Dutch Courage and "Pegasus"

A Memoir

by

Major Digby Tatham Warter, D.S.O.

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Photographs by Digby Tatham Warter
P.O. Box 250, Nanyuki, Kenya

PREFACE

I have given this story the title "Dutch Courage and Pegasus" for reasons that should become clear as the reader progresses. This is a personal account of the four weeks that I spent with the Dutch Resistance after the Battle of Arnhem, culminating in a mass evacuation called "Operation Pegasus". There are already historical records of those times and it is not intended that this should be another. I make no pretence at remembering the names of all the people who helped in so many different ways. To recall them would require considerable research and would not necessarily enhance the interest of this story. I will, therefore, only mention the names of a few with whom I was most closely involved. Likewise I will describe only the events with which I was personally concerned.

Except for the Resistance fighters themselves, I, probably more than anyone else involved, was in a position to observe the day to day bravery of the ordinary Dutchmen and their families. It is one thing to show courage in the face of danger when you are trained to meet it, or when it is forced upon you, but it is quite another thing to go out and look for it when there is really no reason why you should and when, by so doing, you are jeopardising the safety of your family and others. In any case, at this stage of the war, the Dutch knew very well that the end was in sight and their ordeal nearly over, and it would have been understandable had they opted for a lower profile. To the fact that they chose not to take this path, many Allied evaders owed their freedom and, in some cases, their lives.

Memories are not infallible and the events about which I write happened many years ago. So I hope I may be forgiven if some of the

details have escaped me. In mitigation I can only say that it took much pressure from my family and a few close friends to induce me to put pen to paper, and I might add, my daughter, Joanna, volunteering her services for most of the hard work. Once the decision was taken it is extraordinary how memories came flooding back.

Dutch Courage and "Pegasus"

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IN AND OUT

The story, in so far as it concerned me, began on the evening of 21st September 1944. During the previous night and early hours of that day our defences North of Arnhem Bridge had been finally over-run by SS armour and infantry and those survivors who could tried to make their way to join up with the remnants of 1st Airborne Division, who were themselves desperately fighting to hold out against heavy odds at Oosterbeck, some miles to the West. However, few succeeded and the Germans soon discovered most of us in a thorough search of the area. I myself had a very short run for my money. Duncan McLean, the adjutant of 2 Para, and I had taken refuge in a culvert and, though not an ideal hiding place with the whole area crawling with German troops hunting down the erstwhile defenders of the Bridge, we had hoped it might serve until nightfall. But this was not to be and before long we were unceremoniously winkled out at the end of an SS bayonet and taken to a POW collecting point.

In the late afternoon the wounded were separated from the other prisoners and taken to a small hospital in the Northern suburbs of Arnhem. I thought that if I could include myself among the wounded, there would be a rather better, if remote, chance of escaping. I was lucky to achieve this as, although knocked out for some hours during the battle and battered in appearance, I had in fact suffered nothing which could be called a wound.

Amongst the wounded was Tony Franks, a veteran of North Africa and Sicily, who had been second-in-command to me in "A" Company at the start of the battle. He had been wounded by a piece of shrapnel still lodged in one ankle causing him considerable pain and making movement difficult but not impossible. In the transport on the way to the hospital Tony and I discussed possibilities and decided, for a start, to try to stay together when we arrived. We planned to make our stay as short as possible. The first of many bits of luck occurred here when we were put in a small ward on the ground floor. The only other bed was occupied by a man with a very severe head wound. Tony and I were told to take off our clothes and get into bed. It may be of some interest that I still had my pistol which the Germans, in their haste, had not noticed. This I concealed in my clothes under the bed.

In the hospital there were so many more severe cases that, during our short stay there, neither Tony nor I were examined by anyone. Our unfortunate fellow patient was often visited by doctors, nurses and orderlies as he frequently shouted and became violent. After some time we were given a watery soup which did us little good as we had used up our 24 hour special airborne ration on the first day of the battle and were now extremely hungry.

Apart from this we were left in peace. Lying quietly in bed Tony and I made our plan: as soon as it grew dark enough we would put on our clothes, climb out of the window and crawl away through the laurels which grew alongside the house. No plan could have been simpler but there were two major predictable hazards. Although they had been civil enough so far, we could not be sure that the German and pro-German Dutch staff would react kindly to catching us half-way out of the window. The second was that we could not know where any guards might be situated. A good look through the

window just before dark had not revealed any, but we could not assume that they would not be posted after dark. So inevitably a good deal of luck was going to be needed.

As for the details: I first had to move a small table under the rather high-set window so that Tony, handicapped as he was, could use it to climb out. He was to go out first and wait for me in the laurels. If all went well I would first return the table to its proper place and then follow Tony. If I had not joined him within ten minutes it would mean that something had gone wrong and he was to go on alone. As it happened something did go very wrong. When Tony was half way out of the window, he kicked over the table with a horrible crash. This seemed to disturb our room-mate and caused him to have one of his fits, screaming and throwing himself about. I could only lie in my bed watching while a doctor and orderlies rushed in to control the poor man. I imagine that they thought he had knocked over the table himself as they soon departed without apparently noticing Tony's absence, leaving me to follow through the window. We made our departure from the hospital grounds with great caution and without further incident and began our long slow walk towards the West and the sound of gunfire.

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TRAVELS AND BRAVE PEOPLE

We didn't manage to get very far that night, possibly three or four miles. The pace had to suit Tony's bad leg and we kept having to skirt round German positions and bivouacs. Sometimes we were forewarned of their presence by snoring, talking, movement or

rattling of accoutrements - quite a lot of their transport was horsed. But the clearest warning of all came from their smell. I am not suggesting that they were any dirtier than any of us in similar conditions. It was almost certainly the spiced food, such as sausages, that they ate and the ersatz tobacco they smoked. Whatever the cause, it was a very distinctive and unattractive smell and this helped us enormously.

Some time towards dawn we seemed to be getting out of the suburbs into more open country and we were beginning to feel that we could not go on much longer. It had been virtually impossible to sleep for the last five days and the stress of the battle must have taken its toll of our strength. We were just about done up when we came upon a small seemingly isolated house. Discreet knocking on the door eventually produced a little middle-aged lady, who turned out to be the owner of the farm and a widow. She spoke no English and was obviously very frightened and bewildered and one could hardly blame her. In addition to the awful consequences for anyone caught hiding a British soldier, we must have looked a hideous mess. Also the Germany army was all around. I fully expected her to shut the door in our faces, but, after talking rapidly for some time in (to us) unintelligible Dutch, she abruptly changed her mind and showed us to a ladder leading to a small loft above a cow stall. A short time after we had settled ourselves in the straw our hostess brought us the most welcome meal of milk, eggs, bread and cheese. When she came back to collect the empty mugs and plates she indicated by gestures that there were Germans nearby and that we should hide under the straw. This we gladly did and slept like the dead for several hours.

A good deal later in the morning we were woken to find the head of a small Dutchman peering over the top of the ladder. This turned out to be a Mr. Van den Ven, a house painter by trade, who

had been called by our hostess to help. He had a little English and promised to return later to take us away. We would be disguised as his two sons, also painters and in the meantime he provided us with a razor to make ourselves look more respectable. He also stressed the need for extra caution as some German artillery had that morning moved into the field next to our refuge. Mr. Van den Ven duly returned bringing two pairs of paint spattered overalls and some tins of paint. He told us to follow him closely. First we had to make a small detour round the Germans and then walk a mile or two to Mr. Van den Ven's house on the edge of a small hamlet. He took us to a disused delivery van at the bottom of his orchard and told us this would be our home until arrangements had been made for us to move on.

