



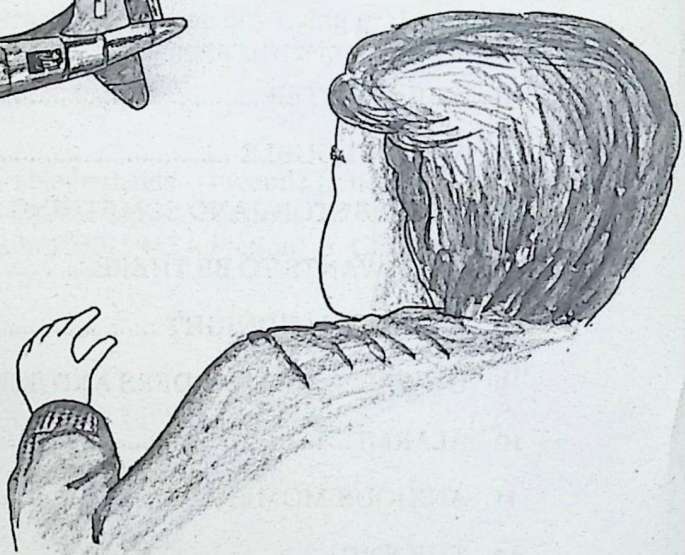
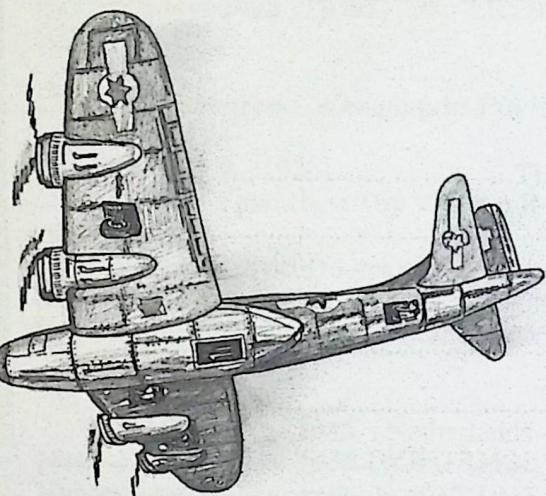
It Began with a Parachute

William R. Rang

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CHAPTER 1

A MEMORABLE NIGHT

The clouds drifted across the night sky like weird giants, casting black shadows over the dark water of the canal. The wind sighed and rustled through the poplars that lined the yard of the old farmhouse. Clouds, wind, and water — these were the things that belonged to the landscape, and without them Holland wasn't Holland.

Bert stood with his back against the farmhouse, as he looked at the sky. No, he wasn't looking at the giant clouds drifting by, for he had seen them many times before. And no, he had not sneaked out of his bed to listen to the playful wind either. He had played and fought with the strong west wind on the dike when he had come from school, trying to ride his bike against its power. What he had left his bed for were not the things he knew so well — the things that belonged on his father's little farm. What had awakened him was the droning sound of hundreds of large aircraft on their way to Germany. The sound of those planes, high in the night sky, was music to his ears. When the first wave of bombers had passed over, Bert had jumped out of his bed and hurried into the cool night. Then the booming of the anti-aircraft guns had started to rip through the darkness, with shells exploding like giant fireworks. Soon there had been the huge searchlights reaching into the skies, searching for aircraft. The whole spectacle fascinated Bert as he stood there shivering. Oh, he hoped that the Germans wouldn't shoot down any of those planes, and deep in his heart was a prayer that the Lord would not allow it to happen.

Wave after wave of aircraft passed over, high and invisible. Bert knew they were there, in the sky. The angry booming

continued, yet seemingly without success. It was the same thing over and over again. Bert had seen and heard it many times before.

