

## My Reminiscences Chapter 5

We are on board a big ship, the SS Houston, and soon settle down in an appointed bunk hearing the familiar rumbling of the engines. Where to? To Okinawa we are told. After years of living under Japanese camp conditions everything around us seemed like luxury. The food, the bed (or bunk, whatever) and most important our clothes and a pyjama to sleep in.

Everything was amazing. Combined with the American ease of effort we were suddenly dumped into another world. White bread, well, we eat it every day - the most normal thing, but then we had not eaten it for years, and it was like manna from heaven and then butter, too. There was no need any more to gather as much as possible of everything because tomorrow there would again be enough.

At the end of our first breakfast there was one man who felt like another piece of the white bread but there was none on the counter anymore. Now, all the crusts were cut off and thrown away in the corner of this eating room and this fellow gets up and walks to the corner to help himself to one of those crusts. "No, NO, Noo" says the American sailor behind the counter. "No need to eat crusts." and he gets on the phone, says something and down comes, with the lift, a fresh white loaf. It goes into the cutting machine and our hungry mate can take what he wants and a lot of others followed his example. Nobody says a word. I looked round and thought to myself that we must appear to these Americans a pretty dumb lot. In modern times, professionals would have been called in to help all of us out of the shock situation we were in: it was all too much to absorb but we all came right. There is still a lingering admiration with me for the American approach to things. Not that any authority on board was slack, no sir, but a little easy, more natural.

Many, many years later Mam and I (Sas was also there) travelled in America and found ourselves in a harbour area. Tied up there was the SS Carolina, a sister ship of the Houston, open to visitors, and we went aboard, an identical ship. It must have been interesting to look around a real warship for every visitor, but for me it woke up feelings from the past that were very strong. Those strong feelings prevented me from the act of talking. I sat sort of dumb looking in one direction because in my head I could see, actually see, all sorts of things from the past. Perhaps some people are different, but with me, feelings are almost overwhelming and I feel them in my stomach. Suddenly it was just a few hours since the Lux toilet soap and the white bread, so to speak.

The next day we ran into the tail end of a hurricane. The entire ship was closed off from outside, and then it became clear how heavy such a ship is judging by its long slow lumbering movements on the waves. Tables and chairs were all removed, the tables being fitted into spaces allowed for, and the other furniture folded in the floors. When eating, we sat on the floor holding on to our eating gear but the movement was so strong that on occasion we were flung from one side to the other 'pannetje in de hand' slamming against the opposite side. I don't remember how many days we were on the way, perhaps two days. When we arrived the storm had abated and we had to get off the ship into a barge as there was no pier. A great net was flung overboard, the top end attached to the ships side so as to form a very large rope ladder. That did not create any problem but there was still heavy swell and the barge moved strongly up and down. The art was to let go and jump down just at the moment that the barge was nearly at its highest.

We were taken by trucks to a camp, an experience in its own. A large number of trucks sped at 70 or faster very close to each other, so close that it would be possible to step from the one onto the one in front. I was a truck driver in the KNIL (Royal Dutch Indonesian Army) where we drove at 30km/h and a distance of three truck lengths, a snail's pace, an easy

target for a plane. Although, at this American speed, a little accident could become a very large one quickly.

Our destination, the camp, had vanished in the storm and an officer sincerely apologised: Only half had been rebuilt but was already occupied. Would we mind to sleep in the open? The power had been restored. American army camps all have the same type diesel generator and do not depend on local power. Installation on your bunk took only minutes and we took a walk about in the area. We were close to the sea, quite high, on a very wide bay, possibly 160 degrees. Then we saw it! The very first impression was of a very large flat city, immense. On looking a little longer and more closely we saw this was no city but ships! Hundreds of them, very clearly ships because of the light signalling that went on.

Next day we were to leave and now definitely to Manila not to some British colonial territory, but how we asked ourselves. Thousands of men in the Dakotas of those days? Come off it, but the officer who told us did not even hint at a problem. It took a bit of time for me, and I think for many others, to start thinking on a different scale. The very small scale of the Netherlands East Indies' army was what we were used to.

