

OH-454

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ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

BEN HOUTMAN

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ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
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BEN HOUTMAN

INTERVIEW NO: OH-454

DATE OF INTERVIEW: March 29, 1998

INTERVIEWER: Scott Tyra

SUBJECT: Life in Holland & United States

INTRODUCTION

Ben Houtman was almost 12 years old when World War II started on May 10, 1940. He was living in Holland that time.

In this interview, Ben shares his experiences in World War II. He experienced people dying and Holland's freedom taken away from the Germans. He was also starving with his people with no electricity, little water, and no natural gas.

When the war was over he went to America. He only knew a little bit of English. He had to find his own way to his aunt's house with other people's help because he didn't know English. He later went to join the army and got transferred to Guam. He later became a U.S citizen. In 1957 he met his wife on a blind date that his friend set him up with.

This transcript contains an interview of Ben Houtman. He was interviewed on March 29, 1998 by Scott Tyra. Student oral history secretaries carried out the various processes: Scott Tyra did the transcribing. Kekaula Nozaki did the auditing, editing, and completed the final assembly. "[OH-454]" and other such notations tell the reader that an interview of that number has been completed with that individual and is on the file in the Oral History collection at BYU-Hawaii.

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Laie, Hawaii
July 8, 1998

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END OF INTERVIEW

SIDE A

INT Can you talk about your experiences of World War II?

BH Well when the war started it was May 10, 1940. I was almost 12 years old, it was kind of, as a kid you used to read about the war in France, England, and Poland but you never realized that it would happen to Holland because Holland was such a small country compared to Germany. Germany had 40 million people and we only had eight million people. So any how, it was really a great surprise. What happened was that we used to have air raid warnings and testing and things like that. It was on this particular day, beautiful morning, and the air raid sirens went off and you know, we didn't pay much attention. Thinking it was another drill and then we heard the airplanes coming over and then we heard the explosions, bombs exploded. Then the antiaircraft gun fire. Then we turned on the radio and realized we were at war.

So, it only lasted five days. See, the Dutch army was not able to compete with the German army. No way. Because we still had horses to pull the guns and the Germans had all the big trucks and everything else and the only defense we had was really was the dikes and I guessed they pulled some dikes up but that didn't stop the Germans.

So, what they tried to do was get Rotterdam. Capture Rotterdam because Rotterdam was the biggest city and seaport there is. All the ship were anchored and they wanted to capture all the ships. In order to go capture Rotterdam, they had to come over this particular bridge. On one side was the Dutch marines. On the other side were the Germans. And they couldn't get across the bridge. So then, they wanted to blow up the bridge and the Dutch didn't like that because it was our link to the city. Then what they did, they had rubber

boats coming across in the river. What happened was that about half way in the river the Dutch marines on the other side took off their uniforms and they dove into the river. When they got about half way into the river, they cut the rubber boats and they sank. Of course, the Germans were waiting there with big boots and the hand grenades and heavy helmets, all this stuff and they all drown. But then, what happened was that I guess Hitler got a little pissed off. He bombed Rotterdam.

So he bombed them. He killed a lot of people, like Nita (his future wife) too. She was in their house. The funny thing was they were going to the bomb shelter and her father, no, her grandfather said the spirit told him something was not right. He said, we should get out. He said to the people, "Get out, get out." Of course, they didn't go out and they got out, and then what happened was the bomb hit the bomb shelter and killed all the people.

So, and then, the Dutch government realized, they had no more defense. The fighter planes were gone. The aircraft guns were without ammunition. So then Germany said if you don't surrender we're going to bomb the Hague, going to bomb Amsterdam and the other big cities, so they surrendered.

So it was a really bad experience to see foreign troops to come into your land, I was standing on this corner when the Germans came in because we were overwhelmed by the power there. By the trucks and I like I say, sometimes it is amazing. Sometimes I can smell the diesel fumes. And it brings me right back again to the particular place I was standing when they came through. I was almost 12 years old. I remember they had when they came there with Germans on the motorcycles directing the traffic. The people really got loud, you know how it is, and you cannot really comprehend the foreign troops in your country. Freedom, everything's gone. So the people started, kinda subtle putting out the hand grenade. It was a scary, very scary experience. So then we surrendered and we became an occupied country.

