

In the summer of 1944, there was jubilation throughout the country. After the Normandy invasion, the Allies moved forward rapidly and the liberation seemed imminent. The stories about the approaching end of the war were so persistent that during "Crazy Tuesday" (September 5, 1944), thousands of NSB members (German sympathizers) already packed their bags and were ready to leave for Germany, hoping to save their ass.

On September 17, 1944, the skies above the southern Netherlands were filled with paratroopers, the start of the "Market Garden" operation. The Montgomery plan was meant to force a quick end to the war. Three airborne divisions had been commissioned to occupy a number of bridges behind enemy lines and make (and keep) a corridor from Belgium, via Eindhoven and Nijmegen and finally to Arnhem. The ground troops had to follow and in one big jump cross the rivers up to and including the Rhine. Once over the Rhine, the troops had to turn east and enter the Ruhr area, the industrial heart of Germany.

The plan was great if it had worked. In London, everyone believed at the time that the war would be over before the end of the year. Operation Market Garden fitted exactly in that picture. The Dutch government, convinced of a rapid end to the war, decided that they also had to contribute to the allied push. In September 1944, the Dutch government in London called upon the railway staff to strike.

The strike would seriously damage German mobility and was to delay a German counterattack in the early stages of the operation. More than thirty thousand men responded to the call that was distributed via Radio Oranje. Within a day, most of the railway staff went into hiding. All train traffic stopped and the Germans had to bring in railroad men from Germany to let their own trains run again. As a retribution the Germans blocked the transport of food to the west of the Netherlands and also the transport of coal from the liberated south was stopped.

As we all know the bridge at Arnhem turned out to be a bridge too far and Operation Market Garden failed. The Dutch in the western part of the Netherlands were confronted with an extra winter under German occupation. It became a harsh winter in every way. A winter of starvation.

The Railway strike went on much longer than initially planned. Many people suffered from the cold and hunger. Especially in the large cities the problem was severe. There were soup kitchens where people could get some food [with ration coupons](#). Many people walked or cycled to the east and northern part of the country to get food. The so called: "[Hunger trips](#)".



Ration coupons



Hunger trip

The atmosphere in the occupied Netherlands became increasingly grim in this period. The resistance became tougher, to which the occupier reacted again with more severe reprisals. Strikers were severely punished and arbitrary executions took place almost every day. In the cities the gas supply was stopped so that it was no longer possible to cook on the stove. The electricity supply also stopped in October.

Already at the end of September a message about imminent food scarcity reached the government in London. The message said that food supplies were only sufficient for a few weeks. Those who were solely dependent on the food rations suffered hunger from November on.

The people in the countryside and town dwellers with a small garden could still grow some food.

In the densely populated cities, the fall in official rations caused serious problems. The daily life of 3.5 million Dutch people is dominated by a relentless and increasingly desperate search for fuel and food. Society is disintegrating. It is everyone for themselves. The black market is flourishing. Some traders charge extortionate prices.

The few food transports that are still under way are heavily guarded. Robberies, looting and theft are at the order of the day. The schools are closed. The garbage is no longer collected.

On average, a Dutch person in the occupied west of the country does not receive more than 550 calories per day in December 1944. In January 1945 that became 460 calories.



Gathering wood

The winter of 1944 turned out to be literally and figuratively tough.

Almost a lack of everything and moreover, November was extremely cold and wet with twenty rainy days. After a drizzly and gloomy November, the frost appeared in December. It would last for two months. When it became clear that a real famine was imminent, [Seyss-Inquart](#) decided to allow food transport via the IJsselmeer again. The idea was that some food could be brought from the countryside to the starving population in the western part of the country. The skippers initially hesitated to start the food transports over water, because of fear of robberies and theft. After a guarantee from the Reich Commissioner that the transport was safe, the skippers went to work. But it was actually too late. The persistent frost made it impossible to cross the IJsselmeer. The ice was just too thick for the ships.

Food became scarcer and worse in the starving areas. Stores started selling sugar beet and tulip bulbs to replace potatoes. The ration coupons issued were far from sufficient for the starving population. Every day, residents left the city hoping to get food in the countryside. Gold and silver jewelry were offered in exchange for some food. Often it were women who stood alone because their men were arrested during raids and put to work in Germany or went into hiding.



Evacuations and rescue operations were set up for malnourished children. In the first months of 1945, around 40,000 city children were evacuated to the provinces Overijssel, Friesland, Groningen and Drenthe. There was still plenty to eat there.

There were hardly any means of transport. With cargo ships, but also buses, trucks, trains and sometimes even walking or cycling, the children left for the countryside. The skinny city children were brought to foster homes after arrival.

