

“Reduced to the banks of mud from which they were reclaimed”: The province of Zeeland, war and reconstruction, 1940-1945

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Using sources from the *Zeeuws Archief* in Middelburg and the *Nederlands Instituut voor Militaire Historie* in The Hague, this article explores Zeeland’s experiences of occupation and liberation from 1940 to autumn 1944. It argues that water, as a weapon, was used extremely effectively and destructively in Zeeland. While both Canadians and Germans used flooding as a tactic in the Schelde, the Germans had the ability to inundate land in a much more calculated way, as opposed to the necessarily more destructive Allied method of bombing and breaching dykes. As a result of the environmental damage brought on by operations in the region, Canadians are not always seen as positive “liberators” like they are elsewhere in the country. The Canadian strategic imperative to flood large parts of Zeeland was an extremely destructive tactic which had long-term consequences for this region’s people and their memory of the war. An understanding of how the environment was used in Zeeland during 1944-1945 and its impact on memory offers profound insight into how total war continues to affect communal and regional histories. While Nazi occupation was indeed a terrible chapter in the experiences of the province, I argue that the Allied invasion inflicted destruction on an unprecedented scale unknown to the region before “liberation” began in autumn 1944.

Key terms: Zeeland; reconstruction; Second World War; memory studies; liberation; occupation; Netherlands.

Introduction

Tucked away in the pastoral seaside town of Westkapelle in the Dutch province of Zeeland, the *Polderhuis* museum tells a very different story of Allied “liberation,” one that stands in stark contrast to how Canadian and British historians tend to understand the liberation of the Netherlands. In Westkapelle,

the overriding message is one of human misery, environmental damage, as well as a stoic and pragmatic reaction to what was effectively the most destructive event in the town's history. Photographs of civilians killed as a result of Allied operations appear where one would expect images of civilians gratefully welcoming Allied soldiers into their villages. "The sweetest spring," an idea celebrated between Canadian and Dutch governments, is entirely absent from this communal narrative.¹

Historians of the Second World War, particularly those writing in the English language, have explored the fighting in Zeeland as part of the wider liberation of the Netherlands, but have largely ignored the environmental consequences of occupation and liberation and how those consequences affected post-war reconstruction.² Using the environment as a lens through which the relationship between human agency and the natural world can be studied, this paper explores one Dutch province's wartime experience, its post-war reconstruction, and how its people have come to remember the period from 1940 to 1945. It argues that water, as a weapon, was used extremely effectively and destructively in Zeeland. While both Canadians and Germans used flooding as a tactic in the Schelde, the Germans had the ability to inundate land in a much more calculated way, as opposed to the necessarily more destructive Allied method of bombing and breaching dykes. As a result of the environmental damage brought on by operations in the region, Canadians are not always seen as positive "liberators" like they are elsewhere in the country. The Canadian strategic imperative to flood large parts of Zeeland was an extremely destructive tactic which had long-term consequences for this region's people and their memory of the war. An understanding of how the environment was used in Zeeland during 1944-1945 and its impact on memory offers profound insight into how total war affects communal and regional histories.

The archival sources used here are diverse and rich. They include inundation and damage reports compiled in 1944-1945 and other documents relating to reconstruction efforts in the region, all of which come from the *Nederlands Instituut voor Militaire Historie* (NIMH) in The Hague and the *Zeeuws Archief* (ZA) in Zeeland's capital, Middelburg. Together these sources demonstrate that the environment was a central consideration in the German invasion of 1940, in how the Germans occupied and made use of land in the province, in the limited nature of resistance, in the context of liberation in 1944, and finally in

¹ See for example Hoffenaar & Kert (1988), an official publication from the Canadian War Museum and *Koninklijk Nederlands Leger-Militair gezag in Zeeland en Wapensmuseum*.

² This trend can be found in the most seminal English-language studies on Nazi occupation in the Netherlands, such as Warmbrunn (1963) and Hirschfeld (1984).

the ways civilians of Zeeland came to create a memory of their wartime experience.

Opposing views: The liberators and the liberated

In the autumn and winter of 1944, while Allied forces pushed Nazi Germany further north into the Netherlands and eventually into the Reich itself, Dutch military authorities and Allied Civil Affairs (CA) units worked together to assess the damage caused by both the Allied assault and German strategic flooding. Heavy Allied bombardment had purposefully breached major sea dykes to “sink” the island of Walcheren that overlooked the Schelde estuary. In so doing, the Allies hoped to dislodge Nazi forces from well-defended coastal positions. By November 1944, both Allied and German armies had flooded a total of 52,548 hectares³ of Zeeland’s surface area, 48,148 hectares of which were inundated by saltwater.⁴ In the dominantly agrarian province of about 256,000 inhabitants spread across several islands, none of which were more than 10 feet above sea level, the actions the Allies took to liberate the province from Nazi occupation had enormous consequences for post-war reconstruction and how the autochthonous population would remember their British and Canadian liberators.⁵ The use of flooding as a tactic, employed by both Germans and Allies, demonstrates the totality of total war, that even the use and manipulation of the environment to achieve victory was not beyond the ken of operational planners.

While many military historians have discussed certain natural challenges to operational planning, primarily the unpredictability of weather, historians in the English-speaking world rarely pay attention to environmental consequences of war in the Netherlands. This is partly because the reconstruction and rehabilitation of regions largely destroyed by the Allies play little role in the memory of wartime experiences in Canada and the United Kingdom (Copp 2006). This article, therefore, contributes to a burgeoning literature that reassesses the traditional narrative of the Second World War and liberation by exploring the experiences of civilians immediately following victory in Europe. As early as the 1980s, Michiel Horn called for a more nuanced approach to understanding the Canadian relationship with the Netherlands, stating that it was much more than simply “cigarettes, sex and chocolate” (Horn 1981). Later,

³ 1 hectare is equal to 2.47 acres.

⁴ NIMH. 575. *Duitse verdedigingswerken en inundaties van Nederlands grondgebied in de oorlog*, inv. 154. Staat van de Inundaties in Nederland: tengevolge van oorlogshandelingen in de jaren 1944-1945, 2.

⁵ Censuses conducted in the Netherlands from 1795 to 1971 have been digitized and are available online at www.volkstelling.nl. Understandably, no census was conducted in 1940. The first post-war census dates from 1947.

in 1995, Geoffrey Hayes examined the effects of liberation from the perspectives of civilians in West Brabant and Canadian soldiers. While the Allies had reached Antwerp by 5 September 1944, the people of Bergen op Zoom waited long and anxiously for their liberators. For civilians, as Hayes rightly points out, “[t]he long arrival of the liberators was frustrating” (Hayes 1995, 56-62). Civilians in that part of the country were impatient with the progress of Allied armies. These two revisionist approaches, however, fell on deaf ears among Canadian historians and politicians alike.

Other historians, such as Peter Schrijvers, have reexamined what life was like in Belgium once the Allies liberated the country in September 1944. He argues that after the initial euphoria of liberation had subsided, the civilians grew tired of what was effectively a second occupation that prevented a return to the pre-1940 world. Some saw the Allied presence as a second occupation. The clichés of chocolate, kisses, and bubble gum began to give way to disappointment and even crime (Schrijvers 2009, 2-3). In a similar way, William Hitchcock (2008) has emphasized the costs of victory in Europe and the ways in which destruction was a necessary evil in the bitter road to freedom. These works represent a trend in relatively recent English-language reassessments of how “liberation” is understood.