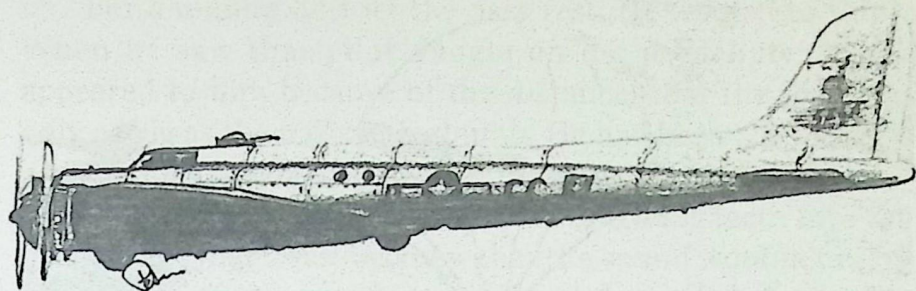
Suddenly he realized how cold he was. Better go back to bed, he told himself, and he got ready to go. But then, all of a sudden, there was something that caused him to stop. What was that? What kind of sound did he hear through the heavy droning of the planes and the barking of the guns? Could it be the sound of a single plane flying low? Bert pricked up his ears and stared into the darkness. Yes, it was the sound of a plane! It seemed to fly in the opposite direction from all the other ones, and much lower. Could it be a German fighter plane that had taken off from an airfield somewhere in the neighbourhood? No, it couldn't be, for the sound Bert heard was much too heavy. This was the sound of a big bomber. And suddenly he knew it: it *was* a bomber that had been hit and was trying to fly back to England! He could hear it clearly, and it sounded as if the plane were right in front of him, just over the village a few miles out on the other side of the canal. The sound of its engines was uncertain, as if it were going to stop any minute. Bert now strained his eyes even more. That plane had to be around somewhere.

Suddenly and unexpectedly it was there. He saw it clearly, right over the windmill by the canal. It was a huge craft that seemed to be totally helpless. Its fuselage glowed in a reddish colour, as if there were a fire inside, and its one engine left a long trail of thick, black smoke.

Bert felt his heart pound in his chest. "Oh, Lord," he said softly, "please let the men jump out. Please!"

But nothing happened. The plane continued its course, slowly and hesitatingly. Now the Germans had discovered it too, and they began firing at it with machine guns from their positions around the polder.

Bert stood there with his fists clenched. That plane was going to crash somewhere. Maybe on the village or even on the nearby town. It would not only kill the crew but many citizens as well.



Suddenly, as he narrowed his eyes to see better, he saw something fall out of the plane. "Parachute! Parachute!" he yelled, but there was nobody to hear him except, perhaps for the wind, for it had always seemed to him that the wind was a person. And yes, there *was* a parachute. He could see it clearly now as a gray ball against the sky. It fascinated Bert so much that he stopped to follow the bomber on its course, and he stared with wide-open eyes at that big piece of cloth in front of him, descending slowly from the darkness.

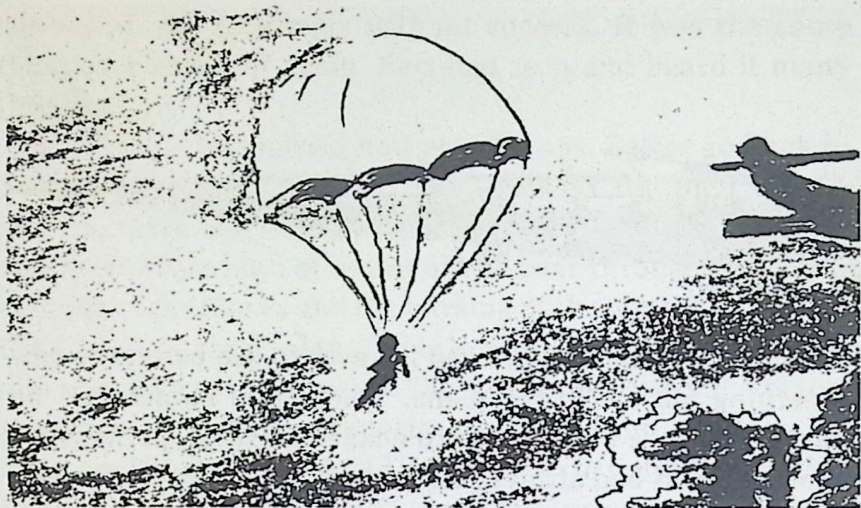
What if the man in the parachute landed in the water? Bert stood there, his eyes still wide open. He could see the airman now, and he guessed as well as he could where the man might land. Instantly Bert knew what to do: get to that pilot before the Germans would.

He turned and dashed into the house. First he wanted to yell for his dad, but a sudden impulse told him not to do it. Dad might not approve of his rescue mission.

Trying to make the least possible noise, he took the stairs skipping the third step because it always squeaked so much.

Moments later he was in his room quickly putting on his warm slacks and the woolen sweater that Grandma had knitted for him. Then he went back down the stairs and through the kitchen to the annex, where his wooden shoes waited. All was well — he hadn't awakened anybody. Only the cat stared at him from the darkness of her basket.

