

**JAN VAN HOOFF,  
Dutch Rover Scout and Partisan.  
August 7th, 1922 - September 19th, 1944**

*Posthumously awarded*

*November 16th, 1945: the US Medal of Freedom with Bronze Palm.*

*July 19th, 1946 : het Nederlandse Ridderkruis 4e Klasse der Militaire Willems Orde  
(the Dutch Knight's Cross 4th Class of the Military William's Order).*

*September 14<sup>th</sup>, 1946: the British King's Commendation for Brave Conduct with Silver Laurel.*

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**NIJMEGEN: A CITY OF STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE**

When The River Rhine, on its way to its final destination, the Northsea, crosses the German/Dutch border two things happen. It changes its name the German Der Rhein to the Dutch De Rijn and it branches off into three arms, the northern one named De IJssel, the central one going on as De Rijn and the southern one being named De Waal. Only a few miles from the border the Dutch city of Nijmegen is situated on the Waal's steep, hilly southern bank and is dominating the river. Throughout the ages Nijmegen has always been a place with an important strategic position. The old Romans recognised it as such and, on top of a hill, constructed one of their fortresses. In the Middle Ages, a castle replaced the old fortress. Nijmegen became an important junction of roads, a trade centre and a river port. Ferries enabled the travellers to cross the wide, wild river. That was until railroads were invented and a huge railway bridge was built spanning the Waal. Later to be followed by an impressive road bridge.

In September 1939, World War II began. Nazi Germany attacked Poland whereupon Great Britain and France declared war on Germany. The Netherlands and Belgium declared their neutrality in the conflict and Adolph Hitler, the Führer and dictator of Nazi Germany, on his word of honour, guaranteed that neutrality. Yet the Netherlands mobilised army, navy and airforce and the Nijmegen bridges being of strategic importance, was also guarded by Dutch soldiers.

As history taught many times, dictators do not have a word of honour and at 0300 hours on that beautiful and sunny May 10th, 1940 the German forces crossed the German/Dutch borderline. It is only a few miles by road from the border into the heart of the city of Nijmegen and so the Germans were there soon but yet too late to conquer the railway and road bridges which were blown up by the Dutch, just before the Germans were about to take them.



— Jan J.L. van Hoof

When the Netherlands, Belgium and France had been occupied and Great Britain had to face it alone, the Nijmegen bridges - as so many others - were reconstructed and used again.

**SCOUT**

Jan van Hoof was born and bred in this city on the hills. As soon as he was old enough he joined the cub Scouts and he was known to be a very enthusiastic cub too, that could not wait until he could join the Scouts. Which he did when the time had come and when the Nazi forces occupied Nijmegen he was a 17 years' old Scout, about to join the Rover Scouts.

In April 1941, the Nazi occupation ordered the disbandment of Dutch Scouting and Guiding confiscating all group's (but also private) possessions and handing them over to the Hitler Youth and the small Dutch Nazi Youth

Movement. All further Scouting activities were made illegal and punishable and indeed those caught later were sent to concentration camps. Many Scouts and Rover Scouts did not obey and - not without running risks - carried on secretly, meeting in odd places, where they donned their uniforms or did without...

### **ROVER SCOUT**

In those days Scouts having reached the age of 17 were supposed to leave the Scout troop and to join the Rover Crew, which was considered to be the preparation for the next task: leadership. At first as Voortrekkersgasten - Rover Squires - for a probation period, lasting about 6 to 12 months, during which they had to stand a number of tests. When the Rover Squire had fulfilled all the requirements to become a Rover, the Rover Crew met for a ceremonial night, mostly in some old chapel or old castle. The very impressive Rover investment was always a very special, secret, nightly affair, the Promise to be made at midnight when the bells stroke 12. Only Rovers were permitted to attend and no one was to reveal or discuss the ceremony to/with non-Rovers, not even with the Commissioners if the latter had never made the Rover Promise. The Rover-to-be was separated from the Rovers and given a list with questions which he had to study and answer for himself and which made it clear to him that as a Rover he would be having special responsibilities in Scouting but also in everyday life for the rest of his life. Playing the Game was over; serving the Movement and the community began. He was given about 2 or 3 hours in loneliness to allow him to reflect and to consider whether he felt that he could meet these obligations. This was called the "vigil". In the meantime the others Rovers would be together and quietly reconsidering whether they had always been loyal to their Rover Promise made. Midnight approaching the Rover Crew assembled in the chapel or one of the castle's rooms lit by candlelight. The Rover Squire was led in. The Rover Scoutleader would ask him whether he would consider himself able to make the Rover Promise and to keep it for the rest of his life, as it was meant for life. At the stroke of midnight the Rover-to-be would make the Promise on St George's Banner and would thereupon receive the insignia indicating him as a Rover Scout.

