

## Nora Hevel, daughter of Adjutant Burgers at the Political Prisoners Camp Boven Digul -Dutch New Guinea



**Adjutant Jan Hevel in uniform**

Nora Burgers (nee Hevel) was born in Ambarawa, in the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia) on 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1920. Her parents were Jannigje (nee Derekson) and Jan Hendrik Hevel.

When Nora was three years old, the family, comprising Nora, Jan, a sister (Mimi), and two brothers, Hendrik (Henk) and Dirk, went to the Netherlands for 6 months during her father's military service. After this visit, they returned to the Dutch East Indies for Jan to continue his service. He was subsequently posted to the [Political Prison camp at Boven Digul \(also known as Tanah Merah\)](#) as an adjutant in the Dutch Army. He died there prematurely at the age of 44, leaving Jannigje to raise 4 children on her own, which she did for another 2 years with help from friends she had there.



**Jan & Jannigje Hevel (nee Derekson) on their wedding day.**

When Nora was 11 years old in 1931, Jannigje and the children returned to the Netherlands where they had further support from extended family. They lived for a short time with Jan's mother in the town of Tiel, and later moved to Nijmegen to be near Nora's aunt, her mother's sister, living once again in their own home and having support from family. Nijmegen is a large Dutch city located near the German border.

The education system in the Netherlands only went to Grade 10 at the time, but Nora only completed Grade 7, then stayed home to help her mother with the housework and looking after her siblings. At 18 years of age, she gained employment making clothing for the local shops to sell. This business was in the town of Malden, which was 7 kilometres away, so Nora had to cycle there and back every day. After working there for 3 years, she was offered employment in a movie theatre in Nijmegen.

Living in a war zone in Nazi occupied the Netherlands, Nora had several close encounters, and was lucky to survive. One day a bomb flew past her as she was going downstairs to visit a neighbour. It went clean through the cellar door, without exploding.



**Hendrik, Dirk, Mvr. Hevel, Mimi, Jan Hevel (in uniform) and my mother, Nora at Boven Digul ca 1929-1930**

On another occasion, the air raid sirens began just as she was on her way to work. She decided to return home, rather than risk the longer distance to her workplace. A bomb struck the picture theatre, killing her boss and several patrons. A clothing store near the theatre was struck as well, killing five women that worked there.



**Dirk Hevel, Mvr. Jannigje Hevel, Mimi Hevel, Hendrik Hevel, Jan Hevel (in uniform) and my mother Nora Hevel (later Bugers) at Boven Digul.**

When Nora was 14, she met a handsome young man named Hendrik (Harry) Burgers and told him that she would marry him one day.

### Harry Burgers Sgt at the 18 NEI RAAF Squadron in Canberra



Harry was born in Nijmegen on 2 November 1918, one of four sons born to Hendrikus and Wilhelmina Burgers. He was educated to Mulo level in Nijmegen, and, at the age of 17 commenced his military career with the Royal Dutch Engineers in the Colonial Reserve. After 3 months basic training in Nijmegen, he was posted to the Netherlands East Indies being allocated to the 3<sup>rd</sup> battalion Engineers in Tjimahi, training as a radio operator. In February 1940, he transferred to the Airforce in Andir, where he completed a Wireless Operator/Air gunner course. He was promoted to Corporal in November 1940 and was posted to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Flight Group at Tjililitan.

The Japanese invaded early in 1942, and while serving at Palembang, Sumatra, he carried out various scouting and reconnaissance flights including some to Singapore. It was during such a flight that the outdated Glenn-Martin bomber was shot down, being forced to make a crash landing at sea near the island of Biliton, south of Singapore. Until February 1942, Burgers served with a bomber squadron which carried out various raids near Muntok, Sumatra. Several aircraft were lost during these raids.

**Harry at 17, just before being posted to the Netherlands East Indies**

On 18 February, Burgers gave 5 bottles of beer to another operator as a bribe so that he could go on a mission to destroy the oil installations at Plajo, near Palembang. On the way, the 3 Glenn-Martins were attacked by 3 Japanese Zeroes. Burgers was awarded the Bronze Cross for shooting down one of the Zeroes, which allowed the bombers to climb to safety of cloud cover. This medal was officially presented to him at a ceremony at Tjililitan Airforce base in 1948.