He picked up his wooden shoes — no, he was not going to wear them. They would clatter on the cobblestones of the stoop, and their noise would awaken Mom for sure. Carefully he lifted the door handle. It did not squeak for once. Only the



hinges of the door made a little bit of noise. The drizzling rain fell on Bert's nose and chin. Sure, his socks would get wet, but he didn't care. In a few steps he was on the little dock where the boat was, and that boat was the only means of getting to the polder. Bert cast off and hung the oars. He knew how to row. He had already taken the boat to his dad's field when he played hooky from school once. That was when Mom was sick, years ago.

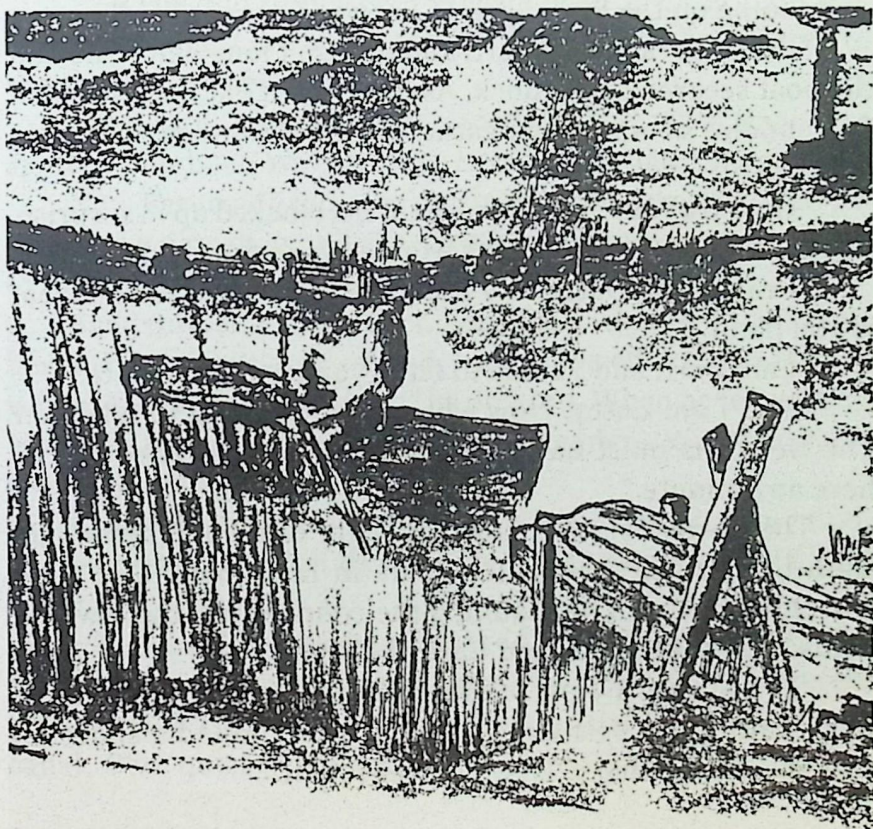
The oars splashed in the water as Bert rowed, but it did not worry him. Nobody would hear now that it was raining and the wind was singing through the bare poplars that lined the canal. Bert strained his arms, and with powerful strokes he steered the boat through the water, under the bridge, and out into the open. He knew where to go, but would he ever find the pilot? Would the Germans beat him to the man, or worse still, would the airman fall into the water and drown?

"Lord, please let me find him," Bert prayed as he looked over his shoulder to see where he was going. He glanced back at the town, but he couldn't even recognize the buildings. It seemed that the houses huddled together in the complete darkness. The Germans obviously hadn't been alerted yet. Their guns had grown silent, and it was as if their searchlights had closed their eyes.

For a minute Bert let the oars rest. He wanted to think. When he saw that pilot dangle on his parachute, it had appeared to him because of the distance, that the man was only as big as the nail of his thumb. He had been rowing for a while, which meant that he couldn't be too far off.

He whistled a shrill, short call through his teeth into the black of the night, but he knew that the sound wouldn't carry too far. In vain he waited for a reply, his head slightly tilted to one side, but there was no answer.

"Pst," he hissed through his teeth, and again he waited, glancing around. Oh, he hoped that the pilot would stand there, right on the water's edge. Yet there was nobody to be seen, and there was no other sound than that of the rain and the wind. Bert had stopped rowing and just let the boat drift. Now he realized how cold he was and how very much alone in the midst of the water and the wind.



