

Winter 2019

# The Joint Archives Quarterly, Volume 28.04: Winter 2019

Geoffrey D. Reynolds

Aine O'Connor

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.hope.edu/jaquarterly>



Part of the [Archival Science Commons](#)

---

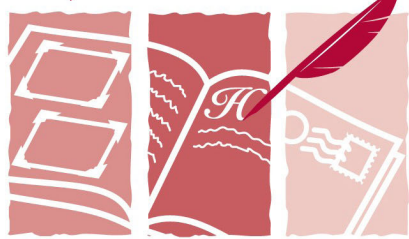
## Recommended Citation

**Repository citation:** Reynolds, Geoffrey D. and O'Connor, Aine, "The Joint Archives Quarterly, Volume 28.04: Winter 2019" (2019). *The Joint Archives Quarterly*. Paper 108.

<https://digitalcommons.hope.edu/jaquarterly/108>

**Published in:** *Joint Archives Quarterly*, Volume 28, Issue 4, Winter January 1, 2019. Copyright © 2019 Hope College, Holland, Michigan.

This Newsletter is brought to you for free and open access by the Hope College Publications at Hope College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Joint Archives Quarterly by an authorized administrator of Hope College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@hope.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@hope.edu).



## *Over Where? One Michigan Soldier's Fight in Russia*

By Aine O'Connor

What was it like to fight a war that no one knew about? During the last few months of World War I, dozens of Hollanders would be forced to answer that question. They were members of the "Polar Bears," a group of soldiers who fought against Bolsheviks in Russia under mysterious orders from the United States government. Their supervisors and generals were usually Brits or Canadians, which caused tension. Almost all of the soldiers were from Michigan; one popular rumor claimed that since Michiganders were used to cruel, unrelenting winters, Siberia wouldn't seem much different.

One of those Michiganders fighting across the world was Delbert "Dutch" Strowenjans. Dutch was born the youngest of seven living children on March 4, 1892, in Holland, Michigan, to Trientje and Dierck Strowenjans. By 1910, his father had passed away and Dutch became the man of the house, living with his mother and two sisters who remained in the home. For a while he worked as a teacher and a farmer, but America's entrance into World War I radically changed the direction of his life. Dutch enlisted on May 29, 1918. He trained at Camp Custer in Battle Creek, Michigan, until July 1918, along with other members of the 339th Infantry, and became a mechanic for the Army. By late summer, Dutch, along with his other Holland compatriots, sailed off from the New Jersey coast, ready to fight for democracy. The only problem was, they had no idea where they were going.



Once Dutch reached a harbor for American ships in England, he was able to send a letter to his friend, Lillian Bax, and her family. He wrote, "I would have enjoyed the trip very much but for one thing. The boat is headed the wrong direction. We have had all kinds of weather mostly cold." The route must have been through a particularly frigid stretch of the Atlantic—in hindsight, it might not have seemed as cold as he originally said! Like other Polar Bears, Strowenjans had no idea what awaited him. He wrote to Lillie, "I do not know myself where we are going, but I suppose it will be somewhere in France." Earlier he had written in a letter to his sister Dora that he wasn't sure if "Italy or France" would be his destination. He didn't seem to have much fear about either proposition, noting, "I am not worrying much about the Huns [Germans] but about ma's health." He even mentioned buying "a sack full of souvenirs" for his family.

Dutch was not alone in waxing poetic on defeating Germany. None of his fellow soldiers in the 339th infantry had any idea they were headed towards Russia rather than the Western Front. The idea to send troops into Russia was originally a British one. According to historian Benjamin C. Rhodes, Woodrow Wilson was not in support of Americans fighting Bolshevik rebels, and only sent troops under the mission of "guarding military stores" in Siberia. By the time the Americans arrived, it

*(continued on page 2)*

## From the Director



This past month we lost one of our volunteers, and with his passing ended some great translation work. John Dykstra volunteered for us three short years, but accomplished much with the German to English translation of family letters belonging to the late Dr. Gisela Gallmeister

Strand. Strand grew up in Germany during World War II, and John really enjoyed the hard work of reading Gisela's family letters and the story that unfolded with each during a terrible time in the world, including for German civilians. His almost daily emails to me always included something funny, and he will be missed.

For one week in January, we hosted our first high school archival intern, Lillian Bruxvoort, from Holland Christian High School. Lillian has wanted to be a librarian since she was very young and really took to the archival work we gave her. I think she has a bright future ahead of her!

