

REFLECTIONS

A Contemporary Road Trip Through Archaeology: From ‘Amateur’ to ‘Pro’ in World War II Archaeology in the Netherlands

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The Netherlands

I was waiting at the brink of Grebbeberg forest in the chilly spring morning for the shovel to unload itself from its transportation trailer. The date was 11 March 2010. Wearing my brand new and (still too) shiny Gore-Tex work-gear, this was my first day officially employed as a World War II specialist for RAAP Archaeological Consultancy.¹ Today we would excavate remains of a Dutch machinegun casemate that had served its purpose during the German invasion of 1940 (Schute 2010). As my new colleagues were lacing their protective shoes I was as much excited as I was cold, because I didn't bring a hat. A typically newbie decision that I would intensely regret most of that day.

The date is somewhere in June 2013. Dr Suzie Thomas requested if I could write a Reflections article on my road trip through archaeology. Only three years have passed since the casemate dig. Is it time yet to reflect? Has enough been learned in just three years? The only wise answer can be 'No!': only when time has pacified the mind and digested experience into the fertilizing ground of insight can proper reflection be done. This is the exact opposite from where I stand right now. Archaeology has been like a high-speed train to me. Once it started rolling, it went on and on with tremendous speed and didn't stop until this day. How can I possibly grab any clear contents from this running mass of steel? But some things can be said, are sure enough to be told. One of them is that it all started with an angry letter.

How it started with an angry letter

It was the year 2006 when provincial (governmental) archaeologist Ruurd Kok (MA) wrote an article for the *Friends of the Airborne Museum newsletter* concerning the archaeological remains of the 1944 Battle at Arnhem Bridge (Kok 2006). Up to that moment no one in the Netherlands, especially not archaeologists, had ever considered World War II (WWII) remains to be of any *archaeological* value. Kok, however, pleaded for better care for this type of heritage, especially with regard to metal



FIGURE 1 The excavation of a (blown up) 1940 Dutch casemate on Grebbeberg hill and my first day at RAAP. Standing on top is senior-archaeologist Ivar Schute.

Courtesy R. Kok

detectorists who had excavated (looted?) most of the original 1st Airborne and SS-Panzer-Division battle positions in the previous decades.

Ten miles west from Arnhem Bridge, this article hit my house like a shell of the 17 pdr AT gun, still present on the battlefield today. Here I was, one hobbyist trying to do things right, ending up feeling very frustrated. At the time I just gave up the formal metal detecting permit for the area, because its rules were impossibly strict for occasional hobbyists. This, of course, was exactly what it aimed to do. Most detectorists had avoided the painstaking permit altogether and had resorted to nighthawking (illegal metal detecting): a much more practical solution indeed, but not the way I wanted to go. In response to the article, I wrote a fierce letter-to-the-editor pleading for better care for *public* archaeological interest, only to receive a letter back urging me to please give Mr Kok a phone call first, because ‘in person he is not such a bad character’. Still grinding my teeth I complied. This event would set the train in motion.

First steps into archaeology

Shortly after this moment, Ruurd Kok — not such a bad character at all — introduced me to Hans Timmerman and David van Buggenum, two metal detectorists in Arnhem, who proved to be quite remarkable specimens. They had been conducting archaeological WWII research *avant la lettre* since the early eighties. They had retrieved the remains of several soldiers still missing in action and often published their results; something metal detectorists rarely do.² Their kind of research integrity inspired me greatly. Together with Ruurd we started a modest internet-based

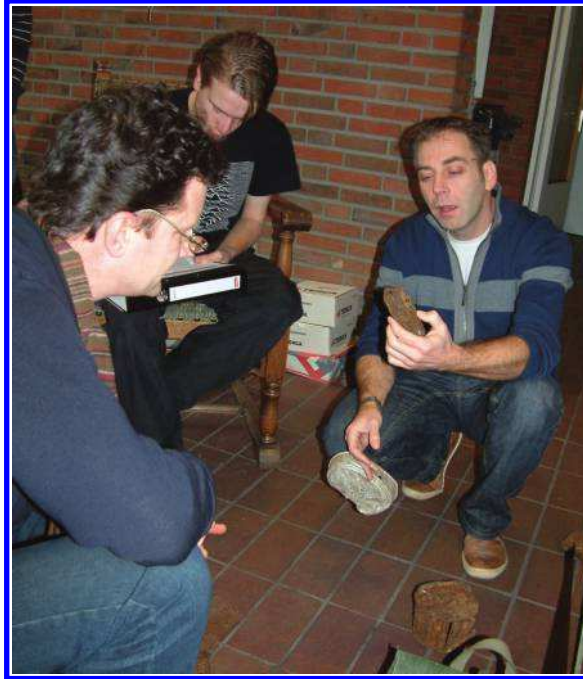


FIGURE 2 Hans Timmerman (left) and David van Buggenum (right) of the ‘Platform Soil Research WWII’ sharing their lifetime experience with German WWII materials with archaeologist Martijn Reinders of the city of Apeldoorn in 2009.