From L to R The Bronze Cross, the World War II Service medal with clasps, and the Indonesian Campaign medal

KONINKLIJK NEDERLANDS INDISCH LEGER  
 KONINKLIJKE LANDMACHT  
 KABINET LEGERCOMMANDANT  
 COMMISSIE ONDERSCHIEDINGEN  
 -----

Nr.CO/0614/v.H.IAa 6

Bijlagen: een Bronzen Kruis.

Onderwerp: Kon. Ond. bestemd voor  
 Sergt.Lvrt. H.J.BURGERS.

BATAVIA, 28 Januari 1948.

Schr.dd. 12 Dec.'47 nr. 2885/02.12.08/ML-HP Geheim.

1. Naar aanleiding van bovenaangehaald schrijven UHoog-EdelGestrenge hierbij aangeboden een étui, inhoudende een Bronzen Kruis, met verzoek, dit alsnog aan den Sergeant Lvrt. H.J.BURGERS, nr.92809, te willen doen uitreiken.
2. Onze Commissie is hierbij uitgegaan van de door U reeds eerder overgelegde verklaringen terzake, resp. van den Lt.Kol. J.W.GERHARZ en den Adj.o.o.Lvrt.M.L. H.G.J.A. van WEEZEL, waarin wordt vermeld, dat de gehele crew, waarvan Sergeant Burgers deel uitmaakte, het Bronzen Kruis was toegekend.
3. Het desbetreffende Gouvernements Besluit kon echter niet meer worden geproduceerd, zodat de bij het eremetaal behorende mutatie niet kon worden bekend gesteld.
4. Aangekomen dient te worden, dat de toekenning plaats vond, n.a.v. zijn moedig optreden op 19 Febr.'42 tijdens de strijd tegen de Japanners, bij de aanval op het vliegveld bij Palembang, waarbij sergeant Burgers een vijandelijke Navy-O afschoot.

Ns.de Commissie Onderscheidingen

A A N :

Den Commandant der  
 Militaire Luchtvaart  
 Koningsplein West  
BATAVIA.-

w.g: A.van HILLEGONDSBERG  
 KOLONEL

Voor eensluidend afschrift  
 BATAVIA.

Ns.de Commandant Mil.Luchtvaart,  
 De Stafoff. Admin.Zaken,  
 voor deze:  
 Het Hoofd Kantoor Personeel. —

H.S.A.W.WILLINCK.  
 Res.Maj.M.L.v.s.d.

At the end of February 1942, Burgers was given the task, along with several others, to collect new B-25 Mitchell bombers from British India. Following delivery of these bombers, Burgers was unable to return to Java because the Netherlands East Indies had fallen to the Japanese by early March. As a result, the B-25's were allocated to the Americans.

Burgers, along with many other servicemen, managed to escape capture by fleeing to Australia. He was posted to 18 Squadron, NEI RAAF which was formed in April 1942 at Canberra, where he was promoted to Sergeant.

### **Questionable arrests at the 18<sup>th</sup> Squadron**

A nasty series of events blackened the history of 18 Squadron commencing on 11 November 1942. Three Dutch pilots, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant William John Burck, Sergeant Erich Henry John de Lyon and Sergeant Henry Kelder, were arrested by Major Simon H. Spoor, who was a member of Dutch Intelligence. He had been given the task of raising the morale and behaviour of the Dutch servicemen of 18 Squadron. He used Sgt. Major Adrian Scholte as a spy to accumulate evidence that the 3 pilots were scheming to steal a B-25 bomber and were planning to firstly fly it to Melbourne and drop bombs on Dutch Headquarters there. Then they would allegedly continue on to Java, desert to the enemy, trade military secrets for the freedom of their family members still living there and return to Australia. Most members of the Squadron, including its C.O. Major B. J. Fiedeldij, were aware of the drunken antics of the 3 pilots, and knew that it was a harmless, alcohol-fuelled pipe dream. It was a physical impossibility. The B-25 would need to refuel multiple times along the route. However, the cunning and super ambitious Spoor arrested the 3 pilots on 11 November 1942, charging them, among other offences, with treason. He wanted the death penalty for Burck, and life sentences for de Lyon and Kelder. Spoor ultimately became a General, the head of all Dutch military forces in the Dutch East Indies. Interestingly, he died from food poisoning on 25 May 1949, at the age of 47.

