

Operation Market Garden: Battle For Arnhem

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Thus, ended in failure the greatest airborne operation of the war All objectives save Arnhem had been won, but without Arnhem, the rest were as nothing.

Introduction

A number of us would have seen the World War II epic film, “**A Bridge Too Far**”. The film narrates the failure of **Operation Market Garden** during World War II, which was the Allied attempt to break through German lines and seize several bridges in occupied Netherlands, including one at Arnhem. The name of the film is said to be a comment attributed to British Lt Gen Frederick Browning, Deputy Commander of the First Allied Airborne Army, who told Field Mshl Bernard Montgomery, the operation’s architect, before the operation: “I think we may be going a bridge too far.” This article will discuss the conduct of operation **Market Garden**, with particular emphasis on Arnhem, in the backdrop of the events leading to the operation, and finally conclude with the possible reasons for the failure of the operation.



Background

After the Normandy landing in June 1944 and up to September 1944, the Allied Armies pushed the Germans, now disorganised, almost completely out of France and Belgium. It appeared that World War II was soon reaching a conclusion, the Allied frontline now at the border of Belgium, short of the Dutch border. The Allied Commanders decided to exploit the advantage and many ambitious plans were drawn up to push this idea, most notably Operation COMET. Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery, Commander of the British forces in Europe, 21 Army Group, suggested a limited airborne operation to be launched

on September 02, 1944, with 1st Airborne Division and the Polish 1st Independent Parachute Brigade securing several bridges over the Rhine to enable speedy advance into the North German Plain. However, it was not approved by Gen Dwight Eisenhower, Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces. Montgomery's persistent argument that an operation of such magnitude would lead to the war ending by December 1944 made Eisenhower accede; thus, the stage was set for Operation Market Garden, the most ambitious airborne operation and air-ground strategic operation till that time. Another significant reason behind this operation was possibly the chance to enter Germany and capture Berlin before the Russians did from the east. Montgomery planned to enter Germany over the Rhine, circumventing the Siegfried Line (the German defensive line) from the north. The Allied forces would cross the river Maas (Meuse river) and two branches of the Rhine (river Waal to the south and the Lower Rhine further north) and encircle Germany's industrial heartland in the Ruhr from the north.

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Operation Market Garden

The operation was to be executed by 21 Army Group in two parts – Operation Market (the plan for the airborne forces) and Operation Garden (the plan for the ground forces). D-Day was set for Sunday, September 17, 1944.

- **Operation Market: 1 Airborne Corps** (under Lt Gen Frederick Browning) to employ **101st US Airborne Division, 82nd Airborne Division** and **British 1st Airborne Division** in the vicinity of Eindhoven, Grave-Nijmegen and Arnhem, respectively, to seize bridges across several canals and the Maas, Waal and Lower Rhine rivers to enable opening of a corridor more than 80-km-long leading from Eindhoven northward upto Arnhem.
 - **101st US Airborne Division:** To capture two canal bridges and one small river bridge in area Son-Eindhoven and assist the ground forces to capture Eindhoven town.
 - **US 82nd Airborne Division:** To capture the Groesbeek heights near Nijmegen, and capture major bridges over the rivers Maas and Waal in area Grave- Nijmegen and a series of five other smaller bridges between the Maas and Waal.
 - **British 1st Airborne Division:** To capture, along with the Polish Independent Parachute Brigade, the main road bridge, a railway bridge and pontoon bridge at over the Lower Rhine at Arnhem.

- **Operation Garden:** XXX Corps to advance from the Belgian- Dutch border to the Zuider Zee along Axis Eindhoven-Nijmegen-Arnhem linking up with all the airborne forces above.

Operations of XXX Corps, 101st Airborne at Eindhoven and 82nd Airborne at Nijmegen

XXX Corps was to reach Arnhem in two to three days. There was only one 64-mile single road leading to Arnhem with the logistical nightmare of passing 20,000 vehicles along it in just three days. The road was only wide enough to allow two vehicles to move abreast and the terrain was ideal for rearguard and delaying actions by even a small enemy force. Even with minimal opposition, frequent blockages and delays were expected.

On September 17, at 1330 hours, the Guards Armoured Division spearheaded the advance of XXX Corps. It was expected that XXX Corps would link up with 101st Airborne in Eindhoven after just a few hours; however, at the end of the day on September 17, they had only advanced seven miles, half the distance. The Irish Guards halted overnight, stalling the advance for twelve hours. Isolated pockets of German infantry, armour and anti-tank weapons, using excellent cover along the road, ambushed and delayed XXX Corps. The vanguard entered Eindhoven at noon on September 18. Here, the advance was hindered by local Dutch people blocking the streets in celebration, and in a greater setback, due to the bridge on the Wilhelmina canal having been destroyed by the Germans before 101st Airborne could capture it. Bailey bridges were constructed and the canal bridged by September 19 morning, and the advance resumed; however, XXX Corps was now 36 hours behind schedule, 40 miles short of Arnhem. The leading elements, the Grenadier Guards, arrived in Nijmegen by 1000 hours on September 19.