"Psst," he hissed, but it seemed that it was no use. Maybe it would be much wiser to turn back, dry himself with a big towel, and crawl under the warm blankets of his bed. It seemed that he had totally misjudged the place where the flyer was going to land.

As he was about to stretch his arms to pull the oars, he tilted his head somewhat and listened intently. Did he hear something?

"Psst!"

That was not his own voice! Somebody . . .

"Psst!"

Quickly Bert turned his head in the direction of the sound. He had trouble seeing, for the rain had soaked his face, his eyebrows, his lashes.

"Psst!"

Now Bert stood up in the boat. The pilot — there he was — standing on the little dock of Farmer Bosma's field!

"Coming!" shouted Bert, and it wasn't long before he had the boat secured at the dock. As he stepped out, he felt that a few puddles of water had gathered in his wooden shoes. He didn't care — not now.

"How are you?" asked the man. Bert looked up in surprise. The man spoke Dutch, yet he wore an American uniform!

"I can speak Dutch, my friend. So don't worry. And what is your name?"

"I am Bert, and I came to fetch you away from here."

"And I am Casey. Now where are you going to take me? The Germans must have seen me come down. They will be here any minute."

The Germans! Bert hadn't thought of them. They would soon be cruising the little canals in fast boats, and their searchlights would be scanning the countryside, the low, flat fields. Where could he and Casey hide?

"I've buried my parachute already," said Casey, as if he were waiting for Bert to say something. "I found a shovel in that shack over there. They'll never find it."

The parachute! Bert hadn't thought of that either. "Okay," he said. "Let's go to my house first." He stepped back into the boat and waited for Casey to follow. But the pilot just stood there on the little dock, his head tilted a bit as if he were hearing something. Then, suddenly, he crouched. "Germans!" he said in a low voice.

All of a sudden Bert had the feeling that his heart stood still. Yes, they were there, the Germans, not even that far away. They were cruising the canals, and now Bert could see the searching of their strong flashlights.

"You go home, Bert. I'll give myself up," whispered Casey. "It's better that way, and they will leave you alone. It was nice knowing you — you are a great kid."

Bert shook his head. He knew better — the Germans would not leave him alone. What was his business in the middle of the night, in the rain, away from home, hours after curfew?

"No," he said resolutely. "We will hide. The Germans will catch me when I am alone on the canal." Then he pointed to the shack. "In there maybe?"

"No," said Casey. "They'll look there first when they have spotted your boat. We can't hide here . . . too flat . . . too open."

Now Bert could hear the puffing of the Germans' boat. He could even hear them yell at each other. There was not a minute to lose! They had to act fast!

Suddenly, as if by instinct, Bert knew what to do. Without hesitating for even one second, he let himself into the muddy water of the canal. "Come on!" he ordered. When he felt ground under his feet, the water reached his shoulders. Was that water ever cold! "Come on!"

Casey did not seem to understand what Bert had in mind, and he certainly didn't like the idea of getting wet, cold, and miserable.

"Why?" he asked, and he wanted to ask more, but the approaching Germans gave him no time. "Okay," he muttered, and as soon as he stood beside Bert in the icy water of the canal, Bert quickly pushed him right under the little dock.

There was just enough room for the two of them, and there was just enough space between the dock and the water. Casey wanted to grin at Bert, but he could not see his face, close to his as it was. As they were huddled there under the dock, Casey felt Bert's body shivering against his own.

Maybe they would be safe there. Bert thought of that. "Please, Lord," he said softly. "Please."

CHAPTER 2

THE HIDING PLACE

It seemed to Bert as if the next few minutes took hours. He was shivering all over and clung desperately to Casey. The Germans were very close, and their lights swept over the fields like long arms touching the night.

"A boat!" yelled one of them, and Bert realized that they had found his little boat.

"What's that thing doing here?" a loud voice answered. "Let's take a look."

Before long, the German craft touched the boat and the two under the little dock heard three or four of the soldiers jump in Bert's boat and then on the dock. Their steps were heavy, and Bert, looking up, thought that he saw the planks of the dock above him bend under the weight of the German.

"Nothing here," one of them shouted, "but maybe in that shack over there. Heinz, Carl, take a look, quick!"

Upon hearing that, Casey pressed Bert a little harder as if he wanted to say "good thing we didn't hide there." Bert returned Casey's gesture by pinching him in the arm. "You bet," the little pinch said. Bert felt terribly cold, and he was very, very scared. The water had soaked all his clothes. What had he started? Why hadn't he stayed home in his warm, cozy bed? Why hadn't he?

"Nothing here either," snapped a strong voice from the distance.