Geoffrey D. Reynolds

---

### *Over Where? (continued from page 1)*

was already clear that British general and head of the intervention, Frederick C. Poole, was in far over his head. Overconfidence, lack of geographical knowledge, and complex issues of inter-country cooperation would combine for a disastrous Russian campaign. Dutch and his fellow soldiers would have no idea what hit them.

After Dutch sent home those first letters while traveling, a span of nearly three months passed. His next letter addressed to "dearest friends" has a decidedly different tone than the more expectant letters from Camp Custer and England. Dutch wrote, "Am now in a small village on the bank of a river. Three mechanics and two buglers and about nine million cockroaches occupy two rooms of a log house." He had arrived in what he would interchangeably call "Northern Russia" or "Somewhere in Russia"—a smattering of different, tiny villages in Siberia that held Bolshevik rebels. Unlike other Polar Bears, Dutch did not spend the majority of his time in a city called Archangel on the Dvina River; he would move further inland, and noted several times to family members that the rate of mail was far worse where he was than other Holland men.

Dutch's first impressions of Russia weren't positive. He wrote home to his friends, "Russia sure is one — of a country... reports here are that the war will soon be over in France. I do not understand this Russia proposition or

why we are here or for how long we shall stay." He had arrived in Russia while recovering from the flu he had gotten on the journey, a flu that killed several of his friends from Holland. Tiemen Schepel—who was on the same ship as Dutch's, heading to Russia—was reported in the *Holland City News* as having died in France. The moment demonstrated Hollanders' confusion about where, exactly, "their boys" were going. Dutch wrote home, "you should not be surprised if I should come lagging in some day soon... I don't think Uncle Sam will keep us here very long." From the beginning, confusion and homesickness in Russia reigned, and morale would only get worse as winter grew closer.

Mail was sporadic for the Polar Bears, especially once winter closed in and froze the Dvina to where boats could not get in and out, so Dutch was often catching up his family on weeks or even a month's worth of news. One letter begins, "Just received six letters... you can imagine how regular the mails are here." One benefit of irregular mail was that each letter was rich and full of information about daily life in Russia. Much of it seemed tedious and repetitive, especially early on when there were few skirmishes between the Americans and the Bolsheviks. Dutch spent paragraphs describing what he wore in Russia on winter days:

Heavy woolen underwear, still heavier woolen underwear over this, woolen sleeveless sweater next to undershirt, woolen breeches and shirt, sweater vest with sleeves, blouse (wool), leather jerkin lined with felt, muffler, wool helmit [sic], big Bolshevik fur cap, fur lined overcoat, three pairs of ordinary wool socks, one pair of Arctic socks, and a pair of #12 Shackleton boots... I don't think I shall suffer much cold, do you?

Included along with these descriptions were brief sketches of both Dutch himself in his gear and more detailed drawings of the Russian village people with whom all of the soldiers spent time interacting.

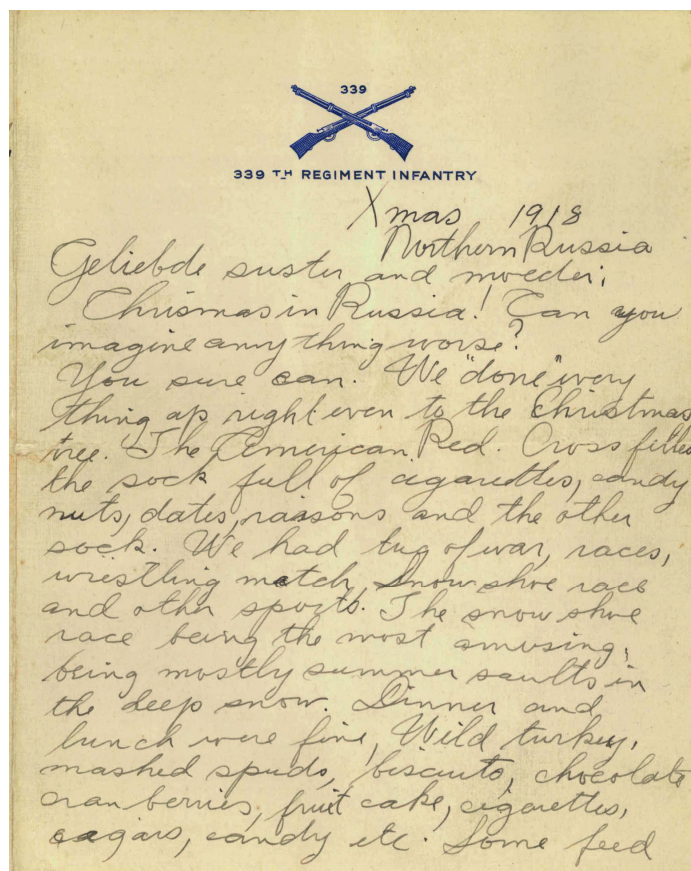
Fighting to stay occupied in this world of ice and snow defined as much of Dutch's life as fighting Bolsheviks. Moments of true entertainment were rare. One memorable exception to the daily boredom came in a letter written to Lillie and her parents in December 1918. Dutch wrote of being sent to "cut the smokestack" of a Bolshevik boat the Polar Bears had sunk. While he and his friend, who Dutch called 'Mac,' were completing the task, they found a dead horse that had risen to the surface of the nearly frozen river. Dutch continued, "We cleaned the hide that night and stretched it... making a neck and finger board from a broken gunstock made a banjo... result, music." Clearly, the Polar Bears had to be quite resourceful in creating their own fun. For the most part,



