

“It’s Just an Old Apron”

Aprons, Artefacts and Art - representations of personal and private ‘her-stories’, as public histories.

Dr. Christiaan Willems *FHEA FIML FAIEA*

ABSTRACT:

This paper examines art and artefact in the representation and recollection of deeply personal WWII women’s experiences as POW’s under the Japanese.

At about 9:30pm it was ‘lights out’ and (camp commander) Sonei used to roam through the camp to check. A few times when he spotted a light still on he came in and ripped the light off the ceiling, kicking and hitting everything and everyone. At first we used to look forward to the full moon so we had a bit of extra light instead of sitting in the pitch dark, but soon we came to dread it as Sonei went absolutely ‘moon mad’ when it was the full moon – he used to march up the street ranting and raving...His favourite occupation was hitting and kicking the women and keeping them standing to attention for hours in the blazing sun...(POW 67)

This kind of treatment of internees in the Tjideng Women and Children’s internment camp (and others) in Batavia under the Japanese in WWII, stands in stark and brutal contrast to the idyllic life lived by many families up to that time in what was then known as the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia). The deprivation and brutality of the Japanese incarceration of these women and children evoked responses - not military, but certainly militant, if muted. Representations of those responses – as both art and artefact - may be found in the most unlikely places and unexpected forms - and are still being unearthed to this day.

Sonei was, as it later turned out, one of the worst camp commanders and one of the very few who was shot as a war criminal after the war...(POW 67)

However close we might personally be to these artists and artisans, can we, as observers from a distance, ever truly comprehend through spoken or written words alone, the day-to-day realities of those extraordinary times?

Dr. Christiaan Willems *FHEA FIML FAIEA*

GradDipArtsAdmin. GradCertTertiaryTL. GradCert-eLearning MA. DCI

ArtsMedia Consultants

PO Box 90 DAYBORO QLD 4521 AUSTRALIA

tel: +61 7 34253308 mobile: 0417 470 874

email: chris_willems@bigpond.com

web: www.artsmediaconsultants.com

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/drchristiaanwillems/>

“It’s Just an Old Apron”

Aprons, Artefacts and Art - representations of personal and private ‘her-stories’, as public histories.

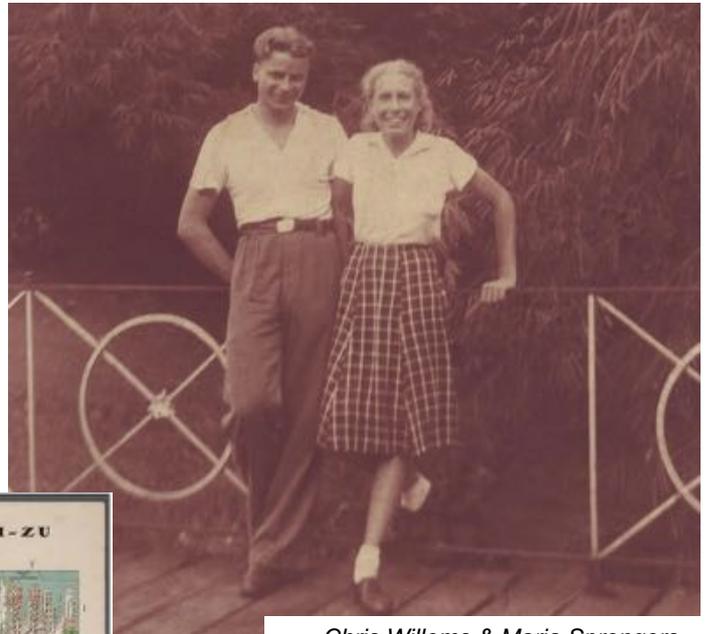
Dr. Christiaan Willems

Java:

This photograph (*below*) is of my parents. It was taken on 26 December 1940 in the Botanical Gardens just outside Jakarta, then known as Batavia. The occasion was their first date together, and the person who took the photograph was my mother’s sister, Therese, who was their chaperone.

Not long after this photo was taken, the Japanese swept through the region and both my parents, separately, became prisoners-of-war.

And it is my parents, and in particular my mother, that this story is about, so it is appropriate that it should be told, as much as possible, in her own words.



*Chris Willems & Maria Sprengers
Botanical Gardens, Batavia (Jakarta)
26 December 1940*



Batavia: 1938 Map
Nationaal Archief – Netherlands
<http://www.nationaalarchief.nl/>
(accessed 13 September 2010)

WWII - invasion & occupation:

In her own words...

“...Sometimes we heard rumours about POW’s arriving...a few times the rumours were true but the Japanese always kept the people at a great distance from the POW’s so it was very hard to try and find a familiar face or to ask where they came from. There were quite a few Australian POW’s in the barracks in Batavia...Once a truck with Aussies drove past me and I quietly gave the ‘V’ for Victory sign just with my fingers on the handlebars, but I had not realised that there was a Japanese (guard) standing amongst them on the back of the truck, who jumped off and got me to stop, kicked the bike down and started to bash me – mostly around the head. I tried to convince him that I had only tried to use my handbrake and that my fingers were therefore spread like a ‘V’ but he did not buy it and kept bashing me. He was talking about taking me to the Kempetai (the dreaded military secret police), but after another kick to my shins decided to let me go... Shortly afterwards we had to register to be put into the camps.”

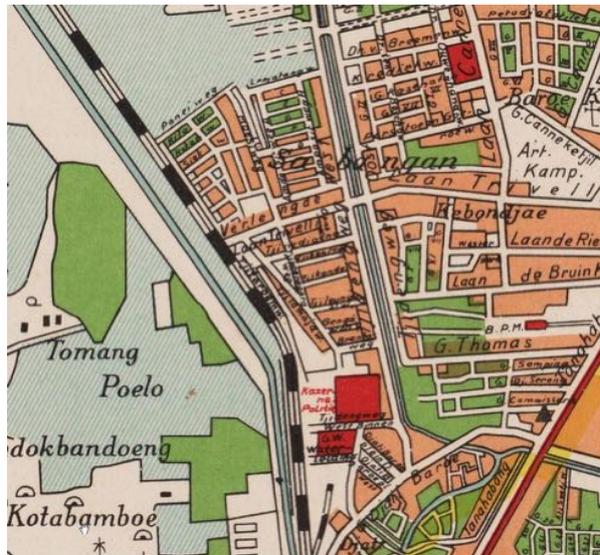
(POW 67, p.30)

Thus, both my parents, not long after they met, became POW’s under the Japanese – my father eventually working on the infamous Burma Railway, and my mother, in her late teens, was interned in a Women and Children’s camp for some 3½ years.