This delivery van seemed a good place to be. It was well hidden from any road and was quite large enough for our purposes. Mr. Van den Ven gave us food and bedding and said he would bring a doctor to see us later. He then left us to sleep for the rest of the day. The doctor arrived in the evening and cleaned us up a bit. Tony's leg needed attention badly and was not looking too good. The doctor said he would return the following day, which he duly did.

Our second day in the van was quiet and we had time to take stock of our situation. We had been incredibly lucky so far. The escape from the hospital, in spite of one close shave, had gone according to our plan. We had avoided colliding with the enemy on a number of occasions during our night walk and, when just about at the end of our endurance, had found a very brave lone Dutch woman willing to take us in and hide us. Then had come Mr. Van den Ven to whom we owed our new refuge, sustenance and medical care. But we had no right to expect this sort of luck to hold for ever. Nevertheless we could possibly be forgiven for thinking that the

worst could be over and that the future held a fair chance of final escape. For the time being we could only wait to see what our Dutch friends were going to do about us. In fact we were destined to spend another week or so in the van.

I used some of the time to write a fairly detailed report on the action at Arnhem Bridge. With Tony's help I think it was pretty accurate and I also wrote citations for bravery insofar as these concerned men under my command. I addressed this to General Roy Urquhart, our Divisional Commander, and passed it to the Dutch Resistance. I did all this because I thought, as it turned out rightly, that it might be some months before an accurate report could reach the General or higher command. He did, in fact, receive my report soon after he had crossed the Rhine with the remnants of his Division a few days later.

Otherwise the days must have passed slowly as we had little to do except wait for one of the Van den Ven family to bring us our meals and the daily visits of the Dutch doctor. Mr. Van den Ven had a few tobacco plants growing in his garden and used to give us dried leaves which we amused ourselves by rolling into some semblance of cigarettes. We never moved further than the immediate vicinity of the van and probably slept a lot of the time as we were both undoubtedly tired from the stress and strains of the battle and our escape. But by the end of our stay in the van I was ready for anything and raring to go.

On 3rd October two members of the Resistance movement from the small town of Ede visited us in the van. After looking us over and asking a few questions they said they would come for me the next morning but that Tony would have to be left until later because of his wound. The same two men duly arrived next day bringing me some different clothes and leading a bicycle for me to

ride. The Dutch often led bicycles.

I said goodbye to our host with a feeling of deep gratitude for all he had done for us. It was only later that I discovered that he was not, at that time, fully trusted by the Resistance from Ede as he had yet to become one of their members, and after spending some weeks with the Resistance it is easy to see how careful they had to be. Sadly the country abounded in pro-German spies.

With one Dutchman riding two or three hundred yards ahead and the second riding with me I set off. Over the next two or three weeks I grew very accustomed to this way of moving. After what seemed like a good many miles to someone not used to riding bicycles we came to a beautiful house set in its own grounds in wooded country. First I was introduced to its owner Miss Lambert, an elegant and attractive young lady, and then to my surprise and delight found our Brigade Commander, Gerald Lathbury, relaxing in a comfortable chair in her sitting room. Over some light refreshment, which included excellent sherry, I learnt that Gerald had been wounded early in the battle some way from the Bridge and had later escaped from another hospital. Since then he had been hiding in woods until found by the Resistance and brought to this safe house. From the time of his escape Gerald, like all evaders who wished to survive, had to do more or less what he was told by the Resistance. But, although confined mainly indoors because of his wound, he was always consulted before any major decisions were taken.

Here I should explain that the name "evader" was given to members of the allied armed forces who, for whatever reason, were avoiding capture by the enemy. If evaders should be caught when wearing uniform they would, anyhow in theory, be subject to the rules of the Geneva Convention and entitled to be treated as POW's. If, on the other hand, they were caught in civilian disguise, they

could not claim the protection of the Geneva Convention and were liable to be treated as spies and shot.

At this time I learnt that my guides were no less than "Bill" Wildeboer, the chief of the Dutch Resistance movement in and for many miles round the small town of Ede which was our immediate destination. The other appeared to be his chief staff officer and No. 2. This was Mennor alias "Toni" De Nooy, a member of a large family in Ede in one of whose houses I was later to discover Brigadier John Hackett. Here Bill told me of his plans for us. Gerald and Tony were to be discreetly placed in different houses in Ede where they could rest and have medical care and start to convalesce. I was to have the honour of staying with Bill in his house on the outskirts of the town. It seemed that he needed some one to visit and coordinate the activities of the considerable number of airborne evaders in the district, and to act as liaison between the Resistance and the Allies across the Rhine. He seemed to consider me suitable for this job.

Sadly, we soon had to continue our journey for a few more miles. Always we could hear the sound of gunfire, now to the South of us. Bill had told us that the remnants of our Division had finally withdrawn across the river. We often rode past units of German soldiery on the move, but they paid no attention to us. After all the Dutch were always riding bicycles and the soldiers presumably had more important things to worry about. On one occasion, however, Toni, our forward scout, had to do a U turn and hurry back to warn us when he spotted a check point ahead. A short detour took us round this and we soon reached the outskirts of Ede and so to the Wildeboer house.

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ABOUT THE RESISTANCE

Before I embark on the next phase of my story it is appropriate to say a few words about the Resistance movement. I soon discovered that they concerned themselves with anything that would assist the Allies and cause discomfiture to the "Moffen" as they called the Germans - comparable to our word "Hun". This included helping and hiding escapers and evaders, sabotage, and the passing of information on German troop movements to the Allies. I have no intention of going into detail of their command structure and organisation which, anyhow, was always a bit of a mystery to me. Suffice it to say that in the Ede district there seemed to be a small cadre of totally reliable officers and a much larger number of members. These latter, although undoubtedly trustworthy, were given the minimum of information about plans and operations and then only about those which directly concerned them. Obviously the less they knew the less they could divulge under interrogation by the Gestapo.

From what I saw discipline and security seemed, and in fact had to be, superlative. I was told that there had been cases of jealousy and treachery in the past, but saw no evidence of this during my stay with the Resistance around Ede. There was also, of course, the very real danger of infiltration by pro-German spies and the Resistance leaders had to be constantly alert against this.

"Bill" Wildeboer, the leader of the Resistance in the Ede district was a solid, shrewd and able man. He was tough physically and mentally, and well liked and respected. Before the German occupa-

tion he had been a senior Warrant Officer in the former Dutch army. To say that he, his family and all members of the Resistance, especially the officers, were brave would be too great an understatement. The penalties for assisting the Allies in any way were ferocious and, if a man was caught hiding or helping an evader, his whole family was liable to be shot and their house burned down. I was told of times when this had happened and I have no reason to doubt the veracity of those accounts. I later heard of two cases where this actually happened, during my stay in Holland, in a nearby town. The strain on the women, especially those with young children, must have been appalling.

