

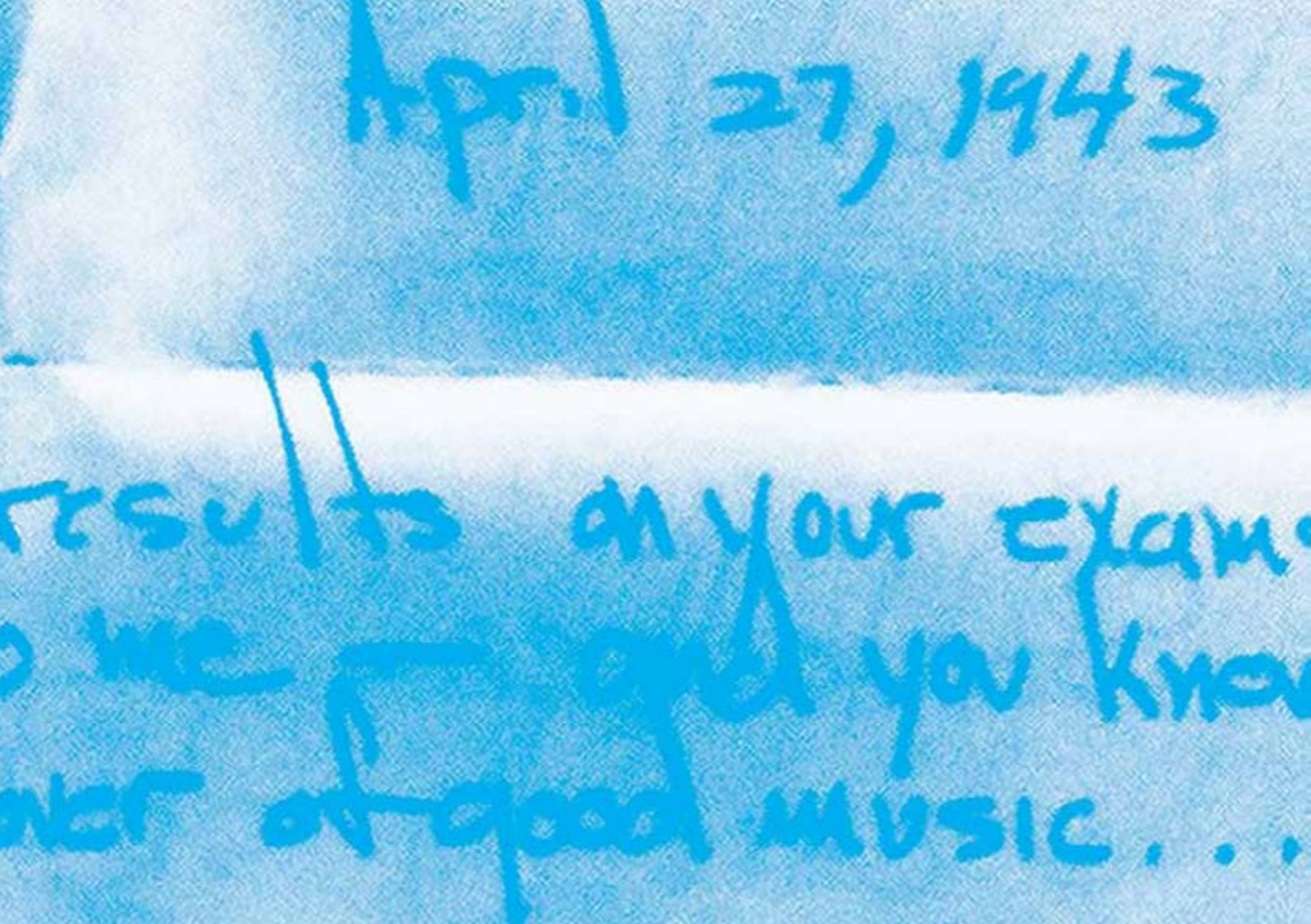


Kingdom of the Netherlands

Finding Leo Lichten

The story of an extraordinary young man





A tribute to our liberators

On 6 June 2014 the world will commemorate the 70th anniversary of Operation Overlord, the amphibious landing of the Allied forces under the command of General Eisenhower on the beaches of Normandy, France.

It is a fitting occasion to reflect on the special nature of the relationship of the Netherlands with the United States and Canada, countries that paid dearly for the liberation of my country. Britain and the Commonwealth nations kept the flame of liberty alive, but without the United States the idea of mounting a successful assault on the beaches of Western Europe would have been out of the question. The US armed forces focused their might on the German *Reich*, while the First Canadian Army cleared the Netherlands of German forces. Together they succeeded in restoring liberty to Western Europe.