The POW camp my mother ended up in was one by the name of **Tjideng**.

Tjideng camp was a closed-off section of one of the poorer suburbs of Batavia with smaller houses on small lots. It was fenced off, initially only with barbed wire. Later matted bamboo (gedèk) was added cutting the internees even more off from the outside world. Any contact through the gedèk was severely punished. Over time the Japanese reduced the size of the camp many times. That did not deter them from bringing more people in from other camps. Tjideng started with about 2000 people. Over the years its area was reduced to about a quarter whilst its population grew to about 10,500.

(VAN der KUIL, P. (1997/2009) Tjideng Camp Website.
<http://members.iinet.net.au/~vanderkp/tjideng.html> -
accessed 30 May 2010)



Batavia suburb, location of Tjideng Camp

(1938 Map Nationaal Archief – Netherlands)

(<http://www.nationaalarchief.nl/>
accessed 13 September 2010)

Tjideng Camp - Batavia:

As my mother describes:

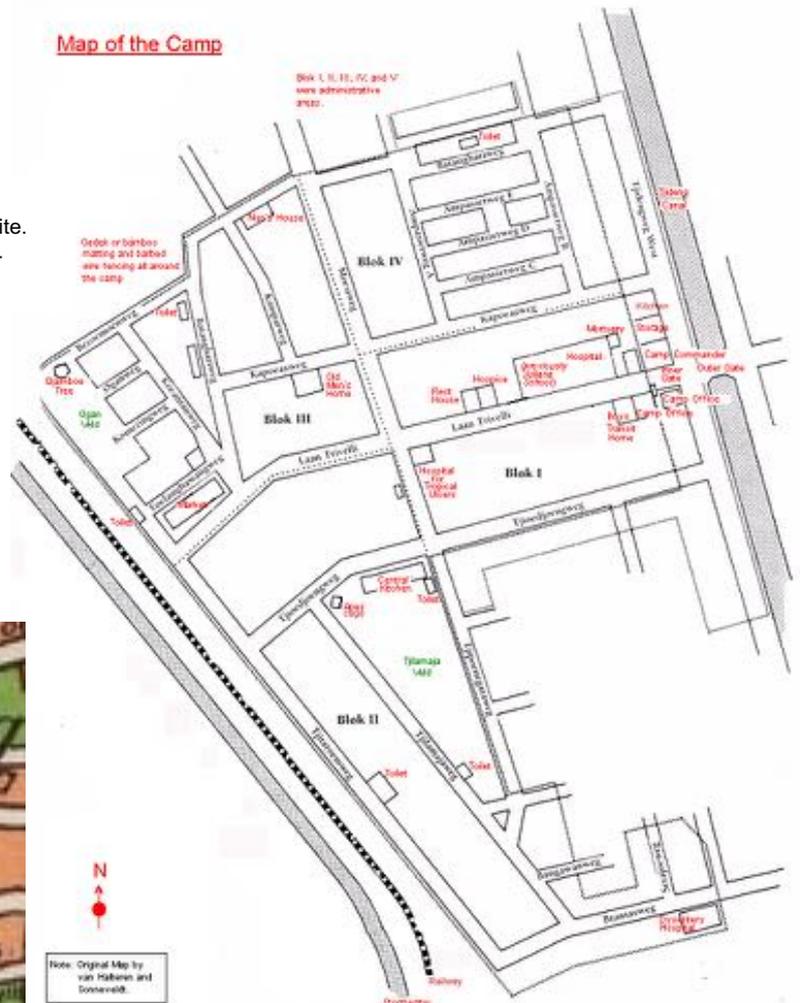
*"...in December 1942, we were allocated to the **Tjideng Camp**, which was a rather poor part of town that had been fenced off for the purpose..."*

(POW 67, p.30)

This Map of the camp (below) is from a recently discovered and respectfully maintained website:

Tjideng Women & Children's Camp

(VAN der KUIL, P. (1997/2009) Tjideng Camp website.
<http://members.iinet.net.au/~vanderkp/tjideng.html> -
 accessed 30 May 2010)



Camp
 (Batavia, Netherlands)
 (van Haberen and Sonneveldt, 2010)

Tjideng Camp website - extracts:

<http://members.iinet.net.au/~vanderkp/tjideng.html>
(accessed 30 May 2010) (VAN der KUIL, P. 1997/2009)

 <p>This site is dedicated to all those who experienced this "Hell on Earth" - a women and children's internment camp set up by the Japanese in Batavia (now Jakarta, Indonesia) during WWII.</p>	<h1><u>Tjideng Camp</u></h1> <p>a women and children's internment camp</p>	 <p>The camp was one of many set up by the Japanese all over the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia) to intern European civilians, mainly Dutch, as "Guests of the Emperor" during the period 1942 to 1945</p>
--	--	---

(<http://members.iinet.net.au/~vanderkp/tjideng.html>)

Japanese Armed Forces took control of Batavia in March 1942 and life changed rapidly for the European population. Men, and boys over 12, were removed from their families and placed into POW camps leaving their women and children to fend for themselves in their homes. Conditions deteriorated rapidly as more restrictions were applied and the women increasingly feared for their safety and fate.

Soon camps like Tjideng were set up all over Batavia, and elsewhere in the Far East, and orders were given to move into them. The houses (and contents) of internees were confiscated by the Japanese. The women and children moved to their new camps with small pieces of furniture, bedding, clothing and some personal effects. As many people as possible were crammed into the houses in the camps.

At first **Tjideng** was under a civil administration and conditions were not too bad. Inhabitants could still cook for themselves, shop, and attend church services. However, when the military took over all privileges disappeared. Money and jewellery had to be handed in and there were roll calls (*kumpulan*, *appel* or *tenko*) twice a day during which time the houses were searched. Food was cooked in the central kitchen and its quality and quantity deteriorated rapidly. Hunger was now a fact of life. So was disease and lack of medicines. Death became a daily occurrence. First the older ones, but soon all ages were affected.

The women and children were often forced to witness horrible scenes of cruelty involving their fellow internees. Savage beatings and kickings were commonplace for the slightest misdemeanour, so were head shavings.

(<http://members.iinet.net.au/~vanderkp/tjideng.html>)

Tjideng Camp Office:

In her own words...

*“Then I heard that they were looking for typists for the Dutch administration office and I applied and got the job. We had to type **endless lists** of all the people in the camps...with all the particulars of everybody – not only for the Tjideng camp but also for Kramat, Grogol, Adek and Gedon-Badak camps... In the office it was like a madhouse...”*

(POW 67, p.30)

This zoomed-in image (*below*) shows the location of *Tjideng's* Main Entrance, the **Camp Office** and **Laan Trivelli**.

