

## The honorary war baby

November was a dark month. By four o'clock in the afternoon the shadows had disappeared and dusk turned into early evening. This night was just another November night. Outside, the clouds had conspired to drench the island in torrential rains. Millions of wet raindrops pelted on the metal roof giving the night its own percussion symphony. Darkness was here to stay with the only hope of lengthening days still months away. Yes, somehow the evening felt safe and cozy. A generous fire was burning in our large woodstove. A kettle whistled upstairs in the kitchen signaling for its contents to be poured into steaming mugs of hot chocolate and *Kalua* International Coffee. These were the kind of nights when a good comedy or a National Geographic Special could pass away the hours. That is, right after *Wheel of Fortune*, when Alice and I would snuggle on the sofa and watch Pat and Vanna tempt contestants with puzzles and prizes.

"Oh no! Not another National Geographic Special, again?" was the lament of those children who still lived at home. Off they sulked to their rooms to play with video games, listen to music on their boom box, or watch their favourite program on a small portable television I bought over ten years ago.

"Turn that stereo down! Now!

"And it's NOT music!"

This night, however, was not a night for television. It was a night for a good story.

Somehow the dark night had transported me into realms of facts and imagination. My mind was swimming in details of stories and events of many years ago. If only I had a video camera when I was young. My large collection of family pictures, including some three thousand slides, did not begin until our honeymoon in 1969, two years after we were married. (Yes, my wife, Alice, was pregnant when we drove from Amsterdam to Florence, Italy). The rest remain as a fathomless collection of glimpses that began pretty well that same year when our first son, Jeff, was born.

Outside the rain continued to pour straight down.

The roof rattled like tiny drums under the avalanche of rain.

The night was dark.

I was interrupted in my thoughts by a grandchild who crawled on my lap. She did not hesitate to make herself very comfortable against my soft and bulky hooded sweatshirt. Or was that my stomach that was soft and bulky? Regardless, I put my arms around her. Slowly she turned her head to look into my eyes.

"*Opa*," she asked, "when were you born?"

Somehow I knew my reply would be a lengthy one. To my children that was not so unusual, but for those who have heard me preach, it was somewhat unnerving when they looked at their watches and saw I had been speaking for an hour, and I didn't appear to be any closer to an "amen," than when I had begun.

However, there would be no sermon tonight.

It's was good night for a story.

I looked her in the eyes and said, "*Opa* was born in a country far away, thousands of miles from Gabriola Island and Canada, a country with a funny name called *Nederland*, which gave me my *Dutch* roots."

She didn't seem daunted by the fact I was an alien to these Gabriola Island shores, even though I had already ived in Canada for over forty three years.

"If you promise not to fall asleep, I will tell you the whole story."

"I was born on Sunday afternoon, April 15, 1945. A bright and warm sun was shining on the ancient Dutch city of Zwolle. The sun was also shining in the hearts of the city's inhabitants. Church bells rang throughout the city. There was excitement in the streets. People didn't know whether to go to church or catch the latest developments on the street. It was *Liberation Day*.

"Less than twenty-four hours earlier, German occupation troops still rumbled through the city's cobblestone streets, and according to my father, your great-grandfather," I added, "Zwolle was still under German artillery fire. However, on this Sunday in April, Hitler's Nazi troops were gone, driven from the city by the advancing columns of Allied troops, spearheaded by Canadian soldiers. Despite the practice of blowing up bridges over key waterways whenever the defeated Germans left to retreat one more mile, one more county, and one more province, the tide of Allied victories could not be stopped. The bridge that crossed the IJssel River, near the southern limits of the city, had been sufficiently repaired to manage the crossing of troops. Nothing could stop the Canadians now. A flood of Allied troops and relief supplies rumbled over the bridge. With the flood of people and supplies came a torrent of joyful tears. People everywhere were dancing in the streets. From rooftops, awnings, windows, and steeples, the bright colour of Orange began to appear. Orange had been the official colour of the Royal Family of the Netherlands, the *House of Orange*, and the proud colour of Dutch people everywhere. The official Dutch flag with its familiar red, white, and blue colours, as well as streams of orange bunting, suddenly appeared all over the city.