Photograph by J. Wijnen

platform to stimulate better WWII heritage care and met regularly to discuss the topic.³ Soon after, Ruurd also introduced me to Ivar Schute, senior archaeologist at RAAP, who was about to excavate part of a 1940 infantry trench at Grebbeberg hill endangered by construction work (Schute 2010). The Grebbeberg is one of the most important contemporary Dutch battlefields of WWII and I took time off from my job to volunteer at the dig. Formal archaeological fieldwork on a WWII infantry trench had never been done in the Netherlands and this would be the first of many first timers to come.⁴ Two more fieldwork projects followed up to 2009, when suddenly but finally an opportunity opened up, when Ivar asked: ‘I would like you to make a map predicting presence for all WWII archaeology on the whole of Grebbeberg battlefield. And this time I can pay you, too!’ For someone who grew up with the idea that ‘if it was fun, it probably wasn’t your day job, I couldn’t be more surprised and happy. Together with the casemate dig my professional career into archaeology was as of this point a fact (Kok and Wijnen 2011).

In the meantime Ruurd was getting pretty restless on his chair at Utrecht Province. While we were doing all the interesting fieldwork, he mainly had to judge plans for what I jokingly called ‘daft brown stain-in-the-soil Neolithic stuff’.⁵ By mid-2010 he couldn’t resist the itch any longer and joined us at RAAP to focus on his battlefield passions.



FIGURE 3 The author inspecting the remains of a German ammunition storage for anti-aircraft artillery in 2011. We were the first archaeologists at the site ever, though metal detectorists had been visiting since the eighties. But who's to blame, because nobody cared at the time. project supervisor: R.S. Kok. Picture: courtesy RAAP

Days of pioneering

When another colleague, Laurens Flokstra, joined in too, things really started to speed up. Projects came and went at an ever faster pace, among which were the first archaeological policy maps for World War II for local governments; the first excavated trenches and German antitank gun positions; inspections of a FLAK aircraft artillery site; large scale metal detecting on battlefields and bomber plane crash site ... we saw it all (Flokstra and Kok 2011; Kloosterman *et al.* 2011; Kok and Vos 2013; Wijnen 2012; Wijnen and Schute 2010). And then there was the clearance of unexploded ordnance (UXO-clearance). Quite a challenge: in the scope of battlefield archaeology, all material, *especially* weapons and ammunitions, are important. However, Dutch regulations on UXO-clearance only accommodate a small but highly structured commercial branch of UXO-clearance companies with safe procedures, using risk zones, enforced certificates, strict hierarchy, fences and armored cranes. When we archaeologists first entered this territory waving the Valletta Convention and requesting better context registration, this — as one can imagine — severely raised or frowned the eyebrows of these often big and former military UXO-men. But with clear communications and mutual respect for each other's expertise we succeeded more and more often to cooperate in constructive ways.

The intensity of World War heritage

Regular protocols seldom fitted the job in our projects. One issue was how to deal with the enormous amount of iron present in World War II sites, often in very bad



FIGURE 4 Archaeological work at the garbage-dump of Nazi concentration camp Westerbork in 2011. Almost 20,000 objects were excavated and washed on site and later registered with help of the community and even some Holocaust survivors. A both physically and emotionally intense project.

Project supervisor: I.A. Schute. Picture: courtesy M. Smit

condition. Or paper!?! Another was how to evaluate and select materials worth keeping, when most are factory made and all but rare ... but could be the last spoon a person touched before meeting his death in a trench ... or a gas chamber (Kok and Vos 2013). Because that is the intensity that WWII archaeology can hold, especially when the Holocaust is concerned. To find yourself at a dig in concentration camp Westerbork with survivors present at the site is truly a humbling experience (Schute and Wijnen 2012).

But also among our own we frequently had to address hard questions. Our work was clearly in friction with the common paradigm ‘the older the better’ and ‘scientific distance’ plays a different role in contemporary topics. I remember one example where colleagues regarded a picture of a WWII 9 mm pistol as too gruesome for public publication ... but would publish pictures of a Roman pilum without hesitation (Raczinsky Henk and Wijnen 2011). ‘Which one would you prefer to be killed with?’ was one of my remarks in this discussion. It seems to me that the emotional distance to older weaponry points out a tendency to romanticize earlier periods and as a way of converting history into something that doesn’t really touch us: in my opinion this is a fallacy. When history doesn’t hurt, even just a little bit, we really have to look closer.

Building biography

My archaeological endeavours then took another interesting path: building biography.⁶ We soon came to recognize that WWII remains do not only reside



FIGURE 5 Ruurd Kok (kneeling) explaining the concept of archaeological context and stratigraphy to UXO-clearing personnel in Amerongen. Notice the just found 8 cm mortar grenade in the hand of the UXO-senior.