(VAN der KUIL, P. (1997/2009) Tjideng Camp website.
<http://members.iinet.net.au/~vanderkp/tjideng.html> -
accessed 30 May 2010)



Willems, 2010. Adapted from VAN der KUIL, P. (1997/2009) Tjideng Camp website.
<http://members.iinet.net.au/~vanderkp/tjideng.html>

Tjideng POW Numbers:

As explained by POW No. 67...

*“...the internees were all given **POW numbers**. As they started numbering at the entrance of the camp and we lived in the first house from the gate, we ended up with the numbers 64, 65, 66 for Mum and my two younger brothers. **I got No. 67** and my sister Therese No. 68...”*

(POW 67, p.32)

Tjideng Register:

NAAM (Name)	BLOK (Block)	PG (page No.)	NR (No in Block)	LEEFTIJD (age)	KNR (Camp Number)
Sprengers, M.J.A.	1	2	67	20, 18	67
Gruisen, J.H.M. van	1	2	64	43, 11, 6	64

(VAN der KUIL, P. (1997/2009) Tjideng Camp website.
<http://members.iinet.net.au/~vanderkp/tjideng.html> - accessed 30 May 2010)

This information is extracted from one of those ‘endless lists’, showing POW’s numbers etc.

Tjideng Commandant - Sonei:

In the words of POW 67:

*“...we had a Japanese officer named **Sonei** as camp commandant...At about 9:30pm it was ‘lights out’ and Sonei used to roam through the camp to check. A few times when he spotted a light still on he came in and ripped the light off the ceiling, kicking and hitting everything and everyone. At first we used to look forward to the full moon so we had a bit of extra light instead of sitting in the pitch dark, but soon we came to dread it as Sonei went absolutely ‘moon mad’ when it was the full moon – he used to march up the street ranting and raving... His favourite occupation was hitting and kicking the women and keeping them standing to attention for hours in the blazing sun or in a heavy downpour. These special ‘punishment Tenkos’ took hours and also had to be attended by seriously ill patients – a lot of them suffering dysentery, so one can imagine what sort of state they were in....”*

...One of (Sonei’s) greatest humiliations was cutting the women’s hair as punishment – sometimes kneeling down before him...this sometimes happened in front of his guests, who were all drunk and thoroughly enjoyed themselves...”

...Sonei was, as it later turned out, one of the worst camp commanders and one of the very few who was shot as a war criminal after the war.”

(POW 67, p.32-33)

This description is further expanded by van der Kuil, (1997), who explains...

*For fifteen months, April 1944 to June 1945, the camp was under the command of the infamous Capt. **Kenichi Sonei**. He came to Tjideng from the POW camp of the 10th Battalion in Batavia better known as the Cycle Camp. He was notorious for his cruelty particularly when the moon was full. Many of his most barbaric acts occurred at such time. During his time the camp's population grew from 5286 to 10,300.*

It is not possible to list all his crimes here... Briefly, punishments included 'kumpulans' lasting several hours in the hot tropical sun which even the sick had to attend, reduced food rations, head shavings, beatings. He had dogs beaten to death by the older boys, tipped food over in the central kitchen and buried bread in rage. His reign was one of absolute terror!

He was sentenced to death by the War Crimes Tribunal on 2 September 1946. In December 1946 Captain Sonei got justice from a Dutch firing squad. His appeal to acting Governor General Hubertus J. van Mook had been rejected. Mrs. van Mook had been one of Sonei's prisoners.

(VAN der KUIL, P. (1997/2009) Tjideng Camp website.
<http://members.iinet.net.au/~vanderkp/tjideng.html> - accessed 30 May 2010)

These descriptions can in reality provide only the briefest glimpse of the overwhelming suffering and deprivation experienced by the *Tjideng* internees.

The *Tjideng* Apron:

In an effort to maintain some kind of sanity in the face of this unspeakable cruelty and deprivation every day, the women would try to keep themselves occupied with 'normal' things whenever possible.

An Apron is about as normal as one can get, and my Mother fashioned this one out of two tea towels, with the intention that each of the women would embroider some aspect of camp life on the Apron – which some of them did – including my Mother herself, beginning with her POW Number...



Tjideng Apron: Sprengers, 1942-45



M.J.A. Sprengers - POW No. 67: (Tjideng Apron image – Sprengers, 1942-45)

This embroidered image represents the **gates at the Camp entrance...**



Tjideng - Camp Gates/Fence: (Tjideng Apron image – Sprengers, 1942-45)

...which can be seen in the following photograph (*below*) taken at the time, providing a sense of the bamboo fence (*gedèk*) surrounding the Camp...



Tjideng camp...was fenced off, initially only with barbed wire. Later matted bamboo (*gedèk*) was added cutting the internees even more off from the outside world. Any contact through the *gedèk* was severely punished.

(<http://members.iinet.net.au/~vanderkp/tjideng.html>)

Aspects of daily Camp life include this **clothes drying rack** – constructed from the ubiquitous Bamboo...



Tjideng Washing Rack: (Tjideng Apron image – Sprengers, 1942-45)

...an example of which is clearly visible on the left hand side of this photo (*below*)...



Australian War Memorial - Picture ID. 305553

Tjideng - overcrowding at its worst!

(<http://members.iinet.net.au/~vanderkp/tjideng.html/AWM>)

As described above, one of the more dreaded aspects of Camp life was the daily **Kumpulan** (Roll Call), as described by POW 67...

*"...they ordered us to hold roll-call (**Tenko**) twice a day. We all had to gather in **Laan Trivelli** to be counted, and stand in rows of 20 with our numbers pinned up on the left hand side of our chests..."*

(POW 67, p.32)

This embroidery (*below*) depicts a **Clock**, a **Bell** and a **Loudhailer** from which the words, "**Het is Koempoeltijd**" ("**Roll-Call time!**") appear...



'Het is Koempoeltijd': (Tjideng Apron image – Sprengers, 1942-45)



Kumpulan: (<http://members.iinet.net.au/~vanderkp/tjideng.html>)

This embroidered image (*below*) appears to depict the kind of freedom and open space with which the internees would have previously been familiar - living in tropical Batavia.



Open Space: (Tjideng Apron image – Sprengers, 1942-45)

By contrast, they now found themselves with no open space; no personal space; and certainly no freedom.



Australian War Memorial - Picture ID M5316

Tjideng - personal space non-existent.

(<http://members.iinet.net.au/~vanderkp/tjideng.html/AWM>)

My mother cannot recall specifically, but we both assume that her embroidery of the name 'Tjideng' was never completed due the fact that the war came to an end and the POW camps were finally liberated.