"But what's the boat doing here?" called another.

"Maybe some dumb Dutch farmer left it here," someone replied. "There's nobody here anyway."

"Maybe the Yankee drowned in one of these endless canals. That's all Holland has — water, water, and more water.

Even the frogs get sick of it. Our fatherland is much more beautiful and . . .”

“Never mind the fatherland,” snapped the other. “Let’s go; there is nothing here.”

Again there was the clatter of footsteps above the heads of the two under the little dock. They were threatening steps, but now they were about to leave. The motor of the boat started to sputter again and a moment later the Germans were gone. Once more Their searchlight scanned the countryside. Soon the sounds of the enemy had faded away completely.

Bert sighed deeply. It was as if a heavy burden had fallen from his shoulders. They were safe, at least for the moment. “Let’s go,” suggested Casey. “If we stay much longer, we’ll both get sick. Pneumonia is not my idea of fun, you know.”

As they climbed out of the water and into the rowboat, Bert said nothing. He was worried. Both were soaked to the skin, and it was a cold, October night. They would surely get sick, both of them. Pneumonia maybe, death maybe . . . “Let’s row, both of us,” said Casey. “It will warm us up a bit.” Bert nodded and handed the left oar to Casey. He pushed the boat free from the dock, and moments later they were on their way.

There was no other sound than that of the rhythmic splashing of the oars in the water. It had stopped raining and the moon seemed to be peeking around the clouds floating across the sky. The shapes of the trees and the little houses were very dark and they looked almost menacing. Bert felt frozen, tired, and even sad about having started this whole adventure. So he saved a pilot. Big deal! The Germans might find him anyway, and where was he going to hide Casey? Their home was only a small one, and the barn was not large either. What would Mom and Dad say? Bert had never done anything important without asking them first.

“Turn left now,” Bert whispered.

Mom and Dad — he hadn’t even thought of them. What would they have to say about this whole thing? He just shrugged his shoulders. It was too late to ask for their permission. Mom would have said “no” anyway. Mothers are

always so protective. She would not have let her twelve-year-old go on a dangerous mission when there were trigger-happy Germans around. Of course, Bert knew why: Mom loved him too much. But what about Dad? What would *he* have said? That was hard to guess, for Dad seemed to love adventure himself.

“Shh!” whispered Casey while he let his oar rest. Over Bert’s shoulder he pointed at something. Bert turned and followed the direction in which Casey gestured. Yes, there was something, somebody. He could see it clearly. Someone was standing near the door of Keesman’s house. Whoever that person was, he did not move. Bert wondered if it was Keesman. If so, what was he doing there in the middle of the night.

“Who’s he?” whispered Casey.

“It’s Keesman. He has a shoe store in town.”

“Is he okay?”

Bert’s only answer was a faint shrug of his shoulders. He felt too cold and miserable to care anymore. Slowly he reached for his oar and started rowing again.

Keesman — what business did he have outside his house at this hour?

They rowed on, the two in the little boat. Each had his own thoughts. Bert thought of his warm bed, where it was dry and comfortable. Casey thought of Bert. Such a young child and such courage! Why had the lad done all this? Bert interrupted Casey’s thoughts. “My home,” he said softly. Casey nodded. Home — he hadn’t been at his own for years.

There it was, Bert’s home, a simple farmhouse hidden behind the poplars and yet so close to the water. Strange — there were houses on either side of it. A farmhouse in town? He had never heard of that before.

Soon Bert had tied the boat. Then he took his wooden shoes off so as not to make any sound and gestured at Casey to follow him. Bert did not go into the house but walked beside it towards the barn. Carefully he opened the barn door because it had a terrible squeak. Then he held the door open to let Casey in. It was dark in the barn, and a sharp smell hung in the air.

Bert was careful not to turn the lights on because that might give them away. He really did not need any light, for he knew every nook and cranny of the barn. The Dutch would say that he knew the barn as if it were the inside of his pocket.

"Wait here," he said softly. "I'll get you some dry clothes." Without waiting for a reply, he left the barn and tiptoed to the house. He needed clothes, but all the dry clothes that would fit Casey were in the large wooden clothes closet in Dad and Mom's bedroom! How would he manage to get them without waking up his parents? He most certainly had to get dry clothes for Casey, for the pilot could not spend the night in his wet outfit.

There was only one thing to do and that was to get the clothes even though he was not allowed to enter his parents' bedroom. Or should he awaken his mom?