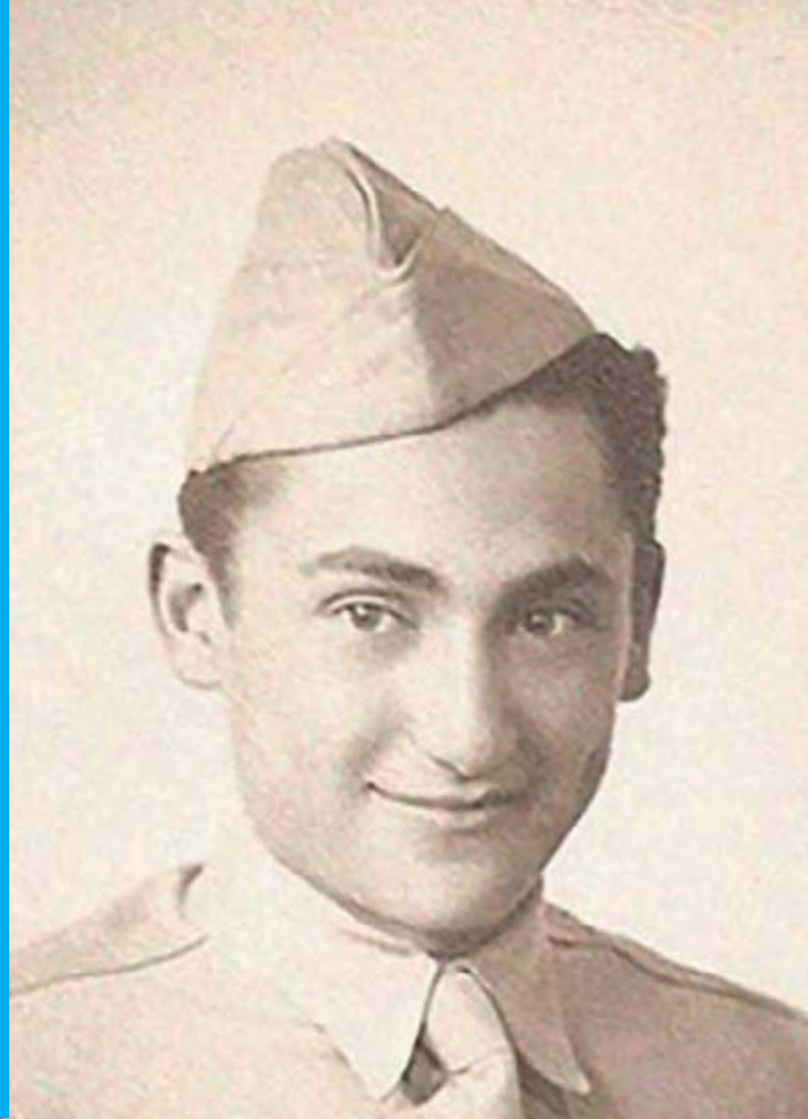


Frans Timmermans
*Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom
of the Netherlands*

Introducing Leo Lichten

Let me tell you about an extraordinary young man I got to know more than sixty years after his death. His story epitomizes the sacrifices made by tens of thousands of ordinary Americans and Canadians in their fight against tyranny and injustice.

His name was Leo Lichten. He now lies alongside more than 8,000 of his brothers in arms at the Netherlands American Cemetery and Memorial in Margraten, in the Dutch province of Limburg.



All the American war graves there have been ‘adopted’, mainly by locals. Some time ago I was able to adopt Leo Lichten’s grave. Very little was known about him, other than his rank (Private First Class), his unit (84th Infantry Division, known as the ‘Railsplitters’), the state he was from (New York) and the date he met his end (20 November 1944). His gravestone also revealed that he was Jewish.

I decided to go in search of more information about Leo, because I wanted to write about the importance of the Margraten cemetery to Dutch-US ties and about the bond even the third and fourth generations still feel with our liberators. It turned out to be perhaps the most difficult yet most fascinating journey I have ever made.

I started by looking into how his unit had ended up in Europe and in which battle he was killed. It seems he arrived from the US just a few months before he died in heavy fighting less than 20 kilometers from where I live. Of course, I was also interested in where Leo was from, whether he still had family living there and whether I could find anyone who had known him.