Courtesy RAAP

underground, but also in the buildings still present on site. Troops and army institutions used buildings for many reasons during the war and the remains can still be there. Strangely enough this kind of research gets virtually no attention within Dutch heritage care.⁷ I decided to organize a pilot study in my spare time in a 1897 school building used by German occupants during the war. The project turned up an unexpectedly large number of finds among which several hundreds of documents, pieces of paper, postcards, school tests, theatre tickets, and ceramics, dating as far back as 1910. A few war-related traces were also found, including inscriptions in the attic, which proved that school teachers had access to the building months after it was officially commandeered by German authorities. Another was an indication of the presence of SS-troops. The prize-winning find, however, was a big, most likely 200-year-old statue of Napoleon Bonaparte (Wijnen 2011). Not a thing we had ever expected to find in the crawlspace of a school building!

Up to this day, over 20 buildings of different time-periods have been investigated with results varying from nil to hundreds and often with unique or rare finds like personal letters, artwork, or pottery (Wijnen 2011). Among the stranger discoveries from more recent times are SS- administration and parts of a Willys jeep in an attic(!) and candy hidden by Cold War soldiers (Wijnen, in prep.). Building biography method is a work in progress, but its anthropological and archaeological possibilities seem to be great.

So where do we go from here?

The examples above are some highlights in a rollercoaster that started in 2010 and has not stopped since. Somewhere I crossed the line between amateur and professional,



FIGURE 6 No one expected a 200-year-old statue of Napoleon Bonaparte in the crawlspace of a school building in 2010. Here it is presented to the public after being restored from 40 pieces. The lady in the center is holding a picture dating from 1959 brought in by an elderly lady in the audience of the presentation. It is the last known picture taken of it before it was destroyed in the sixties.

Photograph by J. Wijnen

but where and by which criterion is debatable. Formally it is the casemate dig, but to me engagement with people and past always came first, not degree or occupation. Today I often find myself in the middle: archaeologists sometimes judging me by academic degree alone⁸ and amateur metal detectorists sometimes regarding me as ‘one of those archaeologists, shouting down the ivory tower telling us hobbyists what to do’. At best I hope my work is an example that these lines may not be as clear as they may seem. ‘Quality’ should actually be a far more important word in this respect, and I’ve seen amateurs with far greater expertise in some matters than I or my colleagues will ever have, simply because they have been studying a subject for 30 years in their free time! In World War II archaeology in the Netherlands, we really can’t do the job without the helpful local experts.

Still, all but done with reflecting on what has happened so far, I stand with great curiosity to how things will develop from here, especially with regard to contemporary and community archaeology. More than once we came to realize that we could actually date a piece of Roman pottery to the decade, but given a shard of modern industrial white ceramics we didn’t even know where to start at first. There’s a whole field of expertise to develop in contemporary materials in the Netherlands. Moreover it seems that ‘contemporary’ and ‘community’ fit together like carrots and pies. Our contemporary projects could always expect high interest from the public. In fact, the publication of one my own projects in a former police station was entirely crowd-funded by a historically-engaged community (Wijnen,

in prep.). Contemporary subjects, especially WWII related subjects, have great opportunity with regard to community archaeology in a time of economic decline where governments are less willing to pay for institutionalized archaeology. Overall, there's much work to be done that fills my heart with enthusiasm and I can hardly wait to again find myself between my shoe-lacing colleagues, waiting for a shovel to unload itself from its transportation trailer.

Notes

- ¹ RAAP is not an acronym but is the brand name that the consultancy uses.
- ² Reports deposited at 'De Gelderland Bibliotheek, Arnhem'.
- ³ This platform was called Platform Bodemonderzoek Tweede Wereldoorlog (Platform WWII Soil Research). After several years we decided that it had outlived its necessity and was discontinued. The website is still live at www.bodemonderzoekwoz.nl
- ⁴ The Dutch were quite behind compared to surrounding countries with respect to battlefield archaeology. When we were excavating the first trench ever in Holland, the biannual Fields of Conflict Conference (FOCC) was already celebrating its 10 year anniversary.
- ⁵ Strictly my words.
- ⁶ Translation of the Dutch 'bouwbiografie'. Worth mentioning is that heritage disciplines are perhaps more separated in the Netherlands than in some other countries. It is quite imaginable that building biography would simply be called *archaeology* in the USA or Great Britain. In Holland, however, archaeologist often do not share this view because of the contemporary and above-ground nature of the object of research. More info at www.bouwbiografie.nl
- ⁷ Again the Dutch seem to be late with this idea. See, for example, the German case 'Erinnerungsort Flakturm: Der ehemalige Leitturm im Wiener Arenbergpark' (Bauer, Pieler and Pototschnig 2010).
- ⁸ MSc in Evolutionary Biology and Entomology.

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