Much more recondit among English-language scholars is how Allied armies affected the environment in the Netherlands particularly, but in northwest Europe generally. In the Netherlands, and especially Zeeland, flooding was, and continues to be, a perennial problem with which the people have dealt for centuries. Inundation has been used in prior conflict as a form of defense against invading Spanish armies in the sixteenth century and in later wars, too. As we will see, however, the scale of inundation in the Second World War, and the destruction caused by it, was unprecedented. Given how ubiquitous flooding has been throughout Dutch history, historians in the Netherlands have paid a great deal of attention to it. Michiel and Arend Kagchelland, for instance, have written on the cultural impact of the great 1825 flood, which covered swathes of land in Gelderland, Zuid-Holland, and Overijssel (Kagchelland & Kagchelland 2012). In the very few histories of Zeeland, the inundations of 1944 occupy a central place. This is the case in Jacoba Kramer-Vreugdenhil’s excellent analysis of life in three villages on Walcheren during and after occupation, as well as Jan Zwemer’s magisterial work on the post-war period in the province and reconstruction efforts (Kramer-Vreugdenhil 2001; Zwemer 2000). In his study that examined the province from 1940 to 1945, Gijs van der Ham (1990) dedicated over half to assessing the economic, social, and political impact of environmental damages.

While Dutch-language scholars have understandably focused on this key period in history, the same cannot be said for historians in the English language. Arthur Westing, arguably one of the great pioneers of the study of war and the environment, has explored in general terms how belligerents like Germany and China unleashed destructive inundations as part of their military strategies during the Second World War (Westing 1988; 2013). However, other than general studies on the environment and warfare, such as one collection edited by Richard Tucker and Edmund Russell (2004), few English-language scholars have engaged with war and environmental damage in the Netherlands. For this reason, I hope to inform future discussion about the Allied role in the rural Netherlands and disabuse conventional Anglo-Canadian interpretations which see the liberation of the Netherlands as a uniform and even process.

Invasion and occupation

It took Nazi Germany about five days to force Dutch General H. Winkelman into capitulation on May 15, 1940. Yet, because of the direction from which the Germans invaded the Netherlands and the topographical challenges the province presented for them, Zeeland was the last place to be occupied two days later, when the Germans reached the provincial capital, Middelburg. The disparate islands posed a number of problems for the attackers, some of which the Germans had not experienced in their advance through the northern provinces. As a defensive measure, Dutch troops in Zeeland strategically flooded parts of the terrain, notably in and around Kruiningen and the Zanddijkstelling. In this way, the Dutch had used flooding as a tactic to control where German troops were to move and therefore reinforced certain defensive positions (Amersfoort & Kamphuis 2012). For the *Wehrmacht*, the capture of Zeeland, which effectively marked the beginning of occupation in the Netherlands, could not have been done with mechanized forces or heavy vehicles, but rather by small rubber boats and on foot. From the invasion onward, Zeeland's wartime experiences, from occupation and resistance to liberation and reconstruction, would be influenced by the province's unique topographical features and its important strategic position—at the mouth of the Schelde estuary, which leads directly into one of the largest port cities in western Europe, Antwerp.

From the capture of Zeeland on May 17, 1940 to the end of the month, Hitler vacillated between whether the Netherlands should be occupied as a military administration like the *Generalgouvernement* in Poland or whether he should implement a civil administration modeled after Norway. For a variety of reasons, not least of which was the fact that the Dutch were considered to be of Germanic blood, Hitler established a civil administration in the Netherlands and appointed Arthur Seyss-Inquart as *Reichskommissar* of the occupied Nether-

lands. In theory, this implied a rigid separation between the German military and Dutch civilians, although in some areas like Zeeland this was simply a desideratum. Because of its strategic importance, beginning in September 1940, the people of Zeeland, together with those residing on the islands of Zuid-Holland, were forbidden to leave their domiciles and non-residents were forced to leave. The coasts of Schouwen, Walcheren, and Zeeuws-Vlaanderen effectively became forbidden territory, as the German authorities imposed a *Sperrgebiet* or restricted zone.⁶ Given its strategic importance at the mouth of the Schelde looking onto the approaches to Antwerp, there was simply no way to have so many German troops stationed in the province and not have civilians interact with them in some form or another. This is particularly true once the construction of the *Atlantikwall* in Zeeland commenced in March 1942 and the German military presence in the region expanded. The island of Walcheren, which protrudes furthest into the North Sea, for example, is only about eighteen kilometers wide, but by September 1943 there were about 28,000 men of the German armed forces stationed along the coast of the province (Sakkers & Houterman 2000, 8-9).

The restriction of mobility enforced on the islands' residents meant that acts of resistance or participation in resistance organizations were extremely challenging. Zeeuwen who did participate in small resistance actions, particularly those initiated by *Groep Albrecht*, *Dienst Wim*, or the *Ordedienst* (OD, Order Service), were often infiltrated by German police and arrested (Schulten 1998). The bucolic villages of Zeeland lacked the benefit of urban anonymity of which groups in densely populated cities like Rotterdam or Amsterdam took advantage. As one former OD member recalled: "You could not stick your nose outside of the door without running into a German. Elsewhere, resistance fighters had more freedom of movement and they were not trapped like us on Walcheren."⁷ While the possibility to resist the Germans was greater in urban areas of the northern provinces, Zeeland's unique position as a military stronghold and as a series of islands precluded effective and coordinated resistance efforts. As a result, opportunities to participate in active forms of resistance only became possible when the Allies broke out of Normandy in June 1944.

When he ordered the invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, Hitler opened up the possibility of a two-front war. This prospect led him to authorize the construction of the *Atlantikwall*, an intricate system of bunkers,

⁶ NIMH. 419. *Duitse bezetting*, inv. 98. De Duitse Kustbezetting in het gebied van de Wehrmachtbefehlhaber in den Nederlanden van Mei 1940, 10.

⁷ As cited in Kramer-Vreugdenhil (2001, 157): "Je kon je neus niet buiten de deur steken of je liep tegen een Duitser op. En elders konden verzetsstrijders alle kanten op, ze zaten niet voor een gat gevangen zoals wij in Walcheren."

machinegun nests, coastal artillery batteries, anti-aircraft positions, and various other defensive positions that stretched from Norway to the Pyrenees (Sakkers & Houterman 2000). In his directive on March 23, 1942, Hitler ordered the construction of defenses in Zeeland and gave highest priority to the sector (Van der Ham 1990, 21). By May 1, 1943, over 15,000 bunkers had been completed, 200 of which were built between The Hague and the Oosterschelde (the estuary between Noord-Beveland and Schouwen-Duiveland), a distance of about 115 kilometers. At the same time, however, 445 were constructed on the island of Walcheren and in Zeeuws-Vlaanderen alone, a distance of roughly 40 km of coastline, which underscores the importance of Zeeland's position in German strategy (Van der Ham 1990, 23).