The first couple of years it wasn't too bad but then they had invasions and then they started taking the Jews, picking the Jews up and we all had to go and show our genealogy to see there were no Jews part. So anyhow, we had this neighbor. She was Jewish living down the street and she had two kids and she was expecting. So anyhow, she asked my mother, would you safeguard this package. She said what is in it. She said, baby clothes. She said, I am afraid that they might come to my house and take all my stuff and then when the baby is born, there won't be anything for the baby. So my mother, being a mother, she said, sure, okay. Like I said, it was really scary because she could have been caught helping the Jews and they could take you in.

About two weeks later, she came and her husband was in some kind of high position in the synagogue and the Germans had told her, no, they wouldn't take him. She came back to my mother and she was all happy and said they won't take us. About a couple weeks later, it was a Sunday morning, we heard this truck down the street and we heard the Germans march. We peeked through the curtain and they stopped in the house and took them.

So that afternoon, where I was living there was a big sports park and they took them all down there and from there they put them on the street cars and they were sentenced to the camps. So what I done was, I was about 15 years old so I went down there looking to see if they had picked up those people too. I sneaked through the guards, I was standing by the fence looking around and all at once, I felt something against my back, it was a gun and this guy, he spoke to me in German and I guess what he was trying to say was, do you want to join them? Anyhow, I took off.

And there was another time to be scared. In 1944 we had no more gas and the natural gas was all shut off and no electricity, nothing. and all we could get water was for two to three hours a day, so in order to cook, my brother and me, we make little stoves of sheet metal and when you put it on the top of the pot belly stove then somehow you could heat it with wood or whatever.

Close to my grandmother's place was a bomb shelter and what the people had been doing was they had like an A frame and they had sand all over it and the people had dug all the way to the sand to take the wood so they could burn it. My grandmother said maybe you guys can go down there and get yourselves some wood. So my brother and me we got a gunny sack and we went down there and it was very quiet. You know when you break wood off, how it snaps. Well what happened was right across from the bomb shelter was the SS garage. When the guard heard the snap, he came running out and starting looking. My brother and me, we just hit the ground. I guess if it could be possible, I could have really ducked into the ground. The guard was looking and looking around and of course, he didn't see us. He went back inside. And I tell you, when he got back inside, my brother and me, we took off and I think we set a world record.

Like I said, that was the brother that died. We were always together And we used to always go to the farms for the food and everything else. We would go on bicycles maybe twenty miles every day and get one bottle of milk and sometimes we get back to the city and the Germans would take it from us.

So anyhow, it was a terrible experience, a terrible time. I guess the most, but everything was bad. At almost the end of the war, it was bad, the hunger, the cold. The winter of 45 was very cold, terrible cold. People cut down the trees on the streets, anything that would burn.

With Nita because, see, we had all boys. We could go out but she had three sisters and her father was in a concentration camp. What they did was, they used to take the doors down and burn the doors. and the wooden mattress. So they , she don't really care much to talk about it, they suffered. Her sister was born in Holland. She almost died of starvation. The doctor came and he told them, she's dying. You know how Nita is with animals, she loves animals, so there was this cat walking around. And he told them, it's survival for your daughter. So they had to kill the cat, ate the cat and I guess once you eat one cat or a dog, it's better than, well, you know, it kept them alive. They suffered bad, terrible, compared to what we did.

Like I said, boys fourteen, fifteen years old, we could go and scrounge food, scrounge or whatever. But girls, it wasn't so easy. So she had really a terrible time. Terrible time hunger, and of course, with her father being away for three years in a concentration camp.

So, but then I guess what I remember most, it was almost the end of the war. Germany was losing and at the same time, people are dying. And somehow Germany gave permission for the allies to drop food over the big cities and it was this particular morning we heard this tremendous noise. You know, the windows were vibrating and people came out of their apartments. They didn't know what it was. We had never heard this kind of noise before. A lot of people came into the streets, just talking. And all by themselves, here came the bombers and they flew right over the roof tops. And you know what, there was such a powerful sound because we had never heard those. We used to see them come over and you could see their vapor trails. But this time, they came right over. You know what, I can still see the gunner and even his gun because everybody was standing in the streets waving their handkerchiefs, what ever they had and they saw us and they're waving back at us. I mean, and then there was this particular tail gunner, his gun going up and down.

