

MARKET GARDEN VETERANS ASSOCIATION

Operation Market Garden - Wars and Shadows

The bad planning was exemplified by our next operation, the operation which took us across the Escaut Canal and into Holland, the operation which was meant to see us over the Rhine and (according to Montgomery) to enable the Allies to encircle the Ruhr before winter. It was called MARKET GARDEN.

I can see our harbour area before the launch of MARKET GARDEN, immediately south of the Escaut, over which the Irish Guards had captured their bridgehead a few days previously-at once named 'Joe's Bridge' in honour of the unforgettable Joe Vandeleur. We – and they – had been at rest for a blessed interval, maintaining our tanks in pleasant meadows near the Army Corps and Divisional centre-line, which was to run from a place called Hechtel behind us (stubbornly defended by the SS against the Welsh Guards Group) over 'Joe's Bridge', and through Eindhoven to the

lower Rhine at Nijmegen (called the Waal at that point); and then to the northern arm of the great river (the Neder Rijn) at Arnhem. Advance up this centre-line was to be as rapid as possible since it would be preceded by a great 'drop' of Allied airborne forces: the whole of the 1st Airborne Corps, led by our own General Frederick 'Boy' Browning, who had commanded our Battalion until 1939, and whose Corps now included the British 1st Airborne Division, the 82nd and 101st US Airborne Division and a Polish Airborne Brigade. We relaxed in glorious sunshine, enjoying a certain issue of German Army champagne captured from their special wine store in Brussels, relishing a few hours and days of comparative leisure and uncurtailed sleep.

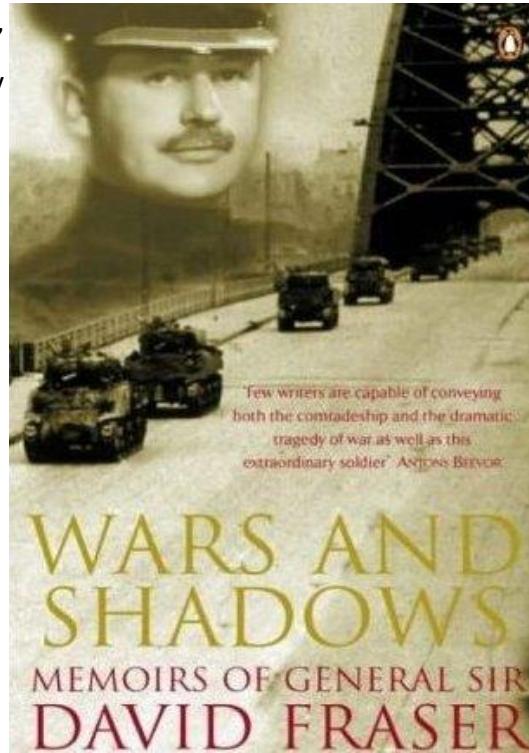
And then, in the early afternoon of 17th September, we saw over-head the great fleet of aircraft – troop carriers, gliders, escorts. They had come from England and were heading towards Arnhem and Nijmegen – at both of which a substantial bridge spans the river, so that both needed capture if the Army was to meet Montgomery's aim of crossing the Rhine and launching an offensive to encircle the Ruhr. The aircraft, in impressively huge numbers, moved northward. This meant that at a certain hour, I cannot remember how long afterwards, we would be on the move ourselves. The Guards Armoured Division was the spearhead of General Horrock's XXX Corps for Operation MARKET GARDEN, intended to link up with the airborne forces. Two other British Corps, VIII and XII, were to attack to widen the corridor driven northward by XXX Corps, on its east and west respectively.



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The advance of our Division was preceded by a deafening artillery preparation – the Division's movement was supported by seventeen artillery regiments and heavy mortars from several other divisions.

