



"The children in Holland show such respect. It means so much to me that they are interested. They keep the memories alive."

## John Jephcote: A Hero Returns

From a vantage point overlooking the Waal River, in Arnhem, Netherlands, he fixed his gaze on the bridge, the bridge too far. "Ten thousand men were sent to take that bridge, only 2,200 got out," he says with heartfelt sorrow, as though he knew personally each man who didn't come home.

"It was a bloody shame," he says, his British accent coming through.

John Herbert Jephcote, commonly known as Jeff, is one of the few remaining veterans of Operation Market Garden, one of the largest airborne assaults in history, which took place in Holland in September 1944. The primary goal of the operation was to gain control of a series of bridges over the main rivers of the German-occupied Netherlands, the Maas, the Waal and the Lower Rhine. This would allow a rapid advance by armoured allied forces. It was the hope of Field Marshall Bernard Montgomery that this would end the war six months ahead of schedule.

Jeff was a hero. He did not assume the title, nor would he have accepted it directly, but it was still the truth. He was a soldier who did his best in the face of danger, under fire and often against all odds. He was a man who lived with the memories of war, often questioning why he lived when others died. He was a strong man who always did what he thought was right. The people of Holland display such unrestricted admiration and appreciation for the soldiers who freed them from German oppression. It is no wonder that Jeff was eager to return, which he did for the last time just prior to his 87th birthday in May 2011.

As Jeff was pushed down the street in a wheelchair, passersby would stop him to shake his hand and openly express their gratitude, usually with glistening eyes.

On the airplane into Amsterdam, one woman approached him. She was a tall woman with blond hair and an expression of joie du vivre on her face. Although likely a grandmother, youth danced in her eyes. She stopped beside his seat and pointed at the crest on his jacket and said, "I'm from there, thank you." Then with tears in her eyes, she leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. He beamed as she walked back toward her seat. Then he said, in his unpolished British accent, "Well that's alright, isn't it."

Everywhere he went it was the same thing. When he visited the Airborne Museum at the Hotel Hartenstein in Oosterbeek, he was swarmed by patrons. The older ones thanked him with the sincerity of someone whose life had just been saved, not 65 years ago. The younger ones, in displays of such great respect showered him with questions, and all within earshot, sat rapt as he answered. As he spoke to those around him, he looked

them in the eye and gripped both their hands and their hearts. Genuine appreciation was expressed by all who were present, and although the subject was heavy, the atmosphere was light.

Jeff visited places where he had served and fought during Operation Market Garden. He sat on a small stone patio behind Oosterbeek Church, which overlooked a farm field, and then the Lower Rhine River and a bridge that connects Oosterbeek with Driel. As he sat there in this peaceful place, he recounted how this church had been the headquarters of the British, then captured by the Germans and re-captured by the British.

As he described the tanks rolling across the field toward the church stronghold, you could hear metal grinding, engines roaring, guns firing. He recounted the story, and it became real. He told of the battles and the hardships, the wins and the losses, and always the cost.

Jeff visited the cemeteries at Oosterbeek, and Arnhem. As he passed by each grave, he would read many of the names aloud and then their ages, "19, 23, 22, 19, 19, 21, just a boy, he never even got a chance to live."

The hardened soldier in him did his best to hold back the tears that came to his eyes, but the depth of his sorrow over those whose names that he read was impossible to hide.

What is a hero? I suppose the answer may depend on who you ask. Ask a child and it is likely a parent. Ask a teenager and it is likely a musician or an athlete. Ask someone ill and it might be a doctor. Ask someone lonely and it is someone who takes time to speak to them, and if you ask a senior it will be someone who visits or helps them. Ask someone from Holland, and it's one of the soldiers in the cemetery, and the few who remain alive. Ask a soldier or a veteran and it just may be you....the one who says thank you, the one who remembers.

Yes, we must remember those who gave their lives for us. Truthfully though, how can we remember something that we didn't live through? How can we understand a sacrifice that we have never had to make? How can we sit in our safe, warm homes and know the cold of the night watch, or the taste of the last ration? We can, however, remember to be grateful. Grateful for the freedom to choose, thankful to be able to pay for fuel, drive a car, ride a bus, get a job, own a home, read a newspaper, surf the net, have a family, live in a community, wander about any time of the day or night, worship as we choose, be free, be kind, be Canadian.



Top left: Jephcote visits the war cemetery at Oosterbeek, Holland on the anniversary of the Liberation of Holland.

Top right: Jephcote leaves a message for visitors at the Airborne Pub No. 1 in Arnhem. This pub was once restricted to Airborne members exclusively.

Top right below: Jephcote, much decorated veteran of WWII, visits the Airborne Museum in Hotel Hartenstein in Oosterbeek. While there, Jephcote becomes the attraction.

Bottom right: At the Airborne Museum in Hotel Hartenstein in Oosterbeek Jephcote basks in the attention of the youth.

Bottom left: Jephcote visits the Oosterbeek Church, a significant stronghold during Operation Market Garden, the largest airborne assault in WWII. The Airborne insignia, "Pegasus," representing the 101st Airborne Division, rests upon the font.

Photos and story by Sherry Tompkins