they passed time gambling, playing cards, and reading their scarcity of mail and newspapers that managed to arrive. By March, Dutch told Lillie, "letters and tobacco are our only source of consolation in this country."

Of course, Dutch and the Polar Bears were in Russia to fight communism, and fight communism they did. On Christmas Day 1918, Dutch told his sister, Dora, and his mother that he would be heading to the front; but, he noted, "things are quiet there, so don't fret. The Bolos are a heap scared of the Yanks." Several months later, after weeks in the midst of fighting, his tone changed dramatically. To Lillie, he wrote, "the Bolos have done their worst to take the village. Every house in the town has been shelled... the enemy visits us a few times every night and serenades with machine guns." As an aside, he included a retort to the celebrations he had been belatedly hearing about on the end of the war: "You say the war is over. Yes it is all over. All over Russia." In a later letter he continued the same rhetoric, saying, "this is a more serious affair than people realize, and some mothers and sweethearts will be disappointed when the 339 gets back. As to when...?" When he left the front a few weeks later, Dutch would call his "escape... nothing short of miraculous." Dutch's life in Russia, like many of the other Polar Bears, was a strange mix of monotony and violence. They were fighting battles they didn't understand, and existing in a world wholly different from the one they had left.

When Dutch was not on the actual front, non-combatative Russians were far more numerous than rebel Bolsheviks in the region. Some of the stories of poverty that he shared with family and friends were nothing short of heartbreaking. He wrote of one small boy, "His chest was exposed to his stomach, legs bare... I pointed to his bare chest and he says 'schaarf' neyat (no scarf). Papa neyat (no father). There are a good many like this." Women, meanwhile, did much of the menial labor in the village, "hauling stable fertilizer" with "horses not much larger than a Shetland pony." Dutch, who had worked a farm in Holland, also noted, "I don't believe the whole village of perhaps four hundred inhabitants produces as much stuff as one hundred and sixty acre farm in the states. And yet they exist." Occasionally the Russians were helpful to Dutch and his compatriots. In addition to buying game like rabbits and pheasant from them, Dutch told his sister that many of the soldiers purchased "handmade and handworked linen" for "their girls" back home. For the most part, the soldiers and the villagers seemed to co-exist. At one point while staying near the frozen Dvina River, Dutch and several other soldiers lived with "a Ruskie granma, granpa, pa, ma, two barishnas (girls) about 15+17, and six or eight kids." This mostly peaceful and rather boring coexistence made the mission of the Polar Bears even more convoluted,



and Dutch became increasingly bitter about the "Russian proposition."

Dutch's own personal morale continued to dip lower as his stay in Russia extended. Perhaps his sharpest line—at least, the sharpest line not cut out by careful censors—on the mission in Russia came in April 1919, almost nine months into the Polar Bears' tenure. It was to his sister, Dora, and his mother, in response to newspaper articles on Bolshevism in the United States: "President better get us out of here or we may be Bolos when we get back." For the most part, though, Dutch remained more despondent than defiant. In one April 1919 letter he wrote to Lillie, "Just a few lines to let you know I am still alive... The boys are all busy sewing on their first service stripe. I would much rather sew a patch on my overalls back in the U.S.A." He also told Dora and his mother, "I would take six months in France rather than three months here." As the timing of when the Polar Bears would be allowed to go home kept getting pushed back, Dutch's optimism about even getting out of Russia began to wane. Before, he had written to Lillie, "you can expect me back to plant corn in the spring." By March, all he could say was, "I am coming back someday. Maybe."

