

OPERATION MARKET GARDEN - A LAST RETROSPECTIVE

Radio Orange (during the 2nd World War clandestinely listened to by a large part of the Dutch population) announced on September 16, 1944 that 'a great battle was to be expected'. Encouraging words for the occupied Dutch who could not suspect that it was going to be the largest Allied debacle which would require more casualties than the invasion-landings at the Normandy beaches. The Germans knew of the existence of a large-scale airborne army. Though they didn't have the slightest idea where this could be used. They did suspect possibly off course the Ruhr-area, the productive heart of the German war machine.

That the offensive would take place in The Netherlands was not expected by the Germans, although the reason for that was pretty easy to understand. Fieldmarchall / General Montgomery was aware of modern warfare for that time and he wanted to end the war before the end of 1944 with a massive air strike with tens of thousands of paratroopers with the aim to push in northern direction of The Netherlands and thus deflect east to give the Ruhr Region the deathblow. To this end, Montgomery ('Monty') asked all the support he could get from his commander Dwight D. Eisenhower. Obstacle for the Allied Forces to go in the eastern direction after the invasion on the French beaches was the German 'Siegfried Line', a heavily armed defense line around the Ruhr-area which ran roughly from Kleve (near Arnhem) to the south border with Switzerland.

Trying to break this line would certainly cost a lot of casualties. Montgomery's plan meant not to break through this Siegfried line but to make an outflanking movement on the northern side to pull through with a surprise attack with airborne troops in the middle of enemy territory around it. For this purpose it was necessary to have the ground troops of the Second British Army march fast from the south (Belgium) to be able to march together with the airborne troops into Germany along the Siegfriedline. Essential point was that the allies would have and hold the bridges over the canals and rivers in the Brabant area such as the Maas, the Maas-Waal canal, the Waal at Nijmegen and the Rhine at Arnhem.

These bridges had to be taken to clear the road for the Second British Army to march up North. The plan was forged, the British 1st and 2nd American Division and a Polish brigade had to secure passages on the waterways, a prerequisite for success. General Patton (and not he alone) had his doubts, however, there was a certain rivalry between Patton and Montgomery. The latter was given the chance to conquer two bridges at Eindhoven, Grave, and two bridges at Nijmegen and Arnhem with his plan. Doubtful, risky... Eisenhower decided to perform the complete operation under the name 'Market Garden', the largest airborne operation in the history of World War II. The airborne operation-part was given the code name "Market", ground troops attack-operation was given codename 'Garden' along.

THE FIRST COURSE OF THE OPERATION

'Monty' was not entirely served his way, there were quite a few leaders (afterwards justified) that faced several problems and great risks, the plan was considered too ambitious. Montgomery was not given enough planes to carry out his original plan: all landings in one day. That may be the first mistake, made by Headquarters in advance. The landings now would take place in two days (planned) however, taking all bridges from the southern Netherlands to the city of Arnhem was rated 'a bridge too far' by many high ranked officers. De landingen zouden dan nu in twee dagen plaatsvinden echter het innemen van de bruggen vanuit Zuid-Nederland tot aan Arnhem werd door sommigen 'een brug te ver' beoordeeld. However, it was assumed that there would be only little German resistance.

It was a mix of conflicting messages, German Tiger tanks were observed around Arnhem and possibly SS units... Nevertheless, the operation started on September 17 from 22 bases in England to secure the waterways in Brabant The Netherlands. Approximately 12 river crossings in the Netherlands had to be taken and held. The Maas Bridge at Grave and a bridge over the Maas-Waal Canal at Heumen fell in hands of the allies without much resistance. Some bridges however had been destroyed already by the

Germans. Also the Waal bridge at Grave could not be taken currently, only one battalion of paratroopers led by Cmdr John Frost with 500 men managed to reach 'their' bridge, (John Frostbridge Arnhem) but John's men only managed to take positions at the northern driveway of the bridge. But Frost carried only supplies and munition with him for the planned two days. The advance of the British toward the north end of August was initially successful, but limitations were the speed of the march itself, supplies and ammunition could not be invoked as soon as it had to be.

This part was in fact a case of being victim of your own success. Although the Germans were surprised (they had to leave their Headquarter at Oosterbeek on the spot directly) the SS units recovered remarkably quick. Access to roads were disabled with the effect that the advancing British could not reach John Frost and his battalion in time. Hitler gathered Naval-, Army- and Airforce personnel from everywhere to fight against any starting offensive. Infact the situation was that the German defense had already been reduced by 80%, even before the start of the allied operation. Hence the remaining 20% actually wanted to come around a little bit and therefor momentarily forces and the German headquarters were located in Oosterbeek. But the battle of Arnhem was near...

BAD LUCK AND ERRORS

When pushing through the implementation of Operation Market Garden several mistakes were made. Unknown factors that could work against in those few days (17 to September 20, 1944) were underestimated. Such as weather, rain and fog for example. Also London was notified by the Dutch resistance that the SS division was in the region. This message was ignored by London, a capital mistake. September 17 several thousand aircraft took-off for the droppings of the paratroopers. Their task was to force some 90 km long corridor that had to pave the way for the waiting troops in Belgium. Around noon, the Dutch could not believe their eyes when they saw this huge air-armada that flew over their territory. Their goal: Operation Market!

