

Story of Zwerus (John) De Nooij's escape

*Zwerus (John) De Nooy, alias "Blue Johnny", was an active member of the Dutch resistance. On 6 November 1944 he was arrested by the Germans, and **on 13 November 1944** was imprisoned in Amersfoort labour camp. During transport of the prisoners to a camp in German on 15 January 1945, he jumped from a train and escaped. This is the story of his escape, as told to his family on 3 November 2013.*

Escape

As I was walking along the road between Arnhem and Ede with another man, we were picked up by the Germans, and taken to Amersfoort concentration camp. Fortunately, they did not associate me with Blue Johnny from the resistance, or my fate would have been much worse.

It was December 1944, the long, cold "Hongerwinter", during which so many died of starvation in the Netherlands. One morning, the prisoners were given half a loaf of bread, to keep them alive on their way to a concentration camp in Germany.

We walked to the nearby railway station. Walking past each carriage of the train, I looked for anything that might distinguish one carriage from the others, making it easier to escape. I noticed a carriage with a broken window, and hopped into it at the last minute.

I left the seat nearest the door (and the broken window) for the German guard. Then I tried to appear very friendly to the guard and offered to swap seats, so that the guard had a more comfortable place further from the cold air from the broken window. He accepted gladly. The train line had to be cleared at one stage so the train had to stop, and the guard climbed out. When he got back into the carriage he again took the more comfortable seat away from the window. It was night-time. The train started to move again, gradually gathering pace. Before it had reached a high speed I suddenly opened the door and jumped out of the train into the wet snow, rolling as I had been taught, so as not to hurt myself. I rolled into a ditch and lay perfectly still. But I was not the only one who had seen this opportunity. A moment later, another prisoner jumped from another carriage, almost on top of me. But he immediately started to get up, to run away, so I grabbed his ankle and signalled at him not to move until the entire train had passed by, so as not to attract attention. The train did not stop. As soon as the last carriage had passed, we each bounded away in opposite directions.

I jumped off the train not far from Apeldoorn. I knew the area and started to walk along the road to Ede, about 30 km away. I didn't suffer from the cold and wet clothes but I was starving. I saw a farmhouse, but as I carefully looked around, I saw a motorcycle of the kind the German army used, so I kept walking, following the road, but trying to stay out of sight. About half-way to Ede, there were a cluster of people. Soup was being given

out to the hungry. I drank some soup, and kept walking. Finally I reached the Torenstraat in Ede, the house of my three aunts, and asked if I could stay the night. They gave me something to eat and I slept till morning. When I got up and went to wash my face, who did I see but General Hackett, who I had helped to escape from the hospital (St Elisabeth Gasthuis). He was in hiding with my aunts.

Story of Zwerus (John) de Nooij (Blue Johnny)

Helping at St Elisabeths Gasthuis

John was working in Heelsum when the paratroopers landed near Wolfheze. He went there and spoke to a leading paratrooper where they told him they were on their way to the Hospital in Arnhem. John asked whether he could walk with them as he knew the area and could probably help with information and translations. The medical troop, with all their equipment, went via minor pathways and avoiding major roads, via Oosterbeek to Arnhem, where they installed themselves at the St. Elizabeth's Hospital. The Germans had in the meantime fled and John mixed with the nurses, doctors and the rest of the staff. He was aware that behind the hospital was a railway line with a number of railway carriages loaded with stolen goods and food that the Germans had taken from the Dutch. So, after dark, when there were no guards about (they had fled away), he went there, opened a carriage, gathered as much as he could of the beautiful cherries from the Betuwe, and with them, returned to the hospital, and was welcomed by the wounded men and the medical staff. He fed them like this for several days.

John had left home to go to the paratroopers and, after a few days, he realised that nobody at home knew where he was. Public telephones had been disconnected by the Germans, and he suddenly realised that there was a telephone at the hospital. He picked it up to see if it was working and it was. He recalled that some phone connections were working illegally (used by the resistance). So he rang home and a prominent member of the Dutch Resistance answered the phone. When that man realised that it was Zwerus on the phone he immediately called out, "Quickly, run and tell your Mother that Zwerus is alive." She must have been very relieved. He then asked where John was and asked how the situation in Arnhem was. John let him know the name of a Doctor at the hospital and he also arranged for John to be at the phone at certain hours from that time on to be able to contact him.

It was from the hospital that John was able to help with the evacuation of several of the airmen, including General Hackett whom he met later at the Aunt's house.