During the German occupation, Scouting having been forbidden and all activities being punishable many a new Rover made the Promise during such a secret meeting. For security reasons it could not be done in the traditional places so some hide out was found.

When Jan van Hoof and two others had fulfilled all requirements, in spring 1943 the Rover Crew met for the ceremony in an out of the way spot in a deserted part of the forest to the south of Nijmegen. In ones or twos the participants - in civvies - made their way to it and when there donned their forbidden uniforms. When Jan and his mates did their "vigil" it was accompanied by exploding German ack-ack shells and the roar of the hundreds of allied planes at first going east into Germany and later returning from their bombing raids. Also the voices were heard of a group of German soldiers patrolling the area.

### **RESISTANCE**

But apart from being active in illegal Scouting the Nijmegen Rover Scouts also got involved in the Resistance. The Underground was well aware of the strategic importance of the Nijmegen Waal Bridges and Jan van Hoof made it his specific task to detect how the Germans intended to blow it up when the Allies advanced. On June 6th, 1944 (D-day) the Allied Forces landed on the Normandy coast of France and having established a strong bridgehead broke out and drove the Germans to the north. The Germans prepared the Nijmegen bridges for demolition. Jan either canoeing, pretending to be an angler in a rowing boat or sitting on the riverbanks was always near the bridge, watching the demolition teams doing their job. Taking notes and sketching.

## **OPERATION MARKET-GARDEN**

On the sunny Sunday of September 17th, 1944 the British army broke out of the bridgehead it had established in Belgium, near the Dutch border and went north. Its road was paved with US and British Airborne forces dropped in several places to take the bridges spanning the many Dutch waterways. The general idea was to take Nijmegen and Arnhem, to slice through the German forces north of Arnhem until the Zuidersea coast was reached, thus cutting off about 100.000 German troops in the Western part of the Netherlands from their main forces and the German hinterland and also from Arnhem heading east into to Germany proper so to encircle and take its main industrial area the Ruhrgebiet (=region). So it was essential to take the many bridges before the Germans could blow them up.

That Sunday morning the German soldiers and the more than delighted and excited Dutchmen watched General Gavin's US 82nd Airborne Division land by parachute or glider to the south of Nijmegen. As always the early hours were chaotic and there was hardly any German resistance. General Gavin's HQ was established in the Hotel Sionshof, in the forests between Nijmegen and Groesbeek. The Dutch resistance made contact and provided information and guides. Jan van Hoof left home and through the so familiar forest also went to the Hotel where he handed the Americans the maps concerning the demolitions prepared by the Germans. If the Germans had caught him he would have been shot on the spot. As many other resistance soldiers he was given a task to guide the Americans through the forests into the city of Nijmegen and to the railway and road bridge. It took some time, enough to give the Germans the time to recover and organise. Heavy, house to house fighting erupted near the bridges and on the 17th the Americans failed in taking them immediately. It so seems that, during the fighting, Jan van Hoof managed to avoid the Germans and despite their fire to crawl on the road bridge apparently managing to cut the cables leading to the demolition charges. No one saw him doing it. But when later he met his sister and later still was able to make a short visit to his parents he just said "the bridge has been saved". Whereupon he reported back for duty.

The Dutch Resistance men and women were mostly glad in blue overalls and wore a special band round the arm. They were armed with simple sten-guns or pistols dropped by the Allies or stolen from the Germans. The US Airbornes soon saw to it that they received better arms and some were even put into US uniforms. The Allied Supreme Commander, General Dwight D. Eisenhower had made it quite clear that these men and women were to be considered as Allied soldiers and were thus to be treated. But to the Germans they were nothing but a bunch "communist terrorists and rebels".