The landing procedure in Manila took a long, long time, enough circling around to make me and many others sick, "air sick in no uncertain manner" On touching solid ground I stretched out on the tarmac full length, sick as a dog. Here again one simple instruction: "Don't move you guys. We fetch you." Soon any number of trucks arrived just moving alongside the row of planes and when full disappeared. That is how I pitched up in a camp called a Replacement Centre, a place where they form their new Army or Marines Divisions.

Here we came at rest again as one does in any army, waiting for something to happen. Plenty of time to absorb the scene and find out how to, and where to, write letters. There I found newspapers old and new, and that was the place where I learnt of the atom bomb and its results, where from it got its incredible force and all there was to know. Only then did I know what we had seen, and reading on, it was spelled out in the paper that two of these things were dropped and recalled that an American had said "but the other day I saw something the same up that way". What we had seen at that crematorium must have been victims. The whole picture opened up again: That was it! Shu, KC you were lucky! This explained the incredible bending of very heavy steel beams and of all that had struck me: On the hills around Nagasaki was only short grass growing: That was new grass and it grew! Remarkable.

This is perhaps the time and place for me to air some views on this very emotive subject: The atom bomb. There are a number of factors and one has to delve into history.

The whole Japanese society of those days, long before 1940, was extremely well suited for what it became. It had a very strong desire to be separate from the outside world. The Japanese felt themselves superior. What counted was good manners and restrained behaviour, politeness. They wanted no foreign taints of whatsoever nature. No foreigners allowed: They were dirty, they stank and they were noisy and pushy. Very obviously the Japanese race was supreme. Even the peoples of the northern island, up right north, were only good enough to clean the sewers. This Japanese supremacy idea existed for decades.

Eventually there was only one nation, the Dutch, allowed to trade with Japan and then only on one smallish place, very close to Nagasaki, on a sort of semi island, "Decima" pronounced Deshima with the stress on 'shi'. I have been there and one could still find old traces of Dutch building style. This society was militaristic, ruled by local lords who had their own armies large or small of 'samurai' On many places one can still see their castles, buildings high up with the many roof edges, slightly 'curled up'. The original building had a wall around at its foot. I am a bit hazy on how this eventually melted together into an empire.

Even in the 1930s a foreigner visiting Japan had to take a bath, to ensure that all this stinking business from abroad would not soil this super race.

This general feeling of being superior helped create the Empire of Japan. From the early twenties there was the building of a military power, with the ultimate goal of a local super power (also economically) which they promulgated as the "East Asiatic Co-Prosperity Sphere", to be built by a powerful military force, the most powerful in the region. Korea and Taiwan (Fomosa then) had been taken and then Manchuria was run underfoot and became Manchukuo (The child Chinese Emperor, deposed, was given the position as Emperor of this new Asiatic Area.) Youth at school received basic military training. The status of the military was elevated in the community. There was, of course, a secret/military police called the 'Kempetai'. There were many international 'peace conferences' seeking to limit armed services particularly the navy but eventually the Japanese had what they thought would be sufficient.

I remember these peace conferences and the League of Nations. Useless, unless all members have the will to act. In that climate Japan could rise to a major military power, unchecked. What is more because of the peculiar Japanese total acceptance of authority and the reverence for the Emperor for whom it became an honour to die; there was little need for concentration camps to maintain the order. The military found it really easy to build, at great expense to the people, a navy and an army, also a very effective and up to date attack aircraft the ZERO, and all that quite openly.

The peace keepers booked great results in the other, their own, camp. This in itself was not bad but the overall bearers of responsibility failed miserably. The great fortress of the British Empire, Gibraltar, at the outbreak of war was not equipped with one single anti-aircraft gun. During the latter part of the war American Navy Admirals viewed the fortress in some more detail and pinpointed very accurately its great weakness: Any naval barrage of heavy gunnery aimed at the rock area above the guns, would loosen so much rock and rubble that the guns would actually be covered under the rock. In Singapore, the great gun emplacements were useless when the Japanese attacked from the land side because the guns could not be turned around. It was cheaper to make them that way, perhaps.