For a long time, I got nowhere, but searching online registers and archives in New York eventually threw up a few facts: the Lichten family had lived in Brooklyn, and later in Manhattan. I teamed up with Brooklyn borough president Marty Markowitz and other acquaintances in the city in pursuit of other Lichtens. Our quest

turned into something of a detective novel because, in Williamsburg in particular, there are many Orthodox Jews who may have known more than they were telling, but were wary of inquisitive outsiders. At one point we thought we were on to something when we met an elderly lady also called Lichten, but it turned out to be a corruption of another name. In Manhattan, too, we hit a brick wall.

I did discover a number of documents, thanks to web sources like www.ancestry.com, that shed light on Leo’s family background. Max Lichten, Leo’s father, was born in Galicia in 1894. At the time it was a province of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, though today it is part of Poland. Max arrived in New York in 1912, on the *Königin Luise*, from Bremen, Germany. He got a job as a bookbinder in Manhattan, where he later worked as a clerk. Mollie Greinfeld, Leo’s mother was born in 1900 in the east of Galicia, an area which later became part of Russia, then the Soviet Union, and is now in Ukraine. She arrived in New York in April 1921 on the *Aquitania* from Cherbourg, France. Max and Mollie married on 3 June 1922 in Manhattan. The Lichtens probably spoke Yiddish before learning English, and it’s likely they also spoke at least some German. They lived in Brooklyn, at 690 East 49th street. Leo had an older sister, Bella, born in 1924. His parents eventually divorced and his dad seems to have left the scene soon after.

As far as I know, Leo didn’t speak to his friends about his father. He doesn’t mention him in the letters I have seen and his best friend knows nothing about him. After his divorce, Max Lichten

lived on Jackson Street in lower Manhattan. In those years he worked for a company called Artamount Inc. He later moved to New Milford, in Bergen County, New Jersey, and he died on holiday in Dade County, Florida in October 1984. He claimed and received the Purple Heart that Leo was awarded posthumously in 1945. So I can only assume he cherished the memory of his only son, a remarkable and talented boy.

Most of what I discovered I found in official records. Since I was struggling to make progress, I decided to post articles on American websites frequented by veterans to see if I could find anyone who had served with him, knew more about the Railsplitters' European campaign or had known Leo when he was growing up in New York.

It was these articles that struck a chord with many American readers. They were all shots in the dark, but somehow I hit the target. I received an email from Robert Simpson, whose mother is Leo Lichten's half-sister. Shortly after Leo's death, the family moved to the West Coast, severing all their ties with New York. What's more, none of the family were called Lichten anymore because Leo's mother had divorced. Robert Simpson gave me a few more fragments of information, but it wasn't much to go on. Robert's mother is still alive but she was just a young girl when Leo died and found it too painful to discuss.

I did find out that Leo was an extraordinary person, highly gifted and a talented sportsman. Despite his very humble origins, he was admitted to the Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP), a short-lived initiative by the army to recruit the brightest young men and send them to college to be trained as engineers, doctors and linguists. I continued to ask Robert Simpson questions but realized there was not much more to be gained, except for a fine family photo and copies of letters, including one from Leo's commander to his mother describing the circumstances of his death.



Manhattan in the 1920's



Leo's grave at the Netherlands American Cemetery and Memorial in Margraten

Leo's army career

Leo must have applied for admission to the ASTP in the autumn of 1943. He was admitted and sent to college. At the end of February 1944, the army decided to terminate the program. It needed the ASTP's young men to serve in combat units. Most of them were sent to infantry regiments as privates. In early April, Leo reported for training with the 84th Infantry Division at Camp Claiborne in Louisiana. He and his fellow former ASTP comrades received a special five-week training program designed to integrate them into the infantry. That in itself must have been quite a challenge, since the other men of the 84th had been training for a year already, mainly in Texas.