Of all the other Dutch servicemen at 18 Squadron, Simon Spoor arrested Sgt. Burgers on the 29<sup>th</sup> November, charging him with failing to report the antics of the 3 pilots to his superiors. The problem was Burgers didn't realise the significance of the situation, so he, like many others, did nothing. But Burgers was the only one singled out for punishment. Burgers became "the fourth man" to be charged, while so many others, including officers such as Hagers, Niewpoort, Hartvet and Barenrecht remained free. The witness statement made by Capt. Jesserun on 15 February 1943 supports the fact that the C.O. of 18 Squadron, Major Fiedeldij, was well aware of the wild rumours that the 3 pilots were planning to desert to Java.

To avoid any reaction from Australian authorities, Spoor arranged for the 4 men to be secretly taken from Australia at night, to face a Naval Court martial onboard a Dutch depot ship, the S.S. Plancius, moored in Colombo harbour, Ceylon, which is now Sri-Lanka. No witnesses were called upon to give evidence. After the arrests on 11 November, Sgt Mjr Scholte, suddenly vanished from 18 Squadron without anybody knowing what became of him. Major Spoor had taken him to Melbourne and instilled him in the Netherlands Forces Intelligence Services.

On the 16 August 1942, 11 months after his arrest, Burck was sentenced to life imprisonment. On 24 September, de Lyon was sentenced to 20 years. Kelder was also sentenced to 20 years on 8 October. Burck's sentence was reduced to 12 years on 8 March 1950. de Lyon's sentence was reduced to 8 years on 19 September 1951. Kelder's sentence was reduced to 8 years on 23 April 1952.

Notwithstanding that several officers gave written evidence that the whole squadron was aware of the so-called "conspiracy", Sgt Burgers was found guilty, on 22 October 1943, of failing to report Burck, Kelder and de Lyon to his superiors. He was sentenced to the period he had already been in custody. He was not demoted or fined but was not returned to 18 Squadron in Australia.

Instead, he was posted to British India, where he became a Parachutist / Commando, was promoted to Sgt. Major

and subsequently assigned to Force 136 under the British Special Operations Executive. This unit was involved in sabotage and other covert operations behind enemy lines until the end of the war in the Pacific, when Harry was posted back to Nijmegen in the Netherlands.

### **Ernie Burgers and his mum honouring the Boven Digul Prisoners buried in Cowra cemetery.**

Nora Hevel and Harry Burgers were married on 29 December 1945. They lived with Nora's mother for some 16 months, after which Harry was posted back to the Dutch East Indies to fight another war against the Indonesian rebels. Their first son, Robert Harry was born on 18 October 1946, in Nijmegen.

Eventually, Nora and Robert, who was then 7 months old, travelled by ship, along with many other service personnel's wives and children, to join their husbands in the Dutch East Indies. Nora and Robert lived with Nora's brother, Dirk and his wife and children in their home near the Dutch Airforce Base of Tjililitan, which was about 13 kilometres from Batavia (now Djakarta) on the island of Java. Harry was stationed at the Airforce Base, and their second son, Ernie, was born under the Dutch flag in the base's hospital on 23 June 1949.

Having served the Dutch military for 13 years, Harry was granted an honourable discharge on 24 July 1950.

Since the end of the Pacific war, the Indonesians had become increasingly resentful of the Dutch who had ruled the nation since 1602. It had become extremely dangerous for the Dutch people still living there at that time. The Dutch were forced out when the Sukarno regime came to power and froze Dutch bank accounts. Harry and Nora managed to flee to Australia, rather than attempt to return to the Netherlands. Having served Australia against the Japanese, Harry thought there would be more opportunities for a better life for the family in Australia than in the Netherlands. On 18 September 1950, the family flew from Java to Darwin onboard Dakota DC3 numbered VH-EBM, with nothing but the clothes they were wearing and whatever they could carry. Interestingly, the registration number VH-EBM has since been allocated to the Boeing 707 owned by John Travolta.

From Darwin, the family flew to Sydney where they boarded a train for the long trip to the Migrant Camp at Bathurst.

Harry was allocated a job as a labourer, working on the Burrendong Dam project, and the family moved into public housing at Mumbil, near Wellington. Late in 1952, Harry secured employment with BHP at the Steel Works in Newcastle, and the family rented part of a house in Adamstown while living there.