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THE WILDEBOERS

Bill's wife, Mevrouw Hil Wildeboer Voskuil, whom I shall call Mrs. W. for the sake of simplicity, was an exceptional woman. A year or two before I met her, Bill had reason to believe that he had been betrayed to the Gestapo and, to escape their attentions, had gone underground for the best part of a year. This meant that Mrs. W. had to leave her home with her two children, Hilly and Dicky, and go into hiding with trusted friends in the countryside. Hilly, a bright and pretty little girl when I first knew her, was, at the time of their escape, possibly five years old. Dicky was a baby. To complicate matters Bill possessed a forbidden radio which was used to receive communications from British Intelligence and it was most desirable that this should go along too. The curfew was strict and, to move this at night

was thought too dangerous. So they hit on the idea of hiding the radio under Dicky in her pram. And so Mrs. W., the children and the radio moved freely through the German check-points around Ede with Hilly pushing her baby sister in the pram. The consequences of discovery are too awful to contemplate.

Not long before my arrival in their house the Wildeboers had hidden a British pilot for several weeks before sending him on his way home. They called him "Peter" and when I came along they decided to call me "Peter" too. Theirs was a fairly small detached house with its own little garden in a row of houses on the edge of the town of Ede. It had an outside laundry room and a shed, or garage, used for storing firewood, tools and bicycles.

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NEW IDENTITY AND MORE EVADERS

It was now necessary that I should be given a suitable identity so, as soon as I had been introduced to the family, Toni led me off with the usual scout ahead of us to a small clothing emporium where I was fitted out with all the necessities. My suit was a nondescript dark grey colour and seemed to be made of string, wool being scarce in Holland. Thus equipped I was next taken to a specialist in forging identity cards. Here I was photographed and told we could collect the card the next day. I still have the card which describes me somewhat improbably as being deaf and dumb. By this time the day was nearly over so we cycled back to the Wildeboer house to enjoy the first of many most welcome suppers.

Soon after the meal Bill showed me to my sleeping accommodation which had an interesting entrance. First Bill removed a few faggots of firewood and then a board or two in the back wall of the shed. This revealed four or five steps leading down to a small dug-out the dimensions of which were perhaps seven feet long by five feet wide by six feet high. It had been well constructed with the sides and roof lined with some kind of rough timber and Bill himself had used it for several months at times of high risk. The little room was furnished with a narrow bed, small table and chair and there were one or two hooks on a wall for clothes. Some kind of light must have been provided and some ventilation, but I do not recall what. There must also have been a bucket for emergency as no way of getting out existed until Bill came in the morning to remove the faggots and boards which he used to replace after bidding me goodnight. The room may have been a bit damp but was comfortable enough and I had no difficulty in sleeping after my always energetic days.

Providing the coast was clear Bill would call me early and, after replacing the camouflage, I would go to wash and shave in the pantry basin while Mrs. W. was preparing breakfast. Bill and I would be away by 8 o'clock to attend the regular morning conferences. Later, unless there was something special on, I would remount my bicycle for a round of visits to evaders in hideouts and safe houses in the town and outlying farms. After a day or two, when the early discomfort had worn off, I began to enjoy these often long, and sometimes exciting rides around the countryside. As Resistance leader many affairs claimed Bill's time and I would usually be guided by Toni, or another member of the De Nooy clan, and often by "Flip" Van den Pol, a prominent and daring member of the Ede Resistance.

One of my first calls was at an old barn set among poplar trees

far out in the totally flat countryside and accessible only by foot and bicycle paths running along the dykes. It was a desolate and secluded spot to which we were secretively led by the boer (Dutch farmer) owner. (After the war he presented me with a woodcut of the barn drawn by himself which still hangs in my house). Inside I found a young officer in the RAMC, called Olliff, in charge of twenty or thirty assorted medics. I remember thinking at the time what a nice fellow he was, although both he and his men seemed uncertain and bewildered by the fate that had befallen them. This was hardly surprising as it turned out that they had been wandering, with many adventures, around the countryside for several days, living on raw turnips, after being landed in quite the wrong place, until the Resistance found them. I like to think that they were genuinely pleased to see me and relieved to know that they had not been entirely forsaken. These men were well looked after and fed through Resistance sources but bored and short of exercise as they were never allowed to move out of the barn until after dark, and then only for a breath of fresh air. Olliff was obviously doing all he could to maintain morale. I left them promising to return in a day or two with any news there might be and thereafter visited them as often as my other activities allowed. (Years later I met Donald Olliff when he came to dinner where my wife and I were staying with old friends in Warwickshire. He was then a much respected country practitioner).

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PLANS FOR SABOTAGE

I think it was the same day that I was taken to meet an SAS officer who, with his team of two or three, had been dropped into Holland behind the German lines some time previously. A Belgian named Kirschen; he had been given the code name "KING" by which I knew him, and operated an Intelligence gathering post and radio link to London. His air of efficiency and quiet confidence much impressed me. He had established his post in one of three chicken houses in a clearing in wooded farmland some miles West of Ede, an out of the way spot and one not likely to attract the attention of the Germans.

"KING" said that he would be able to arrange for a supply drop of uniforms, food, arms and explosives if I gave him details of our requirements. The first drop was, in fact, successfully carried out a few days later some distance North of Ede. The arms and uniforms were then hidden in a farm nearby until they would be required and the food distributed by the Resistance to help in the feeding of evaders.

I should explain here that at this time all of us expected the Allied offensive to be maintained and we were hoping that they would cross the Rhine to join us within days. With this in mind our idea was that, with the numbers we were collecting, we would be able to do useful bits of sabotage behind the German lines once we were supplied with arms and explosives. The Dutch, of course, were more than enthusiastic about this idea as it would give them more chances of a crack at the hated "Moffen". They were already doing

some effective sabotage themselves. In particular they had succeeded in virtually closing the railway line through Ede by blowing it up when necessary. This, together with strafing of roads by the RAF, undoubtedly hindered the German reinforcement of their defences North of the Rhine.

The next few days were spent cycling round the district meeting more evaders and getting as many as possible organised to operate as small fighting groups under the command of officers or warrant officers when the time should come for sabotage.

Amongst the many I visted were Captain Tom Wainwright and Sergeant Major Robert Grainger, both of whom impressed me as being exceptionally keen and able and were to prove their worth later. Both were Parachutists. After I had been in Ede for three days Gerald Lathbury and Tony Franks were moved there by the Resistance and I was immediately taken to see Gerald. Thereafter we used to meet most mornings at the De Menno house in a street in the town where Gerald was being hidden. These morning conferences were always attended by Bill and Toni De Menno and also by Major Tony Hibbert, Gerald's Brigade Major, who was to play a prominent part in events to come. Tony had been taken prisoner after the battle at the Bridge and had managed to escape in a most exciting way. He used to turn up dressed in a very odd fashion wearing a flashy check jacket, vivid green plus-fours with white stockings. I remember that Gerald and I were horrified by this disguise but it did not seem to worry Tony or attract any attention from the Germans. After hearing the news from the Resistance leaders and discussing plans with them we would disperse for the day and I would continue my round of visits.

In addition to these morning conferences I would attend another with Bill and his lieutenants most evenings. The latest

Intelligence would be discussed and Bill would give his orders. Toni spoke English well enough to interpret for me. I also used to visit "KING" twice a week and arranged through him for further supply drops.

