

Chapter Four

Rakers to Roger Coming

I had more freedom at the Rakers' house, as there were not so many neighbours close by. I slept upstairs and spent the rest of the day downstairs or out in the yard, except when someone came who shouldn't know who I was.



Fig.4a Rakers' house

At first I just sat around and read, but soon started doing little things around the place and began to feel at home. I made progress in learning to speak a little Dutch and they learned a lot of Eng-

"THE LONG RETURN"

lish. Dicky Rakers knew a lot of the basics and only needed the practice in speaking English good. However, papa was not around very often, so he really only learned a little.

It was very interesting staying there! I met many men of the Underground, listened to what they were doing, and how they were doing it. It was very exciting and, at times, very scary, especially if you stopped to think what could happen. How soon it could all be over! These men were unbelievable. They were careful and cautious but took very big chances with their lives.

Frits used to come around every once in awhile. One day he came in for morning coffee and said: "I have to go in hiding for a while." The week before, the Underground had scheduled a meeting in town at one o'clock. Something held him up and he was 15 minutes late. As he rode up on his bicycle, something did not seem right, so he rode past very slowly before going in. The Gestapo had found out about the meeting and they were there. They captured eight men that day, but I didn't find out what happened to them. (It would not have been very nice). Frits was very lucky and got away, but now he had to be careful not to be seen for a while. However, since he was a very important man, he had to continue his activity in the Underground. About a month later, he was caught in a house where a Jew was hidden and was put in a concentration camp for six weeks. Fortunately, the Germans couldn't find any incriminating evidence about him, so they let him go, but

Rakers to Roger Coming

he was a completely different man when he got out. He seemed quite a bit older, very pale and thin. A man can change a lot in six weeks of hell.

We really learned how they could torture a person to the breaking point to try and make one talk. This is why very few people knew each other's real name. There were very few introductions and people kept to their nicknames. To get information, the Gestapo would stick a suspect's head in a tub of water and whack him on the buttocks. They would hit your testicles until they bled. You would be put on a starvation diet, just enough to be kept alive, deprived of sleep and beaten terribly. They would put you in solitary, in a very small room with no light so that you would not know if it was day or night. If you could go to sleep you would never know if you had slept for five minutes or five hours. Or they would do the opposite: keep you under bright lights and not let you sleep, smash your fingers or break your knees. You cannot think of a torture they would not put you through.

Things were riskier at the Rakers' house as I had no hiding place. It was planned that if necessary I would go out by the window and onto the roof. One day we were visited by a man and woman who were known as the "Hiding Place Makers," because of their main job in the Underground. They proceeded to make a hiding place for me in the corner of my bedroom. They cut a hole in the wall which was in

"THE LONG RETURN"

the overhang of the eaves and this led to a little passage around the house. The door was a bookcase which pivoted by the corner and the back of the book case was filled with bricks so there would not be a hollow sound if the Germans tapped the wall. It was kept full of books and we could lock it from the inside. It was a great hiding place. I almost had to use it a couple of times but the real test never came. The Germans were very smart and had a lot of practice looking for people, so one had to try and be just a little smarter and have a lot of luck. The door was left open all the time so it would not make any marks on the floor when it was closed. If anything happened, I could just throw my clothes in the hole and get in. My water bottle, a bottle to pee in and a few odds and ends were in the hole. "The Divers, Jewish people and Allied evaders all had to be to have a hiding place." They also had to be supplied with ration books every month, which was a big job. To accomplish this, the Underground would make the odd raid on the ration offices which were very heavily guarded by the police. Rakers was in charge and made a spare key for the safe. On one occasion, Frits, Rakers and a couple of other fellows planned a raid with the chief of police whose name was Klaasen. The guard that night was a good Dutchman but one of the raiders didn't know this and hit him on the head. He was sure mad at them. Afterwards, he used to come around to the house once in a while and they used to tease him for not getting out of the way.

Rakers to Roger Coming



House of Commons
Canada

Ottawa, July 18th, 1944.

Dear Mr. Porter:-

It is with deep regret I learned of your son on Active Service being listed as 'Missing' from flying operations Overseas.

Whilst I realize that mere words are of little solace at times like these still I felt it only fitting that I should write and tender you my sincere sympathy and also in the hope that word may eventually be received by you as to your boy being still alive.