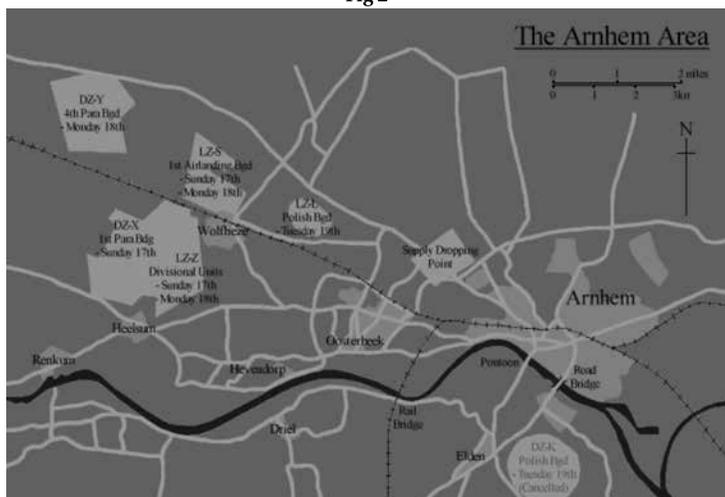
82nd Airborne had to capture intact the road bridges across the rivers Maas and Waal, both on the single road to Arnhem. The bridge on the Maas at Grave was captured quickly. However, 82nd had prioritised capture of Groesbeek Heights, a large high ground overlooking the entire region, critical for the unhindered advance of XXX Corps. Due to this, only 508 Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR) was spared for the capture of Nijmegen bridge and proved inadequate for the task. 82nd awaited XXX Corps before making a serious attempt to capture the bridge, by which time the German 10th SS Panzer Division secured the northern bank and gained a foothold on the southern bank. Finally, on September 20 afternoon, the Grenadier Guards and 505 PIR captured the southern end of the bridge after repeated attacks. 504 PIR, crossing the river in improvised boats, despite heavy

casualties, captured the northern end. The Nijmegen bridge was finally in Allied hands, with 11 miles now to Arnhem. However, progress was slow. XXX Corps halted for 19 hours to rest, refuel and rearm. The Germans, meanwhile, had formed a blocking line north of Nijmegen. When the Guards Armoured Division finally resumed advance at 1230 hours on September 21, they came to a complete standstill due to the German defences. Not having sufficient infantry to continue the advance any further, 43rd Division was called up to lead the advance to Driel through an alternate route. The leading elements of 43rd Division finally linked up with the Polish brigade by late evening of September 22.

Battle for Arnhem: 1st British Airborne Division

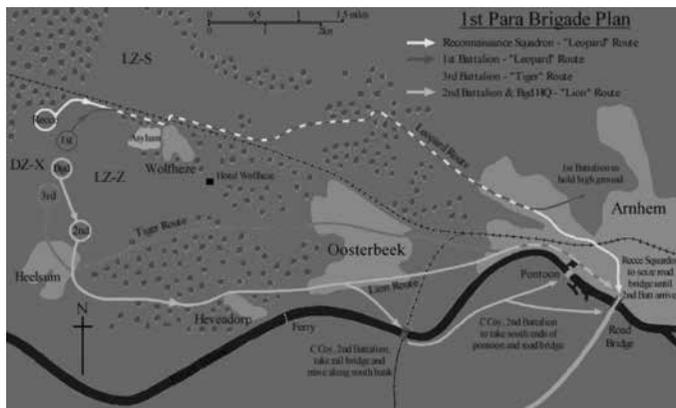
September 17: 1st Airborne Division air-dropped/air-landed into Arnhem. Only half of the division (1st Airlanding and 1st Parachute Brigades) arrived with the first lift. 1st Parachute Brigade – 1st, 2nd and 3rd Battalions began the advance to the bridge as planned, leaving the remaining troops to defend the Landing Zones/Dropping Zones (LZs/DZs). The brigade's Reconnaissance Squadron, tasked to capture the bridge if lightly held, was halted by a strong German defensive position within a short distance. 2nd Parachute Battalion advanced to the northern end of Arnhem bridge and set up defensive positions by evening, while other battalions were bogged down by the Germans.

Fig 2



September 18: 1st and 3rd Parachute Battalions pushed again towards Arnhem bridge and managed to reach 2 km short of the bridge, many of them having been killed, wounded or captured. The second lift, carrying 4th Parachute Brigade and the remaining sub-units of the Airlanding Brigade, delayed five hours, started dropping into the DZ at 1500 hours right into heavy enemy fire. By evening, the entire Airborne Division was in Arnhem.

Fig 3



September 19: 1st Brigade along with 11th Parachute of 4th Brigade attempted attacks to capture Arnhem bridge, however, German resistance was heavy and all battalions suffered heavy casualties and had to withdraw towards Oosterbeek. 2nd Battalion held on to the northern end of Arnhem bridge. Further north, 4th Parachute Brigade led an attempt to break through the German lines but communication difficulties and enemy resistance caused the attack to fail with heavy losses. The division, now dispersed, and under attack by the Germans from all sides, was unable to come to the assistance of 2nd Battalion.

