FOOD DROPS IN HOLLAND DURING WW2

Allied aircraft's targeting of all vehicular convoys, war damage to transportation infrastructure, cruelty of the German occupation, and the unusually harsh winter of 1944 to 1945 all contributed to great famine during the winter of 1944 to 1945 in the Netherlands. The suffering was particularly felt in the more densely populated western regions of the country. During the general *Hongerwinter* ("Hunger winter") period, approximately between Sep 1944 and May 1945, about 18,000 to 22,000 Dutch civilians died due to malnutrition and starvation, with Mar 1945 being the worst month by the number of deaths.

A German blockade cut off food and fuel shipments from farm towns. Some 4.5 million were affected and survived thanks to soup kitchens. Most of the victims were reportedly elderly men.

In April 1945, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and US President Franklin Roosevelt agreed that something needed to be done. Shortly after, US Army Chief of Staff George Marshall gave Dwight Eisenhower the permission to conduct negotiations with *Reichskommissar* Arthur Seyß-Inquart of the German occupation for a limited ceasefire, through which relief could be brought to the civilians. Due to the negotiations, fighting was de-escalated from 28 Apr 1945 through what would become the end of the European War. It was then agreed that Allied aircraft bringing supplies for the civilians following specific air routes would not be fired upon by German anti-aircraft fire. The first of such missions took place on 29 April, and Seyß-Inquart would officially give the order to cease firing on Allied supply transports on 30 April 1945.

In his research, author Adam Sutch of the RAF Museum has provided a more detailed account of the Operation to supply food and medicine to those who were faced with starvation:

Growing Allied strength in the air was a powerful influence on the population. They listened to the roar of RAF bombers flying over Holland to attack German targets and many Dutch people say that this was the sound that convinced them they would one day be liberated. Unfortunately, the Germans were also aware of these routes and the population saw many combats in the night sky with bombers and crews falling to night-fighters, many of them stationed on Dutch airfields. Great courage was shown by many Dutch people, not only helping and hiding crews who survived the loss of their aircraft, but also in tending the graves of fallen crewmen. This was equally true for the crews of the United States 8th Air Force, sending hundreds of daylight bombers at high altitude on their way to Germany.

For much of the War, Holland could just about feed itself, although the Germans removed large numbers of livestock, especially cattle, and requisitioned many other foodstuffs. There may not have been the pre-War variety, but food distribution systems worked and rationing, plus some black market for those who could afford it, ensured an adequate diet. This began to change soon after the Allied invasion of Normandy in June 1944. German priorities moved from being an Occupying to a Defending Army, with effects on the distribution system; the railways, waterways and Agriculture.

Over 500,000 acres were flooded or otherwise taken out of use by the Germans during 1944, many barges had been seized and there was no fuel for transport by lorry. These measures made distribution of food very difficult, particularly to the Western Provinces, which are less agricultural and contain the biggest cities.

A picture of the flooding of vast areas of land taken from a low-flying Lancaster.

Although the Allied Armies advanced relatively quickly through France and Belgium to capture the port of Antwerp, there were areas on the left flank that were left in German hands whilst the British 21st Army Group pushed towards Germany. Thus some of Holland was liberated, but much remained occupied. The British did try Operation Market Garden in September 1944. This was an attempt using Paratroops to seize bridges across a number of major river obstacles. You will all have heard of 'The Bridge Too Far", at Arnhem,

where the attempt stalled. In anticipation of success at Arnhem, the Dutch Government in Exile called on the railway workers to strike, which they did. After the Germans defeated the airborne troops, they took revenge against the civilian population still in their hands. Men were rounded up for slave labour, electricity and gas supplies were severely restricted, partly through lack of fuel, and the transportation of food was forbidden for seven weeks, just as winter was approaching. Railway rolling stock was seized and taken to Germany. The workers maintained their strike, many going into hiding.

These measures and the unusually severe weather conditions of winter 44/45 brought the 'Hongerwinter'. Canals and rivers froze, denying transport of food. This was especially difficult in the so-called 'B-2' area of the Western Provinces, containing some 3.5 Million people and the major population centres of Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht.

