



# The Erica Burton Story

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At the 13<sup>th</sup> hour, on the 13<sup>th</sup> of May, 1927, in the town of Franeker in northern Holland, a baby girl was born to Harm and Janke de Vries. She was christened Henderica de Vries. Six years later, Adolph Hitler was democratically elected to the highest office in the land in neighboring Germany, an event that would spell the end of our subject's rather idyllic childhood.

And Daddy saw it all coming.

Harm de Vries was among a group of men who could see the gathering storm clouds and would later be active in the Dutch Underground, but back to little Henderica.

When 'Erica' as she became known was two, the de Vries relocated to the town of Ede (pronounced Ada) where Harm bought what would become the family home at #10 Bennekomse Road. At six, the subject of our story was enrolled in Christian elementary school, and from the ages of 12 to 16 she attended a Christian high school from which she graduated in '43... but I'm getting a little ahead of myself.

Early on the morning of Friday the 10<sup>th</sup> of May, 1940, three days before Erica's thirteenth birthday, Hitler invaded the de Vries' peaceful world.

Suspecting the inevitable, the Dutch Armed Forces had been mobilized the previous year. This included bringing retired servicemen and women out of retirement if they were yet of fighting age. One such individual was the 40 year-old Capt. Porcelain.

There was a garrison in Ede, and as fortune would have it he boarded next door to the de Vries at #8 Bennekomse Road. His wife and daughter Helen and two sons would visit from Amsterdam on the weekends. Erica and Helen would become instant friends.

All five Porcelains would later be deported from Amsterdam to Westerborg. At Westerborg, Helen sent Erica a letter to which she promptly responded. That second letter was never returned, but nor will Erica likely ever know if it was received. Westerborg, you see, was a stopover on the way to various concentration camps, the Porcelains were Jewish, and they were never heard from again. But back to 1940.

The Dutch did not immediately capitulate to the invaders, but they were also no match for the Third Reich. The pitched battle lasted five days, after which the government of Holland surrendered. Frankly, they had little choice in the matter.

On the third day of the battle, the 12<sup>th</sup> of May, Ede was evacuated. The de Vries walked at least 20 kilometers before being taken in by the Jansens where they and about 30 others slept in a loft above the cows, the good Mrs. Jansen baking bread day and night to keep up with the sudden demand.

The next night, Janke de Vries asked her daughter why she was crying. It was a silly question under the cir-

cumstances. No one remembered her birthday! Eighty years later she still laughs about it.

When the government capitulated they were allowed to return home where they would endure what were to become constantly diminishing rations, a particularly acute problem considering that the de Vries always had “company.”

In Ede and elsewhere, the Germans were in the habit of picking up men to work the factories and farms in Germany. Some were happy to help the cause. They were what were known as sympathizers. The de Vries' neighbour at 12 Bennekomse was among them... and he knew Harm was with the underground.

And thus it was, at least according to Harm, that a German soldier arrived at their doorstep on May 20<sup>th</sup> demanding quarters. He was only there for a few days, but he would be the first of many. Next were three SS officers. More would come and go. In the game of cat and mouse, Harm was a good mouse and never got caught per se, but he had one close scrape.

The brainchild of Field Marshall Sir Bernhard Law Montgomery, Operation Market Garden was a failed Allied military operation in September '44 in which waves of paratroopers descended on the fields of northern Holland. The objective was to carve themselves a path into northern Germany. Though ultimately unsuccessful, they did manage to liberate a couple of towns, though Ede was not among them.

With that many men jumping out of planes with the rather rudimentary parachutes of the day, it was a given that some would be hurt, and many were. The

British First Airborne Division in fact claims to have lost nearly  $\frac{3}{4}$  of its strength in that operation and did not see combat again.

Some of the injured were taken as POWs. The lucky ones managed to hide themselves until in the darkness of night they were found by the underground.

Harm and some like-minded souls set out to retrieve them with a flat-bed wagon lined with pillows and blankets, all of which, like everything else in Holland, were in short supply. It didn't take long to fill it. The objective was to get them to a medical station in Bennekomse, two km south of Ede on the road of the same name.

"Halt!" shouted the German soldier. "What is that?"

"The Red Cross" responded Harm, only half lying as he was in fact a Red Cross volunteer.

"We should kill them all," came the response from one of Hitler's faithful.

"You can't kill them. This is the Red Cross, and these are prisoners of war who need medical attention." The ruse worked, and in the end they got them to the aforementioned very poorly supplied clinic where they were left in a doctor's care with said blankets and pillows.

As food was scarce, small portions of meat were served only twice a week. Harm insisted his be served to the children who were still growing – a sacrifice that his daughter will remember until she draws her last breath.

