

The spoken word counts!

Speech / Commemoration Wesel 2020

By Alexander Berkel

Ladies and gentlemen,

When talking about local history here in Wesel we quickly get to the history of World War Two and to the events which occurred exactly 75 years ago. For many of us this local history is also part of our family history. And if that is the case we are touched by history in a very personal way.

At least that's true for me. One example is this photo. My glance usually focusses on one particular building: the former boys' grammar school. As a young boy I attended this school - that was in the early 1970s. Let me briefly drift into my family history: My grandfather helped to build this school as a young bricklayer in 1912 - before the First World War. At the end of the Second World War, in 1945, he was an inmate of a US prisoner-of-war camp near Rimini in Italy. It was there that he saw this photo in an American newspaper or magazine. I've always asked myself what he must have felt when he saw Wesel like this. Was he surprised? Hardly - because ruins, death and the nightmares of war were the appalling reality in 1945 in all of Europe.

In February and March 1945 bombs and shells laid the town of Wesel to waste. This total destruction certainly is the most incisive incident in the 800-year old history of our town. There's a commemorative book which was published in 1961 - in it you will find photos of a

ploughed up town of ruins, in the appendix you will find lists of the dead, which stretch over many pages. The book's title is "The Annihilation of the Town of Wesel".

It makes sense for the older generation of the Wesel citizenry to talk about "annihilation". They experienced the inferno. Many lost loved ones – or their houses and possessions. The old Wesel was indeed physically annihilated. My generation and all of the younger ones – we don't know this old Wesel. Most of us appreciate what exists today – and we see that Wesel is very much alive. And part of being alive means that at times we come together to commemorate, to recollect the darkest hours of our history – and to remember the victims!

So our commemoration today deals with a sad chapter of local history. But when we investigate this local history in the context of the Second World War we have to look further than the end of our nose. And further than our national boundaries. Here, in the Lower Rhine area, exploring our local history always entails looking beyond our borders.

The history of the war which hit Wesel so devastatingly in 1945 began far away and about six years before. At that time, the doors to hell were opened with the German invasion of Poland on 1st September 1939 – some moments ago we already heard of the horrors in the small town of Wielun.

What happened between 1939 and the end of the war is generally known to most people. So are the results of

the war and in particular the horrors of the Holocaust. But today we specifically wish to recall why the Second World War engulfed the old town of Wesel.

The prerequisite of any form of commemoration is knowledge. We need to know what happened, why it happened and what the consequences were. That's why it is imperative to convey exactly what went on here 75 years ago – in particular for the benefit of younger generations. For many young people today the wartime events defy imagination. However, they become more palpable when facts and their context are being spelled out. That's why I will now present some chapters of military history that preceded the events here in Wesel. And this, for a start, will take us beyond the borders of Germany.

In May 1944 – a month before the invasion - the Allied Chiefs of Staff had already decided that after landing in Normandy a primary thrust should go through northern France, Belgium and the Netherlands and then aim at the Ruhr industrial area. This industrial area near to the western border of Germany was of particular strategic and economic importance for the Reich. And the Allies believed that if they could isolate this area from the rest of Germany the war would almost be won. In September 1944 that plan became quite realistic as British troops had already reached the border between Belgium and the Netherlands.

British Field Marshall Montgomery was in command on that front. In the autumn of 1944 he had his sights set on Nijmegen and in particular on Arnhem. He wanted his troops to cross the river Waal using the bridge at Nijmegen and the Rhine using the bridge at Arnhem. Then he planned to turn to the southwest and advance onto German territory. On crossing the Reich's border his next advance was to be aimed at Hamm – a city on the north eastern edge of the Ruhr region. There he wanted his forces to meet the Americans who were due to approach Hamm from the south. In September 1944 the US-Army had reached the German border at Aachen, and in the Eifel Mountains it stood on German territory. So, the Allies planned to encompass the Ruhr in a large arc.

In the late summer of 1944 Montgomery executed a rather bold plan which looked like this: British paratroopers should land near Arnhem while American airborne forces were to land near Eindhoven and Nijmegen. They were to sustain bridgeheads beyond the rivers Waal and Rhine, secure bridges and wait for the Allied ground troops to move up. Only 70 km separated Arnhem from the main Allied force in Belgium. But as it turned out that was too far. The ground troops made it over the Maas and over the Waal – all the way to Nijmegen. But at Arnhem German army units and SS-troops wiped out the British Airborne division within ten days. The Rhine crossing at Arnhem was denied to Allied forces. The Germans had gained a final victory.