"In the midst of all that excitement, I was born.

"In the old city quarter of Zwolle stood a large *Herenhuis*, a house that belonged to a fraternal religious order. The address was *Rozemarinstraat 1*, the home of my grandparents and parents during World War II, just around the corner of the city's heart, the stately gothic St. Michael's Church and the 115 ft. medieval-style city bell-tower, the *Peperbus*. Bottom to top and back down again was a 30 minute climb up a narrow stone staircase. I remember as young boys it was race which of us could go up and down the quickest. Not me for sure. In fact, when Alice and I visited the city in 1969, it had been eleven years since I had climbed the *Peperbus*. The staircase had mysteriously grown narrower and steeper leaving me breathless by the time I reached the top. Nevertheless the view was still as beautiful as it always had been with all those red-tiled roofs. During the war year, the bell-tower was closed to visitors for fear of enemy artillery fire and strafing by bombers. Whenever the frightening sounds of air raid sirens wailed over the city and the houses shook with the drone of long distance fighters and bombers: both ways, RAF from England to Germany and the Luftwaffe from Germany to England, my grandparents and parents retreated to the house of their neighbours, tucked behind the *Herenhuis* on *Rozemarinstraat*. The reason was a practical one. The Weller family, who were owners of Weller's Glass Wholesalers, had somehow managed to build a makeshift bomb shelter in the wine cellar and storage area of their business, a building which also served as the Weller's family home. It was into this shelter that my father and mother and Opa and Oma, retreated whenever the threat of Allied bombing raids and German retaliation loomed overhead. I could never understand why anyone would build a bomb shelter beneath a large supply of plate window glass just above on a wooden

floor that separated the glass from the shelter. God knows how many prayers were said during those raids to ask that the deadly cargo in the skies would not fall on the city or both houses. People prayed feverishly that pilots and crew of Allied Bomber Command would safely return to their families and friends waiting anxiously at home across the English Channel. However, this sunny Sunday was different. Prayers had at last been answered. Fear had been replaced by renewed hope and joyful anticipation of a better tomorrow. Even though the dangers of bombing missions and street fighting were just hours behind them, the Verstraete family chose to remain a little while longer in their shelter for yet another reason.

“Cornelia Verstraete was about to give birth.

“Dr. Weber, the attending gynecologist, wore an orange tie for the occasion.

“With the liberation of the city of Zwolle came new life, a new life for a battle-scarred country, new life for a beleaguered city, and new life for Chris and Cornelia Verstraete. The world around them may not have been the best of places to begin a new life, but Chris and Cornelia Verstraete smiled as they laid me, their second baby boy, in a crib fashioned from remnants of an orange crate.

With pride they called me *Gerrit*, a name also carried by my mother's brother. I was the second child of Chris and Cornelia, following the footsteps of an older brother, Beert, who had stepped into the world a year earlier on April 2, 1944.

Custom often required that a newborn child be given additional names as well. This custom preserved a tradition of perpetuating family names and the memories of loved ones. For many it was an honour to see one's name live on in the proper names of their children. I was no exception. However, the search for my other names took an unusual twist. To understand what happened that Sunday, April 15, 1945, I must tell a bit of the story of the times.”

“This may be too much for you to understand, my child.”

By April 1945, World War II was over, at least in the eastern part of the Netherlands. During the following month of May, the remainder of my small European fatherland was liberated. Times were a mixture of deep emotions with jubilation and freedom overshadowed by pent-up anger and resentment towards German occupation. Some parts of the country, especially the major metropolitan areas of the west such as the cities of Amsterdam and Rotterdam, suffered a great deal more than eastern parts of the country. Zwolle is the capital of an eastern province called Overijssel, a name that means "over" or "on-the-other-side-of" the IJssel River, a major tributary of the Rhine and an important shipping route to the Atlantic. After Dutch armed forces capitulated early in the war, my father went into hiding throughout the five-year German occupation of *Nederland*. I always thought of my dad's hiding as a form of house arrest, with extremely limited access to outside services and always at great risk to his personal life and that of his family. If he were caught it would mean being shipped to the forced-labour camps of Eastern Europe. My uncle Herman, who was my father's younger brother, served in the Dutch Airforce. When the Airforce surrendered, he hid as well in the family home on Rozemarinstraat.