In the offering of their lives and the sacrifice of the same the Nation owes these gallant boys a debt of gratitude which can never be truly paid.

Mr. C. A. Porter, Yours sincerely,

3406 Imperial St.,
New Westminster, B. C.

Tom Reid M.P.

Fig.4b July 18th. Tom Reid, Member of Parliament

"THE LONG RETURN"

148 WOLVERLEIGH BLVD.

TORONTO

August 17 Th., 1944

Dear Mrs. Porter:

Thank you so much for your letter, I received it yesterday. It was a relief to know you had heard no further word either, I have heard from Mrs. Taylor, of Grafton, Ontario and Mrs. Wilson of Guelph, and I was terribly sorry to hear of their news.

My husband Bill, who was the Navigator on the plane, sent me a number of pictures of Bob's wedding in Wales, no doubt they are the same ones as your Bob sent to you. They seemed to have enjoyed themselves together and they certainly are a fine group of boys. Bill often mentioned Bob in his letters and they seemed very close friends, so I think that wherever they are, they are together. But I feel sure that we shall hear good news very shortly and let me assure you that I shall write just as soon as any word at all reaches me. I received a very lovely letter from the Padre of the Squadron and he mentioned if he heard anything he would write and let me know. It certainly is a very trying time for us all but I still feel sure that everything will be all right in the end.

Your son, who is training at Brockville would be most welcome anytime he would care to call on me I should enjoy a chat with him - please tell him, won't you?

Bill has a brother in the Navy stationed at Halifax just now but he expects to be coming home on leave for two weeks sometime in September - it will be nice to see him for he hasn't been home in over a year. I have a brother but luckily he is too young for the services, unfortunately if the war keeps up much longer, he too, will have to go. Thank you again for writing Mrs. Porter, it was so nice to hear from you. I too, must ask forgiveness for the typewritten letter but I am sure that you will find it much easier to read than my handwriting would be.

Sincerely,

Dorothy Gardiner

Fig.4c (copy of letter) my mother received from my navigator's Wife

The chief of police, Klaasen, organised another raid one night when there were lots of ration cards

Rakers to Roger Coming

on hand. It was one of the biggest raids ever made, yielding thousands of sheets of coupons. Somehow the Germans found out it was Klaasen who was involved and went to his house to arrest him. When he arrived at home, he saw the German cars in front of his house, so he lay in a nearby ditch. Klaasen had a gun ready, but how can one man fight a dozen well-armed soldiers? When he didn't come home, the Germans took his wife, nine month old twins and three year old son. Klaasen couldn't give himself up as he would have only been shot and maybe others too. His wife and children were put in a concentration camp where the children were separated from their mother. She didn't see them most of that time and the babies were not looked after properly. Klaasen grew terribly old not knowing what was happening to any of them. With his picture on display everywhere, he had to go in hiding and keep moving to different places. He sure changed in a few days. He grew a moustache and his hair turned grey by itself. His wife could not tell the Germans anything because she didn't know anything. After a month and a half she and the children were released from the concentration camp but her husband could see her for only a short period every once in a while, as the Germans were still watching her very closely knowing he would visit her. In the Rakers' underground group there was a very cute young Dutch girl called Vonny. She looked only seventeen or eighteen although I found out later that she was twenty years old. She worked in the ration office from where

"THE LONG RETURN"

they distributed all the ration cards in the district. The first time I met Vonny she came into the house and right into the front room. I didn't know who she was. She had a smoke in her hand and said in Dutch, "Have you got a match." I just looked at her dumb and said nothing. Rakers was out in the yard and she went out and she said to him, "Is that fellow in there stupid or what?" Rakers said, "No, he does not speak Dutch, he is a Canadian flyer." She almost died, she could hardly believe it. We became good friends after that. Rakers was generally the policeman in charge when the Germans distributed the ration cards. He had to be very strict and very careful as there were German guards around watching him but he was a little lenient with Vonny. Near quitting time she would take a full sheet of ration cards, sneak them into the washroom, and wrap them around herself under her clothes. Then she would bring them to our place and Rakers would distribute them to people who were in hiding. Sometimes Vonny and people like her would carry them under a girdle. Vonny could not speak much English but who needs to talk? She used to say, "You and me together in Canada." Dicky would say, "None of that around here. He is a married man!" Vonny was always a bright spot in my life. I always looked forward to her coming around. If we happened to end up in a room alone, Dicky would bang on the door and say, "What are you two doing in there?" I used to say Dicky, "You're a poor sport" and she would always answer back, "You are a married man." I guess I al-

Rakers to Roger Coming

ways had "a girl weakness." One day when I was working in the garden, Vonny arrived and sprayed water on me. I was not thinking and chased her down the street, shouting after her in English. My God, the chances we would take! Rakers came home when we were down the street and he was furious with us.