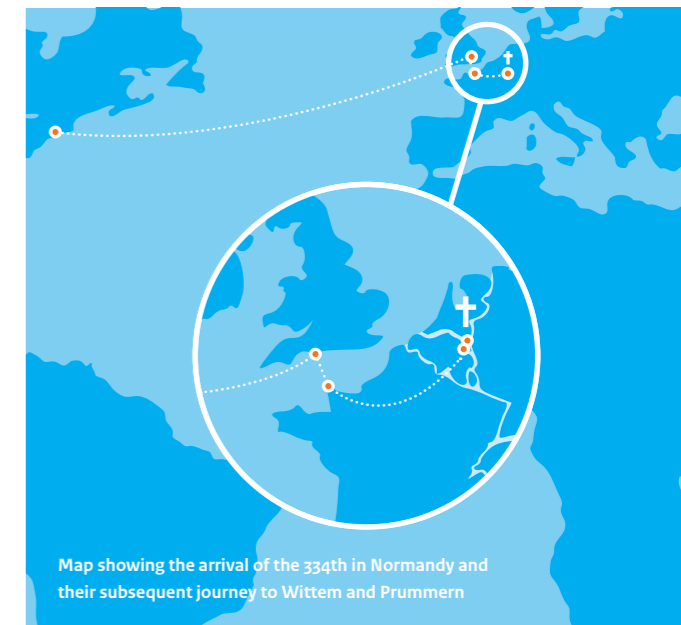


Leo and his family in New York

Leo was assigned to Company A, 1st Battalion, 334th Infantry, 84th Division. Relations between the ASTP recruits and their new comrades, especially the NCOs, were sometimes strained. The NCOs feared that these 'college boys' were out to steal their stripes, and the ASTP recruits sometimes reacted badly to what they saw as crude behavior by their NCOs. Often they banded together, calling out to each other with a cry of 'habba, habba, habba'. The shout identified them as former ASTPs and aggravated those who frowned upon these 'college boys'. The ASTP trainees soon became a morale problem for their new units. They had been told that they were special and that they were probably going to get a commission. They hadn't received much military training, let alone tough infantry training. So they were greeted with suspicion by the veterans of the 84th. This distrust only dissipated once the soldiers went into battle.

On 6 September Leo's regiment moved to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, its staging area. For Leo this was close to home, so one can only assume that he used the opportunity to see his family in New York and bid his loved ones farewell before departing for Europe. On 20 September the 334th regiment embarked from the Brooklyn Navy Yard on the USAT Barry, a converted luxury liner. The Navy Yard was well known to Leo, because he had played there as a child and he and his friends had taken jobs there while at high school, to make a few extra bucks. In early October they disembarked in Southampton. They spent the rest of the month in an assembly

area near Winchester. On 1 November 1944 they landed on 'Omaha' beach in Normandy and quickly crossed France and Belgium in trucks to arrive, on 9 November, in Wittem, in the Dutch province of Limburg, less than 10 miles from the German border at Aachen.



Map showing the arrival of the 334th in Normandy and their subsequent journey to Wittem and Prummern

An eyewitness account of the battle

A few years ago I was sent the unvarnished diary of one of Leo's comrades who had trained with him and was close to him right up to the moment Leo was killed in action. In this diary, Private Sherman provides a harrowing account of Leo's last days. While in Wittem, where the 334th was stationed until 17 November 1944, they are given orders to mount an attack in two days' time on German positions near Prummern, just over the border in Germany. The assault is part of Operation Clipper, a joint effort with British troops to break through the strongest sections of the Siegfried Line. The unit's veterans, who have already seen action, stiffen and fall silent at the news. The young recruits, fresh out of the ASTP, with only five weeks of infantry training, are like fish out of water. Leo tells jokes to try to ease the tension. A day later they are moved to Palenberg, across the border in Germany, where they find themselves huddled in cellars or a coalmine shaft, awaiting the attack scheduled for 4am.



Operation Clipper, November 1944: the capture of Geilenkirchen, near Prummern

Fighting has been going on at Prummern for a number of days, and the Germans are still holding out. Company A is ordered to mount an attack on pillboxes just outside Prummern and eliminate any enemy resistance in the small town. When the attack is launched, early in the morning, Leo is one of the first in his unit to be killed, caught in deadly machine-gun fire while storming a pillbox.

Leo's friend Sherman was devastated at the news. He describes the battle at Prummern from the point of view of ordinary soldiers who barely understood their orders and felt they had little chance of survival. Weather conditions were dismal. It was cold, it was raining and there was mud everywhere, making it difficult to engage with the tanks.

Sherman's account also demonstrates the thin line between heroism and cowardice, and how the battlefield brings out the best and the worst in people. He coolly describes how, expecting death at any moment, the unit storms and eventually takes the pillboxes, with the aid of British tanks, after days of fighting. With the same coolness he writes about how a few men take revenge on a sergeant they loathe, shooting him in the head in the heat of the battle. Assumed to have been killed by the enemy, his murder will never be uncovered.

The brave men of the 84th would later briefly return to Limburg for some R&R. They would then become heavily involved in the Battle of the Bulge, standing their ground in the dead of winter against overwhelming German forces under Field Marshall Von Rundstedt. This is what I

managed to find out about Leo's travails as a soldier and about his death on the battlefield in Germany, less than 12 miles from my present home in Heerlen, just across the border in the Netherlands.

