

War Tragedy at Soestdijk Without a Monument

Author Richard de Mos is a board member of the 'Stichting Legerplaats Soesterberg 1939-1945' (SLS39-45), which aims to keep the terrible history of the Second World War alive. The following article concerns an event for which, remarkably, there is no monument. Thirteen British soldiers met a tragic death shortly after the liberation in the meadows near Soestdijk. It is high time that this tragedy is rescued from oblivion. Lest we forget.

By Richard de Mos



In the final weeks of the war, the German 6th Fallschirmjäger Division was stationed in the area between Woudenberg, Bunschoten, and Hilversum. These were experienced combat troops who had previously fought at Arnhem and on the Veluwe. The front had stalled just east of the Pantherstellung. This line was, in fact, the former Dutch Grebbe Line, which ran from the Grebbeberg near Rhenen, via the Valleikanaal past Woudenberg and Leusden, and along the River Eem near Amersfoort, Soest, and Baarn, toward the IJsselmeer near Bunschoten.

After the capitulation on 5 May 1945, the British and Canadian forces only needed to advance from Wageningen and Amersfoort to take control of the previously occupied western part of the Netherlands. From 7 May onward, the task of disarming the German units in the Eem region was assigned to the British 49th Infantry Division, commonly known as the Polar Bears.

For this purpose, the meadows near Soestdijk were selected for the several thousand soldiers of the aforementioned German unit—specifically the fields between the Biltseweg and the Koninginnelaan (Queen’s Avenue). The British staff established their headquarters in Hotel Trier, located at the corner of the Praamgracht and the Amsterdamsestraatweg (demolished in 1964 to make way for the Oranjeparkflat)



The German units were required to report here to arrange their disarmament. As a result, German troops marched on foot from their positions along the River Eem, crossing the Praamgracht near De Naald, while troops from 't Gooi approached via the Amsterdamsestraatweg, often by bicycle or horse-drawn cart. Their route then continued along the Biltseweg, further along the Praamgracht, with the fields of the Royal Domains on the left (at that time still belonging to the municipality of Baarn).

The disarmament of the German troops took place in the fields near the palace gardens and on the KPS football field. Weapons, ammunition, helmets, and other military equipment had to be surrendered. The soldiers were also checked for identity papers, stolen goods, and other war booty. These inspections took place along the cycle path on the Biltseweg and in the fields on the opposite side of the road.

Before long, piles and stacks of weapons, ammunition, and equipment lay scattered along the roadside of the Biltseweg, before later being moved into the fields. Specific areas were designated for artillery and other heavy equipment. In another section of the field stood all the (stolen) bicycles, while elsewhere rifles and bayonets were stacked in piles, alongside large heaps of helmets and gas-mask canisters. Large carts filled with assorted material were unloaded in their entirety at single locations, after which the contents were sorted.

This sorting and transport work was carried out by German soldiers under British supervision and guard. Initially, this was overseen by the Royal Scots Fusiliers, and from the afternoon of 9 May by the Leicestershire Regiment, assisted by Canadian troops. At night, the German soldier bivouacked under guard in the nearby woods.



Bivouacs were established for the German soldiers who were required to carry out the sorting work. In other locations, German soldiers spent the night while awaiting their turn for disarmament, as well as those considered suspicious and requiring further questioning. The German army in the final months of the war had become a motley collection. It consisted in part of experienced front-line soldiers, supplemented by men who had never had a combat role, such as administrators, cooks, mechanics, and similar personnel (often older men), as well as very young recruits, fresh from the Hitler Youth. Boys of no more than sixteen could be seen walking alongside men approaching sixty.

The front-line soldiers were checked to determine whether they had belonged to units implicated in war crimes. In order to be allowed to return to their homeland as quickly as possible, incriminating items were discarded wherever possible. These included, among other things, Nazi Party badges, medals and decorations, foreign currency, and stolen goods such as silverware.

Once disarmed, the troops were marched westward. Via Amsterdam and IJmuiden, they made the unpleasant journey on foot, after which they were transported by boat to Germany via Friesland.



