



The photo that started it all: Teeuwisse found the negative of the original photo at an Amsterdam flea-market in 2007

# Ghosts of History

When the past becomes the present

BY TIFFANY JANSEN

One of the most fascinating things about visiting historical landmarks is letting your imagination go back in time to recreate what life would have been like 'back then'. In your mind's eye, you watch soldiers engaging in battle, wars being fought, and dinosaurs struggling to survive.

What we often forget is the history that surrounds us in our everyday lives. The local supermarket you frequent every week may have once been a farm. Perhaps that little child's school occupies what was once the campground of an ancient tribe. You don't need to head to Stonehenge or the Parthenon to experience the presence of the past. It is this very idea that sparked Jo Hedwig Teeuwisse's love of history. Born in The Hague and currently living in Amsterdam, the historical consultant remembers spending hours as a child poring over old photos, particularly those from the 1930s and '40s. "I've always

felt less interested in the age I grew up in," the mid-20th century enthusiast confesses. "It seemed as though the years my grandparents lived in were not only more exciting and traumatic, but people dressed nicer, the music was better. I like the movies, the design, the architecture."

Her passion led her to start her consultancy, *Historical Consultancy 30-45*. While on the job, she answers history-related questions, researches, makes reproductions, organizes events, sets up displays, provides props for film and television, and the list goes on and on. She had a hand in Paul Verhoeven's *Zwartboek* (Black Book), Martin Koolhoven's *Oorlogswinter* (Winter in Wartime), the television series *Annie MG*, and numerous documentaries for big names such as the Discovery Channel and MTV.

But she's probably most widely known for her *Ghosts of*

History project, which works something like this: people send her old photos, mostly from the final months of World War II, typically involving a specific unit or soldiers from a particular country. She then finds or takes a photo from the same angle in the same location and combines the two, using photo editing software, to tell a new story.

**S**oldiers marching down a street, past the golden arches of a distant McDonald's. An end-of-the-war Bastille Day remembrance ceremony juxtaposed by a silver SUV. The black-and-white form of a lifeless German soldier slumped over on a stone staircase surrounded by a haze of modern color and dazzling sunlight.

It's that last photo that still haunts Teeuwisse, a constant reminder of why her work is so important. "People use those steps and walk past that spot every day," she points out. By melding that photo with a more recent shot of the same location, Teeuwisse ensures that those who see her mash-up will always see that soldier sitting there.

The project certainly is a labor of love. With each new photo, there's extensive research to find the original location. Once the spot has been pinpointed, she travels to that location to take photos. Then comes the grunt work – layering the two photos on top of one another. This can be an especially time-consuming task if the photos don't line up exactly. This process can take up countless hours.

Every now and then, though, she'll be handed both 'then' and 'now' photos that match perfectly: photos with a clear story to tell. In those cases, a mash-up can be completed in under an hour.

And then there's the occasional dead-end. Teeuwisse admits there are still a number of photos she hasn't been able to place. When extensive research, a visit to the area, a Google Maps consultation, and soliciting the advice of people online fail, there's little else to be done.

"I just hope that these pictures help ignite an interest in history and help people think about our past and the sacrifices made by many for our freedom," Teeuwisse says. It certainly seems as though her wish has come true.

Her photos began to generate interest almost immediately after she began uploading them to the photo sharing site, Flickr. But it wasn't until she posted her mash-ups of pictures of American troops in Normandy that things really began to gain momentum. That scored *Ghosts of History* a mention in the British newspaper *The Daily Mail*, which was soon followed by a spot on an American television program. Within a month, the *Ghosts of History* Facebook Page had twenty thousand 'Likes'.

Since then, a website dedicated to the project has also gone up where photos can be purchased and mash-ups can be commissioned. Teeuwisse is also in the process of



"Somehow it feels like he never really left that place," Teeuwisse says of the German soldier who lost his life on these steps

adding her photos to the HistoryPin app which allows users to create their own mash-ups and pin them on Google Maps. What's more, something that started out as a fun hobby has turned into a nice little side business.

**T**here's a definite fascination with mixing the past with the present. "We all know history is all around us," Teeuwisse says. "But we sometimes forget (or we find it hard to imagine) how real this past was." When the past and the present overlap in a visual format – such as in a photo – it makes the past all the more real. 🍷

For more information, visit: [ghostsofhistory.co.uk](http://ghostsofhistory.co.uk)



Jo Hedwig Teeuwisse has turned her passion into a lifestyle