A very noble idea kills itself: The peace preachers have always more to say, a better argument. How can you translate into slogans propagating war? Not possible. The cause is good but the execution should not be in the hands of like-minded. The real peace promoter takes very good care that there will never ever be any benefit, even for the boldest, to follow the policy of derailing peace conferences for the purpose of starting a war.

At one time, still before the war broke out, as a truck driver, I was also supposed, in the future, to be able to pull a gun, an anti-tank gun, and learned all about the operation of such a gun, the type placed at a strategic spot along the road. We were to write a test about what we learned.

Eventually the practical operational stage was reached. We were sent off to such and such Battalion south of Surabaya and there stood an old fashioned field gun which had a barrel that moved by turning wheels. The explanation of the sergeant was very good, but real funny in the mind of a man who appreciates the ridiculous and can convey it to you in a most serious manner. "This field gun is to be operated like a gun," he said. "Except that you look through the barrel and turn the wheels aiming faster than fast, until, through the barrel, you see the enemy tank. Then shout and the next man jams in the grenade, slams the gun shut. *Do not forget this*, and fires.

You pray that you hit the tank, because if miss you'll have made a hell of a lot of noise with that gun and the tank gunner will spot you! That is then the end for you." This is real truth, not my story telling and I mention it to illustrate our complete un-readiness for war.

No, the result of the fanatic non-thinking peace lover is that he hurts his own people. This was, of course, the same situation worldwide. The thinking went something like "it looks bad but maybe if we close our eyes for a while when we look again it will be gone." These peace preachers in the way they go about it, their persistence, steadfastly maintaining that theirs is the only right-minded thinking, they stink although their aim is right.

The result was that in the end just about 50 million people lost their lives in a worldwide war.

There have been lots of arguments for and against the use of this ultimate weapon. It saved my life that is for sure. If Americans landed on home (Japanese) soil all POWs were to be shot immediately. That was the worry in American military circles. During discussions at the White House it had been proposed to notify Japan in advance to evacuate a city. The military quickly reacted believing that the Japs would send as many POWs there as possible. It was President Truman himself who threw that proposal out, I think.

Considering all the facts: Their brutal treatment of PoWs, the great numbers of Javanese and Sumatrans dead on the railway, many more than white troops, the mass murders of Nanking, the Death March, their intensive experimenting with biological warfare (Chinese prisoners were sprayed with plague infestations from the air and some trials were with plague laden bombs dropped on Chinese camps), their extreme racism, a military outlook never seen before which supported an imperialism that had become a part of Japanese thinking, the Japanese top brass would have insisted on fighting to a bitter end, at huge cost of American lives, which in wartime are simply worth much more than Japanese lives. What must also not be overlooked is that there was still a large part of the Japanese army that had done very little fighting, in Indonesia, Malacca and China. The Americans felt the co-operation of the Emperor was important not only to end the war but also for the time thereafter.

However the decision to drop the first bomb was only firmly reached when peace negotiations through Switzerland which endeavoured to avoid surrender, came to nothing. The immediate reason to drop the second bomb was the sinking of the American warship by a Japanese submarine during these peace talks. The official surrender was on 14 August. The Japanese had a bit of a job to find the high ranking officials to sign this surrender. Most of the high in office refused.

Back to my story: We were picked up by a truck and brought to a very large camp, outside Manila. Everything was large. In the middle of it was a concrete slab with four diesel generators, that switched on at 6 pm. Hundreds of tents, a huge hangar tent not needed anymore and now used for all sorts of functions. It was called a Replacement Centre. That is a place where new divisions are put together and now, of course, was not needed any more.