For the local youth, the enormous collection of war material was a great adventure. There was security, but it was soon apparent that it was not always very strict. Several British and Canadian soldiers were open to a bit of bartering and were willing to offer generous amounts for an old Dutch watch, cigarettes, or a bicycle confiscated from the Germans. Teenagers managed to get onto the fields and pick up items here and there. With a signal pistol and its accompanying flares, they could create impressive fireworks.

Others saw potential in batteries, car tyres, or other useful objects. Climbing onto artillery pieces and playing with them was also a far more attractive pastime than going to school.

Adults had a harder time obtaining items from the site. Besides war equipment, however, there was also usable and harmless material, which was very welcome in that time of scarcity. A woman from Soest, for example, noticed a stack of confiscated walking sticks. Only after persistent insistence did she obtain one. Engraved on it by a German soldier were the words: "*Festung Holland 10 April 1945 – 5 May 1945.*" The war was British believed that they would soon be going home.



Then, on the afternoon of 10 May, shortly after dinner, things went terribly wrong. A tractor pulling a trailer loaded with military equipment arrived and was placed under supervision. It was being unloaded by a few German soldiers under the guard of British troops from the Leicestershire Regiment. While the material was being thrown off the trailer, a live mine exploded among other ammunition, causing a massive detonation. A large crater was blasted into the field, and the windows of many nearby houses were shattered. The tractor and trailer were blown over, and all manner of equipment was hurled in all directions.

Thirteen British soldiers standing in the immediate vicinity were killed instantly, and six others were seriously wounded. Several German soldiers were also killed, including the man who had thrown the fatal mine. It remains unclear whether this was a deliberate act of suicide by the German soldier or a tragic accident caused by an undetected live detonator in the mine.

During the following night, another small explosion occurred, though fortunately no one was injured. By then, fear had firmly taken hold. The sorting and removal of the war material were accelerated, security was tightened, and the local youth were kept away from the fields.

The British soldiers who so tragically lost their lives after the war had already ended were buried on 12 May at the Noorderbegraafplaats in Hilversum. The people of Soest living nearby, in the neighbourhood 't Hart, took this deeply to heart and organised a collection, donating flowers to place on the graves.



The thirteen British soldiers of the Leicestershire Regiment who fell and are buried in Hilversum are:

Private Thomas Vincent Hag Atkin, Corporal Jack Fisher, Private Henry Hall, Private Lawrence Copley Hart, Lance Sergeant Owen William Hartshorn, Private Robert Henry Clement Hyde, Private Vernon George Langley, Private Edward Charles Obeney, Private Samuel Onion, Private Donald Eli Wain, Lance Corporal Roy James Walley, Corporal Lewis George Edmund Whitehall, and Private Ronald Wood.

Numerous photographic reports were made of the disarmament at Soestdijk, and there was even a film recording. Several photographs were later published as postcards. Together with the memories of eyewitnesses—many of which had not previously been published—it was therefore well known that this large-scale disarmament took place at Soestdijk.

Nevertheless, for a long time there was considerable confusion about the exact location of the explosion. Various sources referred vaguely to “somewhere ten or so kilometres south of Hilversum,” or mentioned places such as Lage Vuursche and Baarn. After thorough research, it has now been established that the explosion occurred in the fields along the Biltseweg. In 1945, this area still belonged to the municipality of Baarn; today it lies within the municipality of Soest.

With this article, we hope to bring greater attention to this tragedy. A display case dedicated to this event can also be found in Museum Oud Soest.

Sources consulted: Eyewitness account by John 'Dixie' Dean (Eemland Archive), War Diary by 1st Adj. Leicestershire Regiment, web article The Way Back (Fubar/Kossen), 'Soest onder Vuur' by Geke van der Merwe-Wouters. Also thanks On the Gentlemen Anton Meijers by the archive service by the EOD, Jan Veldhuizen, Gerrit Dekker, G. van Zijtveld, J. Tupker, Van Egdome and the other board members of 'Stichting Legerplaats Soesterberg 1939-1945'. ■