

A casualty of World War II in the Pacific.

Jan Willem Adolf de Roo van Alderwerelt (1907 – 1945)

Jan Willem Adolf de Roo van Alderwerelt was born on July 2, 1907 at the family residence in Bloemendaal as the sixth and youngest child of Charles Francois de Roo van Alderwerelt (1863-1944) and Margaretha Sophia Diemont (1867-1952). The first 2 children from this marriage were born in Amsterdam while the other 4 were born in Bloemendaal, just west of Amsterdam. My father, Joan Karel Hendrik de Roo van Alderwerelt was the oldest child of this marriage so Wim, as Jan Willem Adolf was called, was my uncle.

As a young man, most likely in his early twenties, Wim went to the Dutch East Indies in the employ of one of the many Dutch companies operating coffee and tea plantations and doing so he was following in the footsteps of his older brother Carel (1904-1989) as well as many members of earlier generations of the family. Maarten Timmer, a grandson of Maria Henriette van Alderwerelt van Rosenburgh (1884-1960) in his CD entitled “Collected Works of Maarten Timmer”, described in detail the results of his research into the many family members who were employed by the Dutch East Indies Company in the 17th and 18th century.



Wim as a young man

Wim's name appears on the passenger list of s/s “Johan de Wit”, a passenger vessel that sailed on May 10, 1935 from Sabang, a bunker port on the island of Sumatra, to Amsterdam. So he travelled to the Netherlands on home leave, a year after his older brother Carel and wife Anneke were in The Hague on leave.



1935 in The Hague, Wim, Chap
Frits and Rugier



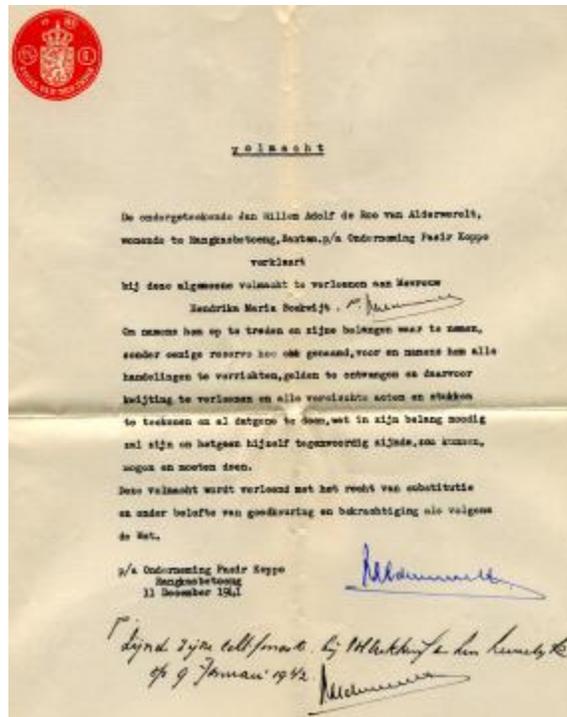
1935



Wim with his dog

It should be remembered that the Netherlands were occupied by the German army from May 1940 to May 1945 while the Dutch East Indies were occupied by the Japanese army from March 1942 to September 1945 so for more than 5 years virtually no communications were possible between the home country and her colonies. It is only through much later research in archives that I have been able to reconstruct some of the events that took place during that time period.

Japan attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, described by President Roosevelt as “a day of infamy”. This was the start of World War II in the Pacific. Not long after that Hong Kong and Singapore fell to the Japanese and the Dutch East Indies were forced to surrender on March 9, 1942.



Power of attorney from Wim to Henny

Before going into subsequent events, it is important to relate some information about Henny. She was born in Leiden on December 22, 1908 and on 28 November 1935 married Leon Justus Henri Meyer in Oegstgeest. There is a photo, taken in the Dutch East Indies, of uncle Carel and aunt Anneke with Henny and an unidentified gentleman. I believe that to be Leon Meyer which would indicate that there was contact between the Van Alderwerelts and the Meyers at an earlier date.



Left to right: Leon Meyer (?), Henny, Carel, Anneke

I have found a document certifying that a court in Semarang granted an uncontested divorce to the Meyers on 14 March 1941 with the provision that Henny was not permitted to enter into a new marriage for a period of 300 days. An interesting provision; I wonder where that came from?

