



**Stories from the archive of the
Donner Family**

**Part 1:
Soestdijk saved**

Soestdijk saved! July 27, 1787

In which Gottfried Otto Donner as grenadier from the Hessian brigade fights with the patriots and eventually is shot in the head.

Standing on the parking lot with your face to Palijs Soestdijk somewhere half way between Amersfoort and Amsterdam, one may notice at the left hand side a statue on a pedestal. Some benches surround the rather small statue and it seems to look the wrong way. It does not look at the palace but into the bushes. It is a statue of grenadier Christopher Pullman, of the life company in the infantry regiment of the Prince of HessenDarmstadt.

On the base of the statue a copper plate states that Pullman, "... old 28 years, choosing rather to lose life than his arms to surrender, in the night of July 27, 1787." Pullman does not look the wrong way but he stands guard. Behind the bushes, in 1787, there was a bridge over the canal. Now there is a wide paved intersection and there are trees and shrubs between Pullman and the road. Pullman was a colleague of the Prussian soldier Gottfried Otto Donner, who, 8 generations before me, had ended up in the Netherlands after long travels through Europe. It was in 1787 that there were serious conflicts in the Netherlands between the patriots and royalists. A complicated conflict with many causes. There was the rising bourgeoisie who rebelled against the regents, in France the revolution was imminent and the Americans had declared their independence. All these events had their supporters and opponents. In addition, more and more newspapers appeared mainly as propaganda used by people such as Johan van der Capellen from Zwolle, who occasionally wrote pamphlets and articles against the establishment and the stadhouder. Stadhouder Prince William V was not a strong statesman and was under the strong influence of the Duke of Brunswick, uncle of William's wife Wilhelmina of Prussia and strongly connected to the Prussian king and even the Habsburg family in Austria. Wilhelmina came from Hesse.

Especially to protect his sister the Prussian Emperor Frederick William II commissioned Christiaan Louis, Prince of Hesse Darmstadt to send regular corps troops to go to Holland. On June, 2nd 1785 the brigade was transferred to the Dutch Republic under the name 'Hessian brigade'. So this is probably the date Gottfried Otto arrived in The Dutch Republic.

Pullman and Gottfried were part of this brigade, both as grenadiers. Under the leadership of Colonel and Major Seyffardt and Van Erpel they

were stationed at the House Soestdyk. The country house of the stadhouder himself who at that time lived in Amersfoort. There he fled because in The Hague the patriots were in power. The famous Jewish merchant Cohen had offered him shelter in the house with the purple windows on the Zuidsingel. Just before the arrival of the Stadhouder, this house had been taken by a major of the Hessian regiment who wanted to rent the place but was refused. He was so angry that he ruined part of the house and its furniture resulting in damages of around 1400 guilders.

I visited the house of Cohen, September 2012. It is now part of a monastery. One of the tour guides showed, still indignant, marble slabs that had to be replaced due to the vandalism. There is still a bullet hole in one of the windows, a remnant of a failed attack on William V.

In Utrecht, the patriots had seized power and on 27 July 1787, a group of 650 men, partly on foot and partly on horseback traveled with two guns towards De Bilt. 300 of them remained in De Bilt, with the two guns. Probably because of the guns the progress was slowed down too much for the cavalry and they decided to continue with some 350 men towards Soestdijk. The patriots were commanded by Frederick III, Rhine Count of Salm-Kyrburg, Their purpose was to occupy Soestdyk. Prince William V was not present but Soestdyk but the House had a strategic location between Amersfoort and Amsterdam. It also had great symbolic value and there was precious booty waiting. In 1787 Soestdijk did not have its majestic wings. However, there were more buildings than there are now, a coach house, stables and there must have been a wall somewhere in the garden.

Around midnight the Patriots came along the Utrechtse straat and the Praamgracht (barge canal). It was pitch dark that night, hot and humid, draining the forests. The Patriots soon encountered the outposts of the guard, two grenadiers and a musketeer, overpowered and captured them. But just before Soestdyk, on the spot where his statue stands, they stumbled upon Christoff Pullman and a fellow guard. The latter managed to escape through a small path. Pullman was cornered and the Patriots tried to bribe him, but he would not surrender and shouted: "Ich bin ein Ehrlicher Kerl!" ("I am an honest guy!") And put one of the patriots down. He was then himself 'shot to the head'.