Both the pace at which construction took place and the magnitude of the program required the use of autochthonous labour and resources, ranging from trees to horses. *Organisation Todt* (OT), the German firm responsible for the construction of the *Atlantikwall*, recommended that some families living close to the construction sites be relocated because of the danger the project presented. In total, about 15,000 Walchenaars (22 percent of the island's population) were evacuated in 1942 at the behest of German authorities and the Provincial Commissary, P. Dieleman. Those Zeeuwen unable to find alternative accommodations were relocated to Noord-Brabant, just east of Roosendaal. These measures were immensely difficult and disrupted life for many villagers on Walcheren (Kramer-Vreugdenhil 2000, 128-129). Additionally, on July 13, 1943, Hitler mandated that 10 percent of all non-Germans working on the *Atlantikwall* in Zeeland were to relocate from their homes to Germany. OT required a large number of workers to help repair towns following Bomber Command's extensive raids against cities like Hamburg, but many were also needed in the Ruhr, a region which by May 1943 was heavily damaged (Sakkers and Houterman 2000, 42-43). Yet, despite these disruptive measures taken by German authorities in the region, the fact that Zeeland required such an extensive defensive system did present one important advantage for many Zeeuwen: working on the *Atlantikwall* in their own province meant that they could remain with their families. This was not the case for those residing in cities far removed from the coast, many of whom were conscripted by the *Arbeitseinsatz* and forced to work in Germany. Remarkably, few historians have explored Dutch participation in the OT and in German work programs (Sijes 1966). But in total about 20,000 Zeeuwen were conscripted to work on the *Atlantikwall* in Zeeland, which greatly exceeds the 13,000 civilians mobilized from Rotterdam and 1,000 from Dordrecht, most of whom were sent to Germany (Sijes 1966, 524).

Zeeland's crucial coastal position and its composition as a series of islands influenced German decisions to change the face of the province's land by

creating an extensive system of defensive positions. The German use of land, therefore, governed the experience of the local population. Modifying the land in this way required the recruitment of a large labour force, the forceful evacuation of some villages near the coast, as well as a change in the type of work civilians performed, sometimes moving agricultural workers to the construction or manufacturing sector.

While the use of land represented one way the Germans worked with topography to their advantage, the use of water as a weapon was perhaps the most influential way human actors sought to change the course of the war. Inundation was a perennial problem with which the people of Zeeland had to deal and both sides used it during the war in the Low Countries. Zeeland was, as Wijlen W. de Bree put it, “a land created by the people’s hands in a millennial battle against the sea” (De Bree 1979, 6). During the occupation the Germans depended on Dutch knowledge and *waterstaat* engineers to strategically flood parts of the province to restrict mobility. Strategic flooding became more common after the Allies landed and pushed north from Normandy in the summer of 1944. Although both the Allies and the Germans employed flooding as a fundamental part of overall strategy in the Low Countries, German inundations could be more controlled and calculated than those of the Allies, and this is particularly true of flooding in Zuid-Beveland and Zeeuws-Vlaanderen, but not on the island of Tholen which the Germans almost entirely flooded with saltwater on February 22, 1944, covering 10,800 hectares.⁸ The Germans also flooded Schouwen-Duiveland, the most northerly part of Zeeland. Beginning on 1 March 1944, they released sluiceways to cover almost 15,800 hectares of the island’s surface area which remained submerged until September 1945.⁹ These two flooding operations can be explained partially by the islands’ proximity to tributaries that lead to the River Maas.

Beginning in the eastern part of Zeeuws-Vlaanderen, the southernmost region of the province bordering Belgium, German authorities ordered the inundation of small tracts of land in April 1944. Following aerial reconnaissance of Belgium and Zeeland in March and April 1944, the Royal Air Force (RAF) reported that the German tactic rendered the area around the Oosterschelde and elsewhere “impassable.” It stated “there are two types of flooding – complete flooding where the area appears to be completely covered by water

⁸ NIMH. 575. *Duitse verdedigingswerken en inundaties van Nederlands grondgebied in de oorlog*, inv. 154. Staat van de Inundaties in Nederland: tengevolge van oorlogshandelingen in de jaren 1944-1945, Provincie Zeeland, b. Tholen.

⁹ NIMH. 575. *Duitse verdedigingswerken en inundaties van Nederlands grondgebied in de oorlog*, inv. 154. Staat van de Inundaties in Nederland: tengevolge van oorlogshandelingen in de jaren 1944-1945, Provincie Zeeland, a. Schouwen-Duiveland.

and partial flooding where the water is shallow enough in places to be little more than very sodden ground. In both cases, however, it is considered that the inundations would probably constitute impassable conditions for A.F.V.'s [Armoured Fighting Vehicles] and N.T."¹⁰ In this particular case, the RAF was likely referring to the large flooding operations conducted in the northeast part of Zeeland, Sint Philipsland, where beginning in February 1944 the Germans released sluiceways to cover 1105 hectares of the island. The only areas that remained dry were polderland Oude van St. Philipsland and Henriette Polder, a surface area of 1619 hectares.¹¹

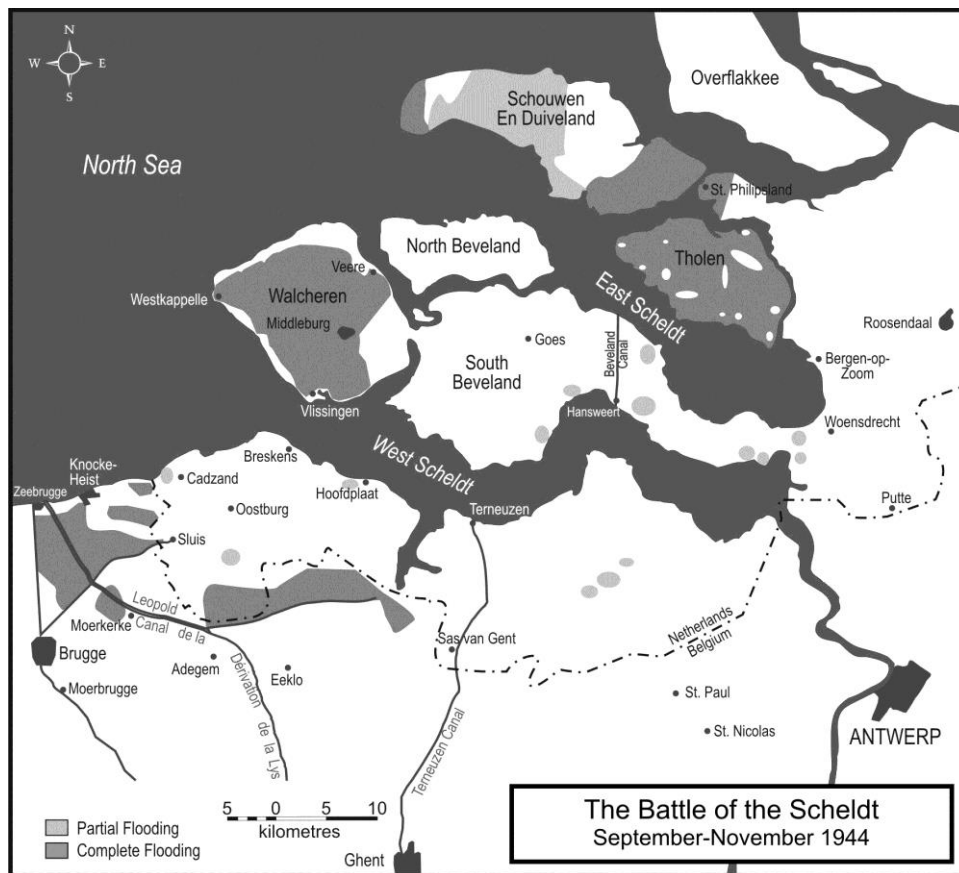


Figure 1. Map of The Battle of the Scheldt, showing inundated areas. September–November 1944. Courtesy Mike Bechthold.