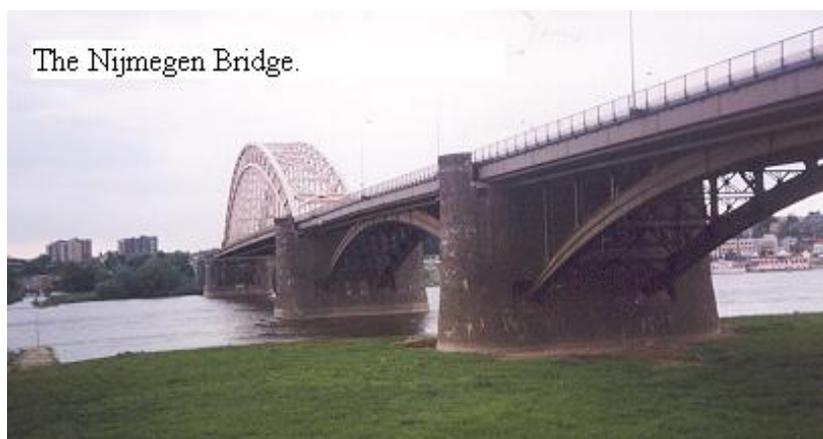
Had the first American attempt on the bridges failed, meanwhile, though delayed, British ground forces with armour had also arrived at Nijmegen and more attacks on the Germans defending the bridges were made. On the 19th of September Jan received orders to guide a column of US Airbornes and British armour to the General Postoffice in between the Road and the Railway Bridge. The leading armoured Humber vehicle was commanded by British sergeant Berry (Royal Engineers), and Jan van Hoof guiding was on top of it. The G.P.O. having been reached and taken, defensive positions were prepared. Then something - so far unexplained - happened. Berry's Humber suddenly gave full throttle and - Jan van Hoof still on top - disappeared into a side street, leading to the Railway Bridge. Whether Sergeant Berry had received orders by radio to proceed to the railway bridge is unknown. It is also possible that Jan van Hoof, after months of research and watching, was convinced that he knew where the railway bridge detonator was hidden and that he and Berry took the initiative to go and put it out of action. It took a while before the surprised Germans opened fire but missed. Until the Humber raced into the Nieuwemarkt (New Market Square) only 300 metres from the bridge and was spotted by a German anti tank gun crew which opened fire. From the surrounding houses Dutch civilians saw

what happened. The Brits returned fire with their machine guns but suddenly the Humber received a direct hit and was set on fire. Sergeant Berry and his driver got out burning and died a terrible death shortly thereafter. Jan van Hoof had been flung off the car but had survived though he was, maybe, stunned and dazed by the explosion and the fall. A number of Germans ran to the burning vehicle and took Jan. They took away his arms and identity documents, removed the armband, which made him an official Allied soldier, kicked him wherever they could and abused him calling him a bolshevik, a communist terrorist and partisan and after having mistreated him one of them shot him through the head. He was 22 years old.

Jan's, Berry's and the driver's bodies were buried in a nearby park and not recovered and identified until a couple of days later when the fighting in Nijmegen was over.

When the railway bridge had been destroyed, and the Germans found it impossible to hold the road bridge any longer, they pushed the demolition detonator. Nothing happened and the Americans and Brits were able to storm and take the bridge intact. Too late, however, to rescue the British Airbornes and to take the Arnhem Bridge. Operation Market-Garden had not succeeded. It was A Bridge Too Far.

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In the city of Nijmegen, there are three monuments dedicated to Jan van Hoof. One on the roundabout on the Nijmegen side of the bridge depicting Jan van Hoof carrying a shot holed flag. One on the bridge on the spot where Jan is supposed to have cut the cables and one simple remembrance tile embedded in the pavement of the Nieuwemarkt square and saying:

**HIER VIEL JAN VAN HOOFF REDDER DER WAALBRUG. 19-9-1944.**

(Here Fell Jan van Hoof Saver of the Waal Bridge 19-9-1944).



After the Liberation many revived and new Dutch Scout Groups took his name.



Dutch Scouting, since 1927, (as British Scouting) knew three special medals for gallantry.

- 1) A Gilt (or golden) Maltese Cross with a red-blue ribbon "For gallantry with moderate personal risk"
  - 2) A Silver Cross on a blue ribbon "For gallantry with considerable personal risk",
  - 3) A Bronze Cross on a red ribbon "For special heroism with extraordinary personal risk"
- When the war was over Dutch Scouting renamed them "Jan van Hoof Crosses".  
(Extinct since January 1973.)



The city of Nijmegen remained in the frontline, within the reach of German artillery, until April 1945 and was bombarded by German artillery almost daily. It was badly destroyed. Those Dutchmen, whose presence was not essential for running the city, were evacuated. The fire brigade, police, hospital staff, soldiers of the Underground Forces etc stayed and so did most of the Scouts over 15, rendering services to the civilians as well as to the armed forces. In a basement also running the International Scout Club where US, British, Canadian, Polish, Belgian and Dutch Scouts could meet and relax in a Scoutlike atmosphere.



US General Gavin, whose Division remained in Nijmegen and its surroundings until November 1944, was much impressed by the assistance his force received from the Nijmegen Scouts. Before he and his men were withdrawn from Nijmegen he officially honoured the Scouts by permitting to wear on their shirts the official badge of the 82nd US Airborne Division, a Parachute and a Glider.

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Monument on the Bridge on the spot where Jan cut the cables.



- State border lines with Belgium and Germany.
- Rivers and Canals.
- Main roads.
- ⋯ Airborne Dropping Zones.
- Frontline 10th - 17th of September, 1944.
- - - Frontline on September 30th, 1944.
- - - Frontline on May 4th, 1945.