'Tji...': (Tjideng Apron image – Sprengers, 1942-45)

Tjideng Camp Liberation - 1945:

As recalled by POW 67 of the early days of the liberation...

*"...The first ship to arrive was the English cruiser, 'Cumberland'...the next was the Dutch cruiser, 'Tromp'. The crew visited the camp and **the ship's band also came to entertain us...with Hawaiian music...**It was a funny thing but the music made a lot of women cry. Nobody could understand that as we had all become hard as nails and very seldom showed emotion..." (emphasis added) (POW 67, p.38)*

Liberation – s.s. 'Plancius':

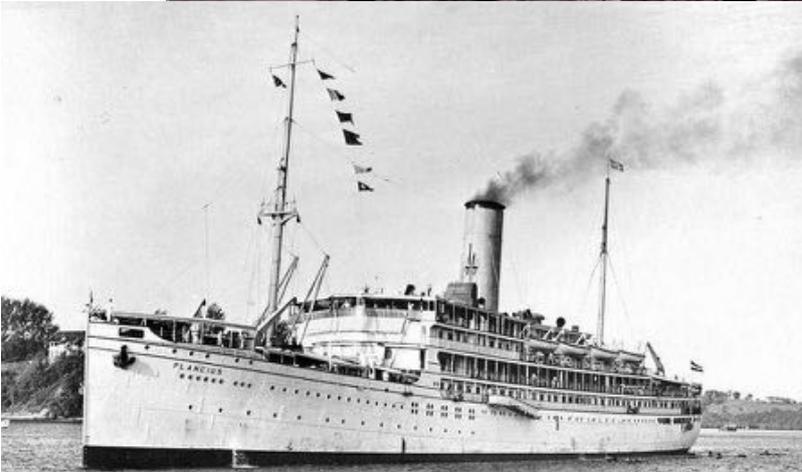
In her own words...

*"...One day, Mr Versteeg, a First Engineer with (Dutch Merchant Shipping Line) KPM came to the camp to see KPM people and we heard that (my stepfather, **Wim van Gruisen**)...**had for a time been captain of the 'Plancius', one of the KPM flagships** that had been anchored at Colombo...and had been commandeered by the Navy and used as headquarters for Admiral Helfrich, the head of the Dutch Navy..." (emphasis added) (POW 67, p.39)*

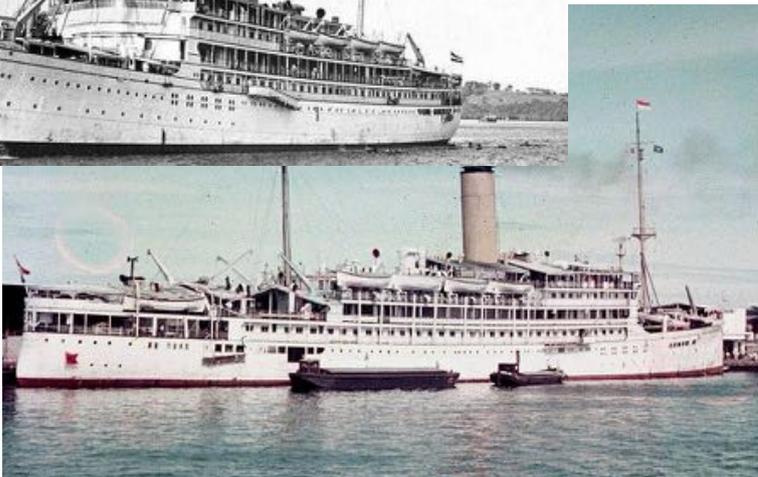
The 'Plancius' as a Troop ship, moored in Ambon...



(Meurs, 2010)



(de Mes, 2010)



Maria Sprengers & Chris Willems - finding each other:

Neither of my parents knew if the other had survived the war – and certainly had no idea where the other was, if they were indeed still alive. But eventually...

*“...Every day lists with the names of the survivors from other camps like Thailand, Burma, Sumatra, Singapore and Japan etc came in. **I found out that (my father) Sprengers, had died on the 13th of August 1945 – two days before the end of the war – on the island of Sumatra...Chris was not on the first lists that came through from Thailand, but on the last list there were two C.H. WILLEMS!** So I just hoped that Chris would surely be one of them. **I got his first letter on 1 October 1945.** He was in **camp Kanchanaburi**, just over 100km from Bangkok, and he got mine on 28 October, but **before that time neither of us knew...if the other was alive or not...**” (emphasis added) (POW 67, p.39)*

Find each other they did, and after much uncertainty, military and bureaucratic impediments and frustrations in the post-war chaos, they finally managed to get married in *Kanchanaburi*, in Siam...



They were then, along with many others, repatriated to the Netherlands...

Repatriation – to the Netherlands:

As my mother explains...

*“...the first ship to depart carried all the widows and orphans to Holland as they wanted to get as many people as possible away from Java because **the killings by rebels were still going on and it was very dangerous...** Ghurkas were guarding the camp but they sometimes sympathised with the Indonesians and gave them weapons...there was often **a lot of shooting** going on at night...” (emphasis added) (POW 67, p.40)*

My parents thus finally found themselves together again, and together in the Netherlands after the war. Like many other WWII survivors, they returned to a country, context and culture which, despite being their homeland, had changed forever, and in which opportunities had also changed significantly. During their post-war time in the Netherlands they produced two children, my elder sister and brother, and sharing a small house with in-laws in a small country surrounded by other countries, found themselves crowded in and eventually crowded out.

So they emigrated.

And of all places on the planet, how and why did they end up in Pittsworth – a very small, very regional town on Queensland’s Darling Downs?

Migration 1951 – Netherlands to Pittsworth:

My father, in his POW Camp, had been given a Bible, which he kept – not so much for religious reasons, but more for the fact that the thin pages made particularly good cigarette papers. This Bible happened to carry the name and address of a **Neville Gore** on the inside cover.

*“...Chris wrote to **Neville Gore**, an Australian farmer in Southbrook, QLD, whose address he had in a POW Camp prayer book, and asked if there was any work there. On the 21st we received a letter in reply...” (POW 67, p.64)*

Hence my parents ended up in **Pittsworth**, QLD, Australia – just up the ‘Gore Highway’ – and, as it happens, my birthplace.