Then there was a delay, of a very familiar kind – we were at immediate notice to move, but 'something' in front was holding things up. It was nearly dark by the time we moved across 'Joe's Bridge' and it was already clear that the race to Arnhem via Nijmegen would be liable to delays. A significant number of Irish Guards tanks – the Irish Guards Group had been nominated as leaders – were burning beside the road. Progress, therefore, was slow. At frequent points the north-running road crossed a minor waterway and a well-placed demolition was enough to cause delay to an armoured column with its heavy vehicles. Our engineers were admirable but it took time to bring the armoured bridging equipment to the right point (and time to find that point, and reconnoitre the approaches to it) and there wasn't an infinite amount of bridging – our time. Nevertheless I remember the impressive silhouette of the long bridge across the Maas (Meuse) at Grave. This had been captured by the American airborne troops and took us across the first main water obstacle at about ten o'clock in the morning of 19th September. By then the operation had been running for over forty hours and was already well behind schedule.



I didn't see him at that moment but friends told me that Boy Browning – immaculate as always – was standing on the bridge when our tanks arrived. The leading squadron commander was Alec Gregory-Hood. He dismounted and, covered in dust, unrecognizable, went up to the General and saluted. 'Who are you?' 'Sir, it's Alec!' Alec had been a subaltern in Boy Browning's Battalion. 'Good God!' was the



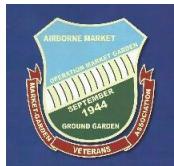
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characteristic response. I always said it would be cleaner to come by air!' And by then Boy Browning must have been fretting painfully about the timetable. The next picture I have is of a Dutch café in the outskirts of Nijmegen, a few miles up the road north of Grave. There a quick conference was being held at midday on 19th September and orders were being given out. Beside our own people American uniforms were everywhere. Members of the Dutch Resistance were buzzing around us like bees, with information (we hoped) of where the Germans were. Our task and our hope was that an armoured column could smash their way through the town, using the main road to the Waal, and cross the enormous bridge – Nijmegen lies entirely on the south bank. That would mean the southern arm of the Rhine in Allied hands, and a short drive – about thirteen miles, no more – up a broad, hard-surfaced, raised road to the northern arm of the river, the Neder Rijn, at Arnhem thereafter. Then the Allies would be across the Rhine.

The American 82nd Airborne Division, whose mission had included capture of the Nijmegen bridge, had been dropped some distance away to the south-east and west. They had then advanced into the town, on the south bank, and found it strongly defended. The Germans had prepared effective defences, had fired a large number of houses near the bridge and were in considerable force. The road approaches were covered by anti-tank gun and machine gun fire. The Americans had had a hard fight and suffered significant casualties. Like the British 1st Airborne Division at Arnhem they had been waiting for two days and nights for the relieving force of the British Second Army, led by ourselves. Meanwhile Nijmegen was in German hands.

A group from Alec Gregory-Hood's squadron and a company of the 1st Battalion, in their lightly armoured troop carriers, was composed and set off. Another group was directed on the railway bridge, which crosses the river a short way to the west of the road bridge and which was being used by the Germans for vehicle traffic, sleepers having been laid between the rails. Yet another small group – a troop of our tanks and two 1st Battalion platoons with some American infantrymen – was simultaneously sent to try to reach the main Nijmegen



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Post Office, where information (untrue) was that the Germans controlled remote firing mechanisms which could demolish the bridge; and the bridge was what mattered. Street maps of Nijmegen were distributed. We soon heard that the first group, aiming at the road bridge, was held up, that our troop leader, John Moller, had been killed and that the town south of the bridge was stiff with Germans. Similar reports came through from the party moving towards the railway bridge, who were eventually halted, not far from the southern bank, and surrounded by Germans; they spent uncomfortable hours isolated from the rest of us. The group directed on the Post Office actually got there. Communications were near – impossible in the built-up areas with the radio sets of those days. To discover where people were and what had happened generally needed physical contact and a visit. By nightfall on that first Nijmegen evening, with our groups at various points in a town strongly held by the Germans, it was evident that Nijmegen would have to be cleared methodically, and that that would take time. This was grim news – the operation had now been running about fifty-five hours. Our hopes of rushing a bridge across the enormous Waal had been frustrated. The bridge itself had not been blown, but to cross the river would need a battle.