¹⁰ NIMH. 575. *Duitse verdedigingswerken en inundaties van Nederlands grondgebied in de oorlog*, inv. 134, 2. Interpretation Report Y.279: Flooding of Dutch Coastal Areas, April 7, 1944.

¹¹ NIMH. 575. *Duitse verdedigingswerken en inundaties van Nederlands grondgebied in de oorlog*, inv. 151. Provincie Waterstaat in Zeeland: Sint Philipsland.

The Germans undertook these actions to hinder Allied advances in the event of a future invasion, and the Allies recognized their categorical efficacy. In east Zeeuws-Vlaanderen there were roughly five separate inundations during that April, all of which made use of freshwater, rather than saltwater, to flood the polderland. For example, 545 hectares of land east and west of the polder Blij were flooded, of which 244 hectares were arable land and 301 hectares were pasture (*weiland*).¹² The four other strategic inundations of polderland in this part of Zeeland were smaller in scale, but were all done using freshwater. In the western part of Zeeuws-Vlaanderen, however, reports assessing the scale of flooding show that some of the inundations in this part of the province were “uncontrolled” (*onbeheerscht*). Unlike in the eastern part of Zeeuws-Vlaanderen, some of the uncontrolled floods, near Cadzand and Hoofdplaat for example, covered sizable stretches of arable land with saltwater.¹³ These actions, not nearly as destructive as what would come in October 1944, sought to strengthen German defenses in the southern part of the province and hinder Allied ability to maneuver. The decision to use freshwater, as opposed to saltwater, meant that German strategic flooding often made less of a long-term impact on arable land, which expedited the recovery process in certain parts of the province. Importantly, after surveying the effects of defensive inundations in the province, Allied authorities realized that “the restrictions imposed upon us by topography were not altogether one-sided” and they, too, could mobilize the sea against their enemy.¹⁴

Liberation

On October 2, 1944, many of Westkapelle’s 2,369 inhabitants gathered around their radios, which, according to one contemporary, were in abundance during Nazi occupation (Ligthart-Schenk n.d., 4). The small seaside village on Walcheren was issued a stern warning from both *Radio Oranje* and airdropped pamphlets, calling for “an immediate evacuation! Warn your neighbours – Leave without delay!” The message from across the Channel quickly listed several other warnings:

¹² NIMH. 575. *Duitse verdedigingswerken en inundaties van Nederlands grondgebied in de oorlog*, inv. 152. Oost Zeeuwsch-Vlaanderen.

¹³ NIMH. 575. *Duitse verdedigingswerken en inundaties van Nederlands grondgebied in de oorlog*, inv. 152. West Zeeuwsch-Vlaanderen.

¹⁴ CMHQ. *Report no. 188*. Canadian Participation in the Operations in North-West Europe, 1944. Part VI: Canadian Operations, 1 Oct-8 Nov. The Clearing of the Scheldt Estuary, 9.

1. It is highly probable that the enemy troops and installations on your islands will soon be exposed to a severe and prolonged aerial bombardment.
2. It is the desire of the Allied High Command [SHAEF] that the civilian population will be spared the consequences, as much as possible, of this necessary military action.
3. Not only the aerial bombardment, but also the danger of flooding threatens your life and that of your families.
4. Leave the islands or, if that is not possible, then immediately move your family to a safe place on the islands.

(Ligthart-Schenk n.d., 6-7)

The warning concluded that all military targets – roads, canals, transport lines, power stations, train yards, depots, warehouses, enemy concentrations of all sorts – should be avoided at all costs. “Travel only by foot and take nothing with you that you cannot easily wear,” the broadcast continued, “keep away from main roads and travel only by fields, and not in large groups which may be erroneously mistaken for enemy formations” (Ligthart-Schenk n.d., 7).

The following day, without consulting the Dutch cabinet or Queen Wilhelmina who was exiled in London, the Allies launched a major bombing offensive over the 18-kilometer wide island. The Allies sought to breach four of Walcheren’s major sea dykes, to flood and sink the island below saltwater, thereby forcing the German armed forces out of well-defended positions. In just under a month, Bomber Command had launched 2,219 sorties and dropped over 10,000 tons of ordnance on an island that lays about two meters below sea level (Naval Intelligence Division 1944, 24). By the end of October 1944, 16,010 of Walcheren’s 18,800 hectares of surface area were flooded with saltwater.¹⁵ At Westkapelle, the Allied bombardment made a 600-meter wide gap in the dyke that protected the town from inundation, while bombing raids took out dykes east and west of the industrial town of Vlissingen. On the east side of the town, now Ritthem, an 850 meter gap led to complete inundation and, on the west side at the Nolledijk, a 350 meter wide opening completed the flooding of the area.¹⁶ Other parts of the province were flooded as well. In Zuid-Beveland, for

¹⁵ NIMH. 575. *Duitse verdedigingswerken en inundaties van Nederlands grondgebied in de oorlog*, inv. 154. Staat van de Inundaties in Nederland: tengevolge van oorlogshandelingen in de jaren 1944-1945; Walcheren; see also NIMH. 575. *Duitse verdedigingswerken en inundaties van Nederlands grondgebied in de oorlog*, inv. 151. Kaart 4.

¹⁶ NIMH. 575. *Duitse verdedigingswerken en inundaties van Nederlands grondgebied in de oorlog*, inv. 154. Staat van de Inundaties in Nederland: tengevolge van oorlogshandelingen in de jaren 1944-1945. Provincie Zeeland.

example, around 1,500 hectares were covered with saltwater beginning in October 1944, 738 hectares of which were considered uncontrolled.¹⁷



Figure 2. Walcheren and the Causeway. Allied inundations, October-November 1944. Courtesy Mike Bechthold.

¹⁷ NIMH. 575. *Duitse verdedigingswerken en inundaties van Nederlands grondgebied in de oorlog*, inv. 152. Zuid-Beveland.

During the planning for operations in central Zeeland, the First Canadian Army considered the “possibilities of flooding” parts of the province. Army officials understood that the topography of Walcheren made deliberate inundation “a two-edged weapon, a fact not to be missed by General Simonds in the calculation of his requirements for reducing Walcheren, that first and final obtrusion in the neck of the Scheldt.”¹⁸ Planners also recognized that “were it not for the dunes and dykes which surround the island as rim to a saucer, raised up with arduous ingenuity by countless generations of Dutchmen in their own unending wa[r] against the sea, its cultivated fields and thriving communities, like those of the entire group, would be reduced to the banks of mud from which they were reclaimed.”¹⁹ Besides a degree of patronizing, these sources underscore that the use of water was a fundamental component of the war in this region and, by October 3, the people of Walcheren realized what this meant for their province. At the same time, however, the Allies understood and tried to react to the consequences of their actions.