Due to lack of information on whether or not there are German FLAK (Flugzeug Abwehr Kanone or ground-to-air guns) drop zones were still shifted at the last minute, making longer distances to be traveled to the battlefields for the men on the ground after landing. The strength of the Germans appeared to be genuinely underestimated. The Germans were allowed to gradually strengthen their defense and managed to close the corridor for the march of the Allies for several times which delayed them dramatically. This was not too difficult, they were aided by the natural conditions of a very narrow road for a huge long convoy of vehicles passing over it. A slowing and also already devastating situation for the troops and thousands of vehicles on the road that would later receive the nicknamed 'Hell's Highway'.

Meanwhile from Belgium the troops also marched in Operation Garden! The FLAK turned out to be less powerfull as expected. In retrospect, had the intelligence known this fact then the drop zones (DZ's) might have been considerably closer after all. Also a disappointing factor appeared to be the 'gratitude' of the Dutch population that welcomed (read thus delayed) their liberators which was not provided in the total picture of the operation. A real incredible setback took place right at the first airborne landings in gliders. A glider crashed and inside the complete plan Operation Market Garden was found on examination by a German officer which fact suited the Germans extremely well.

The Germans could not believe their eyes, the whole effect of surprise for the Allies was gone. Von Rundstedt took the reins, and turned everything on the advance of Operation Market Garden to break it. Two panzer divisions were taken from the 'Westwall' (Siegfried Line) and quickly moved to Nijmegen and Arnhem, now knowing the danger of the airborne troops and their plan bypassing the Westwall. The Son bridge has been destroyed for this purpose. As an additional setback communication connections turned out to work poorly or were sometimes entirely gone.

JOHN FROST BRIDGE

Lt.Col. John Frost and his men were still on the north side of the bridge at Arnhem, waiting for the reinforcements who were held themselves among others by the already mentioned destroyed bridge at Son. This important bridge over the Wilhelmina-canal was blown up at the arrival of the Allies in front of their nose... So there was a need to build an emergency bridge quickly, a 'Bailey bridge', but one that was calculated on the weight of the thousands of vehicles and tanks. The advance of the British proceeded too slowly, on September 18 they had not proceeded yet as planned to join the Americans who now were held by the German Tiger tanks, Sherman tanks were at that time at a distance of about 65 km. There was heavy fighting around these few days in and around Schijndel, Veghel, Eerde and Son

for each strategic point, crossroad, home, railway line, etc. Brigade General John Hackett and his 4th Parachute Brigade landed near Ede on the Ginkel Heath in the middle of a battle and could not go anywhere by the now heavy German resistance. On the 3rd day, the British were not able to reach Arnhem yet and a part of the Polish Brigade landed their gliders with material amidst the battle around the dropping zone where most of the material they carried was lost. Would the British not reach John Frost and his men in time then the entire Operation Market Garden would be in serious danger, this last bridge in a row at Arnhem was crucial. Eindhoven was liberated on September the 18th, but to stop the Allied marches, at the end of this day the city of Eindhoven was bombed by the Germans.

EVEN MORE SETBACKS

During the fighting showed that Major General Urquhart and Brigadier Commander Lathbury were cut off from their men, they got into a ckeckmate situation with the German troops all around them.

They had to try and escape by hiding and walking over roofs later on, which delayed making necessary important decisions. This was also the time on the fourth day when it was realized that having the arrival from the Polish reinforcements under General Major Sosabowski in phases turned out to another capital misstep, which was criticized already in advance by Sosabowski himself. Drop Zones were now in the hands of the Germans. Sosabowski tried to land near Driel which partly succeeded, but the situation also made aircraft turn around without being able to resolve their heavier loads material that was actually needed to be deployed later on in Poland. But on the spot and at that time it was like shooting rats in a barrel for the Germans. Sosabowski was very keen to participate in the battle but to do so he first had to cross the Rhine, and boats were not there. Eventually he managed to reach the other side with four rubber boats but with only 35 men.

Misunderstandings and poor communications led to a situation that supplies and ammunition were dropped in German territory to the amusement of the Germans off course. Market Garden was becoming a nightmare. September 20 showed the superiority of the German "Panzers" and the 88mm cannon overwhelming, but John Frost rejected a proposal to capitulation of the Germans. But even John Frost had lost faith a little later, not the least due to lack of resources. His position in food and ammunition was only covered for two days at the most. He himself got injured and Frost and his men came to an unsustainable situation and he had to surrender with the remaining 200 men (including the injured) from the original 500 to to the Germans. Even the Germans showed some respect for the way these men had defended their position for such a long time given the heavy German resistance. The British reinforcements had not been able to reach Frots in time, the bridge at Arnhem had become inaccessible for the Allies.

THE FAILURE OF NIJMEGEN

Meanwhile occurred yet another drama. General Frederick Browning wanted to try with his 1st Airborne Corps in a last attempt to conquer the bridge at Nijmegen to force a passage to Arnhem.