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DOMESTIC LIFE

The domestic routine in the Wildeboer house varied little from day to day. Family breakfast in the kitchen was attended by Bill and Mrs. W. and the two little girls. Although very different from the sort of breakfast I was accustomed to, it was always an ample and enjoyable meal consisting mainly of cheese, smoked meats and delicious dark brown bread. Conversation was not easy as Bill had little English and Mrs. W. virtually none. However as I began to pick up a few words of Dutch and Bill a few more of English we managed to understand each other pretty well. Thus sustained, Bill and I would set off on our various affairs and would not normally return to the house until just before dark. The evening meal started with a rich meaty soup, one of the best I ever remember eating, followed by the same assortment as at breakfast.

There were occasional alarms when I was in the house. The whispered "Moffen" would send me scurrying for cover, but the house was never searched while I was there. Usually they were checking for billets.

The Resistance somehow managed to feed their Airborne charges pretty well in spite of the strict and meagre rations allowed to the Dutch people. Many boers were members of the Resistance

and used to bring in food to be distributed by Bill's lieutenants and, of course, during my stay the supply drops arranged through "KING" helped as well. I was often given coffee, of a kind, and biscuits at the houses I visited during the daytime and I can never remember going hungry. Twice a week Mrs. W. filled a copper tub in the wash house for my bath with water heated in kettles on the kitchen stove. Altogether I was very well taken care of during the nearly three weeks I spent in that house.

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A CHANGE OF PLAN

Towards the middle of October our situation changed dramatically for the worse when we received instructions from London through "KING" that the Allies had no intention of renewing the offensive that winter. They suggested that we should lie low and hide in the Dutch countryside through the winter months. At our meeting with Gerald next morning it did not require much discussion to decide that such a course of action was quite out of the question.

There were now about eighty Airborne evaders in and around Ede, and thirty or forty more nearer Arnhem who had been contacted by Tony Hibbert, who had charge of that area. Added to this the Resistance knew of many more much further afield. To have asked them to hide these numbers for several months would have imposed an intolerable strain on them and their families.

To make matters even worse the Germans had recently been building up their strength North of the Rhine and there were now

thought to be some two to three thousand troops in our immediate vicinity with a formation headquarters in Ede itself. It required only the smallest slip for the whole set-up to be blown, with appalling consequences for our Dutch hosts. We had to get ourselves out, and the quicker the better.

The question was how and where could we hope to cross the river with such large numbers. The established escape routes many miles down stream to the West were very fragile, and could at best handle only one or two men at a time. Our only hope seemed to lie directly South of Ede, but this might mean that we should have to fight our way through the German river defenses. At least there was some wooded country fairly near the river to give us some cover.

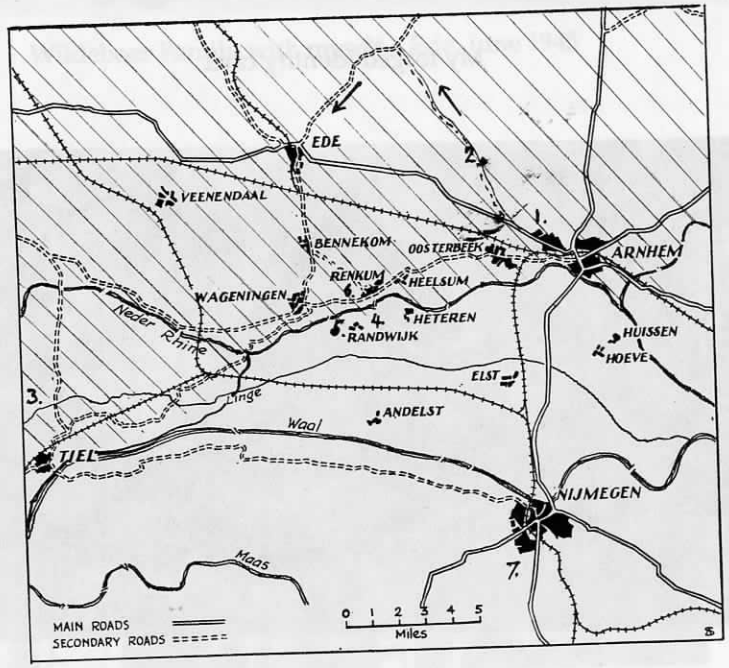
Our first priority was to get a British officer across the river to explain our circumstances and plans. It was at this time that Colonel David Dobie, the commander of 1st Parachute Battalion, turned up after a very exciting escape which is a story of its own. He was brought to Ede by the Resistance and at once I took him to see Gerald Lathbury. It did not take Gerald long to decide that David was the perfect agent to send across the Rhine. His resourcefulness and determination would give him a better chance than most of getting through and his rank, experience and ability meant that he would carry weight in expressing our situation to 2nd Army and making a good plan. And so, after long and detailed briefing by the Dutch and ourselves, David set off with Resistance guides on 14th October.

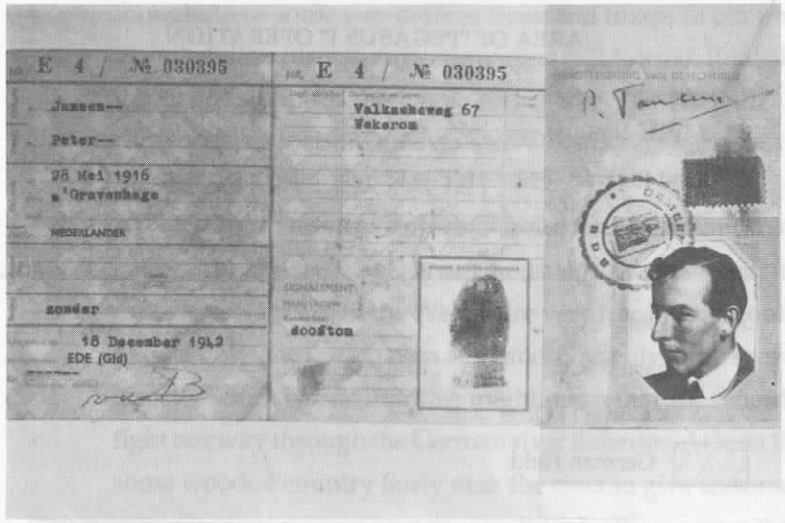
This marked the beginning of the final phase of my adventures. It was now obvious that we would need a very great deal more than ordinary good luck if we were to get across the river without heavy casualties to ourselves and disaster to our Dutch friends, and I am not ashamed to say that I began praying very hard in my dug-out every night.

AREA OF "PEGASUS I" OPERATION

1. My first refuge.
2. Oud Reemst – Hibbert/Piet Kruyff collecting point.
3. Area of established individual escape routes. Dobie's crossing.
4. Sector of Allied front line held by American 101 Airborne Division.
5. "Digby".
6. "Pegasus" R.V.
7. XXX Corps H.Q.