But this victory extended the war by several months and it would be catastrophic for the German Lower Rhine area. But initially our region slipped out of focus.

The Third Reich mobilised its forces for a final large-scale counter punch. They were thrown into the Ardennes Offensive in mid-December. That gamble failed: The Germans lost this battle. At the end of January 1945 the situation was back to where it was before the Ardennes Offensive. That meant: Arnhem was still beyond the reach of Montgomery's armies. But they had already occupied the Nijmegen area. The British Field Marshall no longer had his sights set on Arnhem but on the south, on the German Lower Rhine region. West of the Rhine British and Canadian troops were ordered to advance in the direction of Wesel. At the same time Americans should launch another offensive – the 9th US Army was supposed to advance from Venlo to the north, also in the direction of Wesel. Why Wesel? Montgomery had hopes to capture the two Rhine bridges in Wesel – these two bridges were the northernmost crossing points over the Rhine on German territory.

So, two allied spearheads were heading for Wesel. These attacks were intended to drive the German troops from the left-bank territory of the Lower Rhine region. The area conquered should then serve as the staging ground for the eventual attack across the Rhine. The stretch of river between Dinslaken and Emmerich, including Wesel, was earmarked for this. Why this area? That was obvious: north of the Ruhr area, on the right

bank of the Rhine, flat land stretched out, moreover there was a developed road network. These roads would enable the highly motorised Allied armies to make a quick advance to the east, deep into the Reich.

That was the plan. Thus the area west of the Rhine became a battle field at the beginning of February. In the morning of 8th February the battle for the Rhineland began. British and Canadians attacked from the Nijmegen area in the direction of Cleves. Some optimists in Montgomery's staff believed the Allied forces could reach the Wesel Rhine bridges within three days. But rather than three days it took thirty days.

German troops on the left bank of the Rhine stubbornly defended their positions in and around the Reichswald forest. They were supplied via the Rhine bridges at Wesel and by ferries – for example in Rees. The proximity to the front and the importance as communication and traffic centres suddenly turned these old towns into military targets. Bombing raids on towns near to the front line were routine for the Allied Air Forces. Chaos behind the German front was to be created, the battle field was to be “sealed off” and supply lines of the enemy were to be interrupted. Wesel as a communication centre behind German lines appeared to be a thorn in the side of the Allies.

The town had to be destroyed – that was the military logic. Friday 16th February was Wesel's “black day” – the British attacked the town and carpet bombed it. Further

attacks followed on 18th and 19th February. Around 600 civilians were killed on these days. It should be noted that these victims are not just part of some statistics – but rather grandparents and grandchildren, men, women and children, whole families. The victims were struck and buried by falling debris, some suffocated in shelters, others suffered from their inner organs being torn apart by force of the concussions.

The bombardment of Wesel was a so-called “tactical attack”. This distinguished it from the “strategic” bombing of German industries and cities, which was intended to weaken the Reich’s economy and to break the morale of the Germans. Strategic bombing, tactical bombing - the victims didn’t care what the reason for the attack was. Suffering, death and destruction from bombing became the trauma of many Germans who experienced the war.

We’ll take a small step forward now from those February days of destruction. And we will take a closer look at the left bank of the Rhine – at the area opposite Wesel. At the beginning of March the German defenders of the so-called “Wesel bridgehead” were in a hopeless position: the British and Americans were attacking them from all directions, driving the defenders back to the Rhine. The diminishing German bridgehead on the left-bank couldn’t be sustained – on 10th March the German units withdrew across the Rhine and blew up the final intact connection across the Rhine – the Wesel railway bridge.

From then on the Allies took 14 days to concentrate troops west of the Rhine. 250,000 combat troops were getting ready - and just as importantly - tens of thousands of engineers. They piled up vast amounts of bridge-building material for the crossing of the Rhine. The war bridges they were supposed to build would serve as arteries for supplies. These would be vital for the further advance of the highly-motorized Allied Forces into the German Reich. Facing the Allies on the right bank of the Lower Rhine in mid-March were about 100,000 German soldiers. One may assume that perhaps some of those Germans sensed that they weren't defending Germany or their home soil - but rather the murderous Nazi-regime that had provoked the Second World War.

This film extract shows the start of the Allied offensive:

Extract from film - length 2'20".

On 23rd March the attack over Rhine was launched. After hours of artillery fire a Scottish infantry division crossed the river in amphibious tanks. This was followed by British Commando troops crossing the Rhine at Wesel. A further Scottish division attacked in the night-time hours of March 24th between the villages of Bislich and Haffen. Simultaneously two US-divisions crossed the Rhine between Wesel and Dinslaken, just upstream from Wesel.

