

J. J. Van Der Luur

Heenwijk, the 23rd of June 1945

To the family of Lieut. John Hascall.

Now that Holland has been liberated and we are freed of the German tyranny, it includes that letters can be freely written again. So I use the first opportunity of addressing myself to you, although I really wished that I could write to you about another and more happier subject.

It really is with great sorrow that I must describe the death and funeral of Lieut. John Hascall. As I was a witness of his death, I feel myself obliged to inform you of everything I have seen and done. I do not know whether my letter will be read by his parents, wife, children or girl friend, because the only information about him, which was at my disposal, was his disk. But I am convinced that you all are longing to know more about his death than the simple information you may have received from the Red Cross or Army that John "is missing" or "died for his country". So I do hope that the following will make clear to you what happened to him and that the knowledge of this will give you all some relief, whereas I apologize for the mistakes I make in trying to write proper English.

It was the 29th of November 1943 that I was cycling from Heenwijk to Wanneperveen. Heenwijk is a small town of 8000 inhabitants and Wanneperveen a very small village of 1500 inhabitants, both lying in the north-west corner of the province Overijssel in Holland. It was awfully bad weather, rain and storm. In the neighborhood of Wanneperveen I suddenly heard the noise of an aeroplane, but could not see it. A minute later the plane appeared through the clouds but was apparently damaged, for it fell down straight into a little lake, of which there are many in that part of the province. Some farmers and I, who watched it, were very frightened of course, because we at once thought of the crew. But suddenly we saw a parachute with a man hanging in it. Everything, however, seemed all right with him, at least we saw him throwing down his heavy boots and besides that we saw that he had a sort of a wind cushion, preventing him from sinking if he might fall into the water. And indeed, owing to the heavy storm, he just fell in the middle of a lake. We saw him trying to get rid of his parachute, but he failed. The wind was too strong. In the meantime the so-called "water police" had been warned and came with a motor boat to pick him up. But the wind was so heavy that the pilot (it was John) really sailed over the water like a boat and the water police could not reach him very soon. And that, extremely unlucky, was the cause of his death. Owing to the strong wind, the parachute, which he could not loosen, pulled him under the level of the water. The lake was not very deep, but there was a lot of mud in it. All this together was the reason that when at last he was picked up by the police-boat, he was already dying. The police-men, who did their utmost to save him, immediately tried artificial respiration, until a doctor arrived. The doctor spent at least three hours to make him breathe again. But it was all in vain.

He lied there, just quietly and not wounded or damaged at all. His face was calm and nothing of fright or something like that was in its expression. It was just as if he slept after a tiresome job. We carried him to a little house in the neighborhood, where we had to wait until the Germans had been warned and they had come to take off his possessions, weapons, parachute, etc. It was not necessary to hide him, what we always did with pilots, safely reaching the ground. The Germans did not arrive until the 3rd of December, so there was plenty time to wash him, the civilians to make a coffin with the wood they had hidden otherwise the Germans stole it away and to dig a grave in the churchyard. We had to do that because otherwise the Germans were so beastly to bury the body of an allied pilot on an unknown place somewhere in the country without any indication. Perhaps you have read in the papers how cruelly they treated the Allied pilots for their bombing German towns. This time we were lucky, the Germans, after taking his parachute and other things, left the funeral to us and disappeared. On that same day (3rd of December 1943) at about three o'clock in the afternoon, the clergyman and the policeman of the village Wanneperveen and me, buried him in the churchyard of this village. The clergyman said some words and prayed "Our Father." The next day there were already flowers on his grave and somebody in the village is responsible for the reparation of the grave. If you write back to me that you have received this letter in good order I will see that you get a snapshot of John's grave as soon as possible.

And this is the sad story of John Hascall, who gave his young life for the liberation of Europe. I know that you cannot get back your son or husband with beautiful words and descriptions of his merits. But I do hope very much that you will understand that we in Holland after an unlucky and lost war, followed by a cruel tyranny of five years, were so proud of any Allied soldier fighting far from his home and family for our liberation and that everybody in this country, except the collaborators of course, risked their lives and did their utmost to keep Allied soldiers, wounded or not, out of the enemy's hands and tried to hide them until they could go back either in peace time or with assistance during the war, to their own country. I myself, 29 years old, was a student at the University, then officer in the Dutch Army, prisoner of war and during the occupation a member of the Dutch Internal forces (Underground) fighting the Germans wherever we could with risking everything for our country. But when I saw John lying there in a certainly unknown village to him and also to you, I stood thinking and knew that there was a great difference between his and my fighting. I fought in my own country and for my own country, but he was fighting outside his country for another country, so that everybody might live there in peace and freedom just as in America. That is why I could not get enough from looking to his young and nice face and strong body and I thanked him for this sacrifice. I will never forget those moments. They are absolutely clear in my mind and will stay there as long as I live. I have to write down these personal words, as I am convinced that John Hascall must have been a fine chap and I know how you must feel now that you have lost him. But I hope that after reading this letter, you find some relief in your sorrow as you know that we took care of him, gave him a decent funeral and treated him as if he belonged to us. If the result of my writing to you turns out like this, I will be satisfied.

I don't know yet, whether it will be possible to remove his body to America, either by the government or by yourselves. However I expect that you will be informed about this possibility earlier than we in Holland. I would be very much pleased if you wrote back to me and ask me everything you want to know, for I may have forgotten to write something that interests you. Of course I will give you all possible information you like to have and you can rely upon me, if something must be done here, it does not matter what.

I only wish that once I will be in a position to pay a visit to Marguette and that we can talk personally. But everything is so uncertain nowadays. If I come to the States, I will not forget the family of John Hascall.

Yours truly,

J. J. Van Der Luur

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