So food was scarce to begin with, but when guests who had no rations showed up, the families' foodstuffs had to be stretched that much further, and there were rarely fewer than ten people in the house.

And not all visitors were of the enemy camp. Some were POWs whom the Germans couldn't feed, and one day Erica's aunt and cousin showed up on their doorstep after walking 100 km in search of food. And thus the portions got a little smaller yet again, but at least they had portions. And they had a small advantage over some families.

Harm served on the board of the Christian school. It was the winter of '44/45, also known as the hunger winter. Other board members were farmers, and aware of his straightened circumstances they provided him with two bottles of milk a day. Wheat would be ground in the de Vries family kitchen. That ground wheat, the donated milk and an egg would become a very bad tasting bread, but it kept the family alive.

At this point in her story, the ninety-three year old Erica silently pointed to a wheat grinder, refurbished and painted jet black, mounted on a stand in the corner of her living room. 'The' wheat grinder, of course, and it almost took my breath away, but back to our story.

Part of daily life in a fascist occupied country is the line up, and if you didn't want to spend the whole day there, it started early. And the de Vries had a system. Erica's older sister Zwanny would take the first shift from 6:00 to 7:00 a.m. at the store in question, at which time she would be relieved by her younger sister who would hold the spot until mom showed up an hour later, enabling the girls to go to work or school, accordingly. (Any similarities between occupied Holland and Canada in 2020 are purely coincidental, I'm sure.)

As previously mentioned, Erica graduated high school in '43, thereafter getting an office job in a milk factory

to and from which she would commute by bicycle. Meanwhile, German scientist Wernher Von Braun invented a little something called the Buzz Bomb, many of which would fly over Ede on their way to England. This, of course, meant many more nights in the cellar for the de Vries, and as they were sometimes horribly inaccurate they would also cost Erica her job when riding the two km to and from work became too hazardous.

And then, on April 17, 1945, the fighting grew particularly quiet in the middle of the afternoon. Erica emerged from the cellar and ventured out into the front yard when she saw two khaki tanks leaving the garrison. German tanks were green. Ede had been liberated.

The first order of business was to round up the sympathizers, shave their heads and make them do pretty much every dirty job the underground who supervised them could think of, not the least of which was cleaning up after the incontinent patients at the hospital. It was payback time, but for the most part they got off pretty easy.

On May 6, 1945, German General Blaskowitz surrendered to Canadian General Charles Foulkes in the Hotel de Wereld (meaning Hotel of the World). The German occupation of Holland was over, and life ever so slowly began to return to normal.

Twelve Bennekomse Road, next door, was then occupied by the British commander. He had a cook named Ray who would bring a pot of "honest to goodness real tea" to the ladies in #10 every morning. "And when it's empty," he would say, "just yell over the fence and I'll bring you another." It was never required, but a nice gesture nonetheless.

In November of that year the liberators went home. Ray and the de Vries would remain friends over the years, and in 1947 Erica spent three weeks with his family in Nottingham where she would speak of her life in occupied Holland at his eight year old daughter's school... *and* enjoy his wife's amazing banana pudding! Seventy-plus years later she still talks breathlessly about it.

Her trip home took her through London where she had a short layover. After noting her Dutch accent, a waitress asked Erica what she wanted. She showed her what money she had, to which the waitress responded, "I'll get you a cup of tea." She returned with that tea and a tray full of sandwiches and biscuits, all of which were on the house. There clearly were, and I believe still are, some good people in this world and that fine lady will surely be counted among them.

Later that year Erica joined the Navy and found herself stationed in Batavia (present-day Jakarta) in what were then the Dutch East Indies. (Queen Wilhelmina had promised them independence after the war, and she was good to her word.) As what we in the West would call a naval Wren, our Erica worked a show selling cigarettes. Two men from the Philips Company came all three days of the show.

Now you just knew there had to be a guy in the story somewhere along the way, but it wasn't either of them. One of them, though, introduced her to Fritz Weyrich.

Fritz didn't drink, smoke or dance, and he was quiet as a mouse and meticulously well-dressed. And Erica was utterly disinterested. Not dissuaded, he found out where she lived from one of the Philips guys, rode

his bike the next day to said guarded facility and rode around it a few times (which itself amounted to no less than twelve kilometers) while he worked up his courage.

The Commissioner called her to the gate... and she decided to give the quiet, well-dressed guy a chance. One dinner led to another, and one movie to another, all of which before long led to a proposal and a wedding.