Long rows of tents with wooden floors and the then famous camp-bed. The camp was divided into sections with one kitchen each. The kitchen and dining area looked far too small to serve such a great number of men. I asked the kitchen chief how he managed with such a small place? He said "Sonny that is a matter of calculation. We take the time a man needs to eat in the eating section. Well, when he leaves another man may come in so you need the number of seats and get the regular flow of men coming in and leaving and consequently the size of the eating section space is calculated, This is standard in the army."

Next to the large hangar was another sizeable construction which proved to be a church, but a very peculiar building able to serve the various religions. By moving some screens and the like it could serve as a synagogue or a reformed protestant church, or a Roman Catholic one.

It struck me, too, that the American army spent a lot on the entertainment of its troops. The entertainers were keen to perform for the troops where they sought to establish their popularity for the future. This entertainment went as far as classical music by orchestras brought out from 'the States'. The performance was frequently in the city of Manila itself. To get there, special bus services were arranged.

What I really was after, looking around in the camp was a postal facility. For the first time it was possible to write home and to find out what happened there during the years, Naturally there was a post office and I composed my first letters again, to my mother in Bussum and one to Ina Tamsma in Hilversum.

Within a day or two I discovered in the rows of tents one with a sign in front "Nederlands Indische Handels Bank" That was my bank! I went in and learned that they were acting as paymasters for the POWs in the camp and a day or so later I joined them to work there. The manager of that Manila branch (the office in the city was fully functional again) when he heard of my arrival from Japan, cabled our head office in Amsterdam that I was in Manila alive and well.

A Mr Teeuwen (I think he lived in Hilversum or Bussum) of the Bank stopped on the way home to call on my mother in Bussum to tell her that I was in Manila, alive and well. That must have been by the end of September 1945. I must add that I was unaware of this telegram that had been sent to Amsterdam (as had been done for all the others who came out of Japan before me) and remained under the impression that all the family, inclusive of Ina, would only know of me when they received my letters.

The army post office served, of course, Americans and they were assured that their mail home would be handled fast, very fast. The army post master could not tell me how soon my letter would arrive but thought soon enough as the American Army postal service had become a worldwide network. There was nothing much more to do than wait and see, in the meantime doing what my bank friends did, working at the tent office. It became quite a job, but paying us extra money.

At that time I was in considerable uncertainty: First I worried about what had happened in Holland which the rumours told was bad news. To whom do I address letters? Will they still be there? I decided to post letters to the old addresses assuming that somebody would redirect them should those be incorrect. Very little effort from Embassy officialdom. It would have been easy for them to collect the all our names and to cable these via Foreign Affairs Department for publication. There were newspapers in Holland. It would have been the simplest of procedures to list the names and publish them with the address replies can be directed to namely the military base address in Manila, all very simple.

Sometimes I had the impression that the war experience, which certainly was not a small matter, had kind of paralysed the people. Eventually there was an answer from Ina, from my len. To describe my reaction is difficult if not impossible: "She was still there, waiting for me. Is that reality?" Then it became reality: what I had become quite used to as a dream was not a dream anymore. It became reality in a flash.

While in Japan when asleep in the camp, between shifts, I dreamt very many times and always the same, no, two variations - that I was cycling, either on a typical cycling path lightly tarred left side reeds and water, right side grassland, cycling all the time without getting anywhere, saying to myself. "But you're stupid. How do you know she still wants to know you? Why did you not visit her, hey?" And I remember the very tired feeling in my legs because of all the cycling. The other was identical but the scenery was different: A built up

area with paving of red glistening bricks all with an edge quite unlike the usual which stand up against each other, while these lay flat.

Much more than the transition from dream to reality occurred. Now the important thing became how to get out of here and back to Hilversum. I remember one serious call to panic stations: A letter from Len to say she had joined the navy aiming to be transported to the Indies. Shu, this panic expert sees it immediately: KC steaming on a ship westward, passing a navy ship going east and all we can do is wave at each other. Fortunately, of all these KC-panics few have become reality.