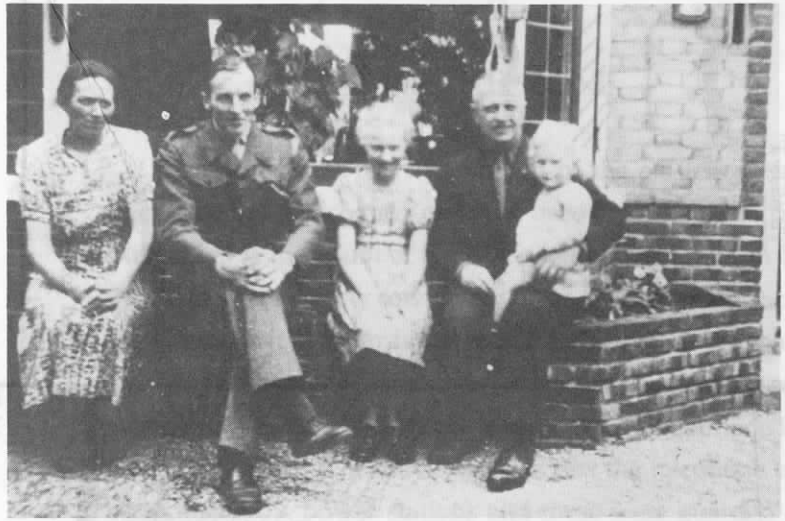
German Held





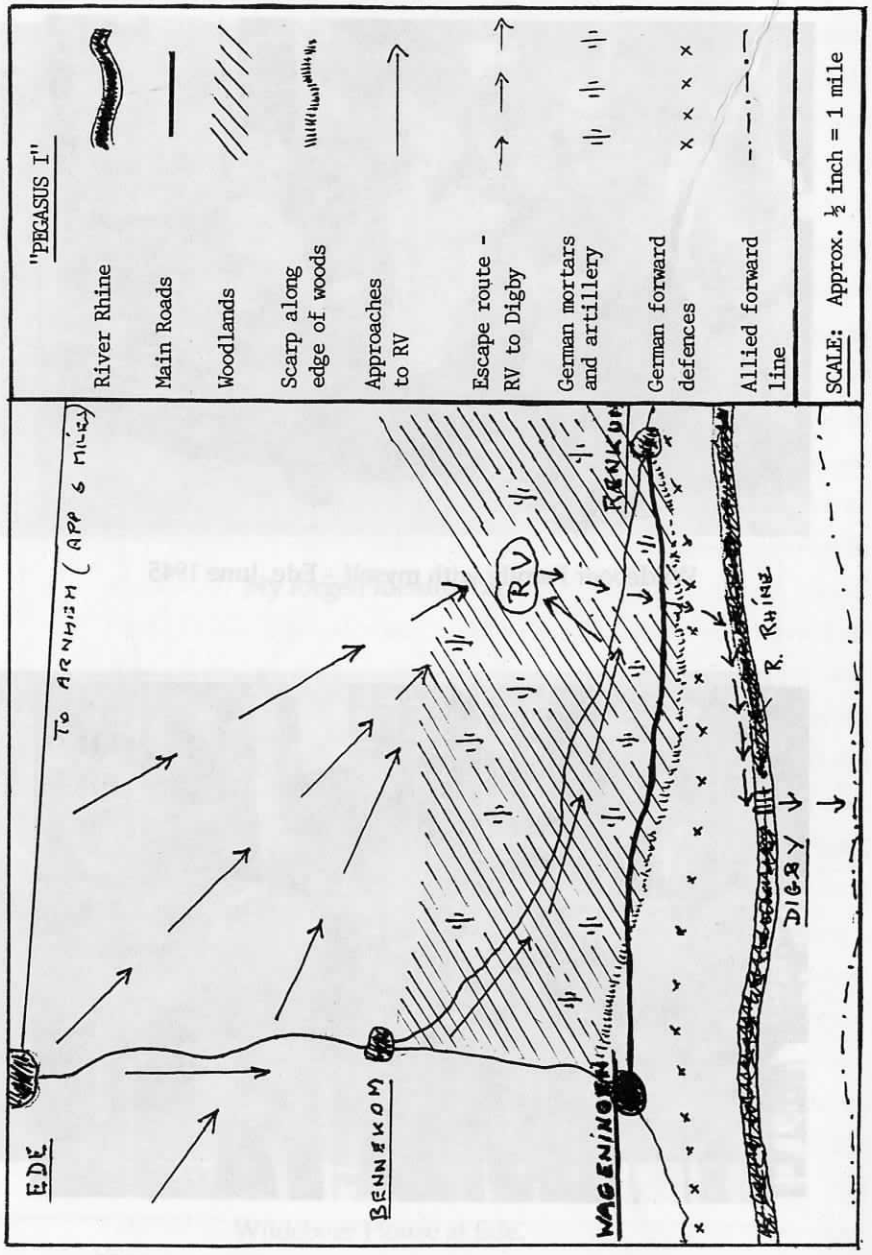
My forged identity card

Wildeboer House at Ede.
(Dug-out behind small building on right.)



Wildeboer Family with myself – Ede, June 1945

Wildeboer Family with myself – Amsterdam, June 1955



THE TELEPHONE

For some time we had known of the existence of a secret telephone link which the Resistance used to talk to their contacts in Nijmegen, to the South of the Rhine, and other towns in Holland. This was a remarkably convenient means of communication which the Germans had so far failed to learn about. It seems that a great many power lines in Holland ran underground, and the engineers who installed them had wisely incorporated a telephone line with the power cables. The only snag was that the telephone terminals were inside the power stations and these were guarded day and night by supposedly pro-German para-military Dutch. In fact some of these were not pro-German at all but reliable members of the Resistance, and Alex Hartmann in charge of the station at Ede, was one of Bill's most trusted men and could let him know when it was safe to use the telephone. Up to now I had not made use of this service as, for various reasons, we had thought it more secure to use "KING'S" radio link to London, and this had so far served our purpose well. But from now on we would be discussing and reviewing the detailed plans for evacuation, and it would suit us far better to have direct communication with XXX Corps Headquarters at Nijmegan.

The Dutch thought that they could, with luck, get David across the river in two days. So, before he left, we arranged to talk on the telephone two nights hence. As this occasion was to be the first of many nocturnal trips to the power station, I will describe it in some detail. I had by now become very used to cycling around in daylight with my two watchdogs, continually passing German soldiery

apparently uninterested in me. There was really no reason why they should be suspicious, and I had complete confidence in my advance scout giving ample warning of any check points. These had to be avoided at all cost, but otherwise there seemed little danger of detection. The prospect of moving at night, after the curfew, seemed to me a different kettle of fish, and I can remember feeling some apprehension.

After supper on the appointed night Bill said that the right guards would be on duty at the power station, and it was time to go. We left the house through a hole in the fence at the back and followed a footpath through woodland to a railway line. There seemed to be little risk here and we moved fast along it for some way. After a mile or so Bill stopped to listen and then gave a low whistle. When this was answered from somewhere ahead, we knew that the coast was clear and it was safe to go on. Shortly afterwards a large building loomed up in the blackout. Alex Hartmann met us and led us in through a side door into a little room which contained the telephone, the odd table and chair and not much else. The guards remained outside to warn of approaching danger.

On the telephone Bill spoke to someone in Dutch for a minute or two and then handed the instrument to me. There to my relief and delight was David's voice as clear as if he had been sitting in the room beside me. He did not waste words in describing his many adventures crossing the Rhine, but did say that everyone over there seemed enthusiastic about getting us back. He had not had time to discuss a plan with XXX Corps and suggested we talk again the following night. After consulting Bill I agreed a time.

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PLANS FOR DEPARTURE

I continued to visit evaders, many of them for the second or third time, and was now able to give them the welcome news that plans were being made for their evacuation. Although all of them were well looked after, inevitably morale was low and I like to think that my visits cheered them up.