"Maybe" came, eventually. Even by December 1918, Dutch was writing to his family in the hopes that "they settle up this Bolshevik business at the peace conference." It would take until March 1919 for

Woodrow Wilson to “emphatically” decide to remove American troops from Russia at all speed. This decision came on the heels of Company I of the 339th infantry (men from Detroit) staging a “mutiny,” asking questions like “why are fighting in Russia”—almost exactly the same comments Dutch was putting in his letters! By the end of June 1919, General Glen Weeks sent in large boats to evacuate the remaining soldiers. According to historian Rhoades, the British remained in North Russia until September, before they, too, admitted defeat. Before long, the Bolsheviks had consolidated their control over the country, and communism reigned.

With this final, inglorious end, Dutch was free. He wrote one more revealing letter to Lillie on his way home on the *U.S.S. President Grant* in July of 1919, just days away from home. Finally there were no more censors, and Dutch could write whatever he wanted about his Russia experience. Dutch’s honesty shone through:

I think I have quite a few hugs and kisses coming after going through almost a year of hell. For it was that. Not the danger so much for some times I almost wished a bullet would hit instead of just missing me. It was the cold, poor food, worse tobacco, lack of sleep and heavy marching and lack of amusement that was hell.

These sentiments, clearly, reflect the general mood of the Polar Bears as they returned home. It had been almost a year since the great parade down the Holland streets in November 1918, at the first end of the war. Service flags were demobilized, leagues and organizations to assist in the war effort had ended, and institutions like the *Holland City News* had already moved on to articles about preparing for the *next* world conflict. On July 17, 1919—sandwiched between an ad for chiropractic “spinal analysis” and an article on Holland primary schools—there appeared the announcement, “men of the 339th infantry continued to arrive in slackened volume Tuesday and it is believed nearly all sent to Camp Custer now are at their homes.” Dutch was one of those men. He had traveled nearly 10,000 miles “over there,” and at long last, he was back again.

Like hundreds of thousands of other men returning from the fronts of World War I, Dutch now faced the question of “what’s next?” In one of his last letters to Lillie before returning home, Dutch mentioned potentially going into either “the building business” or “being partner on a government ranch” with various soldier friends. (Interestingly, the 1930 census lists Dutch’s career as “contractor” in building, so he seemed to have achieved at least one of those options). However, by far the most important thing to him was seeing Lillie again;

he wrote, “it is the reception I get at the end of this deal that counts and determines how long I stay home.” While it is not clear whether Dutch and Lillie were traditionally dating before he went to Russia, by the end of the war he was very attached to her. For much of the last months in Russia, Dutch mentions carrying around a photo of Lillie in his coat button, telling her once, “all the rubles in Russia could not buy it.” Many of the letters to Lillie address her as “little kid,” and this was true. Lillie was around fifteen when the then twenty-four year old Dutch left to serve his country. She was sixteen when they married in December 1919, just six months after he returned. Apparently, Dutch had gotten the “reception” he wished for! Dutch and Lillie went on to have five children (one, Raymond, succumbed to the flu and colitis at seven months old). Dutch passed away in 1959; Lillie in 1984.



Lillian Bax, n.d.

ancestry.com

Dutch’s letters give a stunning, firsthand account of what it was really like to fight a war in Siberia. Before the Cold War shut the curtain between East and West, Russians and Americans were battling in a fight that created lasting controversy and bitterness. Even so, America seems to have forgotten this piece of an already almost forgotten war. There is no longer anyone alive who remembers the young, heroic Michiganders leaving for France to fight Germans and coming back from the top of the world, speaking of Bolsheviks. Letters like Dutch’s are some of the only records of what the day-to-day life of a Polar Bear soldier looked like. At their core, the letters tell a love story—not just the one between Dutch and Lillie, but between a man and the home he longed to return to. They represent human triumph, endurance, and the faith that someday, somehow, everyone gets to come home.

#### Sources

Rhodes, Benjamin D. “The Anglo-American Intervention at Archangel, 1918-1919: The Role of the 339th Infantry.” *The International History Review* 8, no. 3 (August 1986): 367-388.

Strowenjans, Delbert. H91-1122. Delbert Strowenjans Letters, Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College, Holland, Michigan.



#### About the author:

Originally from South Bend, Indiana, Aine O’Connor is a junior at Hope College. She is an English and history double major, with a special focus in disability studies and Holland history.



## Saturday March 23, 2019

This event supports MSRA's exploration, documentation, and interpretation of Lake Michigan shipwrecks

### **The Chicora: Coming Full Circle**

MSRA's Craig Rich and Valerie van Heest revisit the Chicora's 1895 loss and possible discovery while exploring the roots of MSRA.

### **Shipwrecks in the News**

WZZM reporter Brent Ashcroft shares insights into the news business through his shipwreck feature stories, including the shore wreck *Contest*.