And so it proved. More recently I have seen many films and television programmes dealing with MARKET GARDEN, in some of which it was suggested – sometimes by distinguished commentators – that the delay in reaching the bridge at Arnhem (being defended by 1st Airborne Division with great gallantry) was caused by sluggardly conduct or procedural niceties. I have even heard that ‘there was nothing to stop them (our Division) – nothing there’ (between Nijmegen and Arnhem).

Such comments are fantasy. Nijmegen was full of German Troops, street-fighting is a slow, laborious business, and before it was sufficiently advanced there could be no further attempt on the bridge. The attempt by John Moller’s troop on our first afternoon had been frustrated.

The fighting in the streets, therefore, was likely to go on throughout the next day, 20th September. I was sent by Eddy Goulburn to see our Brigade Commander, Norman Gwatkin, and to give him details of the plan to clear Nijmegen. I arrived at Brigade Headquarters, just outside Nijmegen, at about four in the morning. Norman



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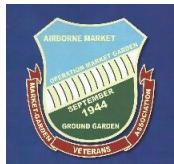


Gwatkin was a man of enormous character. A Coldstreamer, with a high colour, a choleric expression, a loud and infectious laugh, he was loved by our Grenadiers and known as were few senior officers. 'There's the Brigadier!' they would say, chuckling, and I remember one Sergeant adding, and he's an inspiration to the men! – a rare, articulate observation. He cheered all men, wherever they were and whatever the circumstances: and when an advance was held up by German defensive posts and the situation was obscure the column would generally be passed by the Brigadier, driving himself in a jeep, small pennant flying, pipe in mouth, heading for the front, for the tip of the spear, to see what was up.

On this occasion I stumbled in the darkness round the vehicles of Brigade Headquarters and was told the Brigadier was asleep in his caravan. 'So you'd better go and wake him up!' said the Brigade Major, Miles Fitsalan-Howard, with an unsympathetic smile. I found the Caravan steps, climbed, knocked and entered. Norman Gwatkin turned on a light and opened an eye. I explained I had brought Colonel Goulburn's plan for the battle of Nijmegen and the capture of the bridge, if not blown.

'Shall I show it to you, Sir?' I had marked a town map. 'No thank you,' he said, very kindly. 'I'm sure if Colonel Eddy is satisfied with it, it's an excellent plan. Please thank him. Goodnight.' He turned out his light and was no doubt asleep again by the time I was down the caravan steps. Another good lesson of its kind.

Earlier in the evening I had been sent to try to make contact with our group which had aimed at the Post Office. Communications had failed utterly and nobody knew where they were or if anything had happened. I eventually discovered the Post Office, without harassment by Germans, and found our Troop commander's tank outside it. The Troop commander was Jim Scot, later to be a neighbour and dear friend in Hampshire. Jim, who had been trying to make contact with Battalion or squadron headquarters as indomitably as we had been trying to get through to him, was curled up with his radio headset on the turret floor of his Sherman, as far down as it was as it was possible to get, hoarse with shouting. He had found, he said, that the intolerable radio interference in his earphones was marginally better in that position and he had adopted it. Now, after a taxing hour yelling into the ether in this exceptionally uncomfortable position, he looked up and saw me at the turret hatch. He told me long afterwards that it was a great disappointment. He was sure – or almost sure – that he had managed to make some sort of contact, and now I'd spoiled it by turning up in person. He was our best Troop commander and a man, throughout life, trusted and loved by all who had dealings with him. Now he explained that,



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as far as anybody could discover, there was no detonation plunger mechanism in the Nijmegen Post Office. No importance at all in the Post Office, in fact.