Since the German authorities had imposed a *Sperrgebiet*, or restricted zone, on the islands, many civilians in the province remained in their homes during the Allied assault. This was particularly true for villages and towns that were completely submerged at certain points in the tidal cycle. As a result, Allied and Dutch Military Authorities (*Militair Gezag*, MG) had to orchestrate evacuations from the countryside to towns like Middelburg, which for the most part remained above water throughout the fall and winter of 1944-1945. The two groups would work in concert from November 1944 to May 1945 until the Allies passed sole jurisdiction to the MGs and the repatriated Dutch government. The demographic and logistical challenge of evacuation presented the Allied and Dutch authorities with a growing set of tasks. Problems of closing the destroyed dykes meant that other infrastructural issues had to be ignored, while forced evacuations led to overcrowding in Middelburg and in towns of Zuid-Beveland, which posed a number of health and sanitation concerns, including increased frequency of tuberculosis, colitis, dysentery, and a host of other communicable diseases.²⁰ However, the Allies, still fighting the Germans in the central and northern parts of the Netherlands, almost always prioritized military objectives over the reconstruction of Zeeland. This meant that from the Dutch perspective resources were frequently diverted from reconstruction efforts in Zeeland to be

¹⁸ CMHQ. *Report no. 188*. Canadian Participation in the Operations in North-West Europe, 1944. Part VI: Canadian Operations, 1 Oct-8 Nov. The Clearing of the Scheldt Estuary, 9-10.

¹⁹ CMHQ. *Report no. 188*, Canadian Participation in the Operations in North-West Europe, 1944. Part VI: Canadian Operations, 1 Oct-8 Nov. The Clearing of the Scheldt Estuary, 10.

²⁰ ZA. Inv. 4286. Letter from Inspector of Volksgezondheid, L.J.H. Brongers, 16 November 1944.

used for essential military purposes in the north, leaving local authorities very little to work with (Goodlet 2014).

In late 1944, and well after the Allied bombardment, CA and MG officials devised an “evacuation scheme.” During one of his first trips to Walcheren, a CA officer described his experience:

The semi-inundated villages of the island also were crowded with refugees, even the upper stories of houses whose ground floors were covered with two feet of water being used to the extent that whole families of up to twelve people were living in one room... Public utilities with one exception were not functioning: there was no rain water (rain water only from house cisterns was available), practically all wells were salted: there was no electric light or power; there were however limited supplies of gas in certain urban areas up to 1 hr. per diem at low pressure; there were no telephone facilities; the railroad was out of commission; the FLUSHING-MIDDELBURG-VEERE canal was tidal, due to the destruction of all locks and badly blocked, whilst the only road into Walcheren island was so damaged as to be available only for essential military traffic.²¹

In another report dated February 7, 1945, CA officer H.P. Rickard (O.C. Det. 609) wrote “the flood waters rendered 1/3 of Middelburg and 1/2 of Flushing [Vlissingen] and 1/3 of Oost-Souburg (including their environs) uninhabitable. The allied attack on November 1st, 1944, on Flushing caused much of the remaining population to move towards Middelburg and the unflooded portion of the island, whilst the concurrent allied advance through S. Beveland and the allied attack on Westkapelle contained most of the civilian population on Walcheren.”²² This presented both Dutch authorities and the Allies with a number of problems. Although the original population of Walcheren was about 70,000, the authorities could not trust the demographic data to organize the evacuation of the civilian population, since there was no way to confirm that all of the civilians remained in their villages. When CA officers ventured out to remote villages in small boats (often under not-so-pristine weather conditions) there was no guarantee that civilians would actually be there.

Canadian and British CA officers noted other problems. They quickly realized that many civilians of Dutch Reformed confession who were stranded in their villages, often living in attics, would refuse to be evacuated on Sundays, even if, according to the Allies, the weather was perfect. Rickard noted that reactions to evacuation ranged “from passive resistance to bleak indifference” (Van der Ham 1990, 549). To combat this issue, the Dutch authorities established

²¹ ZA. Inv. 4286. Report on Evacuation Scheme, Island of Walcheren, February 7, 1945.

²² ZA. Inv. 4286. Report on Evacuation Scheme, Island of Walcheren, February 7, 1945.

an office for Spiritual Care (*Geestelijk Verzorging*), headed by a Reformed preacher from Middelburg who helped convince some inhabitants that they should seek refuge elsewhere and that the calamity was not necessarily divine punishment.²³



Figure 3. Aerial photograph of the flooding around Veere, November 3, 1944. Laurier Military History Archives (LHM): First Canadian Army air photo collection.

Many of the evacuees also refused to leave their cattle behind.²⁴ Both Dutch and Allied authorities recognized the problems associated with slaughtering a great

²³ ZA. 280. *Militair Gezag in Zeeland*, inv. 4286. Rapport over de geestelijke verzorging der geëvacueerden in Zuid-Beveland, February 10, 1945, 1.

²⁴ ZA. 280. *Militair Gezag in Zeeland*, inv. 4288. Evacuatie Walcheren. I F 18. Vergadering Burgemeesters Walcheren, December 21, 1944, 1.

deal of livestock and therefore planned separate evacuation procedures for cattle. Looting had also been a problem during floods in the past, and civilians feared they might fall victim to pillaging. Additionally, CA noted that the people of Walcheren had an abundance of cheeses, salt, butter, as well as livestock, all of which had been sold on the black market for high prices during occupation. Many in this province, therefore, were not victims of the so-called “Hunger Winter” afflicting the urban cities of Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and Utrecht. According to Rickard, it was this possession of goods, along with their devout belief and their “lack of experience of the world outside their own communes which almost amounted to a fear of the unknown,” that made the people so reluctant to leave their villages.²⁵



Figure 4. Aerial photograph of the flooding around Westkapelle, October 28, 1944. Laurier Military History Archives (LMH), First Canadian Army air photo collection.

²⁵ ZA. 280. *Militair Gezag in Zeeland*. inv. 4286. Report on Evacuation Scheme, Island of Walcheren, February 7, 1945.

By early 1945, out of an estimated 16,540 civilians from ten villages on Walcheren, just over 5,000 had been forcibly evacuated and brought to parts of Zuid- and Noord-Beveland.²⁶ Over 6,000 people would be evacuated from Walcheren and 1,650 from Middelburg alone. Evacuation operations were conducted elsewhere in the Province with the exception of large parts of Schouwen-Duiveland, which was still under Nazi occupation. However, greater attention was given to Walcheren because of the severity of the damage and the island's administrative and economic importance. In West-Zeeuwsch Vlaanderen, for example, evacuations were particularly problematic. On more than one occasion, authorities would evacuate civilians, who would then return to their homes shortly after the authorities had departed their villages. The same occurred in villages on Walcheren.²⁷

Once civilians in the province were evacuated to safer areas, the authorities could begin to reconstruct the dyke systems the Allies had destroyed in October 1944. This was coordinated by an organization called the Reclamation Service of Walcheren (DDW, *Dienst Droogmaking Walcheren*) led by P. Jansen. The major sea dykes at Westkapelle, Veere, and east and west of Vlissingen were repaired by February and March 1945. The British Foreign Office (FO) provided Dutch authorities with some of the necessary materials. In his correspondence, Anthony Eden of the FO emphasized the exigency of providing Dutch officials with the appropriate materials and supplies, although Walcheren was always deemed most important. He also suggested that the military was not pulling its weight, noting that "it was decided, that the Netherlands authorities [MGs] would at once take the repair works in hand, whereby both S.H.A.E.F. and the 21st Army Group would give their full assistance. However, neither S.H.A.E.F. nor the 21st Army Group dispose of the required materials. I have therefore been instructed and beg to approach your Excellency with the urgent request that His Majesty's Government would, if possible, put the following materials at the disposal of the Netherlands Government, whilst at the same time providing for the necessary transport facilities from the United Kingdom."²⁸

The repairs required over 250,000 trees, mainly from Belgium, as well as 2,000 tonnes of stone shipped from Belgium each week in late December and January, and the use of several caissons during certain parts of the tidal cycle (Van der Ham 1990, 566). British resources also sent to the region three

²⁶ ZA. 280. *Militair gezag in Zeeland*, inv. 4286. Untitled/undated chart on projected evacuations to be conducted in ten villages on Walcheren.