Despite a system of food distribution and rationing which was well administered by Dutch civil servants, Food supplies were completely inadequate, particularly in these major cities. Some people cycled to the country to exchange valuables for food, some found black market food but most, particularly the old and children, were slowly starving to death. Lois de Jong, one of the most prominent Dutch writers on this time, estimates that about 20,000 civilians died of cold, malnutrition and associated disease before sufficient food became available. He also calculated that about 800,000 souls suffered some lasting effects from the hunger. The Dutch government in exile was informed of these circumstances and in January 1945 Queen Wilhelmina wrote a letter to King George and President Roosevelt.

"It is the duty of the Dutch government to strongly plead for military action with the aim to drive the Germans out of The Netherlands. She feels that this request is reasonable and necessary and she will be grateful for the assurance that nothing will be left undone to reach this goal. If, which the Dutch government hopes will not happen, immediate military aid will not be possible, than immediate aid in the shape of massive evacuation or in the shape of food supplies, clothing, fuel and medicine is necessary."

A Dutch "Committee of Confidence" negotiated with the German Reichskomissar for Holland, Seyss-Inquart, for limited shipments of Flour, Fats and other food by Switzerland and Sweden under Red Cross arrangements. These began in late January and February 1945, but did not come anywhere near to solving the problem. Although they started to stockpile rations in Europe, against the day when Holland could be liberated, Eisenhower and Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF) high command were concerned. German forces in Holland, had been ordered to fight to the end by Hitler, and might cause complete devastation by flooding the rest of the Western Provinces, if they were attacked.

The Dutch Committee of Confidence then reported in early April that Seyss-Inquart might be open to negotiate a truce, which could allow the supply of much more food to avert an imminent humanitarian catastrophe. This led the Allies to an imaginative plan. Perhaps safe passage for airdrops of food from England, only 130 or so miles away, could be arranged?

Allied transport aircraft fleets were badly stretched by the demands of the War and delivering food quickly to Holland by ship was beset by difficulty through mines and the damage the Germans had done to ports, docks and cranes. However, there was a huge lifting capacity within the RAF's Bomber Command and the United States Eighth Army Air Force, based in the United Kingdom. By this time in the War, there was a real sense that the Bombers were running out of worthwhile targets. Air Commodore Andrew Geddes, whose job was Operations and Plans at 2nd Tactical Air Force, was summoned to Eisenhower's Headquarters on 17th April to be told that he must plan for feeding 3,500,000 Dutch souls from the air, commencing in 10 days' time. There were no parachutes available for dropping supplies, therefore Geddes should plan for low-level free drops and assume that the German troops on the ground would grant safe conduct for the flights.

RAF Bomber Command would provide No 1 and No 3 Group operating Lancasters, together with appropriate Pathfinder Mosquito and Lancaster support; altogether 33 Squadrons. The Americans would provide the B17 Flying Fortresses of 3rd Air Division of 10 Bombardment Groups. Whilst Geddes and his small staff were planning, Engineers in the Air Forces were working out how to pack the food and then drop it, with some changes to the bomb bay of the B17 aeroplanes. Material for the modifications, cargo nets, sacks and of course the food was being transported to the airfields in England.

At the same time, details of the plan were communicated to Holland, in order that arrangements for collecting, safeguarding, transporting and distributing the food could be made. The planners even specified the provision of medical services at the Drop Zones, in case hungry people invaded them and were hit by the tins and bags from the air.

Crews from the nominated Squadrons were practicing flying and drops at low level, in daylight, mostly with sandbags. Not everything went perfectly. At one demonstration; cascading tins of meat, sugar and other food were very close to hitting the senior officer spectators! Early on in the practice drops it was discovered that two sacks, one inside the other, were needed to avoid cargo being ruined or dispersed on landing.

Geddes also turned his plan into a sort of “Heads of Agreement” to be signed by Allied, Dutch and German Representatives. Neither Geddes, nor his seniors were interested in protracted negotiations or horse-trading. His document simply set out arrangements for the Air Supply of food to the population of the occupied Netherlands through flights to ten specified drop zones. Meanwhile, the Germans had flooded more land and the meagre remaining food was fast running out completely.