Then, also on 24th March, the Allies staged the largest airborne assault of the Second World War. Almost

20,000 American and British airborne soldiers landed within a few hours in a triangle between Mehrhoog, Hamminkeln and Wesel. They quickly broke the back of the German defence there. Along the entire Lower Rhine front German resistance collapsed. This successful assault across the river eliminated the Rhine barrier as a military obstacle. The front moved quickly to the east now. The Allies were able to implement their offensive strategy of mobile warfare almost at their own discretion – the German Armed Forces had nothing to counter it anymore.

A high price was paid for this battle: ruined towns, villages and farms, thousands of lives were lost. One can roughly say that the actual Rhine crossing and the establishment of a stable bridgehead cost at least 1,800 lives among the Allied forces. On the German side about 3,000 soldiers were killed in the first four days. And once more I would like to stress: those are not mere statistics. The men who died were sons, fathers, brothers – their deaths were mourned and the loss changed the lives of those left behind.

What happened here in February and March 1945 is just a short chapter in the history of the war. It can only be understood when we know what the preceding chapters were and which chapters followed. With all due respect for local history – it very much helps to point to the wider context.

I just tried to explain why the war hit the Lower Rhine region and Wesel. Maybe we should add just one final thought to the overarching question of "why". Montgomery's Rhineland offensive began on February 8th 1945. Just 10 days before – on the eastern front - a place called Auschwitz had been liberated by Soviet soldiers. We all know what the Red Army found there - and what had taken place in Auschwitz in the years before that. The fighting on the Lower Rhine came to an end on 30th March - with the conquest of Emmerich. About two weeks later the British army liberated the concentration camp at Bergen-Belsen and the Americans reached Buchenwald. At this point it must have been overwhelmingly clear to any Allied conscript why he had been ordered to cross the Rhine at Dinslaken, Wesel or Rees. The wartime events that unfolded here and in all of Germany were the price that had to be paid by a misguided German nation – the path taken as early as 1933 had eventually lead to this.

People all over Europe had suffered in this war. Bombs, shells, death and destruction were a universal experience. For many this war also brought oppression, deportation, enslavement - and we must not forget the genocide that Europe's Jewry had suffered. All of this was carried out by Germans and in the name of the German Reich.

The Germany that we know today seems to be ages away from that Reich which was defeated and lay in ruins. We now live in a democracy and we enjoy the rule

of law and benefit from a thoughtfully designed constitution. We live in peace with our neighbours and consider ourselves part of a united Europe. However: None of that should be taken for granted!

These achievements are the result of a clearly defined political will – and must continue to be defended by a similar political will. If we want to know where we are heading we need to know where we have come from. The so called “Grundgesetz” - or “Basic Law” as we call our constitution - has defined our political and social system since 1949. It accommodates all the lessons that our forefathers had learnt from their experience in the Weimar Republic, during the years of Nazi-dictatorship and in the Second World War. That’s where we come from - and we shouldn’t forget it.

That is why we have to confront disinterest and ignorance! We can do so by preserving our knowledge of the past and by passing on that knowledge. I’m talking to you as an historian and a journalist. With the methodology and the accuracy of a historian I am trying to piece the facts together and to put them into a proper historical context. As a journalist I am trying to convey all these facts and their context to as wide an audience as possible. If we want to understand our world today, if we want to make rational decisions for the future, if we want to realistically judge our past, then we – as a society – need a common basis of knowledge. Let`s not forget: He who knows nothing is prone to believe all sorts of nonsense! He who knows nothing may be manipulated

and is vulnerable to disinformation. He is vulnerable to those who distort facts and belittle past crimes. However, those who know their facts about the Third Reich and the Second World War - or those who experienced it first-hand - will know that the years of Nazi-dictatorship were not a "small splat of bird's droppings on the otherwise clean sheet of German history" (to quote a far-right populist German politician). Whoever talks like that derides the victims on all sides – or they mean nothing to him. Anyone looking at this picture of Wesel will realize that we are not talking about a short aberration in the long and otherwise normal history of Germany.