²⁷ ZA. 280. *Militair Gezag in Zeeland*, inv. 4286. Report on Evacuation Scheme, Island of Walcheren, February 7, 1945, 6.

²⁸ The National Archives (NA). Foreign Office (FO). 371-49408. Letter from Anthony Eden, January 3, 1945, 1.

stationary barge loading suction dredgers, one stationary pump-unit that could reclaim 1,000 cubic yards per hour, and two floating stone-transporter cranes with a capacity of carrying one tonne each.²⁹ The major operations to evacuate civilians in completely inundated villages and to repair the largest sea dykes were complete by February 1945. Because of deforestation and the destruction of Zeeland's wooded areas, mainly on Noord- and Zuid-Beveland, the British government supported a reforestation program that lasted until 1947.³⁰

In spite of the level of destruction inflicted on the region, the pace at which recovery took place in Walcheren was quite remarkable. When it comes to the reconstruction of other parts of the province, the Allied authorities were either less inclined or unable to provide the necessary materials, particularly during the later phases of the war. In January 1945, the Dutch ambassador to the United Kingdom requested that the people of the province could "take in hand the repair of the dykes," but, like Eden's request, asked the UK to provide the necessary materials.³¹ In a dominantly agrarian economy many civilians and authorities expressed fear over the degree to which saltwater would affect the agricultural recovery of the province. One British engineer's report on the situation in 1947 claimed that in some parts of the province "all vegetation is dead and a volume could be written on the time lag for new crops" (Read 1947, 22). The salination of the soil had great consequences for the local economy. In May 1946, one contemporary bemoaned the enormous task that lay ahead for Dutch farmers. He wrote "at present, the greatest handicap to the Dutch farmer is the shortage of machinery for soil cultivation – tractors, plows, harrows, cultivators, mowing machines, binders, and so forth" (Maliepaard 1946, 53). Yet, later that year, a report published in the *Journal of Farm Economics* commented on the rapidity of agricultural recovery on Walcheren. The authors wrote that "common newspaper reports, at the time of the breaking of the sea wall [...] were to the effect that ten years would be required to bring back into production the land flooded by saltwater. In fact, however, around two-thirds of this land grew a crop of barley in 1946, or perhaps is already seeded to alfalfa" (Black et al. 1946, 1070).

Despite the salination of its arable land, Walcheren managed to produce one successful crop of wheat on reclaimed land in 1946, although other parts of the province were not as successful. After barley, the next most successful crop to grow in Walcheren's previously salinized soil was alfalfa because of its tolerance to salt and partially because it can be grown without plowing (Black et

²⁹ NA. FO. 371-49408. Letter from Anthony Eden, January 3, 1945, 2.

³⁰ See for example documentation from NA. FO 371-67850. Letters from British Embassy in The Hague to Foreign Office, 1947-1948.

³¹ NA. FO. 371-49408. Letter from Netherlands Ambassador, January 3, 1945.

al. 1946). But, with the exception of these initial yields on Walcheren, experts in Zeeland published a study on the effects of inundation in 1947, claiming that it would take up to seven years to achieve pre-war crop yields (Dorsman 1947, 65-86). As these contemporary reports suggest, the Allied destruction of Walcheren received particular attention in the UK and elsewhere. In a way, Walcheren became a rallying cry around which international support for reconstruction grew in the immediate post-war period. "Walcheren, the great Dutch island that guards the shipping route to Antwerp," one bulletin read, "is one of the areas most severely affected by flooding" (*Aid for Flooded Holland* 1944, 412). The same bulletin claimed that "between 60% and 65% of the entire population of the Netherlands has been affected by the floods let loose by the enemy," but did not mention how many lives were affected by Allied operations (412).

The most defining feature of Zeeland's occupation and liberation experiences was the use of inundation as a tactic in each belligerent's overall strategy in the region. The ways in which both Allies and Germans mobilized water within their strategies highlights the important relationship between the natural world and those seeking to either defend or assault the territory. Importantly, however, once implemented as part of either belligerent's arsenal, flooding and the natural world considerably influenced the course of reconstruction efforts. It would take a concerted multi-national program to reassert control over the natural forces both sides unleashed to change the tide of war.

The extent to which Allied operations affected the province of Zeeland in October and November 1944 raises a number of questions about how the people have constructed a memory about occupation, war, and liberation. In particular, how have the people of this province given meaning to such a destructive liberation?

Memory

Peter Moogk has claimed that of all countries liberated by Canadians during the Second World War "an exceptional relationship developed between the Kingdom of the Netherlands and Canada" (2006, 1) one which he refers to as "a wartime love affair". Conventional wisdom, particularly in Canada, continues to reinforce the idea that there exists a special affinity for Canadians in the Netherlands (Hoffenaar & Kert 1988). Peter Schrijvers' recent research on the Allies in wartime Belgium demonstrates that after the initial euphoria of liberation subsided, significant conflicts between liberators and civilians began to surface. He therefore reassesses previous interpretations of Belgian-Allied relations from 1944 to 1945 (Schrijvers 2009). In a similar way, we might

question the pervasiveness of the “wartime love affair” between the Anglo-Canadian soldiers and the people of Zeeland. For instance, Dutch historians Ben Schoenmaker and Christ Klep have claimed that the operational advantages of inundating Walcheren were in fact quite minimal (Klep & Schoenmaker 1995, 302-303). Writing about the Allied assault on Walcheren, Tobias van Gent argues that “the truth of the matter is that the assailants were hindered more by the flooding than the defenders as the water made mobile warfare with tanks and armoured vehicles almost impossible” (Van Gent 2005, 15). For the province of Zeeland, there exists a disconnected memory between the liberators and the local population, one that is much more complex “than cigarettes, sex and chocolate” (Horn 1981). A brief look into how one museum in Zeeland presents the province’s wartime experience illustrates this complexity. The example used here is not *the* memory of Zeeland, but rather just one of a multitude of memories constructed *ex post facto*, as subsequent generations of politicians and the public at large tried to give some meaning to this destructive period in their history.

The history of occupation and liberation in Westkapelle is memorialized at the *Polderhuis dijk- en oorlogs museum* (‘Polderhouse Dyke and War Museum’).³² The museum’s name itself highlights the connection between the town’s history and its relationship to water. Visitors begin with prehistoric developments and the reclamation of land during the Middle Ages, but the majority of the museum’s exhibits focus on occupation and liberation. Within the section on occupation, attention is given to flooding, bombing, and the consequences both had for the land. One exhibit informs readers that in January 1941 the people of Walcheren worked to repair Vlissingen’s airfield, which had been bombed by the *Luftwaffe*, by extracting large amounts of sand. Additionally, visitors are told that on August 15, 1943 an Allied bombardment destroyed the nearby village of Nieuw-Abeele, mistaking it for Vlissingen’s airfield.³³ On signage indicating key events in the chronology of the war, October 3, 1944 represents the terminal date on the placard, which reads “the RAF bombard the Westkapelle sea dyke.” Events following that date are not listed. Later in the exhibit, visitors encounter another placard entitled “the Destruction” (*De Verwoesting*) on which more details about the bombardment on October 3, 1944 are given. It reads “Westkappelaars” [the people of Westkapelle] are tied strongly to their land and village ... the bombardment lasts more than two hours;

³² All quotations from the *Polderhuis* are taken from photographs taken at the museum by the author.