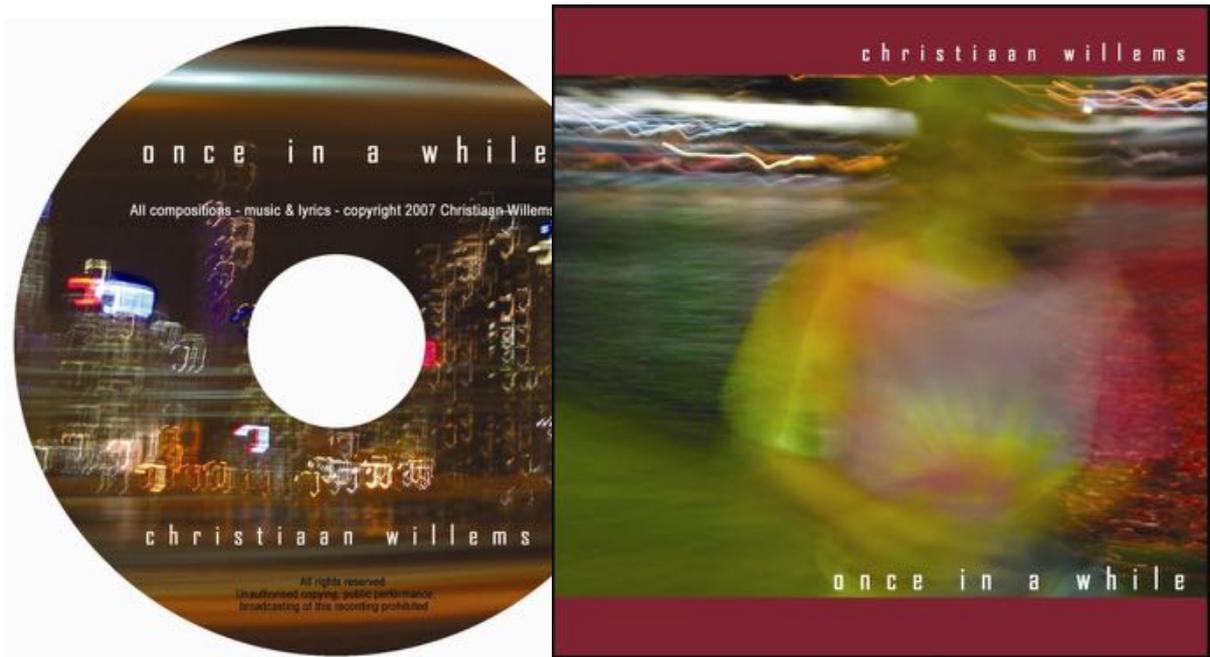
Serendipity plays a significant role in this story – my parents’ survival of their respective POW camps; their re-finding of each other in the post-war chaos; and their eventual arrival in Pittsworth – which must have seemed ‘the middle of nowhere’ at the time.

.....

So, from this point, let us ‘fast-forward’ fifty years from this photograph, to 2007, and my Doctoral Research, which included exploring the tantalising musical possibilities of a process I termed ‘Blind Collaboration’, and in which the role of **Serendipity** also proved to be a significant factor.

Doctoral Research, 2007 – the role of Serendipity:

The first of my three Doctoral projects involved the recording of an album of original, contemporary music titled *'Once in a While'*. It also involved a group of guest musicians 'collaborating' by way of the process I instigated and described as 'Blind Collaboration'.



(Willems, 2007)

'Blind Collaboration':

By way of brief explanation, I sent 14 songs, recorded essentially in draft form, to seven musicians and invited them to each choose any two tracks, and add anything they wanted to them – without any interference or influence from myself as composer, or each other – as they recorded their individual musical contributions entirely separately and unheard until the final mix. Hence the term 'Blind Collaboration'.



This album has been produced utilising a creative process I have termed 'blind collaboration'.

I initially recorded the 14 tracks in basic form and then sent these draft tracks out to a variety of musicians and asked them each to select two tracks which appealed to them.

They were then to take those tracks and add whatever instrumentation they deemed appropriate - based on their own individual musical perspectives, styles and instruments.

The interesting aspect of the process was that each of the musical collaborators would not hear any others' contributions and I as composer would not interfere or influence in any way what they added to each of the tracks - essentially a process of throwing my songs to the wind and seeing what came back to me.

Whilst my previous solo album was titled 'Trust No-One', by contrast for this album I had to 'trust everyone'. However, when you surround yourself with a bunch of world-class musicians the risks are minimal - the rewards magnificent.

I am delighted with the result - both process and product - and I sincerely thank all of the musicians (and other collaborators), who joined me on this artistic journey.

C.W. - February 2007

(Willems,

2007)

On the Left (*below*) is the list of tracks – including a song titled ‘SIAM’ (track 5) which I had written, recorded, and given to my mother as a birthday present a few years prior and decided to re-record for this album.



(Willems, 2007)

'SIAM':

This song was, unintentionally, written about the journey of my parents from their meeting in Indonesia prior to WWII, their incarceration as POW's under the Japanese, and their subsequent re-meeting, marriage in Siam (Thailand) and eventual emigration to Australia in the early 1950's. I say 'unintentionally', because I had absolutely no intention of writing about my parents' journey, but as so often occurs with art, the creative process comes to one more often, and generally more successfully, than when one goes in search of it, or attempts to impose creativity onto an artistic 'problem'.

For this recording, virtuosic guitarist **Steve Reinthal** (*pictured, right*), chose this track, took my draft recording away and returned it some weeks later with a beautifully melodic, mournfully evocative electric guitar 'voice' (one-take only) which is, in my view, both unpredictable and brilliant. The use of a wah-pedal is entirely unexpected but surprisingly, entirely appropriate in this context – giving the guitar an almost 'wailing vocal' quality - described as "*inspired, sweetly majestic and lush*", with '*a haunting feel appropriate for the song*'. This song holds a very significant place on the album.



However, quite apart from the purely instrumental manifestations of serendipity on the album overall, its role could not be more clearly, convincingly, or more personally illustrated than with this track, '*Siam*'.

**(Steve Reinthal, guitarist
photo by C. Willems, 2007)**

Clearly, musically, Reinthal's guitar weaving exquisitely through it is an appropriate addition to the song, but the extent of its serendipitous role was not made clear until Saturday 3 March 2007 when, having invited my 85 year-old mother to lunch, I mentioned to her that I had re-recorded the song. I hesitantly put the track on the CD player, almost apologising for the contemporary treatment, updating the previous recording of the song which featured a violin solo instead of the 'wah-pedal' electric guitar. I had assumed my mother would dislike it intensely for generational as well as simply musical reasons and I was genuinely surprised

– perhaps flabbergasted would be more accurate - when she responded, that, no, she *'like(s) it a lot'*.