A testimony to friendship

But then a letter arrived from the United States. Remarkably, 86-year-old Paul Slater had written to the Dutch embassy in Washington DC after reading a veterans' magazine. It contained a speech mentioning Leo that I had given at Margraten on Memorial Day in 2009. In his letter, Paul wrote that he and Leo had been friends while growing up in Brooklyn. In fact, Leo had once even saved him from drowning. Paul described his friend as a very noble, intelligent and courageous person. Thanks to the internet, I was able to find Paul's phone number and I called him in Northampton, Massachusetts. We talked non-stop for hours, and Paul painted a vivid picture of those years in Brooklyn; a picture of poverty and friendship, of hope and great expectations for the future. Paul also described the casual manner in which young men were tossed into the throes of war. The war effort meant that almost all healthy young men between the ages of 18 and 21 were drafted into service. Of the 16 million Americans who went to war, about 292,000 died in battle – less than 2%. But of the 40,000 high school graduates who went into the ASTP about 8,000 died on the front lines – a 20% death rate. These bright young men paid a high price for being labelled 'special' and consequently being sent to infantry combat units, where casualty rates were alarmingly high.

For four years Paul himself had served on a destroyer, first in the Atlantic and later in the Mediterranean. Talking about Leo was difficult for Paul. Leo had been his bosom friend and to this day he is angry about how Leo was sent into war totally unprepared, only to face the most fearsome and most experienced Nazi troops. Paul went on to have a son and a daughter. He named his son Leo after his best friend, who himself never made it past the age of twenty and so never knew the joys of fatherhood.

For over fifty years, Paul had longed to visit his friend's grave, so it was a great honor for me to invite him and his son to the Netherlands. They came for four days in October 2010. 20 November 2010 marked 66 years since Leo's passing. My country's liberation, six months after he fell, was thanks in part to his sacrifice.

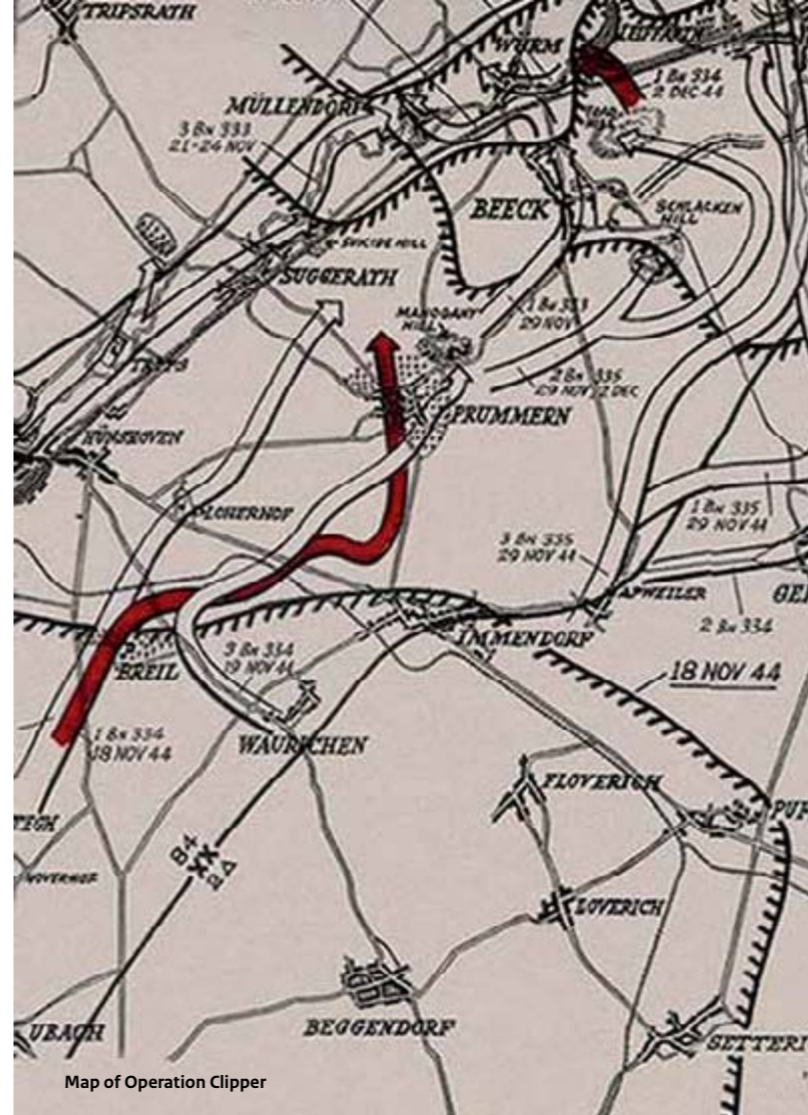
Paul showed me several letters that Leo had sent him during his training and, later, from Europe. It's rare to see such wisdom and empathy in a young man of 19. Leo wished Paul good luck, encouraged him to follow his dreams and said in passing that he didn't expect to survive the war. That was something he accepted, not only because he was fighting for a noble cause but also, sadly, because he dreaded returning to the unhappy situation of a broken family, with a mother he didn't get along with. Reading between the lines, it seems Leo knew that his minimal infantry training would make him cannon fodder. He wasn't cynical about this fact, just resigned to it.