### **Expedition Unknown**

MSRA's Valerie van Heest provides a behind the scenes look as she joins "Expedition Unknown" host Josh Gates to go in search of a famous lost vessel.

**Exploring the SS Senator** Technical diver John Janzen makes Lake Michigan's deepest dive to over 400 feet to film the *Senator*, lost in 1929 while carrying a cargo of over 200 new Nash automobiles.

### **Illuminating Imagery – Great Lakes Shipwrecks**

Emmy award-winning photographer Becky Kagan Schott takes a journey around the Great Lakes illuminating some of the most spectacular shipwrecks, including the *Cornelia B. Windiate*, pictured below.

**Plus** See MSRA's work featured on the Weather Channel.

# MYSTERIES & HISTORIES

21st Annual

Beneath the  
Inland Seas

**Knickerbocker Theatre**

86 East Eighth St, Holland

7:00 - 9:30 PM

\$13.50 advance / \$16 at door

Order at [MichiganShipwrecks.org](http://MichiganShipwrecks.org)

Free Ticket/s and Post-Event Pizza Party  
with Membership

Michigan  
Shipwreck  
Research  
Association

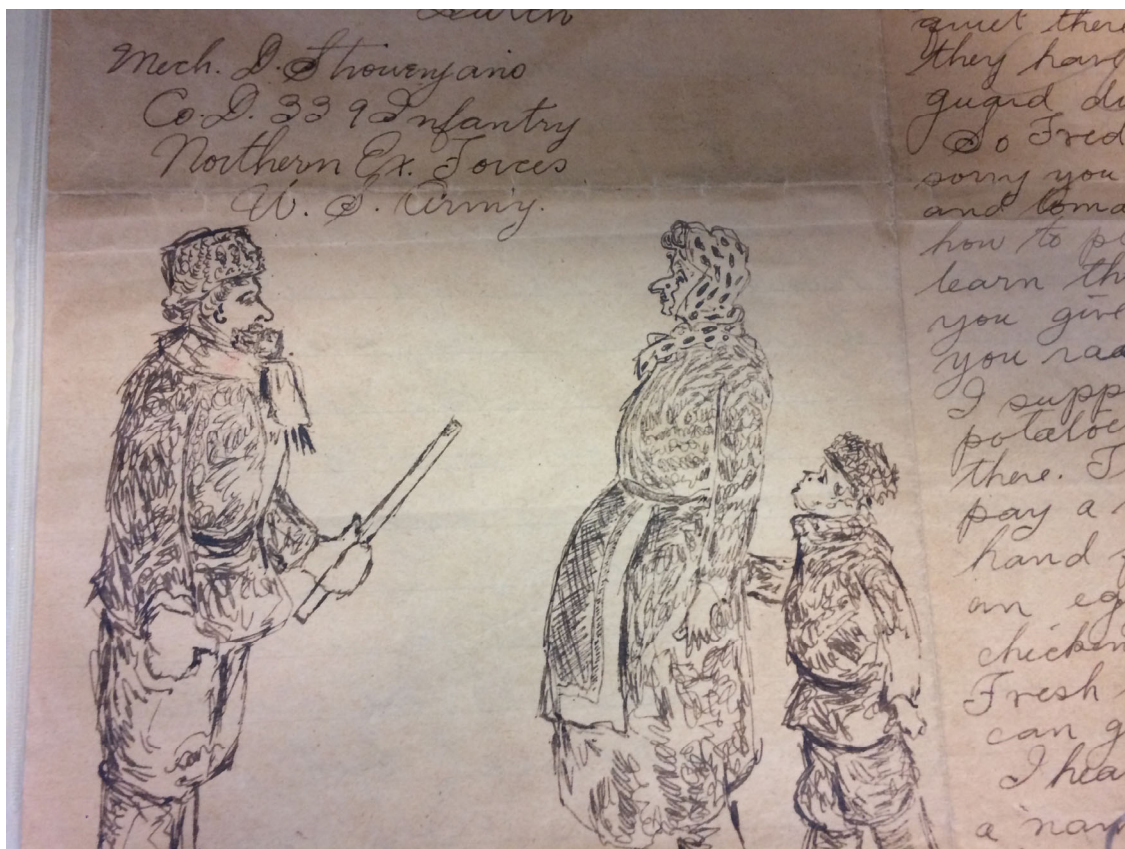
In partnership  
with the  
Joint Archives  
of Holland



---

Contact us at (616) 395-7798 • Fax (616) 395-7197 • E-mail: [archives@hope.edu](mailto:archives@hope.edu) • [www.jointarchives.org](http://www.jointarchives.org)

---



*Dutch Strowenjans' drawing of the Russian village people, 1918*