One such visit that stands out in my memory occurred when I was taken to one of the De Nooy houses in the middle of the town to see Brigadier John Hackett. He had commanded 4th Parachute Brigade, had been very badly wounded in the battle and was lucky to be alive. He, like several others, had been spirited away from the St. Elizabeth Hospital at Arnhem. Now in the capable hands of three old De Nooy ladies, he was receiving regular visits from a Dutch doctor and, although in bed, seemed in good heart. He did not seem too concerned by the presence of a German headquarters in a house just down the street. The Brigadier has written the story of his sojourn in Holland and eventual escape, and I will only say here that, because of the severity of his wounds, the Resistance tried to arrange for a light aircraft to land at night to take him to England. For various reasons this proved impossible and the plan had to be abandoned.

Piet Kruyff headed the Resistance in the Arnhem district, and worked closely with Bill Wildeboer of Ede. A very bold and enterprising leader, he was responsible for some brilliantly planned and executed missions during my stay in Holland. Like other Resistance leaders he derived inordinate pleasure from outwitting the "Moffen", and he was certainly good at it. Somehow he had access to some ancient wood-fueled vehicles that had so far escaped the German net

and he used these when the occasion demanded for transporting evaders. The Brigadiers Lathbury and Hackett, and Tony Franks were amongst those he conveyed to Ede.

When I spoke to David on the telephone the following evening, he told me of the plan being made for our escape. This, although sounding simple enough, was obviously not going to be easy to execute. We were to make our own way to the river at a point given the code name "Digby". Here boats would be sent across to collect us. The exact position of "Digby" would be indicated to us by a Bofors gun firing bursts of tracer shells low over the river some time after midnight, and we were to signal our arrival by flashing a red torch. The whole operation received the code name "Pegasus". The exact time and date would be fixed later, probably during the last week of October. David then told me that my main telephone contact in future would be Major Hugh Fraser of the SAS, the staff officer assigned to the operation by General Horrocks, the Corps Commander.

South of the Rhine the team responsible for planning "Pegasus" consisted mainly of David Dobie, Hugh Fraser and Airey Neave. The latter had himself escaped from Colditz and was now working in the British Intelligence service. North of the river the planning was done at our daily morning conferences in Gerald's house. My nightly talk on the telephone formed the link between the two.

Our first objective was to concentrate as many evaders as possible close to the river and for this we decided to make use of the extensive woodland near Bennekom to the South of Ede. A day or two before the date appointed for "Pegasus" the Resistance would start concentrating evaders from outlying areas and bring them closer to Ede. On the day itself we would all somehow have to rendezvous in these woods. It was obviously going to be an ex-

tremely difficult and dangerous operation for the Resistance, with the countryside now milling with German soldiery.

Except for those coming from far afield, who were to be moved at night by Piet in his lorries, evaders would have to move from their hiding places to the RV in daylight and in civilian disguise. But, for the final move down to the river through the German defensive line, where we expected to have to fight, we would need to be in uniform. As a result of supply drops arranged through "KING" there was now an ample supply of arms and uniforms hidden near Ede, but these too would have to be transported to the RV by the Resistance.

While Bill and Piet made their arrangements, I tried to see all the evaders near Ede to give them some idea of what was being planned for them. Tony Hibbert was doing the same in his area around Arnhem. Moving around the country I was impressed by the increased troop activity as the Germans were obviously building up their river defences. During those few days I covered a good many miles, usually guided by Toni or Flip but sometimes others. There was an attractive girl who often came with me, usually acting as a forward scout. She was with me one day when an amusing incident occurred. A German staff car overtook us at high speed and then skidded off the muddy road into the ditch. As the officers seemed to be in an excitable state, we thought it wise to help push their car out. They were gracious enough to thank us for our help and went on their way, leaving my Dutch friends and me to have a good laugh.

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UNWELCOME GUESTS

However, life was daily becoming more difficult as, apart from regular German troops, the number of Gestapo, Green Police and Dutch SS operating in the vicinity had increased considerably. It was even rumoured that they knew of the presence of a number of Allied evaders, so greater care than ever was needed.

The Wildeboer household had to suffer the inconvenience at this stage of the billeting of four men from a Panzer unit. However, they seemed decent fellows and confined themselves to their room upstairs, leaving the downstairs for us. After Mrs. W. had given them supper they always departed for some canteen and did not return until late at night. Occasionally we would meet coming in and out of the house when they would usually stand aside to let me pass, sometimes giving me a friendly pat on the back. Altogether, their manners were excellent and, although a constant worry, gave us no trouble. Hilly, who knew all that was going on, just ignored them and Mrs. W. treated them politely, but with ill concealed scorn, while Bill very wisely went out of his way to appear friendly.

The evening conferences with the Resistance leaders were usually held at Toni De Nooy's place. Bill would receive reports and give his orders for the night and the following day. Toni was a member of the large De Nooy family clan and ran one of the family businesses, a paint factory. As people were always coming and going on paint affairs, a few extra visitors would be unlikely to attract the attention of the Germans working at a depot next door, and this made it an ideal place for the Resistance to meet. The factory was allowed a ration of industrial alcohol for the manufacture of

paint and, with the addition of some kind of fruit flavouring, Toni made a very passable liqueur. Although probably lethal if taken too freely, it provided a very welcome and refreshing drink at the end of a long day, and Toni usually gave us a nip after the evening meeting. Bill and I sometimes had a nightcap on our return from the telephone. Otherwise alcohol did not seem to be available to the Dutch at Ede.

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GOOD NEWS

On Friday evening, 20th October, we received the stunning news that the Dutch had been ordered to evacuate the entire village of Bennekom by Sunday 22nd. There had been for some time a prohibited zone extending two kilometres North of the Rhine, but this was altogether a different matter. Bennekom, then quite a large village, lay some three kilometres from the river and its evacuation meant that all the roads and tracks leading to it would be congested with Dutch families coming and going with their household belongings. It was sad for the villagers but wonderful news for the Resistance and ourselves as, for the next two days, it would be almost impossible for the Germans to know who was who.

Furthermore Bennekom was near the woods we had selected for our RV. Although it gave us very little time, we had to make use of this opportunity.

Luckily we had already made a number of preliminary arrangements. Members of the Resistance had been allocated to lead all evaders to the RV when the time should come, but of course had not been told where this would be. I had done a daylight reconnais-

sance with Wainwright, Granger, Toni De Nooy and the local farmer, and had decided on the best approach route to the river. We had been led to the edge of the thick woods overlooking the flat river land from whence we could see the German defenses set back some 300 yards from the river behind what was called the winter dyke. At this point we could see a gap of some 300 yards between the posts, and this seemed our best chance. Furthermore, we had found a clearing in the woods South of Renkum, about two miles from the river, and far enough from any of the numerous gun positions to make it reasonably safe as the RV.

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FINAL ARRANGEMENTS

My first priority that Friday evening was to see Gerald, who immediately gave the green light for the crossing on Sunday night. Bill and Piet then put their mobilisation plans into immediate effect at Ede and Arnhem respectively. On the telephone that night I explained to Fraser the new urgency of our situation and he agreed to Sunday night for "Pegasus" and told me that arrangements on his side would be made accordingly. On Saturday morning Wainwright, Grainger and I did a further reconnaissance to confirm that the RV and the proposed route through the woods was still clear. They would do a patrol that night to find the best line from the edge of the woods to the river.