Shared memories

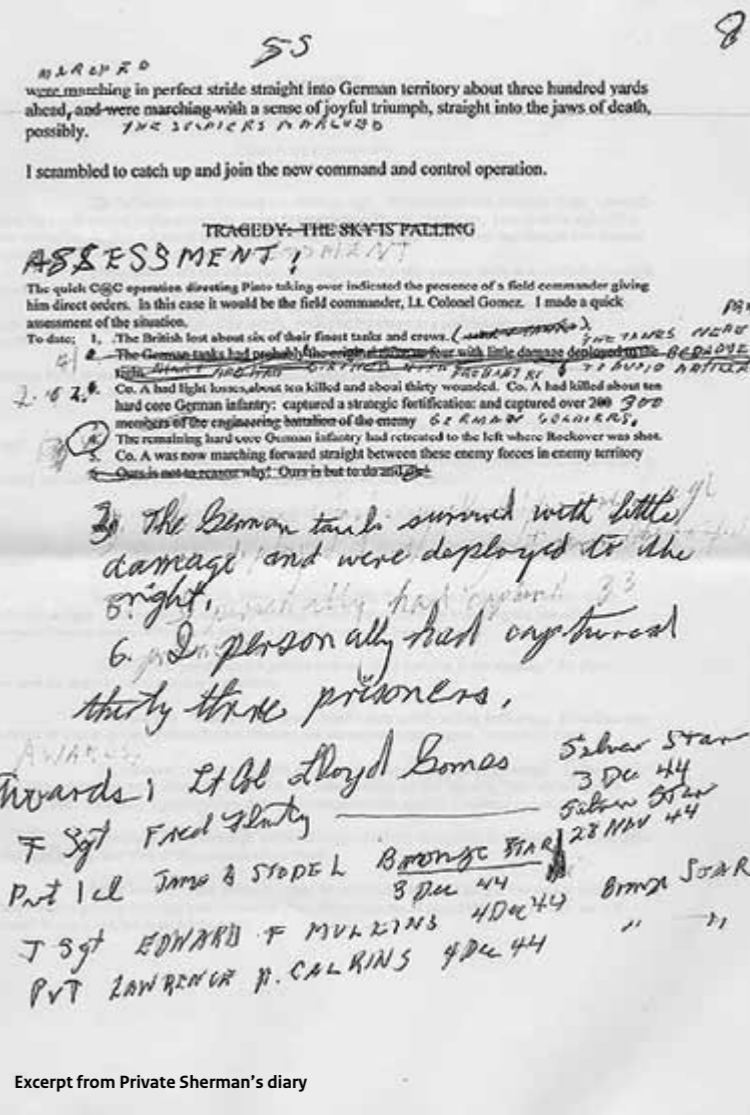
Almost 66 years to the day, I found myself standing with Paul and his son Leo on a hill overlooking the battlefield at Prummern, where the pillboxes had been. Leo Lichten probably breathed his last breath a few hundred meters down the hill towards Geilenkirchen. His best friend took it all in and talked to Leo as if he could hear him. 'You were such a good kid,' he said over and over again.

Nearby, a farmer was busy, doing some maintenance in his yard. We approached him and asked whether he knew anything about the battle that had raged here in November 1944. He couldn't help us, but knew someone in the village who had been there at the time and could tell us more. A little later we rang Willy Pelzer's doorbell. He welcomed us into his living room and I spent over an hour interpreting for two elderly men who had both endured a war, but on different sides. Because he still saw German veterans as the enemy, it took a while before Paul began to feel at ease. But as Willy told him about the repression by the Nazis, who'd thrown his father into jail and then sent him to the Eastern Front, about the brutal way the SS had stolen from the farmers in Prummern and then forced them out, and about the dangers he and his mother had faced, compassion took over and the conversation became both warm and fascinating.