The first meeting with German Representatives was planned for the 28th of April, in a School House at Achterveld. However, on the 27th, Resistance representatives, in touch with the Dutch Civilian Food

Distribution organisation, reported to His Royal Highness Prince Bernhard that supplies and distribution had broken down and that they stood at the edge of catastrophe.

Seyss-Inquart had indicated that he would agree to four drop zones. Despite this, the German Representatives at Achterveld on the 28th said they were only there to hear what the Allies proposed and report back. The Allies then stated that food drops would begin next day at 5 locations, this would be announced on Radio Oranje, for the Dutch population and Radio Luxembourg, which at that time was a SHAEF station broadcasting to German Forces as Nachtsender 1212. The Germans were not to interfere with the drops and were to return to Achterveld as soon as possible with authorised Representatives.

On the next day, 29th April, 239 RAF Lancasters dropped 535 tons of food at 5 locations, followed by 1021 tons on the 30th.

This was the day that Hitler committed suicide in Berlin and the day that Seyss-Inquart agreed to the arrangements at a second meeting at Achterveld. RAF aircrew were suspicious of German intentions when flying the first sorties of Operation Manna, which was the name for the RAF element of this plan.

The crews knew how vulnerable they would be, flying low and slow at the height where light flak and even rifle fire would be very effective against them. However, apart from a few rifle calibre holes in a very few aeroplanes, the Germans carried out their part in the plan throughout. And aircrew confidence rapidly grew.

In sorties from the 1st of May until 8th May, the RAF dropped a further 5586 tons of food. I say 'RAF'. But the crews comprised airmen from around the world. 300 Squadron, your own Polish bombers, flew many sorties, as did Australians, Canadians and New Zealanders. There was even a Dutchman, Heukensfeld-Jansen, flying a Lancaster of 90 Squadron, to drop food at Rotterdam.

The aerial Operation Manna commenced first on 29 Apr 1945, concluding on 7 May 1945. It was conducted by British, Australian, Canadian, New Zealand, and Polish aircraft and crews. During this operation, 3,301 sorties were flown (145 by Mosquito aircraft, 3,156 by Lancaster aircraft), delivering 6,680 tons of food and supplies. The crates were dropped without parachutes at the altitude of approximately 120 to 150 meters (about 400 to 500 feet) to Katwijk (Valkenburg airfield), The Hague (Duindigt horse racecourse and Ypenburg airfield), Rotterdam (Waalhaven airfield and Kralingse Plas), and Gouda.

The US aerial counterpart, Operation Chowhound, lasted from 1 May 1945 to 8 May 1945. A total of 2,268 sorties were flown by B-17 Flying Fortress bombers, delivering about 4,000 tons of food, some of which in the form of K-rations.

After it was realised that *Manna* and *Chowhound* would be insufficient, a ground-based relief operation named **Operation Faust** was launched. On 2 May, 200 Allied trucks began delivering food to the city of Rhenen, behind German lines.

The third effort, Operation Faust, began at 0730 hours on 2

May 1945 and ended on 10 May 1945. During this operation, 360 Allied trucks (from 8 Canadian and 4 British transport platoons) conducted multiple round trips, delivering a total of about 9,000 tons of food and supplies to a designated area between the villages of Wageningen and Rhenen in central Netherlands. Logistical problems prevented Faust supplies from being distributed to the civilians in Amsterdam until 10 May 1945, in The Hague until 11 May 1945, and in Utrecht until 11 May 1945, however. While Operation Faust officially concluded on 10 May, 200 Canadian trucks remained on food distribution missions in the Netherlands for some time to come.

Dutch women collected some of the food parcel drops.

This container was collected by Rob Wethly's (SLO Drenthe) grandmother near Utrecht in the Netherlands at the time. It is reported that at least one civilian was killed by one of these heavy tin containers.

Operations Manna, Chowhound, and Faust Timeline

23 April 1945 George Marshall authorized Dwight Eisenhower to negotiate with the Germans in the Netherlands for a limited ceasefire in order to bring relief to the starving civilians.

29 April 1945 Two British RAF Lancaster bombers conducted the first Operation Manna sortie, delivering food to Dutch civilians.