When they cleared Amsterdam, they dropped the food and what it was, was these big cans of crackers. They told us, now don't eat too much because you know crackers and then you drink a lot of water, it will expand your stomach, your belly whatever, and it will kill you. But you know how it is when you're hungry. You eat and eat and people died. They ate too much. But that was the only time. What they did, they took it to the stores, like big distribution centers and then with your coupons you could go get the crackers. And I was standing in line and passed out, passed out. Hungry. The only thing I remember was, I came to and a woman was standing next to me and she said, I'm nurse, I'm a nurse put him in front of the line and then he will be okay. My brother, my kid brother, was supposed to relieve me. It was hard to stand in line for hours.

So like I said, that is it in a kind of a nut shell.

INT How did you end up in the United States?

BH After the war my father's brother, he came over. He was in the merchant marines. He was kinda of an alcoholic but I didn't know that. He liked to brag like people do when they get drunk. Anyhow, he came over. He was married but he had no children and he was telling all the nieces and nephews, come to America. I have a big farm and blaa, blaa, blaa. And nobody else but me took him up on it. And I said, oh, Ben, that sounds pretty good. Anyhow I came over. My aunt was English and I assumed she was supposed to meet me at the airport and when I got there, there was nobody. And of course, I didn't know that much English. What I did, I took English lessons maybe an hour a week and I had to speak Dutch. But I had my old trusty dictionary so I get in New York at La Guardia field, nobody there. In 1947. And then, if I would have known it, I would have already known what to do, what to say or how to, but I'm standing like a dunce, nineteen years old. Lost. Man, I was terrified. I had to go catch a train to Philadelphia and here in a strange country and no language. I had to get to the train station. I don't know how I did it but I got to the train station. I got a train to Philadelphia and someone told me when to get off. And then of course they had told me, oh don't go in any taxies because they will rip you off blaa, blaa, and so then I had to go from the train station to the bus station to catch a bus and to get there I had to go by subway and you're talking about, man oh man, what I was I getting myself into. I didn't even know what the subway was. But there were some people, somehow you know, when I guess they realize you are a foreigner and they help you. They put me on the subway and told somebody to tell me where to get off. So I got to the bus station and took the bus to New Jersey.

So then when I got there, it was a big disappointment. My aunt didn't know who I was or why I came. Terrible, terrible. She was an alcoholic. Both alcoholics. You know, I had it good at home. I had a job. I was working for the Heinenken beer brewery. I was making money. Yes, there was food right away after the war. So anyhow, she was alcoholic, he was alcoholic. So then they used to hide their

bottles, and then he bought himself a truck and of course, he could not drive and I was supposed to be his chauffeur and all I did was take them to the bars. And I was waiting outside till they get out of the bars and take them home .

So anyhow, and then he came home from sea and he decided to stay at home. He had a chicken farm and he said, you know there is not enough work for you and me. He said, why don't you go in the service. Boy, I mean it was like, you know, pow. I always had the greatest respect for the American uniform and the American soldier. So I thought, that would be really neat but I figured that I was always skinny and my uncle said well, maybe they won't take you because you're too skinny so they kinda fed me up. So I had the physical and I passed, I passed.

So I took my training. I went to Texas and by that time I knew some English. Well, it was about a half year since I had been here so I had the chance to talk to people and things like that. Of course in the Army any kind of order they gave you always used to look at the guy next to you and what he did. I just followed. I didn't understand English very well but they took me anyway. I was amazed because one time I was on kp and I guess somehow the guy said stop but I kept slicing. I don't know. Maybe I didn't hear. I just keep slicing and he said, don't you understand English? I said no. Boy, that really did it, but then I explained to him and that guy became kinda a mentor, you know. He kinda helped me and taught me so then when I got out of basic I got my orders and they gave me an APO number. I asked what is this and they said oh, you are going overseas. Overseas? Yeah. So it was San Francisco, so it was the Pacific.