When Allied troops began to fill the streets that sunny Sunday in April 1945, my uncle was one of many who quickly connected with the city's Canadian liberators. No doubt their common bond of military duty quickly cut through the awkwardness of liberator and oppressed. The fact my uncle spoke fluent English also helped a great

deal. Somehow on that special day, Uncle Herman got the thought into his head to introduce a number of Allied soldiers to the Verstraete family. He led two of his newfound Canadian friends through the narrow streets of the old city, past the old stone church, to the Rozemarinstraat.

As I lay in my orange-crate-crib that afternoon, the door to the makeshift bomb shelter and wine cellar opened and through it stepped Uncle Herman with two strangers dressed in combat gear. It was a moment never to be repeated. There stood the Verstraete family, face to face with their liberators, as I, a little baby in an orange crate, looked on. It was a profound moment in the lives of a Dutch family and two Canadian soldiers.

I do not know who it was that suggested a likely solution to the matter of my additional names, but Chris and Cornelia chose to name their newborn son after the two Canadian liberators. I became Gerrit *Vincent Leonard* Verstraete. It was without doubt a fine way to pay tribute to the gallant men of the Canadian Army, many of whom gave their lives so that babies like Gerrit Vincent Leonard would have a future of freedom. It was no doubt an unforgettable moment for two soldiers as they stood looking at me, a little baby in a bomb shelter just hours after they had liberated the city. Vincent Southrow, who spoke French, came from Halifax, Nova Scotia, and Leonard Clampitt, who spoke English, lived in Vancouver, British Columbia. When the war was over, Leonard Clampitt moved in with his mother, who had in the meantime moved to Santa Rosa, California. Although both Vincent and Leonard kept in touch for a while after the war, nothing further is known of Vincent's whereabouts especially after Leonard's move to California. However, Leonard's mother, moved by her son's namesake in the Netherlands, did something unique and very special. In a way, she initiated her own version of the *Marshall Plan*, the name given to a massive American effort to rekindle the flames of Western Europe's economy that had been devastated and plundered by the Nazis.

Each year, as close as she could manage to the date of April 15, she sent a handsome birthday card addressed to Gerrit Vincent Leonard Verstraete. It came in an envelope *all the way from California*. In the card was a crisp American ten dollar bill, a huge sum for post-war Holland. I didn't have a clue as to how much ten American dollars really was. After all, I was just a baby. But, like manna from heaven, her contributions were vital to the wellbeing of the Verstraete family. Occasionally she sent parcels of clothes as well.

Regrettably, contact with Leonard and his mother, was lost when my family immigrated to Canada. Repeated efforts through Canada's Veteran Services and Canadian *Legion* Magazine had failed to track down either Vincent or Leonard. The last time I tried to contact Santa Rosa city hall was in 1995. I was fifty years old. They sent me a page out of their phone book. It listed a few Clampitts but none were *the* Clampitts I was looking for. Nevertheless, Vincent and Leonard's names live on as the "honourary war baby" named Gerrit Vincent Leonard Verstraete, who lives to tell others of that special day in April 1945, when two soldiers came calling on a little boy and his Dutch family. On that same day in 1945, the city of Zwolle issued the following proclamation, which I translated from a document in the city archives of Zwolle, also dated April 15, 1945.