Indonesia was to gain its independence on the 27<sup>th</sup> of December, 1949. Fritz wanted to be married in the Dutch East Indies as opposed to an independent Indonesia, and thus it was that on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of December that year, following a short engagement, the two got hitched.

The happy couple would go on to have six children.

I mentioned that Fritz was well-dressed on that evening in '47. Fritz Weyrich was, in fact, always well-dressed. He died on April 5, 2002 on his 77<sup>th</sup> birthday. He was in a hospital gown that day, but during fifty-two years of marriage Erica is emphatic that she never once saw him outside of the bedroom or the bathroom without a shirt and tie on. We all have our quirks, I guess.

Fritz's work took the family to the United States. Lake Placid, New York was home for a spell. One evening the happy couple attended a meeting of the John Birch Society, an anti-communist group that advocated limited government. (As such, the author feels a certain kinship towards them, but that's entirely beside the point.) The gentleman leading the meeting asked a Baptist pastor in attendance to close the meeting in prayer. The name of the former has been lost to history, but the latter's name was David Strong, and it must

have been a somewhat profound prayer as Fritz was still commenting on it hours later. Something about that prayer moved him, and as fulfilling as his life was, Fritz realized that night that there was something missing.

A few days later the Weyrichs were snowed in. At 10:00 a.m. Fritz ventured out to the post office in the family car. 11:00 o'clock passed. 12:00 o'clock passed. 2:00 o'clock passed. 5:00 o'clock passed. Erica, at home with the kids, suspected the next knock at the door would be a state trooper with some very bad news, but that knock never came, and at 6:00 p.m. Fritz Weyrich rolled in the door a changed man.

After the post office, and despite the road conditions, he had driven about 35 km down a mountain road from Lake Placid to Wilmington where he tracked down pastor Strong in the rectory beside his church. Seated in front of him in his office, he asked him point blank, "Who is this Jesus of whom you speak?"

Raised Catholic, Fritz had left the church at his earliest opportunity and may well have doubted God altogether after his experience in a Japanese POW camp, but he needed to know. And the two spent the next several hours going through Scripture as the good pastor allowed it to answer the question. And Fritz was never the same.

That day the boy who left one church became the born-again man who would never miss a service or a mid-week meeting at another. And his new-found faith was infectious.

While overnighting in Wilmington at the home of one of pastor Stone's parishioners, Fritz and the lady of the

house spoke of their love for the Lord with such passion that Erica grew jealous. They had something she didn't, and she realized that night that being raised in a Christian home and attending a Christian school did not a Christian make, and she too accepted the Lord anew, as had her husband.

And the Wilmington Baptist Church became their first church home, though it wouldn't be their last.

Fritz finished his career in Oklahoma, and in 1991 the newly retired empty nesters emigrated to Elliot Lake, Ontario where they met some new friends, Gerry and Shirley Burton. The two couples got along famously, but when Shirley passed in 1995 Gerry relocated to Thunder Bay to be closer to his kids.

And as you know, Fritz followed her to the hereafter seven years later. And you likely know where this part of the story is leading because Gerry's last name was Burton and you've read the title of this biography.

With ten hours of windshield time between them dating just wasn't practical, so they decided to skip that part and on January 10, 2003, at Westfort Baptist Church in Thunder Bay, Ontario, Henderica Weyrich became Mrs. Gerald Osmond Burton.

There were five people present at the ceremony: the pastor, his wife, his secretary (who acted as a witness) and, of course, the happy couple. Afterwards, Mr. and Mrs. Burton went out for a nice dinner. The restaurateur was so excited that this older couple had just gotten married that their dinner was on the house. I told you there were still some nice people in the world!

The couple went on to enjoy what can only be described as marital bliss for fourteen years until Gerry's passing on October 7, 2017.

On January 29, 2020 I met Fritz and Henderica's fourth child and third son in Whitby, Ontario. He bought a book I had written, (FIX CANADA) and mentioned that his mom had a story to tell, but they needed someone to write it.

As he said it, she was always telling stories, and although ninety-three years old she was still sharp as a tack and entirely coherent... and so she was. She and I met at a little Baptist church in Omemee, Ontario one Sunday morning in early March, 2020, and that afternoon at her daughter's acreage where she resides on the outskirts of town, I was blessed beyond words to hear her story.

And it's been both a pleasure and honour to write it.

Of course, should this spry old girl ever get married again or live through another war there will have to be an addendum to this story, but for now I think that's a wrap.

I hope you've been as blessed in reading it as I was in both hearing and writing it. Thanks for doing so. God bless.

The end... for now.

Read other stuff by Jeff, including his equally succinct autobiography, at **[www.jeffwillerton.com](http://www.jeffwillerton.com)**.