30 April 1945 Commissioner of the German occupation in the Netherlands, Arthur Seyß-Inquart, officially agreed that Allied aircraft delivering food and other supplies to Dutch civilians would not be harassed by German defensive fire.

1 May 1945 US B-17 bombers dropped crates of K-rations over Amsterdam Schiphol Airport in the Netherlands.

2 May 1945 At 0730 hours, the first of many Canadian and British trucks crossed German defensive lines in the Netherlands without being harassed to deliver food to Dutch civilians. On the same day, 400 US B-17 bombers dropped crates of K-rations over Amsterdam Schiphol Airport in the Netherlands.

3 May 1945 US B-17 bombers dropped crates of K-rations over Amsterdam Schiphol Airport in the Netherlands.

5 May 1945 400 American B-17 bombers dropped food and other supplies over the Netherlands.

6 May 1945 400 American B-17 bombers dropped food and other supplies over the Netherlands.

The American operation, ”Chowhound”, ran from 1st to 7th May and delivered 3770 tons of food By B17 onto 10 Drop Zones in 2189 sorties. In total, almost 11, 000 tons of food was dropped in 5,391 successful sorties, for the loss of 3 B17s and 1 Lancaster in accidents, which caused the death of 12 American crewmen.

Des Hawkins DFC, an RAF Navigator on Operation Manna has told how he normally stayed behind his curtain in the aeroplane but, on his Manna trips, he came out to see amazing sights on the ground; from German soldiers looking up at them to Dutch civilians in their thousands, around and on the Drop Zones, on roof tops, in the streets, waving flags and sheets or just their hands. Similar stories have been told by many of the aircrew.

Everyone on the ground also knew what was happening and why. The aeroplanes meant life and hope and there were hundreds of them. People who were children in Holland then, but aging now, also tell of their absolute joy and renewed hope for the future as they watched the aeroplanes and the sacks and boxes come tumbling down to be collected. Their thanks were spelled out for the crews to see.

What was this food? At the start, the British sacks contained some pre-packaged combat rations, but contents quickly moved to a single type in each sack. It could be flour, tinned meat, sugar, coffee, peas, and chocolate or dried egg powder. Mostly, these were staples, few luxuries. The Americans, too, started off dropping field rations but soon switched to single types of foodstuffs per sack.

Some tell stories of 'finding' and keeping a box or a sack, but that had its dangers as well. Some sacks might just have pepper in them, and there were dangers in eating too much high calorie food, too quickly, after so long on a very poor diet.

Orange Drop Cookies

Despite the general hunger, discipline and organisation on the ground mostly worked very well. German soldiers and Dutch Policemen kept order and escorted the food as it was collected and carried off Barges, wagons and manpower were all used for distribution, which started up very quickly, as did the kitchens to provide meals.