One of the key jobs of the Underground was to provide forged identity documents for Divers or any person in trouble with the Germans. I had my own identity card which was called a "Persoonsbewijs." My name was "Henk DeGraff." and it stated that I was deaf and dumb.

I also had papers saying I was a farmer who didn't have to go work in Germany. I had taken the identity of a boy who had died many years ago.

When I had my picture taken I went in to the photographer's shop with Rakers. I never said a word. We had gone into Utrecht which was six or seven miles on the bicycle. As usual, I was told to say nothing. Rakers and the photographer did all the talking and I thought I had done very well. However, as we were leaving the shop, the photographer winked and said, "Good night" in perfect English. I smiled and kept on going. It never got into a situation outside the house where I had to act deaf and mute in front of any Germans or German Sympathizers but there were many times inside that an awkward situation arose with Dutch visitors. Someone would come who wasn't safe or who we didn't know if they could be trusted. I would have to stay

"THE LONG RETURN"

mute and generally I had a Dutch book which I pretended to read. I was always careful not to have it upside down. We had heard about an airman in France, travelling on a train, pretending to read but he was holding his book upside down. He got caught. That was a very good lesson to remember.

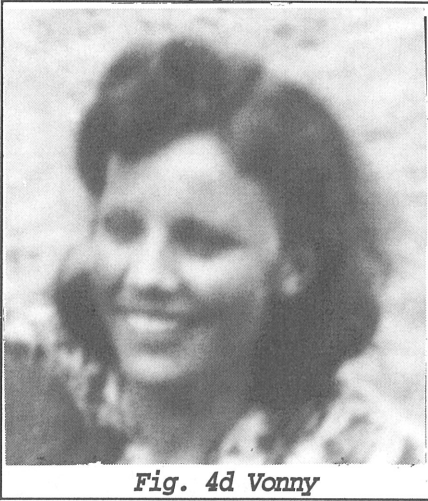


Fig. 4d Vonny

One day, a Dutch policeman named Jan Bakker came to the village. He had been transferred from down south. As he couldn't find a place to stay, Rakers had to take him in. Rakers wasn't sure if he was safe

or not, and wasn't sure if he was going to stay in our village permanently. If he wasn't going to stay it was best that he didn't know who I was so I had to be deaf and dumb for five days. It was sure a hard job, requiring a lot of concentration. At meal times I would go to ask for something and then, remembering, would have to nod to someone for it or someone would go to speak to me. On some occasions, we would be left alone in the room and I would be afraid to look him in the eye in case he said something. However, I guess he just thought I was a bit stupid, not just deaf and dumb. After five days

Rakers to Roger Coming

they decided he was going to stay and they had an opportunity to check up on him. As soon as he passed the security check, they told me I could tell him who I was. When I started to talk to him in English, I thought his eyes would pop out of his head. I told him that he was a hell of a policeman as he could not spot a Canadian airman. He was completely surprised, not having had the least suspicion of who I was.

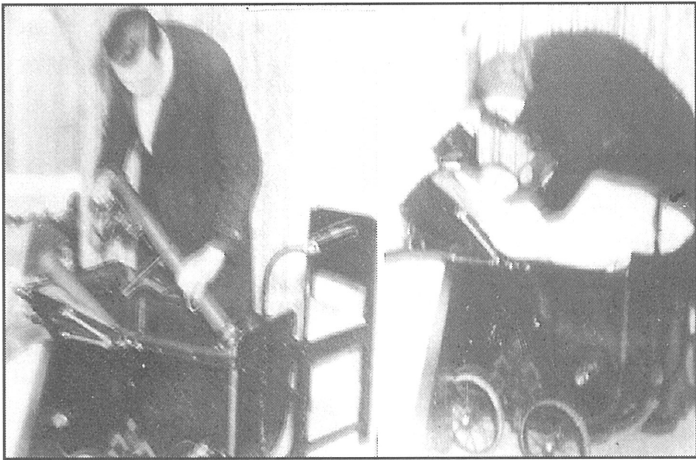


Fig. 4e

*They would put the Machine gun in the baby buggy
and then put the baby on top*

Fig. 4f

In about a month, I knew enough Dutch to be able to say a few things like "Good morning," "Good night" and could understand enough to know what people were talking about. I knew when to nod or smile and I was safer to have around. The baker and

