

*A very special welcome to Mandy, Sharron, and Chriss, grandchildren of Samuel Onion, one of the 13 Polar Bears, who died so tragically in the fields near Soestdijk Palace. My introduction will be in Dutch; our guests of honor have the English version.*

*Welcome Deputy Mayor, dear Meindert, distinguished guests.*



Today, Sunday **10 May 2026**, we will unveil a memorial stone on behalf of the Municipality of Soest and the '4 and 5 May Committee Soest and Soesterberg'. A lasting reminder of what has become known as the 'Tragedy of Soestdijk'. And it is precisely this date, May 10, that makes this moment extra special. On **10 May 1945** – just a few days after the liberation – thirteen British soldiers lost their lives near Soestdijk Palace due to a fatal explosion. These soldiers were part of the 1st Battalion of the Leicestershire Regiment, part of the British 49th (West Riding) Infantry Division, nicknamed the 'Polar Bears'. That nickname did not come about by chance. In 1940, this division was sent to Iceland to prevent a possible German invasion. They trained there under harsh Arctic conditions. Since then, they proudly wore the polar bear on an ice floe as their emblem. On **7 May 1945**, these Polar Bears liberated Utrecht, Soest, Baarn, and Hilversum, among other places. The British staff established themselves in the strategically located Hotel Trier, at the time diagonally opposite Soestdijk Palace; the soldiers were housed in the Geranium School in Hilversum. After the liberation, the Polar Bears were given a new task: disarming the German troops in the wider area around Hilversum. The surrender of weapons took place in the meadows next to Soestdijk Palace. German soldiers marching or arriving by horse and wagon via the Amsterdamsestraatweg or the Praamgracht had to report to Hotel Trier first. They continued along the Biltseweg to the meadows; along the cycle path, they disposed of their helmets, gas masks, and other small equipment. In the meadows, they had to hand over their bicycles, bayonets, rifles, all their ammunition, and their cannons. In photographs, it appears to be a disorderly situation. And then! ... On Thursday **10 May 1945**, Ascension Day, a wagon containing military equipment was unloaded under the supervision of the Polar Bears, and ammunition was thrown onto a large pile. During this process, a so-called 'Panzerschreck', a portable rocket launcher comparable to an American 'Bazooka', exploded. It is likely that the rocket launcher's ammunition exploded during unloading, and that surrounding rockets, hand grenades, and other ammunition subsequently detonated. Whether it was an accident or intentional has never been determined. The war was over; the German soldiers, too, wanted to go home. The explosion killed 13 Polar Bears instantly. Six others were seriously wounded. Several German soldiers also lost their lives in the incident. How ironic it can be: surviving the war, experiencing the liberation, and then—so soon afterwards—perishing after all! The devastation in Soest is immense. In the 't Hart district, near the disaster site, residents are collecting money. An impressive sea of flowers appears on the coffins of the fallen soldiers. Two days later, on **12 May 1945**, the thirteen Polar Bears were transferred from the Geranium School in Hilversum to the Noorderbegraafplaats in Hilversum amidst great public interest. There they were buried. They still rest there today, under the care of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. With their meaningful motto: 'Caring for the fallen'. But remembering is more than just care. Remembering is also continuing to tell stories. Historian Meindert Tepper has taken this motto very much to heart. He adopted the graves and dedicated himself from 2019 onward to finding the faces behind the names. Thanks to his persistence, ten of the thirteen Polar Bears have now been given a face again. And why only now, then, this memorial stone in Soest? Well, the following precedes this... in February 2025, Meindert Tepper gave a lecture for the 'Historische Vereniging Soest (HVS)' as part of the 80th anniversary commemoration, a lecture titled 'The Polar Bears and the explosion in Soestdijk'. An intriguing subject. What explosion? Until that moment, I knew little of this history, even though it took place in my own neighborhood. What particularly moved me was an article by Richard de Mos, a board member of the 'Stichting Legerplaats Soesterberg 1939-1945', titled: 'War tragedy in Soestdijk without a monument'. What do you mean, without a monument? The Municipality of Hilversum pays special attention to the graves, but there is no memorial in Soest? Surely that cannot remain the case? From that moment

on, I delved deeper into this tragic incident. Many articles in the magazine 'van Zoys tot Soest' of the Historical Association Soest (Historische Vereniging Soest - HVS) have been dedicated to this subject. But what ultimately convinced me was the emotion of the surviving relatives. Last year, on **7 May 2025**, I attended for the first time the memorial service for the fallen Polar Bears at the Noorderbegraafplaats in Hilversum. It was an impressive gathering. I was most moved by the reactions of Mandy, Shannon, and Chriss. They were there for the first time. The fact that it still affects them so much after all these years touches you deeply. Their emotion, their gratitude - with the words, "*I am grateful that they are looking after our boys*" - stayed with me. It then became clear to me: we must remember here in Soest as well! Not only where they are buried, but also here, where they lost their lives. Together with René van Hal of the Historical Society in Soest, I submitted my proposal on **10 May 2025**, last year, for a memorial for the 13 fallen Polar Bears. Together with the Municipality of Soest and the 'Comité 4 en 5 mei' (Committee 4 and 5 May) this initiative has become a reality. And that is why, *today* - Sunday **10 May 2026**, *81 years later* - we can give this tragic accident a lasting place with a memorial stone.

To give this place a name.

To make this history visible.

To permanently honor these thirteen men.

**For they, too, gave their LIVES for OUR FREEDOM!**

**LEST WE FORGET**