They sent me to Guam. Terrible place. Terrible. Heat and there was nothing there. When we went over the tour of duty was two years. but there was so many guys losing their marbles that they cut it down to 18 month, then fifteen. So I was only about 20 months because they figure by the time you leave. It was bad because there was no entertainment, nothing. It was just always the heat. Mosquitoes. They used to have open air movies and they would come by with DDT. They sprayed the whole area with DDT. The smoke, you

couldn't even see the screen. The mosquitoes were so thick you couldn't see the screen without the DDT. When the smoke cleared, you could see the movie again.

So what I did was called OJ T and I was working on oxygen and CO2 because we had to make our own for the pilots. So we were located off the air base because of the danger of it. We were right by the jungle and they picked us up in the truck and took us back and forth. So one day the plant was shut down so my buddy and me, we said, Let's go into the jungle because there were still Japanese on the island. It was '48. He said, maybe we can find some souvenirs. I said, all right, Let's go. So anyhow, we were wearing a shirt and pants because it was so warm down there. So we went into the jungle. He had a machete and he was cutting his way through the jungle. You know how it is in the jungle. You hear those birds screaming you know, So anyhow, he said, you just keep on looking. If you see anything, Left and right. I didn't see no souvenirs. No Japanese. No nothing. We were going along pretty well. All at once, he turned around. He was white. He turned white and he said, run. Boy, I knew there was no question. Boy, I took off. I flew through the jungle and so I got out. Later, I said, what did you see? He said, what happen was he was cutting his way and there was this big yellow jacket nest. He hit that and they came after him. They used to call me the flying Dutchman after that. Boy, I just flew out of there. I was scared. I figured, if a guy turned white, there had to be something.

So then, when I came back, I was stationed in New York and then I went to Illinois and then when the Korean War broke out, they sent me back over. I went to Japan because the kind of work that I was doing, they needed that over there. So what we did, do you remember that during the war they used to have those balloons come off of Japan with bombs? We used the same air compressors that they had used in World War II. We took over the particular factories the Japanese had used. It was a big wide building to compress the air and we worked 24 hours a day because we took care of the air force and the navy and the army and the marines to supply their oxygen. And we were stationed pretty close to Mt. Fuji. We could see the

mountain.

I had five buddies. We were together in Guam and when we came back to the States, we went different places and we somehow all met again in the same outfit. So we were pretty good buddies. I enjoyed the work. I enjoyed what I was doing but they wanted some excitement. So one day, when they asked for volunteers for Korea and I didn't know it, but they signed me up too.

One day I came to the orderly and the guy said to me, 'are you ready to go? I said what? He said, you know, you volunteered. Get your stuff ready to leave. Boy, I was really mad. I mean, it's no use to, if you had to go, you have to go, but to volunteer! So then at night I thought, oh well, I couldn't go no place. I was restricted. When you go to the mess hall, you had to sign in and sign out and all that stuff. So I figured, let's get it over with. But then, I don't know what happen, I guess our job was more important. The other guys didn't go either.

So then I only stayed a year. Because when you go over seas, you are supposed to stay in the States a year before you go back again and I only stayed about eleven months. So we were one of the first to get back to the States. And another thing was, I was only signed up for three years but then when I get ready to leave to go over seas, Truman extended it for one more year. So then when I came out, I had no place to go.

INT When did they make you a citizen? When you signed up?

BH No, that's a good thing you brought it up. I had the impression that you would become a citizen automatically, but you know, you don't. But you gotta go take the test. You do everything. I was in Lubbock, Texas when I got my citizen papers. I still had to be here five years. See, I was in New York and I went to the immigration office and said, I'd like to get my citizenship papers and they said, how long you been here. They said you have to be like everybody else. You don't get no favors so then the funniest thing was when I came back from Japan, I was stationed in Texas. I had about 60 days of

furlough and I decided to go home to Holland. And the funny thing was, when I left Holland I was supposed to in the army. I had my draft notice but I figured if I go, then I cannot go to the United States because my visa was only good for about three weeks. So when I left, I was gone for awhile and the Dutch MPs came to my house looking for me. My mother said, I don't know where he is. He's in America some place. She would have said nothing. I never knew about it.