"THE LONG RETURN"

the green-grocer would see me and I could say good morning to them. If they started to talk too much, and I couldn't answer them with yes or no, I would get up and walk off. They thought I was indifferent, angry, or just moody and never guessed who I was.

The Rakers lived in a side by side duplex and the man who lived next door was a National Socialist person and a postman. They never guessed who I was. I would say, "Good morning," or "yes" or "no" or some simple things, without arousing any suspicion. One day, I was standing on the back porch and the postman was talking to me over the fence. Dicky was standing behind me to be sure I didn't get into trouble. We talked for five or ten minutes with me just nodding or saying, "yes" or "no." Dicky was making sure I was not getting into trouble with him. After the war, Dicky was talking to him and he said, "Did your nephew get back home OK." She said, "Yes, he is back in Canada". He just stared in amazement. By now my mother had received a couple of letters from people giving her sympathy, as she still did not know what had happened to me.

In August, after I had been at Rakers' about two months, Rakers felt I could do with a change. I went into Utrecht for a couple of weeks to stay with some other people who spoke English well. This was my holiday. The Heitinga family had spent a lot of time in England before the war. They had two very nice daughters Shelah, a student seventeen years old, and the other, a little older, Eileen who was a dancer on the stage. (They were lovely). They lived in a town

Rakers to Roger Coming

house that was part of a big three story square block of houses with a balcony all around. I slept on the third floor and my escape place was a trap door in the floor, leading into the false top of a linen closet on the floor below. The family was very nice and it was wonderful to be able to speak English all the time.

Mr. Heitinga, was an architect doing displays for large exhibits and theatres, all over Europe. He had a lot of money before the war. When the Germans invaded, they confiscated his big house. They had come on a Friday night and said the family had to be out by the Monday.

The Germans took a list of all the furniture and drapes, and warned them not to try to take any furnishings with them. The Heitinga's then found this town house whose Jewish occupant had just been sent to Germany. The neighbours were not very friendly with the Heitinga's, believing they had something to do with the Jewish people getting sent to Germany. Food was very scarce in the city. Often, we would be lucky to have an apple for breakfast but they said that there was very little sugar diabetes and things like that in the wartime. Maybe the diet was not that bad. After the war the Heitinga's had a very big problem but I will go into that in more detail later in the story. I had a lot of English books to read and a radio in my hiding place for the news. But I never was a very good reader. I was by myself a lot of the time, as the family had other things to do.

"THE LONG RETURN"



Fig.4g Shelah Heitinga

Their lives were very busy. Of course I could not go out or be seen by anybody. Rakers had given me a little tobacco and as I was a smoker this was very nice! About this time, the British and American forces were advancing through France and up into Belgium.



Fig.4h Eileen Heitinga

We listened to the news four or five times a day, expecting our liberation in a few weeks. That was August 1944, but the liberation was not to be for another nine months. Of course when you are watching the news day by day, it goes by slowly, just like waiting for a kettle to boil.

Rakers to Roger Coming

The Allies got as far as Belgium and just seemed to stay there. After a week or so I went back to Rakers' place, because it was much safer and more exciting to hear of what was going on and also I would go for the odd bicycle ride. I would recognise many of the different Underground people as Rakers' house was the centre of a lot of activities. Sometimes I would work in the garden.