It was the ensuing conversation which reminded me that the reason she had always liked what she describes as 'Hawaiian Guitar' (a guitar style which I personally detest) was that as a POW under the Japanese in Batavia for some four years, when the allied forces finally arrived to liberate the British, Dutch and other POW's, they brought with them a Navy band. My mother has a very clear recollection of this band playing songs which featured Hawaiian Guitar – the very particular sound of which induced uncontrollable floods of tears of relief and release in POW's who had not allowed themselves to cry in four years of living in unspeakably cruel and harsh conditions with their lives constantly under threat.

Steve Reinthal had no idea about this connection (indeed I had entirely forgotten it myself), and whilst he had quite correctly assumed that the lyrics referred in part to the infamous Burma Railway (on which my father worked as a POW), he did not realise that the song was written specifically about my own parents' journey, when he chose to play the kind of guitar he played. Whilst I was certainly aware that my mother had always liked Hawaiian Guitar, the significance of the connection to the POW liberation had long been parked in the deepest recesses of my own memory so it never occurred to me - hence I was certainly in no position to brief Steve Reinthal as to the background, in order to influence his choices.

Indeed, as demanded by my own self-imposed Blind Collaboration 'rules', like the other musicians, Steve independently chose the song; chose the instrument; chose his melodic journey; and chose what effects to apply to his guitar. It has to be said that in no way would I ever describe what he plays as anything like 'Hawaiian Guitar' – but the sound is obviously reminiscent enough of that sound to evoke instant, deep and profound recognition (and a significantly positive response) – from an 85 year-old woman - to what can only be described as a very contemporary instrumental treatment.

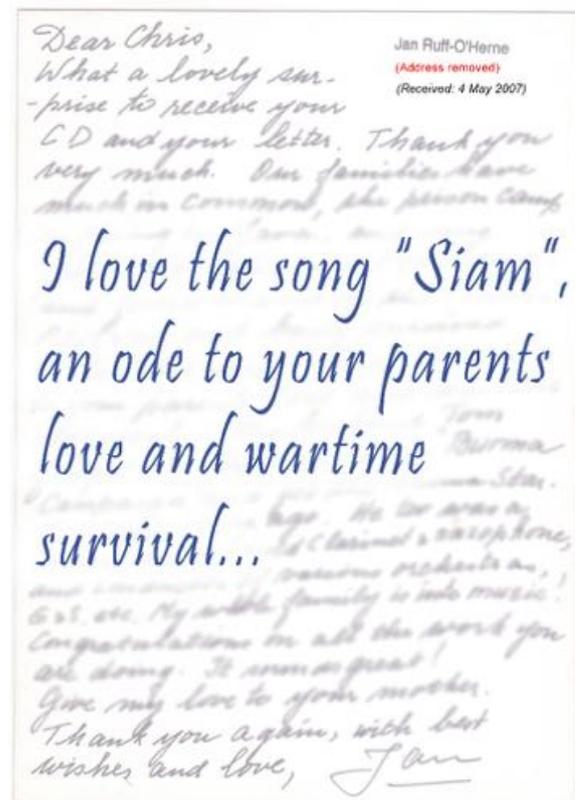
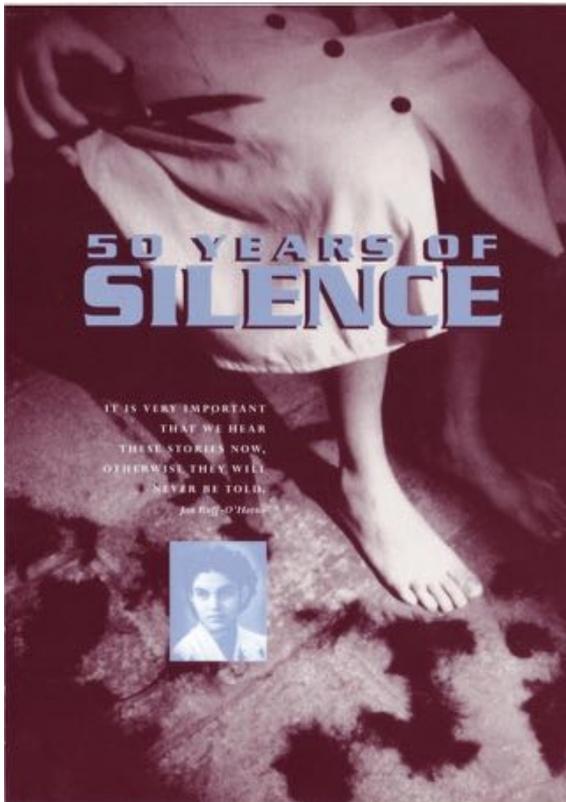
.....

Another 85 year-old Dutch woman who liked the song '*SIAM*' is a woman by the name of **Jan Ruff-O'Herne**.

Literally the same week my album was being pressed in Melbourne, I happened to be watching '*Australian Story*' on ABC Television. This particular episode – coincidentally - featured Jan Ruff-O'Herne, who is internationally recognised, and indeed awarded, for her tireless quest to extract an apology from the Japanese government for the 'comfort women'

atrocities of WWII. As her story unfolded it was clear that there were many parallels between her family's story and mine, so I had decided, even before the end of the program, to send her a copy of the album, containing the song 'SIAM' – which I did via the ABC.

I heard nothing for a couple of weeks and then in the post arrived a beautifully hand-written note, on a postcard featuring the photograph of the cover of Jan's book: '50 years of Silence'. The note read, amongst other things, "...I love the song Siam – an ode to your parents' love and wartime survival".



(Ruff-O'Herne, 2007)

The other things Jan wrote made it clear that there were even more parallels between our respective families' journeys than I had imagined.

More coincidences, more serendipity.

By way of post-script, some time after this event, I mentioned the song to **Kasper Kuiper**, the Honorary Consul of the Netherlands in Brisbane. Coincidentally, this conversation took place just prior to the *Liberation of Indonesia Memorial Day* on 15 August 2008. I was therefore deeply honoured when Kasper invited me to share the song and some words

about its making, in the presence of the Dutch Ambassador to Australia, on the very special occasion of the dedication of a new plaque on that day in Brisbane.

So, although ‘SIAM’, was originally written about my own parents’ journey, it has become clear that this song carries relevance for many Dutch, as well as other people, who lived through similar experiences. As an artist one can hope for nothing more, or better, than that one’s art touches many more people than for whom it was originally intended, and serendipity has been the mechanism through which this art has grown, beyond its creator; beyond its music; and beyond its intended audience.

20 February 2010:

Fast forward once more to 20 February 2010. My now 87 year old Mother, having recently decided to sell her house, was doing a clean-out. Handing me a pile of linen she said, “Take any of this that you want and just throw the rest out”.