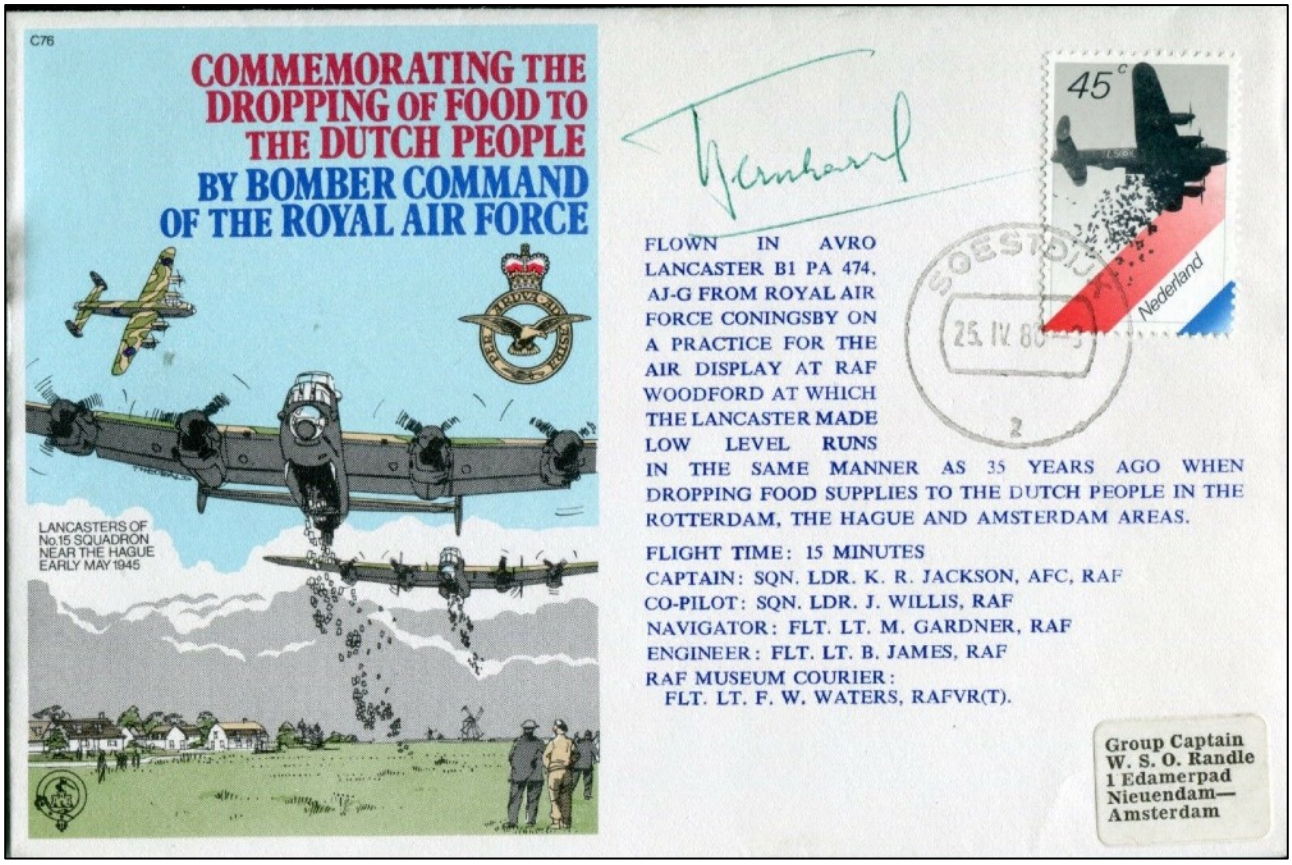
This was all bolstered from 3rd May by another Operation, “Faust”, which was Canadian Army transport, with the agreement of the Germans, crossing through the lines and delivered food, coal and medicines into

the Western Provinces. Two hundred or more lorries were quickly given to the Dutch to help with the onward distribution.

After the German capitulation in Holland on 6th May 1945, Chowhound ended on the next day and Operation Manna on the 8th. As Dutch Government was re-established, reinstating Mayors and a civil administration, the supply of food by land continued, but the airdrops were over. They only lasted just a few days but the Manna and Chowhound drops have had a massive impact on many levels. They made a real difference to the survival and future health of millions of people. Secondly, the people of Holland have not forgotten and have regularly honoured both the Veterans and the event itself. Prince Bernhard decorated Geddes after the War and they remained friends since meeting during the planning and at Achterveld.

There is a formal memorial to Manna and Chowhound in Holland and many households still cherish an old food sack, or a ration tin from those days. Many contacts have been established and maintained between the aircrew and the Dutch citizens involved. There are Memorials across the world from stamps in Holland, a tile mosaic in Canada to paintings and commemorative coins. Also, these Operations showed the world a new use for Air Power, in the service of humanity, if you like. Ironically, one of the first and major recipients was the German nation, or at least those in Berlin. Commonwealth and American Air Forces found themselves running a massive airlift, Operation Plainfare and Operation Vittles, when the Soviets closed the access corridors to Berlin. This lasted almost a year and delivered over two Million tons of supplies.

