

Dear Sir or Madam,

This circular is about **a new initiative** towards **Remembrance**.

Remembrance of **Soldiers** who died in wartime, either in battle, or of wounds, disease or in accidents while on active service.

It is about Remembrance by means of a new **Television Documentary Series**. But not an ordinary documentary series. If I can help it, it will be one that **the public will remember for a long time**.

The idea is this. It will not be long now before the centenary years of the Great War will be upon us. There have been earlier wars, and there have been others since, and some were more protracted and gruesome than others, but even for us, today, the Great War is still the all-time culmination point of senseless slaughter. The centenary years of such a war are of course not going to pass unnoticed. But one cannot help feeling that a special effort should be made, with the objective of placing the millions of war dead on centre stage, as it were. Nobody else has a right to be in that position. Not the politicians, not the historians, not you or I, and not even those who are doing their utmost in the maintenance of war graves. This is the point I am trying to make. The public should be told about the **War Dead**, who they were, where they had come from, how and where they died, and where they lie buried. It is **their stories** that need to be told and heard. Irrespective of their nationalities.

And this is another point. Their **nationalities**. Did you realise which nation suffered the largest number of Great War fatalities in proportion to its population? It was not Britain, France or Germany, as one might think, but Serbia, which also suffered grievously in the Second World War.

There is an understandable tendency, in the face of casualty rates like those suffered by nearly all belligerent nations in both world wars, to concentrate on our own dead, to the virtual exclusion of those who fell among our allies, never mind those on the other side. Our capacity to comprehend and to respond adequately to human slaughter, on that scale, is limited. But the passage of time, and more importantly the course that history has taken during that time, have made a great difference. Europe, and to some extent the rest of the world, but Europe more than any other continent, has committed itself to multi-lateral co-operation and unification, to such an extent that another European war has become unthinkable. Which was indeed the objective of those who initiated that process all those decades ago. Some of us tend to forget that, once in a while. But regardless of how we might feel or think about some of its other consequences, we must all, surely, admit that the virtual banishment of war from our Continent was an objective worth achieving, by any means, and that the significance of some of the things we have lost in the process clearly pales in comparison.

This is why I would suggest that a television documentary series as outlined above should be a **multi-national project**. Every nation that has war graves to care for, here in Europe, should be involved. Perhaps I am being over-ambitious, also in the face of the current financial crisis, but I believe that this initiative is one that is worth taking. We owe as much to the war dead. After all, what would be a more fitting act of remembrance than the realisation of a television documentary series about **all** the war dead, produced by or on behalf of **all** the ex-belligerent nations, a hundred years after the Great War was fought? It would imply that we have learned a thing or two.

The circular now before you is being dispatched to organisations like yours all over Europe and in countries that had their armed forces deployed in Europe in both or either of the world wars. This means veterans' associations and others that are more or less in the same league. My first objective is to find a number of people representing these organisations, from various countries, who share the basic idea outlined above, and who would be prepared to step forward and sit in a provisional project management team. Some fluency in English would of course be helpful. This is only to begin with, but who knows where this might lead us.

As far as the CWGC, Volksbund, OGS and other official war grave organisations are concerned,

I have been told that they are planning to do their own thing in this respect, which in itself is of course very good news. However, I do not know to what extent these plans have meanwhile matured, nor

whether all such organisations will be involved, including those in the United States, France, Belgium, Poland, Italy, Romania, Spain, Denmark, Norway etcetera. Let me emphasise that I have no wish to alienate myself from any of these organisations as a result of this initiative, but I am certain that there is so much material available, potentially, that there is more than enough, not just for one or two, but for several such documentary series. Which are bound to materialise anyway, certainly within many of the nations concerned. This is why I hope we can at least establish a formula of co-operation, if for no other purpose than to avoid duplication.

We should also realise that war grave organisations such as the CWGC, Volksbund and OGS, have a second priority, apart from the war dead, which is having to put *themselves* in the limelight. They have to keep telling the public what they do and how they do it, and a TV series is of course a first-rate opportunity to do so. From their point of view this is not only perfectly sensible but indeed imperative, for reasons that will be obvious. From my point of view, however, this would diverge us, to that extent, from our prime objective, which is the War Dead themselves and their stories. This is why the CWGC, Volksbund and OGS, and perhaps others, are less likely to participate. That they are nevertheless on my mailing list is not so much because I hope they will come aboard regardless, which they would be more than welcome to do of course, but just in order to let them know. Transparency is the first step towards mutual understanding and co-operation.

Finally, let me tell you where I myself stand. I am the author of a Dutch-language book about war graves in the Netherlands and adjoining parts of Belgium and Germany. It is entitled "*Gesneuvelden in Steen*" and has been published by Penn Uitgeverij, Leeuwarden. The English-language edition (700 pages) is ready in manuscript. It will be published as soon as we can make it economically viable to do so, and you will all realise what that means. I would love to have that English-language edition on the market as soon as possible, available to anyone who is interested, but as far as I am concerned all the proceeds it may generate will go to some appropriate charity, or towards the funding of this television documentary series. Similarly, any profit that this documentary series may generate should, I feel, be transferred to the organisations that contributed towards its realisation, in strict proportion to their respective contributions. Speaking of which: I myself do not have the funds nor the know-how to produce a documentary series. All I know is that the basic idea is sound and appropriate, and all I want to do is to kick-start the process towards its realisation. I am not interested in prestige. Not any more, anyway. To me, it is the stories of the War Dead that matter. Other than that, I am just an ordinary chap. That is all there is to say, for the moment. It is up to you now.

Please consider the above carefully and let me know what you think.

Yours sincerely,

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