Sadly, the short time left to us meant that a number of evaders who were in hiding too far afield could not, as had been originally intended, now be included in "Pegasus". However there were eighty

to ninety in the vicinity of Ede and another forty or fifty near Arnhem, and this was really quite enough to handle. The Resistance plan was to concentrate the evaders scattered around the Arnhem district in some woods at Oud Reemst, several miles to the East of Ede and some 20 miles by road from the RV. Here Hibbert was to take charge of them and they would be equipped with arms and uniforms brought there by the Dutch. From there Piet undertook to bring them by night on the final stage to the RV in his lorries. Meanwhile the Ede contingent would move by foot, bicycle and horse drawn carts on Sunday morning, with the whole party hopefully assembling at the RV soon after dark that night.

Such was the plan; but the chances of us all reaching the RV undetected did not look good to Gerald, Tony Hibbert and me. The Dutch, however, appeared quite confident and, anyhow, what alternatives did we have other than to give ourselves up or expose our Dutch hosts to hideous danger through the long winter months?

That night I had my final telephone talk with Fraser and confirmed the plans for the next day.

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"PEGASUS" - THE CONCENTRATION

Sunday dawned bright and sunny, though bad weather would have suited us better. From early morning, evaders led by their Resistance guides, men and women, boys and girls, started to make their way in ones, twos and threes along byways and footpaths to the edge of the woods at Renkum. Here new guides met them and took them to the RV in the clearing. All travelled in some kind of civilian

disguise. Even Olliff's non-combatant Field Ambulance men, who had remained in uniform from the beginning, had to look like Dutchmen, while their uniforms were brought to the RV by the Resistance in a covered horse drawn cart.

Having said goodbye to Mrs. W. and the children I left their house in mid-morning and, with Bill and Toni De Nooy, called round to collect Gerald and Tony Franks from their houses in the town. Both had now more or less recovered from their wounds, but, like most of the evaders, were very unfit from enforced inactivity. I remember being somewhat doubtful about Gerald's similarity to a Dutchman. He was abnormally tall and, looking a bit seedy in a dark clerical suit, did not quite fit into the landscape. He didn't look too happy on a bicycle either.

The peaceful Dutch countryside became the scene of abnormal activity today. There were many people on the move, some on foot and others on bicycles and some with horse drawn carts. Among them we recognised several evaders with their Resistance guides and we also passed German troops on the march, or resting by the wayside. More than once we came upon emergency first-aid posts that had been established by the Dutch Red Cross, ostensibly to provide help and refreshment to tired refugees from Bennekom. But it so happened that all the nurses, some of them quite young girls, were members of the Resistance and had been positioned and briefed to give warning of unusual enemy activity and point evaders in a safe direction. Bill and Toni had a quick word with them as we passed by.

At the RV in the woods we found that many of the evaders had already arrived and had changed into the uniforms smuggled in by the Resistance. Many of them, tired after the unaccustomed exercise, were soon asleep. It must be remembered that most had been

confined to their hiding places for nearly a month now. However, now in uniform, we had to become a fighting force, albeit not a very good one, and we soon got everyone armed and organised in platoons and sections under officers and NCOs, with fire positions and sentries posted. A hot meal prepared by the Dutch helped to put heart into us all.

Bill had other arrangements to make and had to leave us now. It was a sad moment for me, as I had grown to like him enormously during the few weeks we had been working together. Toni and one or two others, including the farmer whose local knowledge had been of such value, remained with us. Wainwright and Grainger had reported favourably after their very bold patrol the night before, and now there remained nothing more we could do but lie low until after dark, and await the arrival of Tony Hibbert's party from Arnhem.

It was to be of such importance to us a few hours later that I must digress here to explain another of XXX Corps plans for our evacuation. This was the softening up of the German defences through which we would have to pass. To achieve this they had been sending strong fighting patrols of about a hundred men over the river for several nights previously. The patrols were provided by 101 American Airborne Divsion, under command of British XXX Corps, who were holding that sector of the front. These comprised soldiers of the highest fighting quality. The idea was partly to scare the wits out of any German patrol they might bump into and also, to draw fire from their defensive positions. This in turn would provoke the return fire of a fair slice of XXX Corps artillery, and they hoped in this way to teach the German defenders the advisability of keeping a low profile.

To return to the RV: shortly after dark Toni led me to a road running through the woods where it had been arranged to meet Piet

Kruyff with his lorries bringing the Arnhem contingent. We did not have to wait long for the welcome sound of the ancient vehicles clattering towards us. I don't remember the details, but I do know that there had been one or two narrow escapes on the twenty mile journey. Piet had brought them through by the sheer audacity of his plan, and the clever positioning of Resistance members at crucial points along the route to give forewarning of danger. Tony Hibbert's party, now about forty strong, had been equipped with arms and uniforms before leaving Oud Reemst and had travelled crouched in the back of the lorries, ready to fight their way through should it have become necessary. There was a nasty moment when these men were clambering noisily out of the lorries, and a German bicycle patrol came down the road. We had to take cover quickly, but some men were a bit slow and the patrol had to slow down and ring their bicycle bells to clear a path. It seems that they noticed nothing to make them suspicious, and we heard no more of them.

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"PEGASUS" - THE EXECUTION

When we were all assembled at the RV I gave the final orders for the move to the river. The first two miles or so would be through the woods and, with so many virtually untrained men, there would be a real risk of losing some on the way. So, I ordered double file with frequent stops to allow the men at the back to close up. After that would come the really difficult part of leaving the cover of the woods and crossing completely flat, open farm land for several hundred yards to the river bank passing between the German defences on the

winter dyke.

At the final count we were about 150 strong. In addition to some 120 airborne, we had been joined by several Allied airmen who had been shot down at some stage, and brought to us by the Resistance. There were also a few young Dutchmen who wanted to join the Allied forces and, for some reason that I never understood, two Russians. It was a strangely assorted lot and not one I would have chosen for what lay ahead. However, Gerald had delegated command of the party to me, and at 9.30 pm when the moon rose, I gave the order to move off with Wainwright and the Dutch guides leading.

Although the importance of moving silently was obvious, and I had stressed this at the briefing, we were soon making far too much noise, and the further we went the worse it got. The morale of these men was low anyhow after several weeks of confinement to one place, and most of them had never set eyes on the officers and NCOs appointed to command them. And, of course, many were totally untrained and unsuited to this kind of adventure. Be that as it may, I was utterly horrified as it seemed that the Germans could not fail to hear us coming a mile away. As the men grew more tired they stumbled into each other and over roots in the woods and fell into holes and ditches. To make matters worse, all this was accompanied by low mutterings and oaths which no amount of admonishment from their officers seemed able to control.

In spite of everything we reached the edge of the woods overlooking the river flats at about 11.00 pm without incident. As there was no call for our Dutch guides to come any further, and to do so would have been an unnecessary risk, we shook hands with whispered thanks and farewells. For the final stage to the river we adopted the formation that I had previously ordered for the open

country. We would now move in a compact main body with Gerald, Tony Hibbert and myself at the head and Tony Franks bringing up the rear. Ahead and on either flank were strongly armed sections with picked officers and men. I thought that this formation should give us some all-round protection if we bumped into trouble.