So, exactly 300 days after March 14, 1941, namely on January 9, 1942 Wim and Henny were married in Serang, Bantam, west of Batavia. The 2 photos show that it was a military wedding.



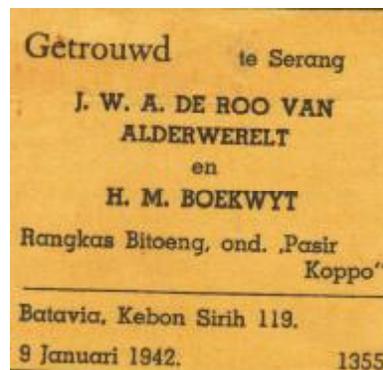
Wedding



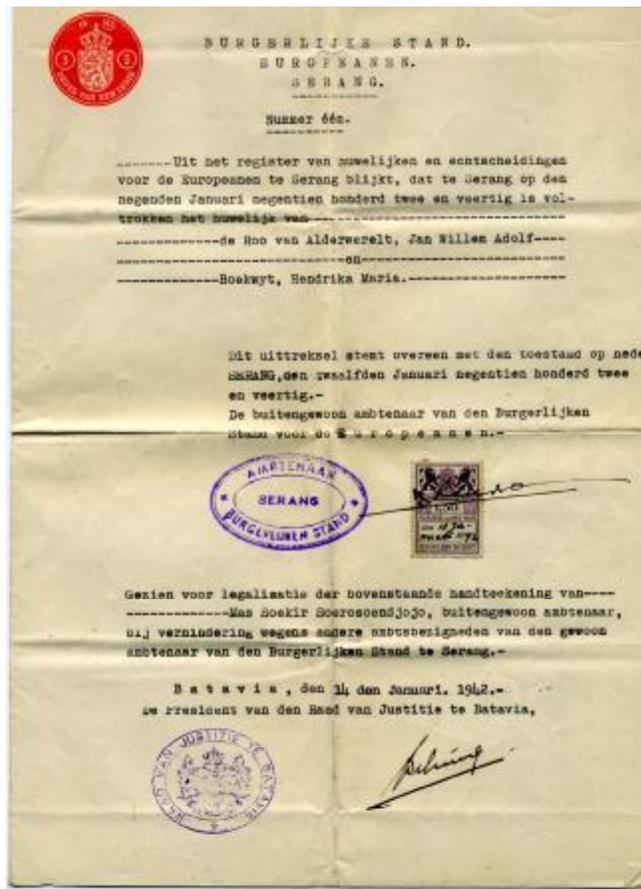
Wedding

It is curious that they did not get married in Batavia where Henny lived. It is possible that Wim's unit was stationed in or near Serang and that he was not permitted to travel away from his unit.

In the announcement in the local newspaper, Wim's address was shown as Plantation Pasir Koppo, Rangkas Bitoeng and Henny's address as Kebon Sirih 119, Batavia. The announcement did not mention that Wim was in uniform.



Newspaper announcement



Official wedding certificate

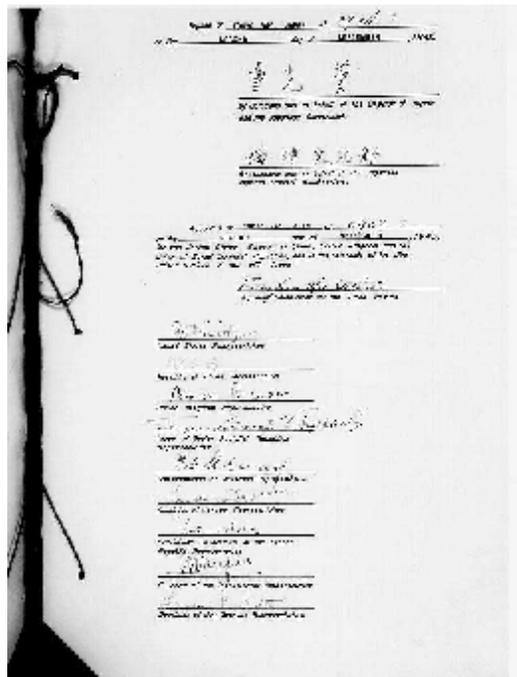
I do not know if Wim actually took part in any fighting when the Japanese invaded. I do know that when the Dutch East Indies surrendered on March 9, 1942, or shortly after that date, all Europeans were taken prisoner. The men were placed in various camps on different islands while the women and children were placed in separate camps for them. This is the last time that Wim and Henny saw each other or had any contact. Apparently it was not unusual for prisoners to be moved from one camp to another.