Awakened by the shots the soldiers of the Hessian regiment put themselves out of bed, and rushed, half-dressed, towards the garden. There they formed a line at the gate, the front row sitting on one knee and the back row standing. Seyffardt shouted: "Who is this?" And was only answered after a third call: "Salm". In response, the soldiers fired off a tirade which gave a barrage of bullets. The Patriots were very impressed because later they spoke of "a great fire". Fire came from all

around, also from the windows, behind the walls and through the palisades in the garden.

The Patriots, beaten back by all the bullets that were fired at them kept occupying the bridge. Van Erpel attacked them with heavy fighting on the bridge as a result. The attack failed and the Hessian soldiers were forced to retreat behind the fence at Soestdyk. The patriots had reached the courtyard and set fire to the stables, stealing horses and leaving quite a destruction.

In the darkness began a 'mad' battle, in which the patriotic cavalry could be of little service. Because of the lasting gunfire and grenade attacks from the defenders of Soestdyk the Patriots had to retreat in the end.

Afterwards the patriots counted four deaths, including a farmer who had encountered them in De Bilt during their march to Soestdyk. They had three prisoners and stole six horses which they took to Hilversum. Some of the patriots, who were reported lost, had lost their way in the dark forests surrounding Soestdyk. They appeared later again.

Twenty patriots were imprisoned and five horses were taken by the Hessische Brigade. One soldier, Pullman, was killed, and fourteen wounded, including Gottfried Otto Donner. He was hit by a bullet in his mouth. The bullet shot through his palate and left his head just below his ear. One centimeter to the left, and all of my family would have never been born. It took him 8 months in bed to recover from this blow.

Letters from his grandchildren say that Gottfried stood guard and is shot through his palate when he called for help. Or that he was the last of his regiment left and had screamed to the soldiers in the Palace 'Zu hilfe' and so got a bullet in his mouth. Another even states that he was wounded in the Sea battle with Great Britain. All versions are unlikely. Only Pullman died, the outposts were quickly nabbed by the patriots and the regiment was aroused by the shots the patriots fired at Pullman. Gottfried may have told the story himself to impress his grandchildren.

Storytelling will it not have been easy in his later years because by then he was really suffering from this war wound. The prince had given him a golden palate in duplicate, but constantly he had to clean it and with age talking and swallowing were getting heavier for him.

The fight did not last long. In less than an hour, the patriots were gone. At 1.00 in the night Prince Christian of Hesse Darmstadt arrives. He visits the wounded. Gottfried will not have looked very cool with a cleft palate and a hole behind his ear. Maybe he was still in a coma. Also

Seyffardt and Van Erpel were injured. The first one had a shattered wrist and the second had a bullet in his thigh. The next day the stadhouder came. On his way from Nijmegen to Amersfoort he made a detour to Soestdijk to speak with the soldiers. He was so impressed that he, again according to family letters gave Gottlieb his purse with 25 golden ducats to buy some refreshments, which would have been hard for him to eat...

Within a week after the fight at Soestdyk, on July 31, stadhouder William V, asks the orangist 'Staten van Utrecht', staying in Amersfoort, for an appropriate reward to the defenders of Soestdijk. On the 31st of August the 'Staten' declare that they will reward the soldiers with gold and silver medals. The contract for the making of the medals was awarded to John George Holtzhey.

January 2nd, 1788 William Nicholas Bullies rewards the medals officially to the garrison assembled at the Neude in Utrecht. Since September 1787 the city of Utrecht was back in the hands of the royalists. Major Friedrich Wilhelm Erpel and Colonel Johann Ludwig Seyffardt were given a gold medal. The other members of the regiment received a silver one. The front of the medal shows a winged and acclaimed allegorical female figure of Victoria, presenting a bare chest. She wears a Roman tunic and a palm branch and holds a flag with the striped lion from the arms of Hesse. She has both feet on an altar with the text "'t geweld beteuged" (The violence curbed). Before her lies a down beaten body, whose long hair symbolizes envy. Around the altar drums, weaponry and banners displayed. In the background is Soestdijk to recognize. On the brink the medal says in Dutch: "Soestdyk manfully defended by a detachment of 't Regim. HESSEN DARMSTADT". On the back is a shield on a cloth nailed the text "Remembrance of the high lords of the 'Staten van Utrecht to to the high esteemed lord's regiment officers of Hesse-Darmstadt because of hat happened at Soestdijk, July 26th-27th 1787." Above is a crowned coat of arms of Utrecht wreathed with myrrh twigs. On a pennant is the slogan "CONCORDIA RES PARVÆ CRESCUNT" written which is Latin for "unity promotes the right". The medal was hanging on an orange ribbon.