³³ *Polderhuis*: “Om het vliegveld Vlissingen te herstellen, wordt overal op Walcheren zand gewonnen ... Het dorp Nieuwe-Abeele wordt per ongeluk door geallieerden gebombardeerd, het had het vliegveld Vlissingen moeten zijn.”

with new waves of attacks every fifteen minutes. The first bombs hit not only the dyke, but also a large part of the village. The mill *De Roos* of the Theune family is hit hard and crumbles. Some people in the basement are killed instantly. The exit is blocked by debris and fallen millstones. Just after one hour the flood water, coming through the dyke opening, flows through the village, drowning almost all the people in the mill. Only three of forty-seven people (two adults and a baby) are barely rescued from the rubble. On the same day, 113 other people die in Westkapelle. The remaining inhabitants abandon the village and go to surrounding villages. Only a few remain behind.”³⁴ This implies that the Allies attacked, rather than liberated, the province. In this version of the events, grand strategy plays very little role and local civilians are attacked, resulting in wanton destruction and death.

As this suggests, the primary theme interwoven throughout this form of memorialization is human tragedy and despair. *Polderhuis* visitors are steered through the course of events, but almost always within the framework of *De Verwoesting* (‘The Destruction’). For example, after listing details about the Allied landing on Walcheren and Zuid-Beveland, placards list the degree of destruction inflicted upon their village. “Before the three bombardments there stood 650 houses, afterwards only about 50 were inhabitable. The seawater, that the bombardment let free, brings new misery,” and concludes that “the fighting and the shelling of November 1 ensures that afterwards no building can be found unscathed.”³⁵ When it comes to providing a timeline of Allied advances through Walcheren and Zuid-Beveland, one placard laconically reads: “November 1, 1944, liberation.” Directly beside the title is “*Feest?*” (‘Party?’), questioning the local reaction to what the Allies typically refer to as liberation. To conclude the liberation section of the *Polderhuis*, one placard provides a list

³⁴ *Polderhuis*: “Westkappelaars zijn heel sterk aan hun grond en dorp gebonden ... Het bombardement duurt meer dan twee uur; elk kwartier komen er nieuwe aanvalsgolven. De eerste bommen treffen niet alleen de dijk, maar ook een groot gedeelte van het dorp. De molen De Roos van de familie Theune wordt zwaar getroffen en stort in. Sommige mensen in de kelder zijn op slag dood. De uitgang is versperd door puin en de omlaag gevallen molenstenen. Als na een uur het vloedwater door het ontstane dijkgat het dorp instroomt, verdrinken vrijwel all mensen in de molen. Slechts drie van de zevenenveertig mensen (2 volwassenen en een baby) worden ternauwernood uit de puinhopen gered. Op dezelfde dag komen ook 113 andere mensen om in Westkapelle. De overgebleven inwoners verlaten het dorp en gaan naar de omliggende dorpen. Slechts enkelen blijven achter.”

³⁵ *Polderhuis*: “Voor de drie bombardementen staan er in Westkapelle 650 woningen, daarna zijn er circa 50 nog enigzins bewoonbaar. Het zeewater, dat na de bombardementen vrij spel heeft zorgt voor nieuwe ellende. Niet verwoeste huizen die het zeewater weten te doorstaan, bieden een treurige aanblik. De gevechten en de beschietingen van 1 November zorgen er vervolgens voor dat in Westkapelle geen onbeschadigd pand meer gevonden kan worden.”

of every citizen from Westkapelle who died as a result of the Allied bombing and flooding, along with their age and photograph.

Most of the exhibit, however, is devoted to the reconstruction phase, which is perhaps the most important part of the town and province's history.

Comparatively, the sections that deal with the Allied assault on Walcheren and Zeeland occupy a small part of the museum's exhibit. Here, the most apparent, and perhaps most important theme of the museum, is the ability of the people to rebuild following such a destructive process of liberation. Visitors then move on to a section entitled "Life Goes On" in which the recovery and reconstruction is the most important part of the narrative. The most striking aspect of this exhibit is the almost complete absence of Allied assistance and the CA officers who worked alongside Dutch authorities from October 1944 onward. Instead, the exhibit tells the story of recovery in Westkapelle and Walcheren as one initiated, supported, and completed by the Zeeuwen and Dutch people. A placard reads "Walcheren is reclaimed. The land and its people, however, have suffered under the sea. Every farmer has damage done to buildings, business inventories, crops and his livestock. Walcheren becomes a desolate barren plain, with remains of trees and shrubs, which have almost without exception not survived the salt water."³⁶ In this section, too, visitors are guided through a life-sized *Bruynzeel* emergency home, in which many villagers were housed after the bombardment. In 1945, the community requested the Dutch government provide 200 emergency homes, which were placed throughout the town. The last home of this type was removed in 1963. When it comes to closing and repairing the dykes, a small book containing English-language information is located near the end of the exhibit. Even here the Allied contribution to reconstruction efforts, so exigently requested by Eden and others, remains absent. The page devoted to "Closing the Dykes" notes that "in the period between May 18, 1945 to February 2, 1946 (almost 9 months) around 4 million m³ of sand, 140,000,000 kg of rocks, 3,600,000 bundles of wicker were used. In addition to the many hands, huge machinery was involved in carrying out the repairs. This included 12 suction dredgers and 20 tugs. For the first time ever caissons (huge submersible concrete structures) were used to close off flow channels."³⁷ The exclusion of Allied aid cannot be explained by the lack of resources they supplied in late 1944 and 1945. But, in many ways, this narrative seeks to situate the people of this region at the apogee of reconstruction efforts.

³⁶ *Polderhuis*: "Walcheren is drooggevalen. Het land en de bevolking echter hebben onder de zee geleden. Elke boer heeft schade aan gebouwen, aan de bedrijfsinventaris, aan gewassen en aan zijn veestapel. Walcheren is een troosteloze kale vlakte geworden, met resten van bomen en struiken, die vrijwel zonder uitzondering het zoute water niet hebben overleefd."

³⁷ *Polderhuis*. Photo of placard taken by author in May 2012.

The materials and the CA units sent to the region by the Allies have no place in the narrative of reconstruction. While this provides just one example, the type of memory and the story of the *Polderhuis* offer a stark contrast to how liberation is remembered in the Anglo-Canadian tradition, in which liberation is almost exclusively associated with euphoria among local population. But the version told in Westkapelle underscores the human and environmental toll, and suggests that the processes of liberation, which also required substantial reconstruction, were more costly for the region than four years under Nazi occupation. In a publication commissioned by the *Polderhuis*, Thijs Weststrate writes: “Although the invasion succeeded and Walcheren was liberated, the situation after the liberation was simply disastrous. In those few weeks, 184 inhabitants perished in Westkapelle, almost 8% of the entire population, and more than 80% of the village was destroyed. There was no family in the village that was not in some way a victim of the violence of war” (Weststrate 2007, 6). The history of liberation as constructed by one town in Zeeland emphasizes the damage and enormous scale of reconstruction and recovery, with particular attention given to the environmental consequences, not of one that glorifies the euphoria of a local population after Nazi Germany’s capitulation in the province in 1944.