In the Nationaal Archief in The Hague is a document dated April 1944 which lists Henny as one of the 5,290 prisoners in camp Tjideng, near Batavia. The diary she kept and several related items are in the Van Alderwerelt family archives.

Towards the end of the war, Wim was in a camp outside of Palembang on the island of Sumatra where he died as a result of dysentery on August 18, 1945; just days after Japan had agreed to surrender. Much later Henny managed to make contact with other POW's who had survived and who were present when Wim died. They had kept a very few of his personal belongings which they gave to her.



Japanese delegation on board the battleship USS Missouri just before the signing of the surrender documents



Japanese surrender document



Wim's death certificate

Originally those who died in the Palembang prisoner of war camp were buried in the vicinity of that camp. In 1967 Wim's remains, as well as the remains of many others, were transferred to the war cemetery Pandu at Bandung on the main island of Java.



Wim's grave at the war cemetery Pandu at Bandung – section IV, number 310

After the liberation and lengthy delays, Henny was able to return to the Netherlands. We do not know the exact date but we do know that it was after November 4, 1945. It was on that date that my father wrote a letter to his brother Wim using an address for him that he had received two years earlier from the Red Cross. This letter clearly shows that nothing was known about Wim's fate several months after the Japanese surrender. It also shows how little was known in the Netherlands about events in the Dutch East Indies since the Japanese invasion and subsequent surrender. The letter, a translation of which follows below, also presents a very interesting description of feelings and events in the Netherlands during and after the war. The reason that the original letter is available is that it was returned to my father as undeliverable and he saved everything!



Translation of letter dated November 4, 1945 from J.K.H. (Jan) de Roo van Alderwerelt, then living in Wassenaar, Netherlands, to his youngest brother J.W.A. (Wim) de Roo van Alderwerelt believed to be a prisoner of war in Japanese hands. (The Henriette mentioned in the third paragraph of this letter is my mother.)

Dear Wim,

Although I do not have the slightest reason to believe that the address I am using for this letter is a real address at which I am able to reach you, I am going to try it anyway. No matter how many messages and news items are coming in from Indie, there continue to be large gaps in what they contain. And for us that is the case with respect to news from you. Until now we have not heard anything positive. The address I am using for you is the address which I received from the Red Cross when, in October 1943, they advised me that you were in a Japanese prisoner of war camp. After that, I sent you a Red Cross telegram every three weeks but, because I never heard anything, I have to assume that these never reached you.

In those telegrams I told you that Moeder and Vader were evacuated to Oudenrijn and later also that Vader had died. In December 1943 part of The Hague was being converted into a fortress and had to be evacuated so our parents moved to Oudenrijn. I was able to find a house for us in Wassenaar. Moeder now lives in the gardener's cottage of Rhijnvliet (Rhijnshoek) and is doing quite well. Vader could not cope with all the unpleasant happenings and we have to be thankful that he died before the onset of the enormous misery, which he just could not understand and which he would not have been able to survive.

Apart from that, everyone is fine. After May 1940 I went to work at the Netherlands Institute for Military History. In May 1942, when all officers were taken prisoner, I was gravely ill. I was therefore not transported to Germany. The result was that the Germans "lost" me and that I disappeared from their records. For two years I did not exist for them. In May 1944 they discovered me but for some incomprehensible reason I was classified as being unsuitable for living in a P.O.W. camp. It was of course a very tense time while trying not to be discovered. This was also the case for our two older sons who participated in the underground and were candidates for transport to German labor camps. Both of them came through it alright. Daan is also fine. Henriette is doing very well. It was for her a very difficult time because so many things had to be done by the women because it was too dangerous for the men to be out in the open.