Wainwright, who had reconnoitred the route the previous night, led the advance guard for some way along a series of drainage ditches, which at least provided a little cover should we come under fire. But for the last 200 yards or so we had to crawl across a completely open meadow in full view of the enemy. By some miracle just before midnight we reached the river without a shot being fired, and turned West downstream on the last leg to "Digby".

The going was better now and we were making much less noise. I think that everyone appreciated the danger of our situation, out in the open and only about 300 yards from the German defences. And luckily there was now some cloud cover, and the night had become appreciably darker. We could just make out the far side of the river, here some 300 yards wide.

We had not gone far along the river bank when what we had all been dreading happened. The silence was shattered by several bursts of a light machine gun from close in front. Our advance guard returned the fire while we all went down ready to defend ourselves, expecting at any moment to be lit up by star shells and plastered by mortar and machine gun fire. But apart from a few Very lights over the forward posts nothing happened, and with a sigh of relief we went on our way.

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"PEGASUS" - TROUBLE WITH "DIGBY"

When the Brigadier, Hibbert and I thought that we must have reached the right place we decided to call a halt and wait for the boats to come over. But after twenty or thirty minutes had elapsed and there was still no sign of them, we began to think that something had gone very wrong. Either we were in the wrong place, or the boats were, for some reason, unable to come. There had been no answering torch signal from the other side and there remained at least another half hour before the next Bofors tracer signals were due. Meanwhile, if they were to light us up, we would be sitting ducks on a totally exposed river-bank in full view of the enemy. The outlook was not good and the choices open to us limited. If we were to stay where we were we would be finished off at dawn or earlier. If we were to turn back there was nowhere to go to, so our only line of escape lay in the river itself, here cold, wide, deep and fast flowing. Without boats very few of us would have made the far side.

It can be imagined what a very worrying time this was for us all, especially for me, as I had agreed the plan with Dobie and Fraser on the telephone and so felt that the responsibility for our situation was largely mine. Were all our efforts and the bravery of the Dutch to be wasted at the last minute? And then out of the night came what must have been the most welcome words I ever heard, "Are you people by any chance looking for some boats"? Had I been a modern footballer I feel sure that I would have hugged and kissed the owner of this voice, such was my joy. As it was, I am reputed to have said something like "Well, actually we are rather". We then wasted no time in following this Canadian, as he turned out to be, a short way

down the river to where we found David Dobie waiting with the boats.

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"PEGASUS" - THE FINALE

On either side of the crossing point the Americans had set up machine gun posts to protect our flanks. This had been a wise precaution as the British sappers paddling the boats had to make three crossings to carry us all over, and this, with the fast current to contend with, took some time. At the final count we had lost only one man, one of the two Russians who had disappeared somewhere along the way as mysteriously as he had arrived. It was, without doubt, a remarkable achievement for which the Dutch Resistance were mainly responsible. We had, of course, been blessed with incredible luck and it must also be recorded that we almost certainly owed our survival in the final stage to the preparations made by XXX Corps. Their foresight and planning had left nothing to chance. General Horrocks had personally visited the scene the previous day to satisfy himself that all was ready, and there is no question that the softening up by the American fighting patrols had saved us when the Germans, although probably having no reason to suspect a mass escape, must certainly have been aware of the passing of a large and noisy body of men through their defences.

As I stepped out of the boat on the southern shore I was greeted by the two majors, Hugh Fraser and Airey Neave, who had been anxiously waiting and watching most of the night. I also renewed my acquaintance with our Canadian saviour, Leo Heaps. As he has

recorded his own exploits elsewhere suffice it to say here that he was a very bold and enterprising officer who had, early in the battle of Arnhem, first attached himself to David Dobie's battalion, and then somehow purloined a jeep and made his way through alone to the bridge. And now, after a long and exciting escape experience, he had involved himself with the "Pegasus" operation. It was he who, standing on the river bank with Dobie, Fraser and Neave, and happening to glance upstream at the right moment, had spotted the dim flashing of my torch and had immediately come across with Dobie to look for us. Not seeing any sign of us, he had walked alone upstream until he found us and introduced himself in the manner I have described. We had owed a lot to Leo Heaps.

Now, with all the worry behind us, we followed a white tape that had been laid to guide us across the river land to a farmhouse where the American Parachute Battalion had its headquarters. Here we were given very welcome tea and buns before climbing into and onto an assortment of jeeps and trucks, which were to take us further back. It was then that the only tragedy of the night occurred. Not finding space inside, Tony Hibbert had climbed onto the front of a jeep which, in the black-out, rammed a jeep coming from the opposite direction, crushing both Tony's legs between the two. It was a sad ending to all that Tony had done, both during the battle at the bridge and the escape. He was destined to spend many months in hospital and, when I saw him last, in 1984, he was still walking with a pronounced limp.

The rest of us ended up in the very early hours of the morning in a casualty station that had been prepared for our reception, and where David had had the foresight to provide refreshments more appropriate than tea. I can still remember how good that champagne tasted.

The next day we were debriefed and I was interviewed by Generals Dempsey and Horrocks. Then, after more celebrations that night, we were flown back to England, to the very airfield in Lincolnshire from which we had set out so full of hope five weeks earlier.

EPILOGUE

The success of the "Pegasus" operation tempted British Intelligence to mount a second operation to bring out some more evaders about a month later. This was given the name "Pegasus II", and the plan was very similar, perhaps too similar, to ours. Sadly, it proved a total disaster resulting in the loss of a number of lives, both of evaders and Resistance. Luckily for them, most of my friends in the Resistance had been on the run from the Gestapo ever since our escape, and so played no part in "Pegasus II".

A happier sequel was the eventual escape of Brigadier, now General Sir John, Hackett in early February. He had remained hidden and convalescing in Ede until the Resistance were able to smuggle him across the Rhine by a long and hazardous route many miles to the West. They successfully used the same route to bring out a number of other evaders.

When the Allies resumed the offensive and crossed the Rhine in the spring of 1945, I at once asked for and received permission to visit my friends at Ede. After flying to Paris I was lent a jeep and told to help myself from army supplies. Filling it with everything that I thought would be most welcome, I drove through France and Belgium into Holland where I spent two happy days staying with the Wildeboers and renewing old acquaintances.

The next opportunity to visit Ede came in 1955 when my wife, Jane, and I stayed with the Wildeboers in Lunterensweg and were shown around some beautiful parts of Holland by Hilly. This was the last time I was to see Bill as he died not long afterwards. But we kept in touch with the family over the years, and Hilly and Dickie stayed with my mother in England. I last saw them in September 1984 when Jane and I with our youngest daughter went over to Holland for the

40th anniversary commemoration of the Battle of Arnhem.

During this visit we stayed with both Hilly and Dickie in their new homes and called on Mrs. W. in her retirement home. We also attended a huge reunion party for ex-evaders and former members of the Resistance and their families in the town hall at Bennekom. This had been organised largely through the initiative of Tony Hibbert, who persuaded me to give a short account of 'Pegasus'. There were many familiar faces there and amongst them I was especially pleased to see the farmer's widow, then an old lady, who had taken in Tony Franks and me after our escape from the hospital. Altogether a great occasion bringing back many happy memories.

Nanyuki, Kenya
December 1990