

A Memorial to 'Tillie'

A young Dutch girl named "Tillie" awaited with great excitement the expected arrival of her liberators - the U.S. Second Armored Division ("Hell on Wheels"). The U.S. forces were approaching her town, Geleen, in southern Limburg province, which had been under Nazi occupation since May 1940. Four years is a long time in a young girl's life.

On September 18, 1944, troops of the XIX Corps, 2d Armored Division entered the south edge of Geleen against light resistance from the retreating German forces. The Germans were regrouping for the defense of the German border, just 6 miles to the east. The city of Aachen, Germany, was the American target, but first the Dutch towns near the border had to be cleared of snipers and the last German units.

A young American named Warren Kappen is, if you will, the other half of the story. Tech Sergeant Warren R. Kappen, son of Robert E. and Mildred (Patanude) Kappen, was born March 28, 1920. At age 14 he moved to Detroit and was employed as a welder. Warren entered the army Nov. 26, 1941. He served in the African Theatre and, in 1943 he joined the 67th Armored Regiment, 2nd Armored Division (Hell on Wheels) in England. After the D-Day invasion, Warren and his comrades fought their way across France, and pushed on into southern Netherlands. Their goal was to break the Siegfried Line defenses and take Aachen – the first large city in their path.

Warren was aboard a tank that drove down the street where Tillie lived. It is a beautiful Dutch street, still lined with lovely stone houses and carefully-groomed gardens. In the hard days before liberation, no doubt those gardens provided much of the food for Tillie and her family.

Tillie heard the tank coming and ran excitedly to the large picture window to see what would happen. To her amazement, Warren Kappen's tank stopped in the street right outside. After a pause, the tank hatch popped open and Warren Kappen cautiously climbed up. Tragically, he was immediately killed by a German sniper, right in front of Tillie's eyes. It was September 18, 1944.

We first met Tillie, and her husband Hubert, in 2000 at a meeting of the Netherlands-American Institute of Limburg – a friendship organization that still actively commemorated and honored the liberation of that Dutch region by American soldiers, sixty-six years earlier. Many months later, Tillie related a piece of the story you have read here, but she could not talk about it. It was still a vivid image that stayed with her throughout her long and beautiful life. Her eyes would tear up and she would stop.

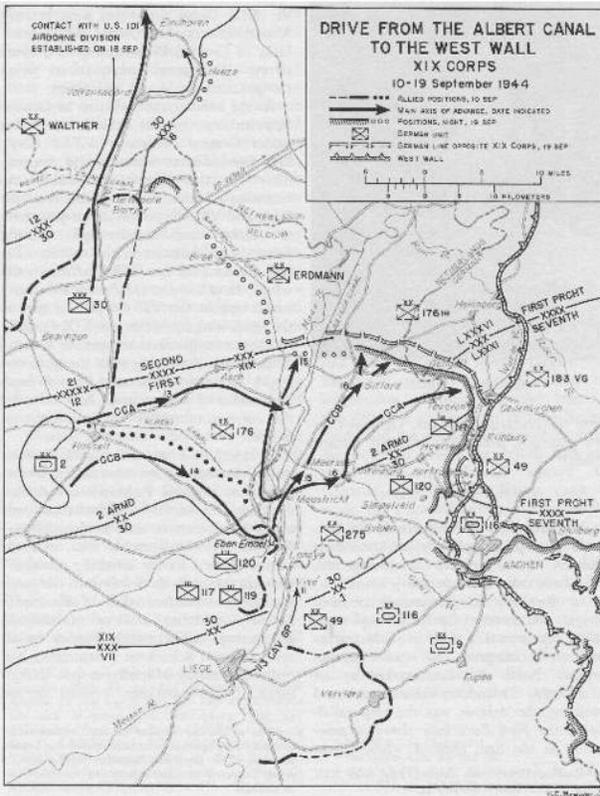
Then, in 2003, another Dutch citizen of Geleen who had experienced the liberation, Arno Bemelmans, decided to build a memorial to the soldiers who had brought freedom back to his town. Many people in his, Hubert and Tillie's generation knew each other and even lived in the same homes their parents had passed on to them. Tillie learned of the memorial project and contacted Arno to answer a question that had been nagging at her all her life – who was this brave young man who gave his life to make me free? With Arno's help, Tillie learned the name, Warren Kappen, and where he had come from, the State of Michigan. She and Hubert pursued that lead and found Warren's descendants.

They began to talk to the family members who had known almost nothing about how Warren died. Tillie revealed to the Kappen family the sad story of Warren's death. But they also told the almost unbelievable story that a brand-new monument would be erected in Geleen honoring Warren and the 60 other American soldiers who made the ultimate sacrifice liberating the town. Hubert and Tillie invited the entire Kappen clan to Geleen to attend the dedication of the monument on a beautiful fall afternoon, September 18, 2004. And that is how Karen and I met the Kappen family.

Tillie passed away on October 19, 2019, leaving her life-long partner Hubert and the life together they shared. She was a beautiful person in every way.

We are comforted by the fact that she and Hubert were able to complete the circle – to learn the name of Warren Kappen, and to see his name and sixty others honored in her town. The memorial that stands there today is in the form of the letter "H", which might be seen as a reference to "Hell on Wheels," the division's motto. But Arno Bemelmans, who lead the effort for the memorial, preferred to think of the "H" as representing "herinnering," Dutch for remembrance, and "herdenking," Dutch for commemoration. He wants English speakers to think of the "H" as symbolizing "homes," for the ones the soldiers left behind.

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Geleen's bevrijding

De bevrijding van Geleen geschiedde Maandagmorgen omstreeks half negen, maar de wijze waarop zij geschiedde zal uniek in de historie van ons land blijven. De gevechtshandelingen tusschen de aanrukkende Amerikanen en de wijkende Duitschers waren den Rijksweg bij het klooster der Paters Carmelieten genaderd. De Duitschers hadden zich goed verborgen achter daar liggende objecten van allerlei aard. Een pater, die zich naar buiten gewaagd had en in de veronderstelling leefde, dat de Pruisen definitief waren afgetrokken, vertoonde zich onmiddellijk op straat, gesierd met een groote oranje sjerp, dat voor de bewoners in zijn omgeving het sein werd onmiddellijk de nationale kleuren uit te steken. En toen de Pruisen dat zagen, meenden zij dat de Amerikanen op hun vervolgingstocht hen weer op de hielen zaten. Het werd een wilde vlucht terwijl de Amerikanen daar nog niet te zien waren.....!

Het beteekende de definitieve bevrijding van Geleen en hoe dit verder gevierd werd, behoeven wij zeker niet te vertellen. Dezelfde enthousiaste toneelen als elders speelden zich ook hier af.

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Warren Kappen







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