I also served in the underground and subsequently, until August 1945, in the Internal Armed Forces. Frits served similarly and now, as a volunteer for the new Dutch Army, is undergoing training in England. Right now I am not doing anything. The officers from before May 1940 are now too old for field service and now it is wait and see if a desk job opens up somewhere.

I do not hear anything from the Prince but technically I have not been removed from that post, but there is a new "regime" that does not like the old timers. Rugier works at Philips in Eindhoven. He had to stop his university studies because "good" students could not accept the rules imposed by the Germans but now he is not picking up his studies where he left off. The younger generation has in recent years experienced so much that they just can not easily fit back in.

Our brothers and sisters are doing well. I received a letter dated September 22 from Anneke while she was still in Camp Kramat in Batavia, with all sorts of news about various people but not about you. Only that you married in January 1942. Moeder had already heard that from a different direction. We live outside the city and do not have transportation so I do not have the opportunity to visit with friends in the city who may have received correspondence from Indie.

Now that the availability of foodstuffs has improved, we are beginning to forget the terrible time of hunger and cold. We have learned in recent years to be satisfied with very little. Now we have electricity and gas again, although in limited quantity. We have very little fuel but we are hoping some will come. Last winter we just went to bed when it got dark because we had neither heat nor lights. To cook something we searched for or stole wood. But that is all behind us, now that there is some gas for cooking again.

We get very little news about the situation in Indie. Newspapers are miniscule because of paper shortage and the radio also does not report very much. There is a general tenseness in the air and nobody really knows how things are in the Far East. Our country is unable to start anything on its own because we are an empty and ransacked land. The Germans stole everything and left us with very little. We don't have money anymore to buy something. There is some money but it is not worth anything. Foreign countries will not accept it and there is so little one can buy in our own country. I am sure that it is not any better were you are. We should be thankful that we have survived it all.

Dear Wim, I am going to leave it at this for now. Best regards from everyone.

Jan

Henny eventually settled in The Hague, never remarried and passed away there on February 4, 1998 at the age of 89. She left instructions that her collections of items from the time period discussed in this article be placed in the family archives. It is these archives that I researched in early 2006 and late 2007.

Earlier in this article I mentioned Wim's brother, my uncle Carel and his first wife Anneke. Both Carel and Anneke were taken prisoner by the Japanese shortly after the surrender of the Dutch East Indies and as was the case with Wim and Henny, they were taken to prison camps.

Anneke was still in camp Kramat in Batavia when she wrote my father on September 22, 1945, i.e. a little more than a month after the Japanese surrender.

Carel survived very harrowing conditions in a prison camp in Burma where he endured forced labor on the Burma Railway and the bridge over the river Khwae Yai.

The Bridge over the River Kwai is a novel by Pierre Boulle, published in 1952 and made into a film in 1957. The story is fictional but is based on the building in 1943 of one of the railway bridges over the Khwae Yai at a place called Tamarkan five kilometers from the Thai town of Kanchanaburi. This was part of a project to link existing Thai and Burmese railway lines to create a route from Bangkok, Thailand to Rangoon, Burma (now Myanmar) to support the Japanese occupation of Burma. About 100,000 conscripted Asian laborers and 16,000 prisoners of war died on the whole project. By the end of the war only 10% of the prisoners of war had survived.

Both Anneke and Carel eventually returned to the Netherlands. It is clear from my father's letter quoted in translation above that they had not yet returned by November 4, 1945 so their return was most likely in very late 1945 or early 1946.

Carel subsequently went back to Java where he remained until 1958 when political developments dictated his return to Europe. After a short time in Luxemburg he moved to Italy where he lived until 1980 when he returned to Luxemburg. He died there on 21 August 1989.

D.M.O. de Roo van Alderwerelt
January 2008

Sources:

De Roo van Alderwerelt archives at Nationaal Archief in The Hague and at the residence of Willem de Roo van Alderwerelt in Hoofddorp.

Oorlogsgravenstichting (Netherlands War Graves Foundation) www.ogs.nl

Mrs. U.P.E.(Urschi) de Roo van Alderwerelt, widow of C.L.(Carel) de Roo van Alderwerelt

Wikipedia for the paragraph about the paragraph *The Bridge over the River Kwai*