Later that day, Paul would talk to Leo again at his grave in Margraten. 'You knew I'd show up one day, didn't you?' he asked. Leo, forever 19, suddenly brought out the boy in Paul, the boy with whom he had



Map of Operation Clipper



Excerpt from Private Sherman's diary

Dear Paul,
The excellent results on your ex-
me like good music to me — and you
that I am a great lover of good music
The results as you see — of t
pictures were fair — i.e. the guess we
was pretty good. Let me know if you care
have any enlarged. Your indoor shots we
beautiful. I might say that the one wh
you are sleeping is the finest I have
ever taken with my camera.
Well, Buddy's in. That leaves
Bob + myself + heads scheduled to go
As for myself, I am perfectly willing
to my fate. If I go it will mean salva-
from the yoke of the despotism of a man
whose mind is completely saturated with
refuse of public opinion — and that scurrilous
other opinions caused by divorce of the st
of criticism and struggle for replacement

Letter from Leo to his friend Paul Slater



Paul Slater and his son Leo at Leo's grave in Margraten

gone swimming, done odd jobs in the Brooklyn Navy Yards and talked about girls and about their dreams of a future without poverty. Paul told Leo that he was living life to the full, that he'd fulfilled those dreams and found happiness with his wife and children at the farm they'd built together. He told him about the opportunities they'd had to further their education and about the values they'd been able to pass on to their children. And therein lies the beauty of Paul's visit. We did, of course, reflect at length on what happened to Leo, on his battle and his death. But there was more to it than that. Thinking about his sacrifice makes us think about the legacy Leo and his band of brothers left behind, the freedom we can almost take for granted these days, thanks to them.

Leo spent the final days of his life in Limburg. He might have met people in Wittem, people who are perhaps still with us today, or whose children and grandchildren still celebrate our freedom. The war was such a long time ago and there are fewer and fewer people around who witnessed it first-hand. As time passes, we consign the events of the past to the history books — it's only human — or we give our own twist to the tale. By that I mean drawing on history to get across a political message today. In fact, we refer to the Second World War almost every day. We place everything we dislike about today's Netherlands in the context of the persecution of the Jews or the Occupation, thus trivializing these dramatic events in our history. Or we do the opposite, mythologizing the Second World War into something that is almost beyond the realm of human possibility and so could never happen again.

We shouldn't trivialize or mythologize, but there's no easy way of avoiding these tendencies. Life simply goes on, as the 'conversation' between Paul and Leo shows. I do believe, however, in the power of narrative, in the beauty of wanting to share our experiences with others, in the wonder that has been bestowed on us all: the ability to see the world through another man's eyes. A man who is brought to life again, even though he has been dead for almost seventy years, because we see him as a real person, with his good and bad points, with a life that will always have something in common with our own lives. And that is how, in the space of a few years, Leo Lichten turned for me from a name engraved on a white marble Star of David into a young man of flesh and blood. A young man with more talent in his little finger than I have in my entire body. A man with an unhappy childhood, loyal friends, great compassion and a casual fatalism about his own destiny.

Sharing histories – keeping memories alive

Anyone who lived through the war or has heard first-hand accounts of it from parents or acquaintances has the opportunity – and perhaps even the duty – to pass these stories on. Anyone who knows people who experienced the war or has heard personal accounts has the chance to listen, to show they want to learn more, and make themselves part of those stories, of that history.



The liberation of Heerlen in September 1944

My father saw the Poles running from hedge to hedge in Breda, in the street where his childhood home stood. I know where my mother was when Heerlen was liberated – as chance would have it, she was standing at the door of the very house my family and I now live in. From there she saw the Americans descending the hill at Heesberg and the Germans retreating towards Bekkerveld.

From inside that house, owned at the time by Dr. Bob van Hoorn and his family, Rudolf Jacob Zeller watched the American approach with elation. He was a German Jew, a painter, who had escaped his native land and found refuge in Dr. Van Hoorn's home, where he remained undiscovered for the duration of the war, pretending to be a deaf-mute relative of the family. He was lucky to survive the Shoah, while so many others perished at the hands of the Nazis. The American GIs, who would establish a machine gun position on the top floor of the house and would remain house guests for months after liberation, got their portrait drawn or painted by a grateful Rudi Zeller.