Throughout the next day, 20th September, fighting continued and the clearance of Nijmegen proceeded. Towards the end of the afternoon the Valkhof was attacked by the King's Company, supported by the tanks of James Bowes-Lyon's squadron. The Valkhof was a high wooded mound, an ornamental public park with mock fortifications and many tunnels. It commanded the final approaches to the main road bridge and the Grenadiers of the King's Company climbed the very steep slopes to its summit while our Sherman tanks poured in fire from between houses on the other side of the moat. Vicary Gibbs, the King's Company acting Commander, and several more were killed but eventually the approaches to the Waal seemed clear.

At seven o'clock on that evening of evening of 20th September a column of our tanks, Commanded by Peter Carrington, rushed the bridge. It was an exiting moment, with at any moment, the possibility of a mighty explosion, the bridge sundered and the adventure over. Then we heard, listening to our radio sets, that there had been no explosion. We were across the Waal.

Next morning, 21st September, I accompanied our Commanding Officer, Rodney Moore, to the far side. The huge structure was in our hands. Without the bridge at Arnhem it was of little operational significance, but we didn't know what was happening at Arnhem and to us it seemed that we, the Grenadiers, were over the Rhine. A few destroyed vehicles, a few corpses in field grey lying by the bridge approach, and then the mighty river. On the north bank Peter Carrington was in control, brisk and assured as usual, but annoyed by a German high-velocity gun, I expect an 88, which was firing shells at our little bridgehead.

Further west our group aiming at the railway bridge reached it at 9 o'clock in the morning Rodney Moore sent me to make contact with the group commander. This was Johnny Neville, Alec Gregory-Hood's squadron second-in-command. He was a delightful man, tall, saturnine, an exceptional soldier (a businessman in civilian life), with a sardonic sense of humour and a kindness of heart he ineffectually tried to conceal. Affecting a good deal of admiration for most things American (which experience of business had to some extent inculcated in him) he was only slightly older than me and my contemporaries, but in sophistication he seemed a whole generation senior and we held him in awe. He was downright, brave, witty and competent.

He was standing on the south end of the railway bridge, having spent by now two nights and a day surrounding by elements of the Wehrmacht, and wore his usual rather mocking grin as he told me what had happened. What had happened, as he explained with his usual economy of language, was that after a considerable fire fight the Germans had decided to pack it in. They moved – fast. He hadn't lost a man; about 150 enemy dead were counted. I remember it as an occasion – there were many and they always struck me with surprise – when the entire German defensive position on the bridge and by the southern ramp up to it was covered by a fast mass of paper – army forms of one sort and another, returns, indenting forms, report forms. They were blowing all directions. Paper is, or was, a considerable element in the detritus of war.

On that morning of 21st September the Irish Guards Group took up the lead, and tried to get up the road to Arnhem. They couldn't get far, losing tanks to enemy fire almost



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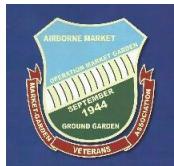
immediately.

The road runs on raised dykes, deployment for armour off it is impossible and it resembles an attempt to drive in the face of the enemy through a tunnel on a one-vehicle front. By this time troops of the American 82nd Division, crossing the wide river further downstream in borrowed and unfamiliar British flat-bottomed assault boats with canvas sides – and crossing it under fire, an outstandingly brave performance – had joined up with us on the north bank. An infantry division was brought up and later reached the south bank of the Neder Rijn, but by then our Airborne troops at Arnhem had been worsted. It was all over – had been over since early morning that day when gallant remnants of the British parachute battalion holding the north end of the Arnhem bridge were overwhelmed.



The tactical flaws in MARKET GARDEN have been discussed frequently and I can add little. The command and communication set-up was peculiar. Boy Browning had command of his 1st Airborne Corps divisions after they dropped or landed, yet the land battle would inevitably lie with XXX Corps (General Horrocks), under which were the advancing divisions, including our own. When artillery is required to support another formation (and the main weight of artillery would inevitably be with XXX Corps) such things matter.