*"Fellow-citizens! The Netherlands are rising again. The House of Orange returns. Zwolle has been liberated. The Allied armies are in pursuit of the defeated enemy. His unbearable tyranny is a thing of the past. God be worshipped and praised. Let us first of all thank Him in our places of worship and respectfully remember today those who suffered and died for the cause of freedom. With joy and enthusiasm we welcome the Allied forces who have freed us from our yoke. Let us not forget, however, in our rejoicings the sorrow still borne by so many and the difficulties which must be overcome by united cooperation. Three cheers for our native country and long life for the Fatherland. God save the Queen and her House!"*

Shortly after my birth, I was baptized Gerrit Vincent Leonard Verstraete in Zwolle's *Oosterkerk*. Thus began the journey of my life, first as a young child in the Netherlands and later as a teen and adult in Canada.

"Do you want to hear more?" I asked, wondering if she had fallen asleep.

"Sure *Opa*," she replied, as she snuggles closer.

"You see, my dear child," there was a very peculiar event that resulted in the liberation of Zwolle. So peculiar that fifty years later, the truth became known and as a result the city named one of their streets after a soldier and celebrated his valiant actions to this day. And that same soldier became a celebrity in his hometown of Montreal.

"Léo Major was raised in Montréal, Québec. He was 19 when he enlisted in the Canadian Army in 1940. He landed on the beaches of Normandy with *Le Régiment de la Chaudière* on June 6, 1944 and captured a German armoured vehicle, single-handedly. Days later, he came across a four-man German SS patrol. He engaged them and was victorious, but not before a phosphorus grenade was set off, causing Léo to lose his left eye. From that day he wore a patch over his eye, like a badge of courage.

"But, he did not quit. His resilience pushed him to carry on. Léo fought in the Battle of the Scheldt in the fall of 1944, and captured numerous enemies *on his own* but sustained a spinal injury and broken ribs in ensuing combat. He was nominated for a Distinguished Conduct Medal but he declined the decoration.

"Valiantly, Léo endured his severe back injury and stayed with his regiment as they reached Zwolle. When he arrived at the outskirts of Zwolle on Saturday evening, he volunteered with his friend, Corporal Willie Arseneault, to conduct a nighttime reconnaissance mission into the city. Sadly, as they proceeded cautiously along a railway track, Arseneault was killed by German sniper fire. Grieving and enraged, Léo, throughout the dark night, launched an attack of his own against the Nazi occupied city centre. He set on fire the Gestapo headquarters as well as armoured vehicles that stood outside a hotel that served as German command. Armed with a submachine gun and grenades, his advance was so swift and unexpected, *and* powerful, the Germans thought they were under attack by the Canadian Army and fled the city. By early Sunday morning, Zwolle was liberated. He encountered a member of the Resistance and the two of them went door to door, shouting, "*You are free!*"

"Léo Major earned a Distinguished Conduct Medal for his bravery, and another one when he fought in the Korean War. Today, Léo is a celebrated figure in the Dutch city of Zwolle, with annual commemorative events and a street named in his honour. Léo died in Montréal in 2008 at the age of 87. The events and bravery of Léo Major are described in detail in my book "*Sweet Bitter Spring*."

“And yet, the story does not end here.”

I looked down to see my granddaughter sound asleep.

“Blessed child; why bother you will all those details of wartime tragedy and triumph. Maybe when you get older you’ll understand this particular story. Yet I must continue to tell the tale for fear no one will remember.”

On April 21, 2005, after sixty years of searching, I discovered one of my liberators, Leonard Clampitt, was alive and well and still living in British Columbia. It began six days before with a call from my younger brother in Toronto to wish me well for my 60th birthday. He had spoken with Albert Vanderheide, publisher of the *Windmill Herald*, in British Columbia. Albert Vanderheide was planning a special Liberation Edition of the *Windmill Herald* and wanted to include my story, which was first published in 1985, in a book also written by Vanderheide, titled “*When a neighbor came calling*” (Paideia Press, Jordan Station, Ontario ). When Vanderheide called me about the story, I told him I had been on an unsuccessful quest to locate Clampitt and to see if he was still alive. Of all things, Vanderheide said to look in the phone book. But, he beat me to it. And there he was, Leonard Clampitt with an address and phone number in Langley. Vanderheide, who lived not far away, took it upon himself to visit Leonard Clampitt in the Fraser Valley just east of Vancouver. The visit was a disappointment because Clampitt was old and remembered very little of the war. But he did remember the baby in an orange packing case. And so this unique story ended sixty years after it began and continues as I proudly wear the names of two Canadian liberators, Vincent Southrow and Leonard Clampitt.

