

This is from a regional column in AD/Amersfoortse Courant from reporter Willem Meuleman.

Theo Zuurman gets military distinction in Canada Medal for old 'Hippy'

Hoewelaken– He has to laugh about it himself as well. As a pacifist from the sixties he couldn't imagine that he would get a distinction from someone out of the army. Still Theo Zuurman got 'The Order of the Hodden Grey' in Canada. The old hippy now has a real military distinction!

Is Theo (64) a real old hippy? He answered with a heartfelt YES! "You can say that. I'm from the era of youth center 'Sopla' in Amersfoort, which was located in an old cigar factory. I ran the place with Frans Ruhl. Many Dutch bands performed there, once John Mayall even came. It was the time of Bob Dylan and his The Times They Are a-Changin. And of John Lennon, his song 'Imagine' is the greatest song he ever wrote."

"And yes, I also was a pacifist. It's not that I walked in the frontline to demonstrate to disarming, but I did walk with several anti-war marches. I even served for a while. Not because I liked it, but because I had to, there still was compulsory military service. I was with the Air force in Gilze-Rijen. But I was lucky; I had a lump on my knee which never hurt. I was used to walk long distances. Yet I told the doctor it did hurt. Eventually I was condemned and I could go home."

Theo grew up in Amersfoort. His mother had two children when she divorced. Theo was born from a short lasting affair from his mother. He doesn't know who his biological father is. After living a year with his mother, he was sent to 'Huize Scheltus', an orphanage on reformed basis. The matron was a strict aunt, and was therefore called Aunt. When Theo let his hair grow and refused to go to the barber, he was kicked out of the orphanage. By that time he was 19 and ready for military service.

Best friends.

"I never really missed my father, nor my mother. I had a couple best friends and spend a lot of time with them. I didn't feel different than them. I know the stories of children who miss their parents, but I never suffered from that, haven't got trauma from that. Later I heard my father had a family in Limburg, but I didn't want to rummage in that family."

After a graphical education and a successful publicity agency Theo enjoys life with his two (three TZ) children and grandchildren. With his (second) wife he lives in Hoewelaken, in a beautiful architectural build house, with loads of local art on the walls, also there is a painted portrait of his greatest Beatles hero.

The reason why he got his Military distinction also is in Hoewelaken. Because of his PR-work for the local 'Oranjevereniging' he was involved with the 4th of May celebration in 'Park Weldam'.

There at a war memorial, he saw the name of Walter Strang, an unknown soldier. That name never let him go. That was back in 2005. "The unknown soldier, you see

that quiet often, on burial ground. A memorial for an unknown soldier. Unknown is impossible for me. Walter Strang must at least have had a mother, I thought.”

His fascination for the ‘unknown’ Walter Strang never left his brain. Theo wanted to know who this man was, where he came from. So the search started.

“Internet was a great boost in the search operation, Because of the Municipal clerk of Hoevelaken wasn’t that clear to me. I found the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and they told me Strang is buried in Groesbeek. He died in Hoevelaken. I even got to know he was part of the Loyal Edmonton Regiment in Canada.”

Years and years of searching brought Theo on the lead to Ken Froland, Strang’s service partner. He knew that Strang was born in Scotland and immigrated to Canada with his parents on his 4th. Through Wim Rhebergen, a citizen of Hoevelaken, he got in touch with the Toronto Scottish Regiment. There he met Hugh Steward, who gave him the address of Strang’s Family. Walter had four brothers and two sisters. All five the boys served in the regiment. The wife of the youngest brother gave him a picture.

Puzzle

And so Theo gathered more and more pieces of the puzzle he liked to complete.

“I met more and more people and came to know more and more. Soldiers died, the people behind them didn’t. I now get the human Walter Strang to the surface and show them, I hope, why waging war is useless. A man, who married in Canada, goes to Europe to liberate us, but a few days before liberation, he dies...”

On Walter Strang’s death day, 19th of April, Theo gives readings on schools in Hoevelaken for five years now.

“That is how I reach the parents, but also the children. The whole community of Hoevelaken learns that way, who Walter Strang was.”

In Hoevelaken is a memorial of Strang, which is build on initiative of Theo. The statue is an Iron plate, where the silhouette of Strang is carved out, from a picture Theo had. It is now in Canada, on the ground of the new barracks of The Toronto Scottish Regiment.

“It is unique that one memorial is in two parts around the world,” Theo thinks. “In Canada this symbolizes all the soldiers, so to speak, who in times of war died in peace. Here, in the Netherlands, Walter looks to the west aiming to Canada, in Canada he looks to the east. Their faces meet somewhere in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean.”

Theo went to Canada, where the memorial was revealed. There was a surprise for him. During a grand diner from the regiment he had to join the presidency at the grand table on a platform. And during that diner he was distinct. He was taken aback, but also honored.

“Yes, I am really proud about it. There is no military distinction for killing people or for doing a heroic deed. And this medal also praises all the people who helped me in Hoevelaken.”

With the medal Theo’s Search operation isn’t finished. In a church in Canada he found the marriage certificate from Walter and his wife. Also he found programs of a play where Walter and his brother Alex were lead players in. The play was called The

Dutch Detective by coincidence. And next year the granddaughter of Walters's youngest brother will come to the memorial in Hoevelaken.

Fascination

"It fascinates me that I still dig up new facts. It is important that the memories to Walter stay alive. He was just a human being, not an unknown soldier who by accident got and mortar to the head, shot from Amersfoort."

AD/Amersfoortse Courant, October 31, 2012

Translation: Karen Westein, Holland/Hoevelaken.