In Manila we had quite a good life. We had work that brought money to our pockets and we could, as bank officials, sometimes borrow a military car from the embassy. Occasionally we'd find a restaurant in some or other boulevard to dine and I remember being unused to the concept of paying for meals. I remember thinking "Gosh, if you eat out you have to pay afterwards!"

The Dutch prisoners were to be evacuated back to Indonesia but we, in the bank, had to stay to work as clerks in the pay office of the Finance Ministry "balancing the books" until all matters were complete and the place could be closed down. Only then were we officially retired.

Only recently was I made aware that we should have been paid for this work. We, of the armed forces, were given a token payment, (in the '80s?) "het Gebaar"- the gesture, to acknowledge the inequities of that time. I found this amongst old documents on typical cheap post-war paper that had been meticulously saved by Mam.

One day suddenly every Dutchman was called up for a medical examination, a military medical moreover. Nobody knew why but we soon learned. They wanted to call up every able bodied person to form a new army to invade Makassar and later Celebes to put down the Indonesian *extremists*. A long queue had formed snaking around the little building. A remarkably large number of guys came out there declared fit. This did not mesh with my plans at all, or with those of the others declared fit, but I had no idea how I was going to get out of this. Everybody had a sad tale of terrible deprivation and suffering but these stories made no difference to the docs.

When there was just one man ahead of me I still didn't have an idea, and the pass-rate among the examinees was high. Suddenly a light goes on in my head: I'm not going to tell a sad tale but I'm going to be very brave. "No, nothing wrong with me, doc, as strong as a horse. What I had is all gone, really" "Oh, what was that then?" "Oh, just the stuff everybody had, something called *neuritis*. Some bad pain when I was lying down but not when I was walking. But I have no pain anymore, not for a long time." "Really, never any pain?" "Well, not quite ever. When I've been walking for a half hour or so my right leg pulls a bit, just a little, it drags. But then I sit for a bit and after 10 minutes or so, I'm fine" That is exactly how the conversation went.

The doctor tests the strength of my leg with vigour. "Shu," I think, "this is going well. Mustn't be too brave but I mustn't whinge either." Result: Rejected. Unfit. That was really something. A large proportion of those declared fit spent another 2 years in the military and for a totally lost cause. (Not what the Dutch government, - a Catholic-Red combination - of Mr van Mook who wanted to continue the colonial power, thought)

Soon after the other Dutch POWs left, either to Java/Sumatra or to Makassar and we had completed our task as paymasters and everything balanced we, too, were free to leave. We flew in the hold of a bomber to Balikpapan (East Borneo), date forgotten, sometime in

January. (Remembering dates has always been one of my many weak points) So that was the end of my military career that began in December 1941 and ended in January '46

In Balikpapan we overnighted in an holiday camp and continued the next day to Batavia (Now Jakarta the capital of Indonesia, then also the capital) There all was chaos although small areas were restored and orderly. It quickly became apparent that we were not welcome in the accommodation organised for us by the bank. Most branches of the bank were still closed and there was not enough room for us. Surabaya (in East Java, the second biggest city) was too dangerous because of *extremists*. So what am I doing here I asked myself. I was still employed but without pay by the NIHB but they needed me like a whole in the head. Evacuation was reserved for women children and the elderly.

I had good reason to leave but no opportunity. I heard of young men working on the evacuation ships. That's for me; I thought, but how to achieve it.

By this time I was working as an official in Royal Finances together with my old friend Henk Roselaar (Rosie we called him) but he was an officer and I was nothing. My work included involvement with the transport of Rupiahs (Japanese war currency) from Bandung, in the west of Java (the third largest city and the place where the Dutch were building their new capital when war broke out) to Batavia. This happened by plane, every day. I had my own reasons for wanting a car but this was a good official reason. I needed the car to get to Tandjong Priok to the office where I could sign on as a hand on the ship to help poor women and children.