Bert opened the door and stepped into the house. It was dark, so Mom and Dad had most likely not heard or noticed anything.

He walked past the living room to the stairs. Just as he was about to put his foot on the first step, he heard a familiar voice softly say his name.

"Bert?"

It was Mom's voice from the kitchen.

Suddenly he felt very small and tired.

"Bert?"

"Yes, Mom?" He entered the kitchen. Mom sat behind the table. She was in her nightgown and her hair was undone.

"Where have you been, Bert? I was so worried."

Dear, loving Mom! Bert looked at her eyes and could see that she had been crying.

"I, uh . . ."

"You took the boat, Bert."

"Yes, Mom."

"And who is that man that came with you?"

Bert's eyes opened widely. Mom knew! Mom had suspected! He'd better tell her the whole story now.

"He's a pilot, Mom. I picked him up. I saw him come down with his parachute." Bert stood closely to Mom. On the floor,

near his feet, there grew a puddle of water. He looked at it. Mom took his hand tenderly.

“I guessed so. I should be angry with you — very angry. This pilot is a soldier, and soldiers take great risks when there is a war. A twelve-year-old is too young to take those risks. But you are so wet, Bert. What have you done?”

Then Bert told her the whole story of how he had watched the parachute come down, how he had guessed where it was going to land, and how he had taken the boat.

Mom nodded. “You need dry clothes first, and so does that man.”

“He’s my friend, Mom.”

Mom just looked at him with her soft, beautiful eyes. Then she said, “You wait here.” Bert watched her as she went out of the kitchen. His mom! How he loved her! How proud he was for knowing that she had understood why he had done all this!

A little while later she came back. In her arms she carried a pair of towels, clean underwear, and a pair of coveralls. “You’d better dry yourself while I take this to the pilot. But I don’t speak any English!”

For the first time Bert smiled again. “You don’t need to, Mom, because he speaks Dutch. And don’t forget to put your coat on. You look funny in your nightgown.”

Now it was Mom’s turn to smile. Without saying a word, she left. Bert listened as she went through the hall. He heard her putting on her coat. A moment later he heard her go softly by the house. Then he took his clothes off and started to dry himself. Ah, that felt good! His blood started to tingle again. Minutes later he followed Mom to the barn. The night had grown clear, and the moon shone bravely through the diminishing clouds. It looked as if the moon wanted to smile at Bert, but he was too busy to notice.

Mom was in the barn. She was talking to Casey, who stood behind a partition drying himself. “So there you are,” said Mom. “You tell us what we must do now. We can’t have this man sleep in the house. If the Germans come and find him, they’ll kill all of us.”

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by William R. Rang

Suddenly and unexpectedly it was there. He saw it clearly, right over the windmill by the canal. It was a huge craft that seemed to be totally helpless. Its fuselage glowed in a reddish colour, as if there were a fire inside, and its one engine left a long trail of thick, black smoke.

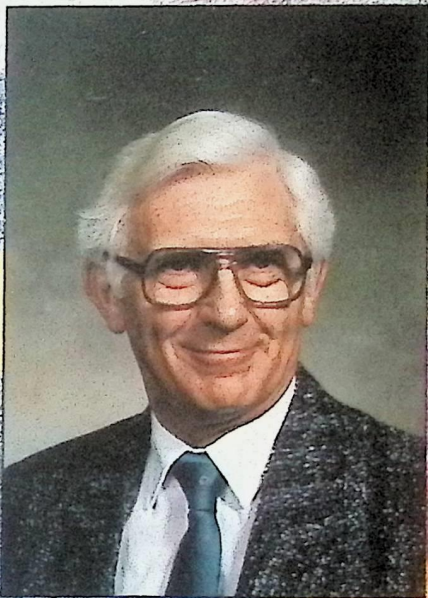
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Bert stood there with his fists clenched. That plane was going to crash somewhere. Maybe on the village or even on the nearby town. It would not only kill the crew but many citizens as well.

Suddenly as he narrowed his eyes to see better, he saw something fall out of the plane. "Parachute! Parachute!" he yelled, but there was nobody to hear him.

William R. Rang has recently retired as teacher and principal of the Dunnville Christian School in Ontario, Canada. For many years he has written short stories in *Calvinist Contact* and lately in *Christian Renewal* in the column *Skylights*. He also wrote *The Stowaway* which was one of the first books published by a Dutch immigrant in Canada. After having written more books, he is presently writing a book on the life of Michiel De Ruyter, one of the most famous (Dutch) admirals in the history of the world.



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