“What’s this?” I enquired, as the ‘tea towel’ fell open.

“It’s just an old Apron from the (POW) camp”.

It was only then, some 65 years after its creation, that the Apron, its story and its significance emerged.

My immediate response was to contact the **Australian War Memorial** (AWM), who, of course, indicated that they were “very interested” in this ‘old Apron’



Tjideng Apron: Sprengers, 1942-45

“The Australian War Memorial would be very interested in this item for the National Collection...”

(AWM, email 23/2/2010)

Australian War Memorial - Canberra:

There was, predictably, also some media interest in the discovery of the Apron, particularly in the region to which my parents had emigrated in the early 1950's, and which is also the region in which I find myself having, through circumstances, returned to work.

MEMORY LANE
POW apron added to War Memorial collection

A HUMBLE kitchen apron sewn from tea towels and embroidered by female prisoners-of-war in Tjideng during World War II will be included in the Australian War Memorial's national collection.

University of Southern Queensland lecturer, Dr Christiaan Willems, recently discovered the apron at his mother Maria's home in Brisbane and immediately realised the historical significance of the item.

"My mother Maria Willems (formerly Sprengers) was a Dutch prisoner-of-war in the Tjideng Women and Children's Internment Camp in the Dutch East Indies," Dr Willems said.

"She was aged about 20 at the time. The apron had been fashioned from stitched-together tea towels, made with the intention of each of the prisoners embroidering some aspect of camp life on each of the small square panels - some of which have been completed.

... my family's journey, culminating in their post-war lives lived in Australia, certainly makes the item relevant to this country.

— Dr Christiaan Willems

"The apron has been preserved in virtually perfect condition and includes my mother's POW number (61), as well as embroidered images of the camp in Tjideng."

The apron will be donated to the Australian War Memorial's (AWM) national collection to preserve its heritage.

Mrs Willems' POW experiences have been included in Shirley Fenton-Hale's book *The Forgotten Ones - Women and Children Under Nippon*.

Like many other Dutch people post-WWII, after marrying and returning to the Netherlands, Mr and Mrs Willems, who met during the war, emigrated to the Darling Downs in 1951.

Their son Christiaan was born in Pittsworth in 1952.

"Whilst it may seem more appropriate to offer the item to a Dutch war museum than the AWM, my considered view is that my family's journey, culminating in their post-war lives lived in Australia, certainly makes the item relevant to this country," Dr Willems said.

Dr Willems has written and recorded the song, *Siren*, based on his parents' war experiences.

Tjideng Camp was established in one of the poorer suburbs of Batavia after the Japanese Armed Forces took control of Batavia in March, 1942. Men and boys aged 12 or older were removed from their families and conditions deteriorated rapidly.



Dr Christiaan Willems with his mother Maria's apron, which will soon be included in the Australia War Memorial's national collection.

Picture: DAVID MARTINELLI

(*The Chronicle* 5/03/2010)

After this media article appeared I was contacted by two people in particular – one **Rita Gore** (widow of Neville Gore of Pittsworth), and also a retired man by the name of **Bernie Snep** – who is well known to the University of Southern Queensland, where I was teaching at the time, because of his hobby of recording virtually every concert presented at USQ by the Music discipline – giving the university a priceless archive of music performances over decades.

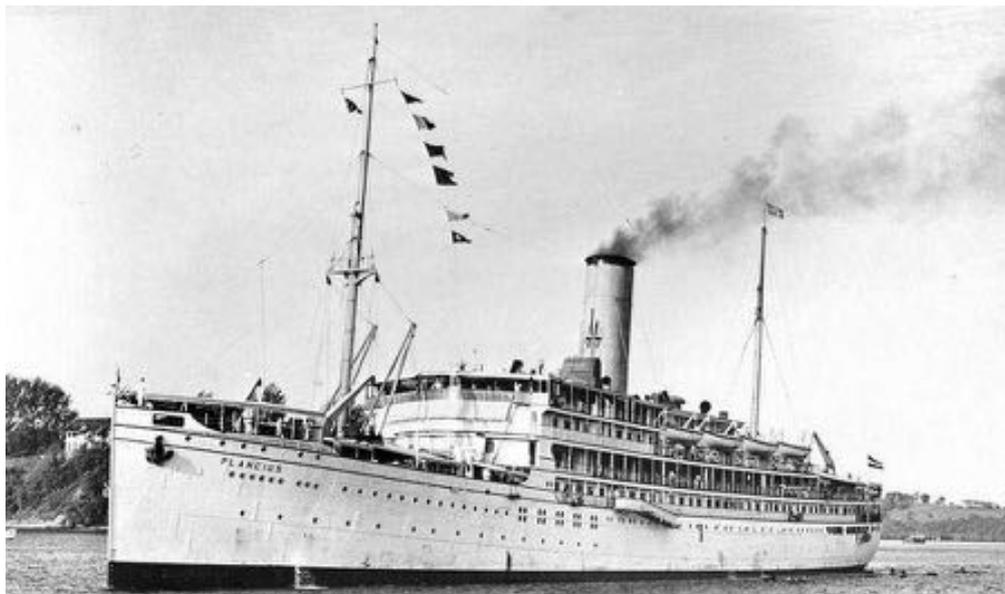
The reason Bernie contacted me was that as a young sailor in the Dutch Navy, he had been a crew member of a ship named the '**Plancius**', when it was amongst the first ships to arrive to liberate the Indonesian POW camps - in particular, **Tjideng**.

This Royal Netherlands Navy Identity Card (*below*) which he showed me indeed identifies **Bernie Snep** as a crew member of the '*Plancius*'.