The story told at the *Polderhuis*, however, is not necessarily unique. In 1950, Dutch filmmaker Anton Koolhaas produced the film *De dijk is dicht* (‘The Dyke is Closed’) in which he similarly emphasized the human and environmental toll of liberation (Koolhaas 1950). Because it was filmed so early after the war, much of the setting reflected the true scale of destruction brought on by Allied bombardment. Likewise, writing under the pseudonym A. den Doolaard, novelist Cornelius Johannes George Spoelstra Jr. wrote several stories focusing on the tragic condition of Zeeland. In one novel, *Het verjaagde water* (1946), translated into English as *Roll Back the Sea* in 1948, Den Doolaard lamented “so the great strategists decided that Walcheren must drown for the liberation of Europe” (34). Here, too, the theme was one of utter tragedy and human loss, all of which resulted from the sea. Walcheren is sacrificed for Europe, not liberated. As these few cases suggest, Zeeland’s relationship with the sea and water have had an enormous cultural impact on how history has been remembered. The early publication of den Doolaard’s works, as well as Koolhaas’ film, raises questions about whether the memory of liberation in this region has been constant and subjected to little change over time. The *Polderhuis*, which is a relatively recent museum, exhibits some of the very same narratives, emphasizing the negative aspects of “liberation,” as the literature and film of the immediate post-war era. The narrative described here affords important insight into an alternative form of remembrance that contrasts with other forms of commemoration in the

Netherlands or Canada. It also shows how human actors, regardless of nationality, appear less important than the environment.

Conclusion

The most salient feature of war in the southern Netherlands during 1944 is that both sides mobilized the environment and employed it within their strategies. In this respect, attention to the use of “water as weapons,” to borrow the title of one Dutch book, highlights the very total nature of “total war” (Cats 1990). Each phase of the war in Zeeland, from invasion in May 1940 to liberation in 1944, was shaped by the province’s topography and natural features. That Zeeland, and much of the Netherlands, lay below sea level meant that water may have been the most powerful weapon in either arsenal. Most of the province, with the exception of Zeeuws-Vlaanderen, consisted of islands, which often isolated civilian populations and also governed the ways in which reconstruction took place. Because of its topography, the reconstruction of Zeeland required seagoing transportation, dredgers, tugs, and stone barges to carry materials to and from the various islands. These materials were required to assert control over the environment. In addition, the isolation of each island made resistance an extremely challenging and dangerous enterprise, since the movement of personnel and materials was strictly monitored. While Canadian efforts to liberate the Netherlands have been buttressed by bilateral commemorations, the “wartime love affair” is not representative of the country as a whole. Some towns and villages like Westkapelle memorialize the “bitter road to freedom” by emphasizing the destructive, costly, human and environmental toll of liberation (Hitchcock 2008). In Zeeland, the German occupation was indeed disruptive and marks a painful experience in its history, but the process of Allied liberation and its corollaries of destruction and reconstruction have perhaps left an even more indelible mark on the region.

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About the author

Kirk W. Goodlet earned his PhD at the University of Waterloo, Canada. His dissertation, *In the shadows of the sea: The destruction and recovery of Zeeland, the Netherlands, 1940-1948*, examines the history of this rural part of the Netherlands and the ways in which the people navigated the challenges of the 1930s and 1940s. In addition, he has published on the history of German Prisoners of War (POW) in Canada during the Second World War, the Holocaust, as well as Canadian officer leadership. He is also the co-founder and contributor to *clioscurrent.com*, a website that explores current events with historical perspective every Monday and Thursday.

« Réduits aux bancs de boue dont ils ont été réclamés » : La province de Zélande, la guerre et la reconstruction, 1940-1945

Basé sur des sources du Zeeuws Archief à Middelbourg et au Nederlands Instituut voor Militaire Historie à La Haye, le présent article explore l'expérience zélandaise de l'occupation et de la libération, de 1940 à l'automne de 1944. Il prétend que l'eau comme arme a été utilisée en Zélande d'une manière extrêmement efficace et destructrice. Canadiens et Allemands ont tous deux utilisé l'inondation comme tactique sur l'Escaut, mais les Allemands ont pu s'en servir d'une manière beaucoup plus mesurée, tandis que la méthode des Alliés : la brèche des digues par bombardement, a été beaucoup plus destructrice. Les dégâts environnementaux causés par les combats dans la région ont fait que les Canadiens n'y sont pas tous rappelés comme des libérateurs comme ailleurs dans le pays. L'impératif stratégique canadien d'inonder de vastes régions de la Zélande a été un acte extrêmement destructeur qui a eu des conséquences à long terme pour les habitants de la région et pour leurs souvenirs de la guerre. La compréhension de l'usage fait de l'environnement en Zélande en 1944-45, et de son effet sur la mémoire collective, offre un aperçu profond de l'effet durable de la guerre à outrance sur l'histoire communale et régionale. Certes, l'occupation nazie a été un chapitre terrible des expériences de cette province, mais je prétends que l'invasion des Alliés a infligé la destruction à une échelle sans précédent, telle que la province n'avait jamais rien vu de pareil.

“Gereduceerd tot de modderbanken waaruit ze waren voortgekomen”: Oorlog en wederopbouw in de provincie Zeeland

Dit artikel behandelt de bezetting en bevrijding van Zeeland tussen 1940 en 1944 aan de hand van bronnen uit het Zeeuws Archief en het Nederlands Instituut voor Militaire Historie in Den Haag. Het betoogt dat het gebruik van water als een wapen in Zeeland effectief maar ook destructief was. Zowel de Canadezen als de Duitsers gebruikten inundatie als een taktiek in de Schelde. De Duitsers waren in staat om het land te laten onderlopen op een gecontroleerde manier, in tegenstelling tot de Geallieerden die noodzakelijkerwijs veel destructiever te werk gingen bij het bombarderen en doorsteken van dijken. Als gevolg van de milieuschade die werd toegebracht door deze operaties werden de Canadezen in deze regio niet altijd beschouwd als de “bevrijders” die ze waren in de rest van het land. De voor de Canadezen noodzakelijke strategie om grote delen van Zeeland onder water te laten lopen was een zeer destructieve methode, die ingrijpende gevolgen had voor de bewoners van de regio en bepalend was voor hun herinneringen aan de oorlog. Begrip de manier waarop het Zeeuwse landschap werd gebruikt in 1944-1945 en het gevolg daarvan voor de herinnering aan en verwerking van de oorlogsgebeurtenissen geeft een beter inzicht in de manier waarop totale oorlog nog steeds effect heeft op de geschiedenisbeleving van de bevolking in de regio. Ik betoog dat de bezetting door de Nazi’s weliswaar een verschrikkelijk hoofdstuk vormde in de geschiedenis van de provincie Zeeland, maar dat de Geallieerde invasie verwoesting aanrichtte op een schaal die niet was voorgekomen in de regio voor het begin van de “bevrijding” in het najaar van 1944.