I challenge you to find people around you who can give you personal accounts of the war, whether you live in the US or Canada, in countries that were occupied or in Germany itself. Pass them on to at least two of your loved ones or acquaintances. Then together we can make history a collective experience. Together we can make sure that the sacrifice made by Leo and countless others who gave us our freedom will always be prized. By doing so, we can show that war, peace, hate, love, good and evil do not exist outside us, only in books, but are inextricably linked

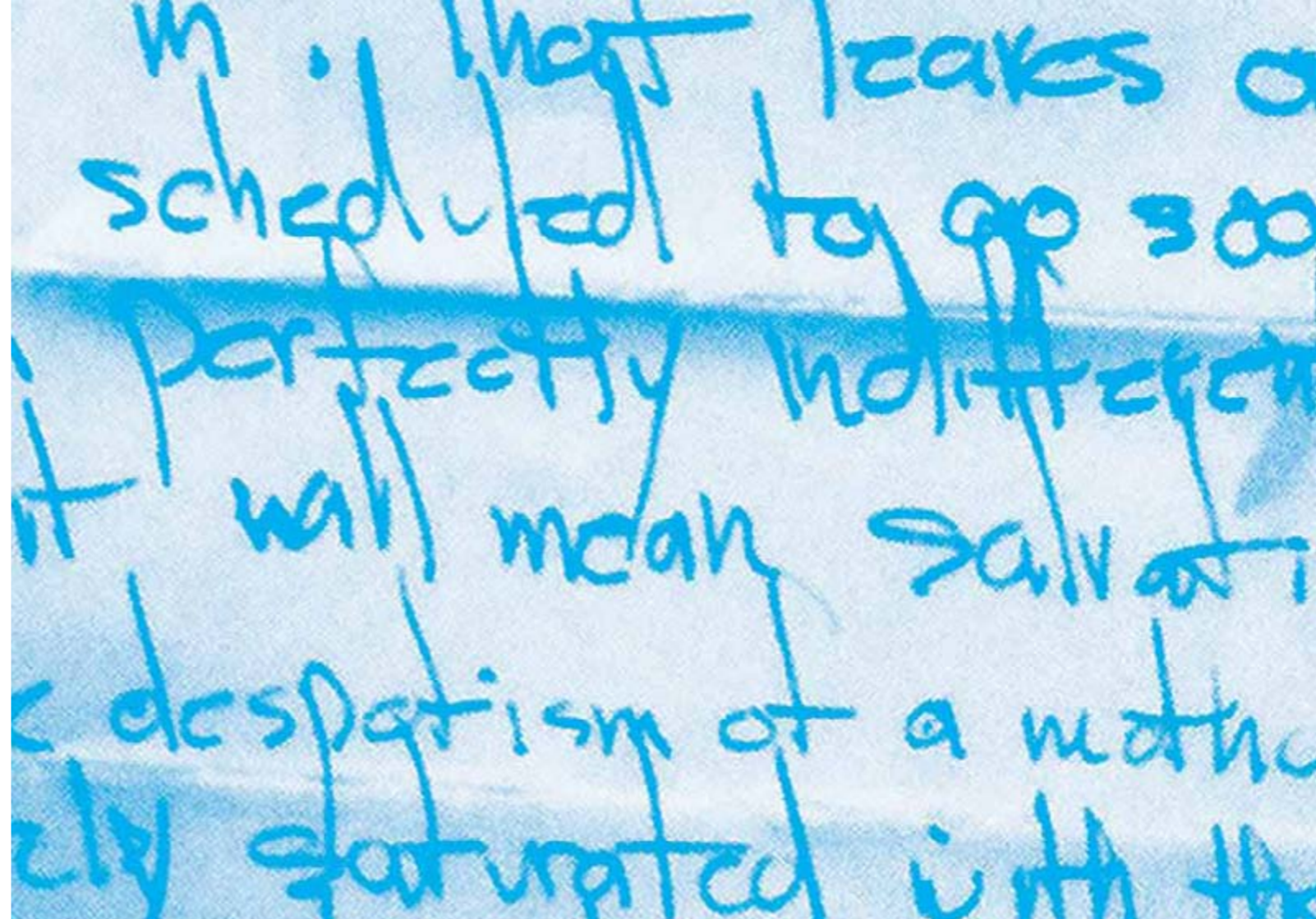
to human nature. We can reduce the chance of our making the same mistakes as in the past and increase the chance of our children and grandchildren only knowing of war through stories.

This is nothing more than a simple story about an extraordinary young man who will forever be a member of the Timmermans family. Once you have read it, you might soon forget it, since there are millions of stories like it. For me, though, the important thing is the sentiment engraved on the tower at the Netherlands American Cemetery and Memorial in Margraten:

**EACH FOR HIS OWN MEMORIAL
EARNED PRAISE THAT WILL NEVER DIE
AND WITH IT
THE GRANDEST OF ALL SEPULCHRES
NOT THAT IN WHICH
HIS MORTAL BONES ARE LAID
BUT A HOME
IN THE MINDS OF MEN**



Queen Beatrix, who has since abdicated, at the Netherlands American Cemetery and Memorial in Margraten





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