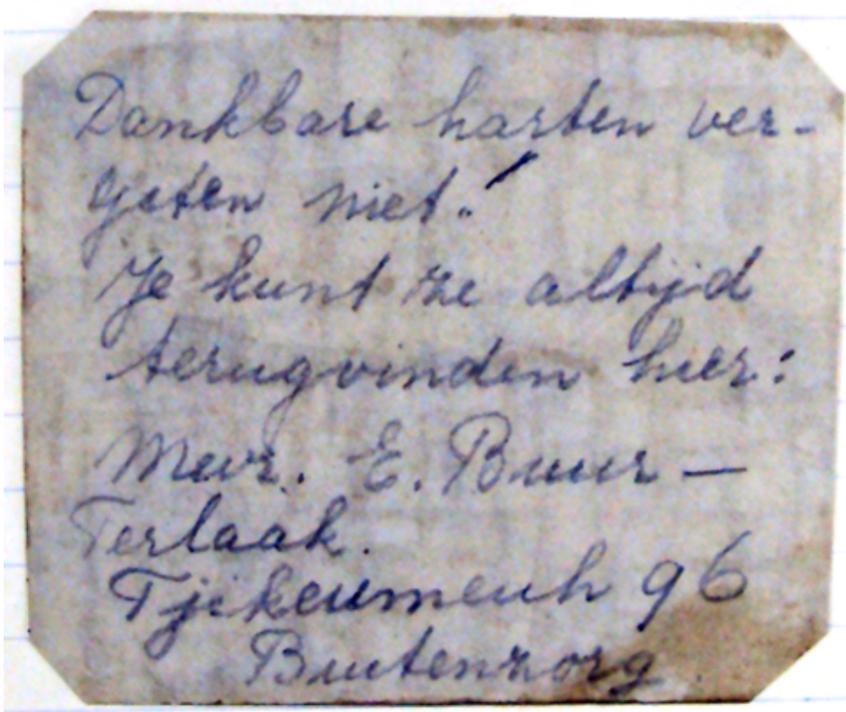


(B. Snep - Navy ID - '*Plancius*':1943/2010, private collection)

The sight of ships such as the '*Plancius*' arriving must have been utterly overwhelming for the POW's, after so many years of horror...



As a response to such overwhelming relief and acts of generosity towards and support provided by those liberators to the internees, another item shown to me by Bernie Snep was a 'thank-you' note he had received from a **Mrs Terlaak**, which translated reads, "*Grateful hearts never forget...*"



(Snep:1943/2010, private collection)

By way of full circle, it is highly likely that my mother, working as a typist in the *Tjideng* POW Camp office, typed the original list on which the name of Mrs Terlaak appears.

NAAM (Name)	BLOK (Block)	PG (page No.)	NR (No in Block)	LEEFTIJD (age)	KNR (Camp Number)
Terlaak, E.	3	6	415	55	1880

(VAN der KUIL, P. (1997/2009) Tjideng Camp website.
<http://members.iinet.net.au/~vanderkp/tjideng.html> - accessed 30 May 2010)

CONCLUSION...

So what does all of this signify?

The Migrant journey – how did they end up where they did?

Insecurity drives the desire for security. Apparent security in returning to their homeland in post-war Holland, actually presented my parents with a different kind of *insecurity* – in terms of employment and opportunities. Consequently, they ended up in a place which was geographically and culturally so far removed and totally unknown to them, and therefore, by definition, represented complete *insecurity* - yet which ultimately proved to be the most secure.

Whilst my parent's story is unique and individual to them – through their particular circumstances – it is a story equally shared by any number of other migrants whose circumstances may have been either very similar, or very different, but all of whom were driven by their own individual yet collective desire for security. And it is that very individuality – of the personal, the private, the *individually lived experience* – from which we might extrapolate in order to gain some sense of the *global* experience.

Given the depth and detail it provides, we need to not only *comprehend* that individual personal and private experience, but more importantly, *respect* the individuality of that personal experience, before we can even begin to understand the global implications.

Academics are, with the best of intentions, very fond of talking about 'authentic knowledge'.

In my own personal and utterly biased view, I believe that there is more 'authentic' knowledge embedded in the embroidery of this Apron than there is in any collection of academic historians (many of whom were probably not even on the planet at the time); any of their books; any of their articles; and any of their journals - about WWII and the subsequent migrant experience. Despite my Mother referring to it as "...*Just an old Apron...*", she has kept her *Tjideng* POW Apron for 65 years – and, despite being one of her children and occasionally talking to her about her war experiences (and badgering both my parents to write about it), I had absolutely no knowledge of the Apron until the 20th of February 2010 - this year.

However close we might personally be to those who have actually lived it, can we, as observers from a distance, ever truly comprehend - through spoken or written words alone, the day-to-day realities of those extraordinary times?

This is 'authentic' knowledge borne of direct, personal, and for most of us, utterly incomprehensible experience. It represents a continuum of knowledge, passed on to offspring generations, partly through direct information, but even *more* than that, through the *intuitive*, the *tacit knowledge*, the unspoken and unconscious sense of one's heritage. It is the 'DNA of experience', expressed through Aprons, Art and Artefacts, and through the utter unpredictability, inexplicability, and inescapability of Serendipity.

Wars and history are often told from a particular perspective. The deprivation and brutality of the incarceration of these women and children, evoked responses - not *military*, but certainly militant, if muted. Representations of those responses are to be found in the most unlikely places and unexpected forms - and are still being unearthed to this day.

Migrants and their stories are absorbed into the culture of their adopted land and thus embedded in its cultural DNA – personally; through family; and publicly through the DNA of collective memory - manifested in institutions such as the Australian War Memorial, and also through public commemorations of those extraordinary times.

'Lest we forget'? – impossible.



Dr. Christiaan Willems

15 September 2010

REFERENCES:

- AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL (2010) – personal communications (various – via email & letters)
- AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL (2010) – selected photographs appearing on the Tjideng website (www.awm.gov.au)
- CHRONICLE. THE (2010) ‘POW apron added to War Memorial collection’ *Our Town* (5/3/2010) Toowoomba
- de MES. R. (2010) archivist - *Vereniging van oud-employé's der Koninklijke Paketvaart-Maatschappij* (KPM) (translated: Club of ex-employees of the Royal Packet Navigation Company) Netherlands. Photograph – s.s. ‘*Plancius*’
- MARTINELLI, D. (2010) selected photographs – USQ Photography Department (www.usq.edu.au)
- MEURS. H. (2010) Zoetermeer Holland - photograph – s.s. ‘*Plancius*’
- NATIONAAL ARCHIEF – NETHERLANDS (2010) (<http://beeldbank.nationaalarchief.nl/>)
- RUFF-O’HERNE, J. (2007) – personal communication (4/5/2007)
- SNEP, B. (2010) – WWII items, private collection
- SPRENGERS-WILLEMS, M.J.A. (2000) A Family Memoir 1918 – 2000 (unpublished)
- VAN der KUIL, P. (1997/2009) Tjideng Camp website.
<http://members.iinet.net.au/~vanderkp/tjideng.html> (accessed 30 May 2010)
- WILLEMS, C. H. (2007) ‘Siam’ *Once In A While* album (www.music.artsmedia.com.au)
- WILLEMS, C. H. (2007) Doctoral Project 1 ‘Blind Collaboration’ *Creative Industries Faculty*. Brisbane, QUT
- WILLEMS, C. H. (2008) Doctoral Project 2 (VODcasts): ‘Music, Mime & Metamorphosis’. *Creative Industries Faculty*. Brisbane, QUT
- WILLEMS, C. H. (1918-2010) selected photographs, private collection