A desperate attempt was made in broad daylight to cross de Waal-river which was accompanied by heavy losses. Partly this succeeded, the troops on the north side and the south side were trying to reach each other. The Germans wanted (self-interest) did not want to blow-up the bridge at Nijmegen. But the need but the need to be able to do so made them decide to undermine the bridge in advance. Anyway however, when the Allied tanks rolled across the bridge the button was pushed but the ignition refused. A Godsend ! It was spoken about but never known for sure if the Dutch resistance succeeded in sabotaging the matter.

But the British were exhausted, they had not received the reinforcements they needed and therefore they decided to wait and see the night over. A capital mistake, the bridge at Arnhem thus fell in German hands. Operation Market Garden was jammed. The British had two choices: surrender or die. In the afternoon of the 21th September 1944 the picture already signed off: the advance to the Ruhr area to destroy the heart of the German defense had failed, which was confirmed the next day officially. World War II would not have ended before Christmas 1944. Eisenhower would have to turn around his strategy completely. In the subsequent dialogue Montgomery lacked, he had failed. On September 24, the situation for the British proved unsustainable, some 1800 soldiers remained, and additionally some 1200 wounded ...

OPERATION BERLIN

The remaining soldiers were enclosed on three sides by the Germans with heavy artillery, they were like rats in a trap. To prevent the flanks would be closed and the remaining soldiers would be slaughtered in

further senseless violence of war, 'Operation Berlin' hastily was set up, it was still only option. In the evening of the 25th the British and Poles left their positions. There was one last heavy covering-fire opened on the German positions to cover the retreat. British and Canadians performed with 35 boats back and forth to save the last survivors. Heavily Wounded could not be included, thus, 2163 men were rescued from the original 10.000. The rest of the remaining men from the last 3000 were either killed or captured as prisoners of war. Not a single objective of Operation Market Garden was reached. By underestimating the German resistance, poor communication, slowing bad weather at the outset in England, and the fact that the Market Garden plans directly fell into the hands of the Germans, the guarantee for the defeat of the Allies was a fact. Operation Market Garden had been an ambitious plan. Too ambitious ...

LARGE-SCALE COMMEMORATION OPERATION MARKET GARDEN 2014

BASE CAMPS AND FINAL MEMORIAL AFTER 70 YEARS

In the Netherlands anywhere in the vicinity of Operation Market Garden for probably the last time the operation was commemorated. Most veterans who are still alive now and were able to attend the memorial will probably not do so again over five years. The memorial was very grand and internationally established. About 250 activities took place in a few days. International participation was there at various droppings such as over Ginkel Heath near the city of Ede with soldiers of different nationalities. Some original 'Dakota's' or in fact the military version C-47 Skytrain dropped hundreds of parachutists, assisted by British and American C-130 Hercules transport aircraft which flew from Eindhoven Airport. In advance it had to be determined by means of throwing ribbons out of the planes from which point the paratroopers had to jump due to direction and speed of the wind. The spherical round parachutes are much less controllable than the current mattress shaped ones.

Many actions were put in a 'modern twist'. The 'John Frost Bridge' at Grave was under attack of American soldiers of the 82 AB, led by four Blackhawk helicopters. 375 American soldiers were guests of the Royal Dutch Army. There were several dropzones where paratroopers were dropped near bridges and in the fields of villages such as Grave, Heeswijk, Eerde, Overasselt and Veghel where paratroopers from the 'Round Canopy Parachuting Team' landed. Tanks from that WW-II time took a ride over the J. S. Thompsonbridge after the Blackhawk helicopter action. There is a huge organization of various re-enactment groups who have a lot of authentic material from that period varying from drinking cups to tanks, uniforms, jeeps, trucks, even improvised toilets and showers for in the field and basically everything that was used these days.

For example, a convoy of hundreds of military vehicles (from various countries) first gathered at the town of Borkel-Schaft to ride a historic route from Borkel to the Basecamp at Veghel. Incidentally, also a basecamp was arranged near the bridge at Grave and Nijmegen, all by different re-enactment organizations. Near Son where the bridge was destroyed in 1944 at the very same place the Dutch Army Engineers Corps started at 05.00 hrs in the morning to build once again a Baileybridge, strong enough to carry the heavy tanks that would cross later on in the morning. Various vehicles and tanks of the Liberation Task Force crossed over again. Also a Waal Crossing was put in scene with participation of the American 82nd Airborne Division, and Royal Dutch Army soldiers as enemy. Last but not least there was a real liberation party held in Veghel in which two veterans of that time (John Primerano (88) and Ray Nagall (92) were honored by the population of Veghel and many others.

'Never forget the history to understand the present'

With the cooperation of a number of additional volunteers the absolute highlights of Market Garden were imaged for you by Dutch Aviation Media. The website www.dutchaviationmedia.com shows the highlights of the Memorial Operation Market Garden 2009 and 2014 with so many impressions, for you to remember or to look back if you were there or just missed it. These impressions will start from the mainpage of the website and will remain there up til the end of 2015 at least.