Fig.4i Mr. Heitinga

They had some odd weeds and the vegetables seemed different in the Netherlands, so I was pulling out the vegetables and leaving the weeds. Once I found an old fellow standing, looking over

the fence and staring, and asked me what I was doing in the garden but Rakers was there to answer for me, otherwise I would have just had to ignore him. Rakers took many risks. For example, the Underground had planned a special raid in Amsterdam and needed some guns. Since Rakers was able to

"THE LONG RETURN"

travel with no problem and as a policeman wore high boots, leggings and a large leather coat, he went into Amsterdam carrying twenty six revolvers strapped on his legs, body and in his pockets. They almost completely weighed him down. He sat next to a German officer on the train but, as always he was very cool, and everything went well. He left on these trips as if he was going to the corner store, yet he often went off in the morning and never knew when he would be back. He would come back and have supper then go out again, coming home at ten or eleven o'clock. Being a policeman, he could be out at night. Not many others had such freedom, so he had to do a lot of the night work. He told Dicky very little, so if either of them were caught, neither one could tell anything.



Fig 4j Mrs Heitinga

In September our electricity was completely cut off. The Netherlands produced its electrical power from coal and all their coal was going to the war. The Dutch cook mostly on electric stoves. To solve this problem, Rakers climbed the pole and put a thin wire jumper between the main lines and ours. It didn't provide enough electricity to run the stove but we could have a couple of lights on or the radio on for

Rakers to Roger Coming

news. We would pull the drapes tightly over the windows so no one could see that the lights were on. The Germans allowed everyone one sack of coal every once in a while but that did not last long. Rakers found an old wood cook stove which we patched up and made to work. Any old stove was worth a fortune. However, wood was almost impossible to get so we gathered bits of wood from everywhere.

Rakers once bought a tree about a foot and a half thick and not very tall in a farmer's wood lot. He must have made some sort of deal with the farmer as it was marked. When we got to the farm to pick it up, we had to cut it, then haul it home. While we were cutting the tree in the woods, a German officer who was hunting came up to us. Rakers knew him as a result of his police duties. Rakers always wore his uniform and as we stood there and they talked, I could understand enough of what they were saying to know when to nod or smile. He never guessed my identity and finally walked off. It was funny how close one can come and not be caught. But I noticed that Rakers had kept his hand close to his gun. Everybody played for keeps and I am sure Rakers would have shot him if it had been necessary.

After we cut the tree up and were on our way home with our wood in the farmer's horse-drawn wagon, the farmer said something to me. Hans, Papa Rakers' four year old boy was there and said, "That's my Uncle from Groningen. His Dutch is different from our Dutch." I smiled and said nothing. That explanation was a lot better than expecting the

"THE LONG RETURN"

children to be so very careful not to tell anyone that I was Canadian.

The British were bombing very heavily these days. The main highway to Hilversum, ran along the front of the house and a railway ran along the back of the house. Very often the allied fighter bombers would dive bomb over the house, bombing either a train on the railway or trucks on the highway. I found this difficult, sitting right there, not knowing if they were trying to hit the railway or the highway or would just hit us in between. They flew so low that I felt I could almost touch them. I always thought about the pilots having their ham and eggs in a hour or so. I felt I was so far away from England and yet so close, but yet so far away. Eggs in Holland were almost impossible to get. If you could get them, they were very expensive on the black market and I don't think I ever saw any ham. They had a little bacon once in a while but it was cured a little more than ours and not smoked as much.

One day, some of the fellows of the Underground brought some small boxes of explosives around to the house. They had been dropped by the British for blowing up the railways. However, the explosives had to be put together and the timer put in. With directions in both Dutch and English, we all sat at the dinner table figuring out how to wire them and just how best to set them off. The plan was to blow up each railway line coming out of Utrecht. Each Underground unit was to be ready when the orders came to blow them all up at a certain time. At this

Rakers to Roger Coming

exact time there would also be aircraft flying over, on their way to a target in Germany, so the Germans would be confused about where and how the bombing was being done. The important thing was to keep the Germans confused for a while and to give the Underground time to get home or into hiding.

Once assembled, the bombs were taken out and attached to the railway tracks. Rakers placed his bombs on tracks close to home, so he had time to come back before they went off. We stood in the dark in the back yard and waited for the explosions. Each set of bombs had been set for intervals of a few minutes or so and, because they were well scattered, the Germans didn't know which way to go. It was like Halloween!