The Hunger Winter lasted from October 1944 to April 1945. It is not known exactly how many casualties occurred. Most estimates came to around 20,000. Especially the elderly and single people, people without a social network, succumbed. They had no one who could undertake a hunger trip for them. There had already been some foreign aid via sea transport. At the end of January 1945, two Swedish ships had delivered 3,200 tonnes of flour to Delfzijl. Distribution to bakeries in the west was difficult and took almost two weeks. At the beginning of March 1945, a ship, chartered by the International Red Cross, delivered some additions. 2,600 tons of grain also came from Oldenburg in Germany.

In London the cry for help had not been unnoticed. There was a strong urge to help the West of the Netherlands before the eventual liberation. The pressure on Prime Minister Churchill grew and he passed it on to General Eisenhower. On April 25, 1945, Eisenhower agreed to negotiate with the Germans and appointed Lieutenant General Walter Bedell-Smith as his representative.



Achterveld

Relief finally came at the end of April. After negotiations with the Germans, known by the name of the "[Achterveld Conference](#)", food aid was allowed for the western part of the Netherlands. English and American bombers flew to the west of the Netherlands and dropped loads of food. 11,000 tons of food fell from heaven in nine days. These operations became known as "[Operation Manna](#)" (RAF) and "[Operation Chowhound](#)" (USAF).

Much less is known that food aid was also provided by road from the south. The transport by road was given the name: "[Operation Faust](#)".

In the south, the liberated part of the Netherlands, considerable supplies were built up by the Allies. This was at the insistence of Eisenhower, who had ordered the 21st Army Group (mainly British and Canadian) to build up supplies. The push had come to a halt after Market-Garden's partial failure.

The supply was already a major logistical problem for the Allies, because everything had to be transported from Normandy. The port of Antwerp could not be used because the access to the Scheldt was still under German control.

In the area of 's-Hertogenbosch and Oss, a total of around 30,000 tons of food was stored. On 2 May 1945 at 07.00 am, the start of Operation Faust, aid could actually start immediately. General Foulkes had agreed with the Germans that a thousand tons of food and medical equipment could be transported by truck through the German lines. After that it would be transferred and further transported by Dutch cars. The food packages included: biscuits, cans of meat, fat, condensed milk, sugar and salt.



How dire the situation was for many, according to a report from Lieutenant John Abbott, he was responsible for a convoy of 50 trucks. He reported from the transfer place at Rhenen: "I remember very well that a number of Dutch citizens who would help us with the transfer were so weak that they could not lift and carry the boxes. We had to get Germans to work to help. They did not like that but with some pressure it worked out".

Operation Faust, began at 07.30 am on May 2, 1945 and ended on May 10, 1945. During this operation, 360 Allied trucks (from 8 Canadian and 4 British transport platoons) conducted multiple round trips, delivering a total of about 9,000 tons of food and supplies to a designated area between the villages of Wageningen and Rhenen in the centre of the Netherlands. Logistical problems however prevented Faust supplies from being distributed to the civilians in Amsterdam until 10 May 1945, in The Hague until 11 May 1945, and in Utrecht until 11 May 1945. While Operation Faust officially ended on the 10th of May, 200 Canadian trucks remained on food distribution missions in the Netherlands for some time to come.



Trucks in
Wageningen →



The convoys, with a white flag, did not go smoothly, according to a report. On the way from Wageningen to Rhenen, passing the front line, a group of Dutch SS men reacted hostilely, throwing stones at the cars transport. They were still armed, but there was no shooting.



The 49th Infantry Division, then assigned to the 1st Canadian Army Corps, not only provided transport. At the request of the Red Cross, they also collected money. The response from the division was immense.

The total amount was almost the wage for a week from each individual member of the division. With the money, medical teams were trained and provided with equipment. Princess Juliana, patron of the Dutch Red Cross, had heard of the collection and visited the division after the war to thank them personally.

Although the Allied representatives in Achterveld had attempted to complete an overall surrender of the Germans, the stubbornness of Seyss-Inquart at that time was to great.

However, on 5 May 1945 the [capitulation meeting took place in Wageningen](#).



Princess Juliana visiting the troops

Dark skies still, but the flag on top.



A terrible time ended. The Dutch people were anxious to start the difficult (re)construction of their homeland. But in the joy and euphoria of the liberation, countless households also felt and regretted the other side of recent years.

Indeed: they had regained freedom, but had lost their homes and beloved ones.

Sources: several www sites, among others: [mapleleafup.net](#); [secondworldwar.nl](#); [ww2db.com](#); [bbc.co.uk](#); Wikipedia

Column: *Herman Sligman*