Rosie was not easily persuaded. "Where must I get you a car?" "Simple. You tell them you need one for me from the government car pool." And that happened but it took a while. In the meantime every day I flew with billions of rupiahs. Unbelievable. One day my transport from the airport did not arrive. I wondered around looking for the transport not wanting to spend the night at the airport returning without success. Then "a wooden chest with money gone, stolen by the English, a million rupiahs" Never saw worse rabble than the English.

On the subject of currency, I said to Roselaar: "I don't understand your tactics. The whole place is in chaos yet you want to be so neat with the money, taking in the old currency and bringing in the new in very limited areas. You should dish out that stored money and spend it on what you wish. This will destabilise the extremists' territory completely and the people will turn against them. You could just dump it in the streets one night as long as no one saw who the generous donor was. And when all is total economic chaos we step in and fix things" No that couldn't be. Not at all neat. But my million was gone and there was not much noise about it. Was actually worthless.

I found in Tandjong Priok the recruitment office for strong young men that they needed. The lieutenant laughed at me. Full up and at least a hundred on the waiting list. That was awful news. But then I had an idea. In Manila I had bought 3 bottles of whisky, Canadian whiskey, not good but all that was available and I still had one left. Possibly the lieutenant would like it. I'll go back there in a few days time with my sob story with the bottle wrapped in brown paper and I'll leave it behind like I forgot it there but he must notice that it is from me. The answer will still be no but I'll be back the next day. Handy to have a car for my use. And then I'll go back again the next day. That's what I did. And the lieutenant opened one of those old fashioned metal drawers, the kind that you need two hands to open and prevent the whole table from toppling forwards and said, "This man is not going but you are." and handed me a ticket. Oh on which ship?" "The Ruys in about 10 day's time.

Now that was a fast return on my investment, hey? I have to admit when I lost control of my bottle that I did not sleep so well that night. I wasn't sleeping well anyway as there were not

enough *klamboes*, mosquito nets, and without them you are like prime steak for mosquitoes. My colleagues were quite relieved that I was leaving

On paper the situation was quite complicated: Officially I was still a soldier (Number 163918) but I did no service, nor was I attached to any unit. Also I was an employee of the Nederlands Indische Handelbank, unpaid, as well as a clerk in the Department of Finance, unpaid. I forget now but I must have been paid by someone as I had to pay for my meals and my share of the *mess* costs where I stayed with the bank people. We weren't paying rent, though, such was the state of chaos.

Any idea that the common Filipino was better off is false. We came out of the American Army which was just a piece of America transplanted across the Pacific in military order. The first impression is that the American Army drifted along without purpose or discipline, but that is totally incorrect. When there was action, boy, was there action on parade they were the essence of perfection, particularly the Marines, who seemed to be the sturdiest recruits.

We'd had a lot of experiences and built up a lot of impressions during these last months as a rescued POW in the American Army and then in Indonesia. Many of them too confusing to try to make sense of. Nor did I need to any more.

It's amazing that our mail was still being censored – in a letter to Bussum I tried to describe the chaos, and my mother replied, enclosing a newspaper clipping, saying only that not everyone agreed with my sentiments. The letter had been officially opened and an included note said "The quoted text did not meet with our favour".

Yes well...these things I could safely ignore - the Rhys ticket in my hand meant my departure was imminent. There have not been many times in my life that I have experienced so many contrasting circumstances and none to start a future upon. Not in Indonesia – that was very clear.

I stood at the stern of the Ruys and watched the coast of Java gradually disappear in the distance with a measure of sadness. "I'll never be coming back here again," I thought. Although my plans for the future were vague I did decide that Indonesia was not going to feature in it.

A new chapter was starting, a whole new era. I had written to Ina Tamsma that I was on my way.

With hindsight I realise that I was a wet-behind-the-ears chap still immature, but now the world had changed and my vision for the future firmly established, a vision I could start to realise.

But if I do some self-examination there was the thought: Don't think about it too much. But that's what we must do in the next chapter.