeten had gathered to lie and wait for nothing.

The Dutch are not brutal to these people, and the prisoners are lightly guarded. One is always surprised to see what kind of people are arrested; one is most surprised by their apparent poverty. There are rooms with dreary-looking young women, ill, lying in bed with very small babies. These are the women who lived with German soldiers and are now the mothers of Germans. There are rooms of old people, who either trafficked with Germans, or worked for the Dutch Nazi government, or denounced, or in some way harmed the true Dutch and the country. There is a nun in one room, looking very frozen and unforgiving. And alongside her are two stupid, homely girls who worked in the Germans' kitchens, and were soldiers' delights as a side line.

But at this stage of the war and the liberation, it is to be noted that the little people—or should one say the little crooks?—have been caught; the real evil ones, the big enemies, are either safely away with the Germans or well hidden. Arresting collaborators is as much a part of cleaning up a town as is the maintenance of the sewerage system and the street sweeping.

Something should be said here about the

Dutch Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, who have impressed us all. They learn English in school and, unlike most school-learned languages, they can really talk the tongue. They have been invaluable as guides and aides. The girls work in the communal kitchens and keep the government buildings clean. The boys do a variety of errands and spend their spare time trying to find ways to volunteer in any Allied army. They are a marvelous bunch of kids and a credit to a great international organization.

Due to the fact that some of Holland is still German-occupied, it is impossible to write now about the Dutch underground. But it is possible to say that the Dutch people, individually and in their underground organizations, tried to help the Jews who, in Holland as elsewhere, were doomed. The penalty, as usual, for sheltering Jews, was death, and, nevertheless, the Jews who lived through all this are reappearing in the light of day.

One day we gave a lift to a thin, dark, worried-looking woman who worked in the Dutch Red Cross. She did not seem a particularly inspiring woman and she seemed unusually nervous—which, in perilous places, is always very unpleasant because the proper manners under such circumstances is a real or assumed calm. She was going to the civilian hospital to see her little girl. Her child, aged twelve, was badly wounded by shell fragments; her husband had been shot; her possessions had long since been confiscated by the Germans and now her house had been destroyed by shellfire; she worked twelve hours a day in the Red Cross and during lunchtime—unless she got a chance lift—she walked four miles to the hospital to visit her child. She was a Jewess. She had been back in the daylight for a month.

There were twelve hundred Jews kept in a concentration camp near Nijmegen. The Germans took them in freight cars to Poland. There was an SS guard, and one of these SS men, returning to Nijmegen, spoke to a Dutchman about it, and he said that he could not sleep for nights afterward and he thought he would have nightmares all his life. The Dutchman hoped he would.

Anyhow, these twelve hundred Jews, old and young, men, women and children, were taken to a rather nice-looking building and told they could all have showers. As they had lived in misery and filth for months, they were very happy. They were told to undress and leave their clothes outside; notably they were to leave their shoes. From vents which looked like air vents, the Germans pumped what they call "blue gas" into the clean white-tiled bathrooms. It appears that this gas works faster on slightly humid naked bodies. In some few minutes, twelve hundred people were dead, but not before the SS man had heard them scream and had watched them die in what agony we cannot know. Then the shoes were all carefully sorted and sent back to Germany, and before the mass cremations, all gold fillings and gold teeth were removed from the corpses.

For the Jews, the Germans meant death. For the rest of the Dutch—apart from the

underground, which risked the usual hazard of imprisonment, torture and death—the Germans meant slow hunger and the destruction of their families. The Germans deported half a million Dutchmen between the ages of nineteen and thirty-five to work as forced labor in Germany, and for a year now none of these men have been seen or heard from.

There was one splendid comic touch: The Germans are fiends for paper—you had to have a pass for every move, a paper for rations, identity cards, paper and paper to burst a wallet—and they like to check their papers frequently. The Dutch forged these papers themselves, in quantity, and everyone who was doing underground work or simply escaping deportation had wads of false documents. Finally the Germans began to drown in their own paper; they could trust nothing. They admitted defeat, refused to recognize any documents, even their own, and solved the problem by simply arresting everyone for any reason whatsoever.

The Germans were also very shrewd in Holland in the taking of hostages and used this filthy weapon as a way to destroy the intellectual life and the leadership of the country. But that, too, they have done before; there has been little variety in the German technique of terror. A story with a moral should be short. Even the moral should be short. What best points the moral of this story is short.

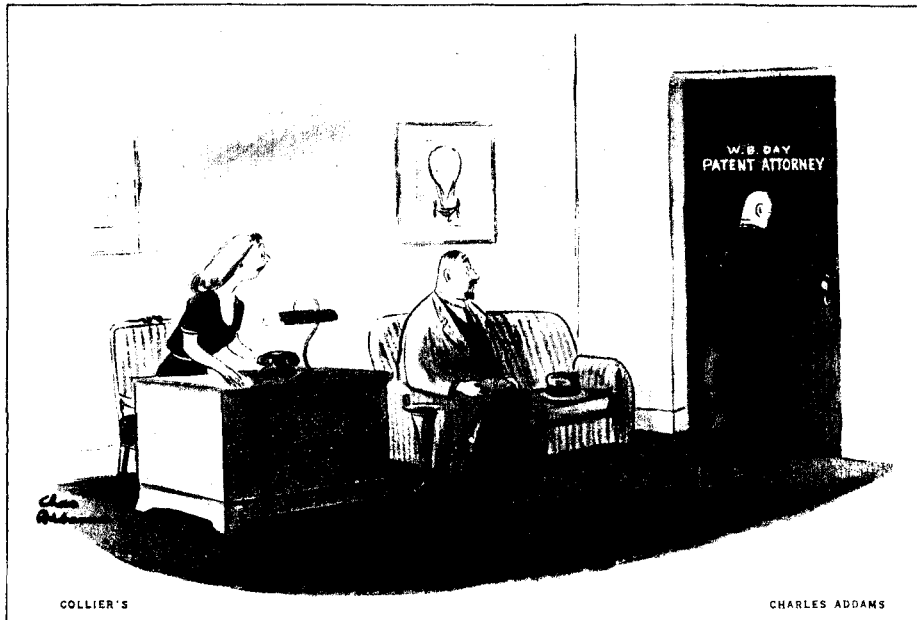
A Cargo of Tiny Bodies

In the basement of the civilian hospital—for Nijmegen has many hospitals but now they are full of wounded soldiers—there are corridors where the heating and water pipes run. These corridors are now wards because they are safe from shellfire. In one long corridor there are the wounded children, small white iron beds carrying a cargo of tiny bodies. The children are often too young to speak but in all cases they are amazingly silent. There is not much for the children to eat, no special little things to please them and make their pain easier.

There was one thin little girl of four, whom I remember beyond all the other small, tormented bodies. Both her arms were broken by shell fragments, and a shell fragment had been cut out of her side and another from her head. All you could see was a tiny soft face, with enormous dark eyes, utterly silent eyes looking at you, and the arms, like flower stalks, were strapped to boards, and the bandage around her head was almost as big as she was; and there she lay and would never be able to understand what had happened or what sort of world it was that could so hurt a little girl of four who had been playing in the garden of her home, as surely little girls ought to be able to play in all the gardens on earth.

The moral of this story is: It would be a fine thing if the Germans were never allowed to make war again. And then, you see, you would never have heard of Nijmegen and there would be no little girl with dark eyes, lying on a bed in silent pain.

THE END



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