One of the railway lines that Rakers blew up was just at the end of the row of houses in which I was living. Some of the residents heard the aircraft overhead, the bombs going off, and ran out of their houses through a big ditch filled with water to cross the road away from the tracks. They would wait there awhile, then go back just as another bomb went off. They would then run back through the ditch full of water and again wait for a while, until they were sure the bombing was over. They did not know where the bombing was coming from but naturally they figured it was from the bombers flying overhead. They were sure angry, getting wet and muddy every time they had to cross the big ditch into the field. Of course they were also very frightened. They never

"THE LONG RETURN"

found out that it was Rakers who was setting the bombs off. It was a very successful night and almost everyone was pleased, except the Germans of course. It was funny when people came around in the morning and told us about it. De Burgomaster (The Mayor), phoned Rakers up and told him all about the damage caused by the sabotage.

All went well except for one real tragedy. A group of fellows who were blowing up one of the other rail lines had a bad break. A German soldier shot one of them, although the others got away. The next day the Germans went to his home, asked for his father and shot him at the door. The Germans then went into the house and destroyed everything. They opened up food, ate some, threw the rest all over the house and then they destroyed all the furniture. That's the price the Dutch had to pay. The families of the ones that got caught had to pay very harshly. The Germans had a very hard time in Holland as the average Dutch person just did not co-operate with them. The Germans wanted to burn all the houses along the railway track that had been damaged, but the Mayor talked them out of it. There was a small town in Holland where a German officer was shot and killed. The Germans moved in and gave all the people an hour to move out. The Germans then completely destroyed the town, flattening it completely. They brought bulldozers in and buried all that was left of the town, as if it never existed. Many times these things were actually carried out by the (Nationaal Socialistische Beweging.) That was why

Rakers to Roger Coming

they were hated so much, even more than the Germans. They tried to break the spirit of the Dutch people but they never did. It just made the Dutch people stronger and more determined. By now my mother had received a couple of letters from people giving her sympathy, as she still did not know what had happened to me. Just a telegram saying I was missing on a flight over Germany and a letter from the squadron I was flying from.

"THE LONG RETURN"



ADDRESS REPLY TO: THE SECRETARY, DEPARTMENT OF NATIONAL DEFENCE FOR AIR, OTTAWA, ONTARIO.		OUR FILE: R133074 (NO 4) REF. YOUR DAY(S)
ROYAL CANADIAN AIR FORCE		
OTTAWA, Canada, 15th September, 1944		
Mr. C. A. Porter, 3406 Imperial Street, New Westminster, B.C.		
Dear Mr. Porter:		
I must regretfully inform you that since your son, Sergeant Robert Edward Porter, was reported missing no further information regarding him has been received other than that contained in the letter to you dated June 23rd from these Headquarters.		
You may rest assured that every possible effort is being made to trace your son and upon any news being obtained you will be informed immediately.		
May I extend my sincere sympathy to you and the members of your family in this time of anxiety.		
Yours sincerely,  R.C.A.F. Casualty Officer, for Chief of the Air Staff.		
R.C.A.F. O. 328 M9M-1-4 (177) E.G. 85 G-301		

Fig.4k September 15th my Mother received this letter

Rakers to Roger Coming

AIR MINISTRY

73-77 Oxford St., London, W.1.,

31st October, 1944.

CAN/R113074/P.4 CAS

Dear Mrs. Porter,

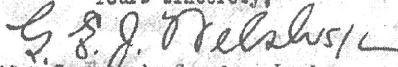
I greatly regret to inform you that since my letter of the 20th June, 1944, no further information has been received concerning your husband, Sergeant Robert Edward Porter.

In view of the absence of any news for so long a period it is felt that you should be informed of our grave anxiety for his safety, but action to presume that he lost his life will not be taken until evidence of his death is received, or until such time has elapsed that it is considered there can be no longer any likelihood of his survival. Such action will then be for official purposes only and I will write to you again at that time.

You may rest assured that every possible effort is being made to trace your husband, and upon any news being obtained you will be informed immediately.

May I again express to you my sincere sympathy in this time of great anxiety.

Yours sincerely,



(G. E. J. Welsh), Squadron Leader,
for Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief,
Royal Canadian Air Force, Overseas.

Mrs. R. E. Weller,
18 Llwyn Hflyn,
Nantybwch,
Tredgar,
Monmouthshire, Wales.

Fig. 41 Letter of October 31st. Not good news for my wife to receive.

"THE LONG RETURN"