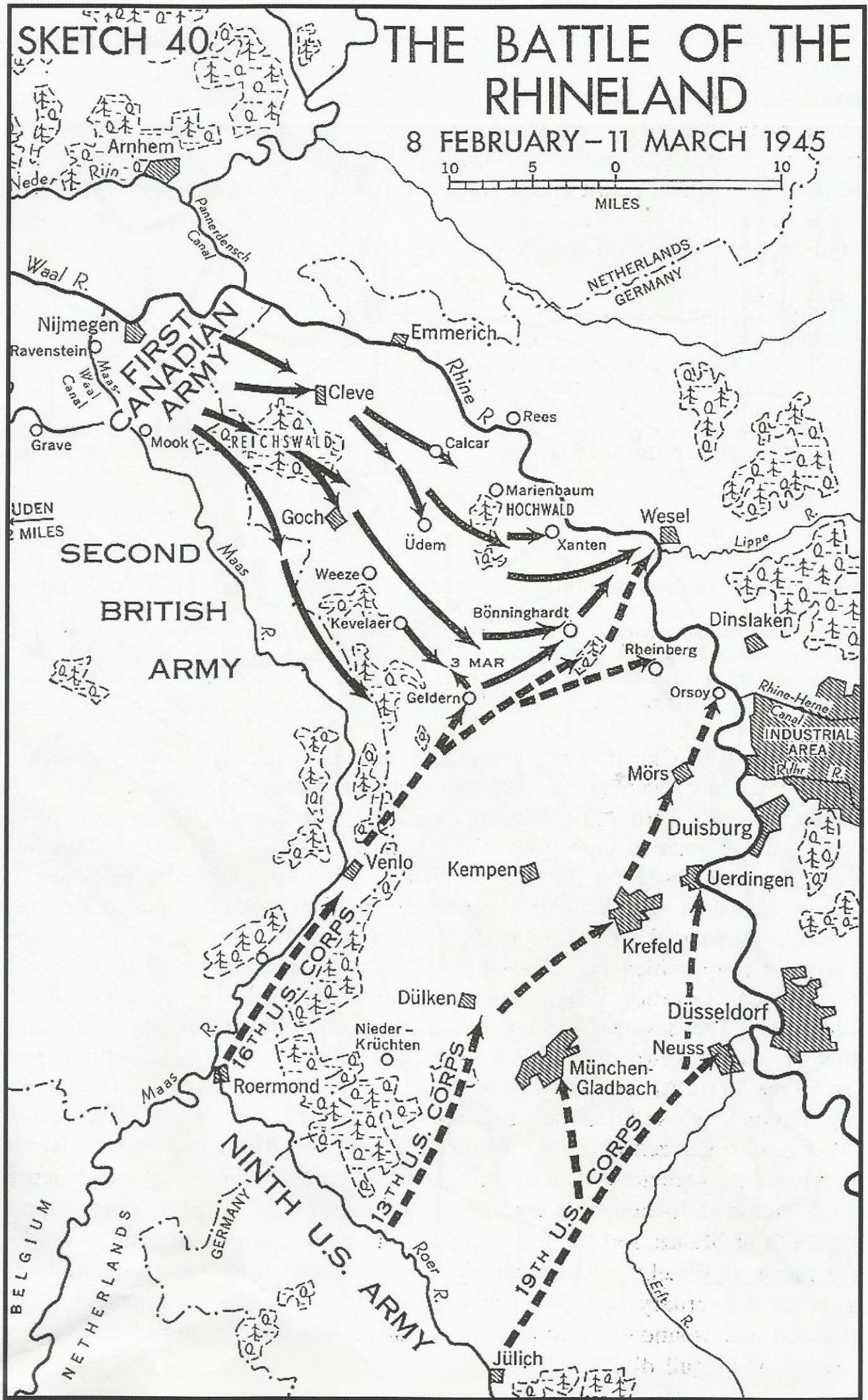
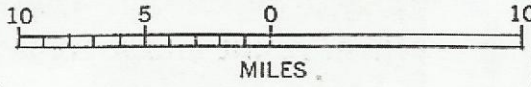
The Second World War was a man-made catastrophe – the effects of which still reverberate today. This catastrophe was induced by Hitler's Germany. Its politics were nationalistic and aggressive, totalitarian, racist and murderous – in other words: criminal. All of this happened a long time ago. But it must not be forgotten. It is our duty to remember it. We're here to remember it today – and we will do so in the future. Thank you very much.

Translated by Alexander Berkel and Tracy Lambrecht

SKETCH 40

THE BATTLE OF THE RHINELAND

8 FEBRUARY - 11 MARCH 1945



Geschichtstour ins Freiheitsmuseum nach Groesbeek/Niederlande am 15. Februar 2020 anlässlich der Veranstaltung „Nie wieder Krieg“ – Gedenkfeier zur 75. Wiederkehr der Zerstörung der Stadt Wesel