On Tuesday April 25, my discovery of Leonard Clampitt, a feature story written by Doug Ward, appeared in the Westcoast Section of the *Vancouver Sun*, complete with a big colourful photograph of me in front of one of my large abstract paintings, and a black & white photograph of my older brother Beert and I in Zwolle in 1949. I was 4 years old at the time. The headline in the Vancouver Sun read: “*Finding namesake a liberating event. Gerrit Verstraete finally gets to meet a Canadian soldier he was named after in Holland in 1945.*” A revised article and photograph by staff writer Bruce Mason also appeared two weeks later on May 5, 2005, in our local Gabriola Island weekly newspaper, the *Souder*.

“And still the story does not end, my child.”

Even though she was still asleep I began to tell her about a Gabriola Island connection.

Back across the Atlantic Ocean, a woman had come upon the *Vancouver Sun* story in the paper’s online edition. Her name was Hanny Linek. Because of the 60th anniversary of the Netherlands’ Liberation there were already many wartime stories of tears and laughter circulating in major Canadian and Dutch Press, especially about the heroism on the Canadians liberators. One Dutchman named John Boers had begun an online initiative titled: “*Liberation Children and War Babies, WWII,*” for preserving the stories of these often unwanted children (translated from “*Bevrijdingskinderen*” WWII). Hanny Linek, as part of an organization called “*Bevrijdingskind,*” (“Liberation Child”) that aimed to destigmatize war babies, had undertaken extensive research and in the process came across my story in the *Vancouver Sun*. She was an unwanted war baby determined to find her biological father. Hanny Linek was born Hanny Vander Heide on February 10, 1946, in Leeuwarden, Friesland a Northern Province of the Netherlands.

Her mother's maiden name was Vander Heide. Right after the war over Hanny's mother married and her stepfather adopted the wear baby as if she was his own child. Hanny spoke about a wonderful childhood and a happy family. When she turned 16, she was told by her mother, now 37 years old, that she was the child of a very brief encounter between her and a Canadian soldier. Her biological father's name was Leonard Clampitt. She was shocked when she came across my story of Leonard Clampitt in the *Vancouver Sun*. She contacted the newspaper and got my email address. She wrote me and soon we began an online conversation. Further details proved to be conclusive, that this Leonard Clampitt was one and the same. He had traveled back to Canada, knowing Hanny's mother was pregnant. Yet he had chosen to leave his pregnant "war-bride" behind and never contacted her again. He never knew about his daughter's birth.

Until the summer of 2005.

Hanny had married Chris Linek in 1976, and together they were determined to come to Canada, contact her biological father, and have closure.

Imagine that summer day in 2005, when Hanny and Chris sat across from us in our livingroom on Gabriola Island. It was like a homecoming. She had no bitterness towards her father. She just wanted to meet him. In the meantime I had made sure the address was correct and the possibility of father and daughter to meet one another after sixty years was a reality. Hanny and Chris left Gabriola Island enthusiastically hopeful about their encounter. I did not feel any need to meet Leonard Clampitt myself. Father and daughter reunion was more important. We heard afterwards, when Hanny and Chris had returned to the Netherlands, that the encounter had been brief and that her father's memory was practically nonexistent. But he did acknowledge Hanny was his biological daughter. Enough said, except to conclude Hanny found her biological father and had closure, once and for all.

I looked down to see my granddaughter still sleeping with not a care in the world, especially oblivious to the vivid memories of an honorary bar baby.