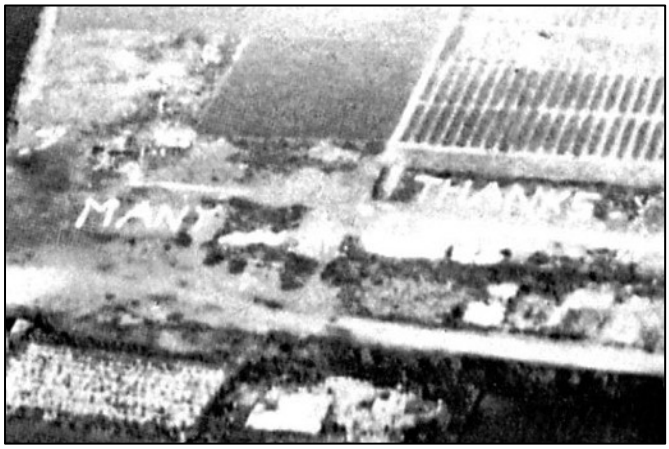
Since then we have seen many other examples of this humanitarian use of Air Power; the delivery of aid from Ethiopia to Grenada and many places in between. This combination of Strategic Reach and the ability to plan, organise and implement effectively and quickly is a hallmark of the best Air Forces and will be needed around the World, again and again, in the future.



A signed appreciation from Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands

The words “Many thanks” are written in Tulip’s (May 1945)

Towards the end of World War II, food supplies became increasingly scarce in the Netherlands. After the landing of the Allied Forces on D-Day, conditions grew increasingly bad in the Nazi-occupied Netherlands.



The Allies were able to liberate the southern part of the country, but these efforts came to an abrupt halt when Operation Market Garden, the attempt seize a bridge across the Rhine at Arnhem, failed.

The Allied advance into Germany was delayed by supply problems as the port of Antwerp was not useable until the approaches had been cleared in the Battle of the Scheldt. But Montgomery had given priority to "Market Garden"; and to the capture of the French Channel ports like Boulogne, Calais and Dunkirk, which were resolutely defended and had suffered demolitions, see Operation Market Garden .

Food stocks in the cities in the western Netherlands rapidly ran out. The adult rations in cities such as Amsterdam dropped to below 1000 calories (4,200 kilojoules) a day by the end of November 1944 and to 580 calories in the west by the end of February 1945. Over this *Hongerwinter* ("Hunger winter"), a number of factors combined to cause starvation in especially the large cities in the West of the Netherlands. The winter in the month of January 1945 itself was unusually harsh prohibiting transport by boat for roughly a month between early January 1945 and early February 1945. Also, the German army destroyed docks and bridges to flood the country and impede the Allied advance. Thirdly, Allied bombing made it extremely difficult to transport food in bulk, since Allied bombers could not distinguish German military and civilian shipments. As the south-eastern (the Maas valley) and the south-western part of the Netherlands (Walcheren and Beveland) became one of the main western battlefields, these conditions combined to make the transport of existing food stocks in large enough quantities nearly impossible.

The areas affected were home to 4.5 million people. Butter disappeared after October 1944, shortly after railway transport to the western parts of the Netherlands had stopped in September due to the railway strike. The supply of vegetable fats dwindled to a minuscule seven-month supply of 1.3 litres per person. At first one hundred grams of cheese were allotted every two weeks; the meat coupons became worthless. The bread ration had already dropped from 2,200 to 1,800 and then to 1,400 grams per week. Then it fell to 1,000 grams in October, and by April 1945 to 400 grams a week. Together with one kilogram of potatoes, this then formed the entire weekly ration. The black market increasingly ran out of food as well, and with the gas and electricity and heat turned off, everyone was very cold and very hungry. In search of food, young strong people would walk for tens of kilometres to trade valuables for food at farms. Tulip bulbs and sugar beets were commonly consumed. Furniture and houses were dismantled to provide fuel for heating.

In the last months of 1944, in anticipation of the coming famine, tens of thousands of children were brought from the cities to rural areas where many remained until the end of the war. Deaths in the three big cities of the Western Netherlands (The Hague, Rotterdam, and Amsterdam) started in earnest in December 1944, reaching a peak in March 1945, but remained very high in April and May 1945. In early summer 1945 the famine was brought quickly under control. From September 1944 until May 1945 the deaths of 18,000 Dutch people were attributed to malnutrition as the primary cause and in many more as a contributing factor.

Compiled by Norman Bambridge
Basildon Borough Heritage Society
September 2019.