Clearly there can be dispute until the end of time about dropping zones for the airborne divisions, and their distance from the sky objectives, the Arnhem and Nijmegen bridges; such disputes generally turn on factors of time, space, security and likely enemy reactions, and no doubt some judgements, with hindsight, could have been better made.



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There has also been plenty of argument about whether more could have been made of the comparative effectiveness of glider-borne troops (which land united rather than scattered and are thus more quickly and effectively deployed) over parachutes for the key objectives where time was of the essence. Also discussed incessantly has been the intelligence available to the airborne commanders and their deductions from it. It has been suggested that the presence in the Arnhem area of 9th and 10th SS Panzer Divisions – resting from the Eastern front, depleted in numbers but being refitted and always formidable – was or could have been known. 1st Airborne Division was dropped into something of a hornets' nest. It also seems curious that no airborne forces were dropped south of the Arnhem bridge – between the two bridges – until 21st September, when the battle for Arnhem was already lost.

This was attributed to weather but it was surely crucial to the concept. The ground forces' advance, in relationship to the amount of time the airborne forces would need to hold their objectives. This timetable was impossibly optimistic and implied a bad appreciation of terrain by planners. Furthermore the Nijmegen bridge- key to any attempt to drive to Arnhem – was perhaps not given a sufficiently decisive priority as an airborne objective. The British XXX Corps, the relieving force, therefore found two major rivers ahead of them after crossing the Maas, with bridges over both all or partly in German hands and with the town of Nijmegen thick with German troops. Not a situation lending itself to rapid solution.

Then there is the question of why the operation was aimed at Nijmegen and Arnhem – at two rivers – in the first place. To aim – if there was to be such an attempt at all – further upstream, at somewhere like Wesel, or Rees, where the Rhine was ultimately crossed, would have meant concentration on only one crossing. It has been said that this would have exposed the airborne invasion to dangerously heavy flak from the air defences of the Ruhr – it would have taken place some thirty miles nearer the latter. Thirty miles? I find the argument unconvincing. And our air forces had plenty of experience, by then, at blanketing off anti-aircraft fire with the weight of their preliminary bombardment if that was the need. But, in my opinion, more fundamental than any of these operational questions was the concept, the object, the overall purpose. This was defined by Montgomery – and Eisenhower supported the operation, and had assumed authority after Normandy as land forces commander – as to debouch from the Rhine, encircle the enemy forces in the Ruhr, isolate it, and thus make it improbable that Germany could continue the war into the winter. It must be self-evident that for this enormous advance by a most circuitous route the supply line of communication would have to be adequate. Huge tonnages would need to be shipped into the theatre and transported forwards. This placed an absolute premium not only on transport vehicles but on port and road capacity.

Yet in the autumn of 1944 much of the Allies' supplies were still coming from Normandy. The critical port was Antwerp, with huge capacity and suitably placed for an advance to or round the Ruhr; and Antwerp was not yet usable because the Germans had left strong forces on the bank of the Scheldt between Antwerp and the sea and they were still active. Without Antwerp MARKET GARDEN might have succeeded operationally had every factor or decision which turned out wrong gone the other way; but without Antwerp, I do not believe that MARKET GARDEN could possibly have been exploited for the (only) purpose for which it was devised. Some might rejoin that the existing line of communication might have still



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done the job (that is, enabled Montgomery's 21st Army Group to advance deep into Germany from Arnhem) had the American Armies further south been reined in. I doubt it – and doubt even more the strategic and political practicability of reining in General Patton, whose Third Army was racing towards the Southern Rhineland. As it was, the alleged reluctance of Eisenhouwer to give priority to Montgomery's thrust had no effect whatsoever on the way things went. Operation MARKET GARDEN was, in an exact sence, futile. It was a thoroughly bad idea, badly planned and only - tragically – redeemed by the outstanding courage of those who executed it.

*From the book "Wars and shadows"
memoirs of General Sir DAVID FRASER
(Grenadier Guards)*