In 1954, Harry gained employment as a Morse Code Operator for the NSW Government Railways and was transferred to Cowra Railway Station. Initially, they lived in part of another rented house at the Northern end of Lachlan Street. They lived there for 6 months and then bought a dwelling, which was little more than a galvanised iron shed. This shed was situated in Watt Street and was home for the family from 1954 to 1962. It has since been demolished.

The Burgers family became naturalised Australian citizens in 1956, at the time when Mark Whitby was Mayor of the Cowra Municipal Council.

In 1962, Nora and Harry purchased a home at 15 Lee Street. This home was built by another migrant family by the name of Gocentas, in 1952. Nora worked on a casual basis at Edgell's Cannery to help pay off the loan from the Dutch Building Society.

When the Morse code system of railway communication was replaced by telephone in the 1960's, Harry was transferred from the railway station to the goods shed as a Goods Clerk, spending the remainder of his working

life there until he retired due to failing health in 1984. He died from a massive heart attack at Orange Base hospital on 17 August 1987, at the age of 68.

Nora continued to live in the family home until she moved into the Bilyara Retirement village in mid 2006. She passed away on 29 November 2009, aged 89.

Ernie was educated to year 2 at Mulyan Infants School, in Myall Street, Cowra. He then attended Cowra Primary School through years 3 to 6, and went on to Cowra High, completing years 7 to 12.

He became a Cadet Engineer with Cowra Municipal Council from June 1968 until he was called up for National Service during the Vietnam war from July 1969 to July 1971. He was credited with being the most outstanding soldier of 24 Platoon, D Company, at Kapooka Recruit Training Battalion and was promoted to Corporal within 12 months, serving with A Squadron, 2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Regiment, Holsworthy, NSW.

Upon completion of military service, Ernie returned to Cowra Municipal Council and served again from July 1971 to December 1973 when he gained employment with Oberon Shire Council. He studied and received qualifications in Local Government Works Supervision, Civil Engineering, and Health and Building Surveying.

Ernie married local Cowra girl, Robyn Rush in July 1974, and they had two children, Kylie and Craig, both born at Oberon District hospital on 15<sup>th</sup> August 1977 and 17 August 1980 respectively. He was invited back to serve Cowra Council, which had become an amalgamation, in 1980, of Cowra Municipal, and Waugoola Shire Councils.

Ernie left Cowra Council in September 1989 and became a director of an Engineering & Surveying Company and remained there until September 1994, when he was yet again invited back to serve Cowra Council. By then, his colleagues affectionately referred to him as “Phar Lap”, because “He’s had the most wins from the most starts!”

Following heart attacks in 2004 and 2005 resulting in 4 stents, subsequent Electro-Physical Studies, Ablations, and implant of a pacemaker/defibrillator, Ernie retired on 15 February 2007. He suffered another life-threatening heart attack in January 2021, which resulted in another stent to open up his left main artery which had become 95% blocked.

Since retiring, Ernie has kept busy, pursuing a pastime of singing for Nursing Homes, Weddings, Funerals, Wakes, Charity Concerts and parties. He has over 1000 backing tracks and has recorded 658 songs, mainly 50’s, 60’s and 70’s popular songs and Country songs from past to present. Artists covered include Kenny Rogers, Don Williams, Buddy Holly, Brad Paisley, Toby Keith, Zac Brown Band, Elvis, Neil Diamond, John Denver, Everley Brothers, Alan Jackson, Willie Nelson and Johnny Cash.

Ernie and his wife of 48 years, Robyn, continue to live in Newcombe Street, Cowra, as they have done since September 1981.

## **The Cowra connection**

The move of the Burgers family to Cowra adds another twist to the Dutch Indonesian-Australian story. The prisoners who Ernie's grandfather guarded in Boven Digul were in 1942 transported to Australia.



Together with other Indonesians, some ended up in the 22nd Garrison Prisoner of war camp at Cowra.

This POW camp also confined Japanese, Italian, and Formosan prisoners and is the site of the Japanese mass breakout on 5 August, 1944.

Thirteen of the political prisoners are buried in the [Cowra Cemetery](#). The Dutch referred to the political prisoners as rebels, while the Indonesians honour them as Freedom Fighters.

My mother and I were regularly invited to attend the annual pilgrimage to the cemetery in November each year. I continue to be invited as the only Cowra resident who was born in the Dutch East Indies