It was five months after the shooting so Gottfried's probably was not there, since he needed 8 months to recover. But his half brother Johan Christiaan probably was. Who wants to see the medals can still visit the Royal tokens Cabinet in Leiden or the Teyler Museum in Haarlem.

The wounded, who were no longer suitable for the service got, beside the medal, an annual allowance. This also accounted for the widow of Pullman. Gottfried recovers but can do no service in the army anymore.

He tries to get another job as a storekeeper in Naarden but is refused because he was Lutheran. The prince was "not amused" and gives Gottfried then a grant worth 300 guilders a year until his death in 1837.

Pullman gets a monument. First a kind of elongated pyramid, a needle grave they called it, and later, in 1937 the statue that overlooks the forest. The pyramid is now in the Rijksmuseum. Until well into the 19th century Queen Wilhelmina annually honored Pullman each July 27 with an official ceremony by his statue. Queen Juliana and Prince Bernhard unveiled July, 27th 1937 the new monument but abandoned the annual ceremony.

Although perhaps not more than an incident, the victory at Soestdijk was important for the orangists.

In June 1778, the stadhouder and the Prussian king were badly offended with the arrest of William's wife Wilhelmina of Prussia at Goejanverwelleluis. Wilhelmina, sister of William Frederick, King of Prussia was raised at the Prussian Court. She was exactly what you could expect from a Prussian princess: resolute, stubborn and not afraid. While half of the Netherlands was in the hands of the Patriots, she wanted to make a statement by traveling in a coach to The Hague. She was stopped by the patriots and for several hours housed in a farm. This insult was now avenged. Pullman became a symbol of steadfastness and loyalty to the Stadtholder.

Exactly one week later, the stadhouder had to take another blow. While, on August 2nd, he is staying in the house of Cohen with the purple windows, at the Zuidsingel in Amersfoort, a few hundred yards away the Church exploded. A soldier had been careless with a grenade and all the ammunition, stored in the church, exploded. The church burned down and collapsed, never to be rebuilt. It all happened within a radius of 500 meters from my current house in Amersfoort.

In this chaos, the stadhouder, stimulated by Van Brunswick, could do not much more than ask the Prussian king for support to bring back order to the country. On 13 September 1787, the Duke of Brunswick invaded the Republic with an army of 20,000 men in Nijmegen. The Patriots offered little resistance and many fled to Belgium and northern France. The patriotic movement was temporarily suppressed but would return in 1795 with the French invasion. The Stadhouder and the princess moved September 20th 1787 back to The Hague, where they received an honorable welcome.

Gottfried Otto left after eight months of rehabilitation for Arnhem, the city where many German garrison soldiers had taken up residence. His half brother went to Zutphen.

Stories from the archives of the Donner family is a series in development based on the many genealogical work of my father Jer Donner. Using his thorough studies of the family history, these stories recorded, investigated further and wrote by me.

Jerphaas Donner, Amersfoort, October 2012

From Gottfried Otto Donner to Jerphaas Donner Jr.

0. Andreas Matthias Donner	1700 Carmzov	1791 Carmzov
1. Gotlieb Otto Donner	1756 Carmzov	1836 Renkum
3. Johan Christiaan Donner	1793 Arnhem	1839 Arnhem
4. Johannes Hendrikus Donner	1824 Arnhem	1903 Leiden
5. Jerphaas Donner	1854 Leiden	1929 Goes
5. Johannes Hendrikus Donner	1900 Goes	1985 Apeldoorn
6. Jer Donner	1924 Molenaarsgraaf	2010 Zwolle
7. Jerphaas Donner	1961 Apeldoorn	