So anyhow, somebody turned me in. One day when I was in Japan, I got an official notice from the Dutch government that I had to report to some outfit at this and this time. Wow! They mean business. See, I was still a Dutch citizen. That was the trouble. So I went to the base commander and told him the situation and he said, I don't know what to tell you. So he said, go to Tokyo and talk to the ambassador, the Counsel, and the guy told me the same thing. You're still a Dutch citizen. There's nothing you can do. Go to the Dutch Counsel. That was scary because you know there on the consulate, it is their property. They can keep you. So I took a couple of my buddies with me, I don't know why. I still remember it was on St Nicholas Day, December 5th. When I went down. This guy was a captain in the Dutch army. Boy, I gave him a sharp salute. So I told him the situation. Well, he said, don't worry about it. Write a letter to the Queen and just tell them you are already serving in the American military. So then I got a letter from the Dutch government that said I was exempted but in case of war, if Holland went to war, I had to go back. So by the time I came back, I was a citizen but you see, when I went to Holland on my leave, I was still a Dutch citizen. I was taking a chance, but I had my papers saying that I was exempt. It was kinda neat, going on the street car and the people would be talking about me and they didn't know I was Dutch and I knew what they were talking about.

It was a good thing I went. My mother died a few months after. My father died when he was 56. He was a big man and then he had cancer and my mother, she was 57 when she died. And she died more like a broken heart because my father and mother, they were always together. There was something about those two and I guess she was

sick and she had a cold and in those days the doctor came to your house and the doctor came and said, oh, it's a respiratory disease and she died of pneumonia.

In one way it was fortunate that I was over here because see, when my father died, in those days there was no pension or social securities like that and my kid brother was still in school. My oldest brother was just getting married and the other brother was in the sanitarium with TB. So there was no money coming in. With me being in the air force I was able to send an allotment home to my mother. I paid so much money in and the government paid the rest of it. She lived really good when I look back, maybe it was meant to be like that. I don't what would have happened. She got about \$70 dollars a month and the ratio was about \$350. She had about 210 guilders a month and the rent was 10 guilders a week so you see she was able to live very well. I think my brothers, they profited too.

So anyhow, when I came out of the service I met these people when I was in Illinois. I was going with their daughter and then I got shipped over seas and she found somebody else. You know how it goes.

There was an oxygen plant in Phoenix. So when I got out, I went to Phoenix to see if I could get a job there. They didn't give me a job. So there I was and a guy I knew was a house painter so he took me on the job a couple times but I guess I wasn't fast enough. So I can never be a painter. So then I almost decided to go back into the service but then one of my buddies was working in New York and he said, why don't you come over and stay with me. So I went to New York, around Syracuse to work.

I went to work for the railroad putting in telegraph poles. It was terrible hard but it was a job. The reason that I took it was, it paid room and board. It was like a high class hobo because you worked on the railroad tracks and then at night you had a hotel room. and then you only paid 50 cents a meal and they paid the rest. I used to pound and dig those -holes 6 ,7 feet holes and I never built up.

Let me tell you how I met my wife. I ended up in Niagara Falls, New York. I got laid off from the Railroad after about a year and a half. It was a awful. In the summer time we'd be working on the Hudson River between Buffalo and New York City. And it was not so bad in the summer but in the winter time it was so bitter cold. I was laid off and then I got called back for \$70 a day. And I had bought myself a brand new car, my first new car, a 1956 mercury. It was a two-tone, white and cream. I was never very good at driving in the snow and I had a few minor scraps. So then I had my new car and I decided to go to California, route 66 to Santa Monica.

I found myself a room and got a job at Douglas Aircraft in 1957 on Ocean Park Blvd. I enjoyed that. They gave me a raise and great comments like, you're doing a good job. One of the guys I was working with, he said to me, would you like to met a Dutch girl? Oh, sounds great. So that's how I met her. On a blind date. Beautiful, I mean, she was gorgeous. Long hair. Meeting her was the best thing that happened to me. And then of course, I got introduced to the church which was a great thing because I was drinking and smoking and stuff like that.

END OF INTERVIEW