September 20: 2nd Battalion, having heroically held the bridge for four days (the divisional task), now fighting an untenable battle, the Commanding Officer (CO) agreed to a truce to enable evacuation of his casualties, even if it meant himself and others becoming Prisoners of War (POWs). Meanwhile, the Airborne Divisional Commander decided to concentrate the balance of his forces into Oosterbeek, in a bid to consolidate and salvage the situation by creating a bridgehead north of the Rhine. The 4th Parachute Brigade fought a withdrawal into the Oosterbeek. By now, approximately 3,600 fighting men, of the original 10,000-strong force remained, the rest either dead, wounded, POWs/escapees, to defend Oosterbeek and await XXX Corps.

September 21-24: The Polish Brigade (less a battalion), delayed two whole days, dropped into Arnhem, at Driel, south of the Rhine, on the evening of September 21, amidst heavy German fire (one battalion dropped near Grave). Intended to reinforce the besieged Oosterbeek, the Poles attempted, but could not cross over the Rhine to the north, suffering 590 casualties. In addition to attacking Oosterbeek from all directions, the Germans now also divided their forces to address the Poles and to prevent the link up of XXX Corps and the recapture of the bridge. XXX Corps linked up with the Polish Brigade on September 22 evening. Over the next few days, attempts to cross the Rhine and secure landing areas on the northern bank failed. The German troops continued their attempts to breach the Oosterbeek defences and also succeeded in cutting off the Nijmegen-Arnhem road. With increased chances of getting completely trapped in Oosterbeek, the only way out for 1st Airborne was to cross to the south of the Rhine.

Onus of the defeat at Arnhem surely lay on the strategic planners, not on the men who executed the operations.

September 25: All day long, the Germans attempted to break the Oosterbeek defences. Operation Berlin, the withdrawal, commenced after last light, at 2200 hours. Forces from Oosterbeek were ferried by British and Canadian engineer units across the Rhine, covered by the Poles on the north bank. By September 26 morning, approximately 2,400 survivors were on the south bank, with 300 men having had to surrender on the north bank at first light. This force retreated to Nijmegen, the new forward defensive line of the Allied forces.

Reasons for Failure

The plan of the operation, though audacious and risky, appeared perfectly reasonable to attempt. With the German Army in chaotic retreat, and the Allies advancing at great speed, the airborne troops would face minimal opposition around the bridges and German defences on the front line would be minimal. One such operation would hasten the end of the war. These formed the broad assumptions for this ambitious plan. If any single reason for the failure can be pointed out, it must be overconfidence. The Allied Commanders appeared blind to the dangers due to their buoyant outlook. While apportioning reasons for failure is always an outcome of hindsight, and cannot be arrived at simplistically, the failings lay in the broad headings discussed hereunder.

- **Overambitious Plan:** The Allied plan itself was overambitious leading to underestimating the Germans and overestimating their own capabilities.

- **Short Planning Time:** The plan was approved on September 10. This gave only seven days from the plan being disseminated from the highest level to the commencement of execution at the tactical level. Given this short gestation time, and the pressure to conduct the operation, a number of deficiencies of the plan had to be waived.
- **Limitations of the Air Plan:** Due to shortage of aircraft, the air plan was made to suit the Air Force, not taking into consideration the requirements of the airborne forces. The principle of landing the forces as concentrated as possible was discarded, resulting in the piecemeal dropping of the airborne forces at Arnhem. As a result, concentrated force could not be applied on the Germans. The DZs and LZs were 8-16 km away from the objective, again wresting away from the paratroopers the initiative of surprise. In sum, the essential fundamental of a successful airborne operation, surprise, was lost.
- **Weather:** The weather was predicted to be bad and would affect the air operations, after the first day. The second and third lifts delayed crucial reinforcements at Arnhem and later air supply was also critically affected. The Polish brigade arrived two days late and all air operations from September 22-24 were cancelled.
- **Communication:** Available radio equipment permitted communication between units within 3-5 km and between the units and brigade up to 8 km. However, given the disposition of troops in LZ/DZ and operating areas, units would remain out of communication for long periods. Moreover, communication equipment to call for air support also was limited and not properly planned for.
- **Intelligence:** Intelligence inputs indicated anti-aircraft threat at the objective at Arnhem, leading to planning DZs and LZs at a great distance. On the ground, however, the anti-aircraft threat was limited. Despite information of two German Panzer formations having moved into Arnhem, no importance was given to such inputs and no changes incorporated into the plan for the threats arising out of these.
- **The Dutch Resistance:** The British had not cultivated or, consequently, exploited the Dutch Resistance as the French Resistance had been in France. Due to British mistrust of the Dutch Resistance for various reasons, the opportunity for invaluable assistance which could have been gained at Arnhem by the airborne forces was lost.

Conclusion

In retrospect, Operation Market Garden is regarded as a blunder that unnecessarily sent many soldiers to their deaths. However, the courage and determination of the men who fought stands glorious in the truest traditions of a valiant military, especially the defence by 2 Parachute Battalion at Arnhem bridge, and those who fought within the Oosterbeek perimeter. The onus of the defeat at Arnhem surely lay on the strategic planners, not on the men who executed the operations. As a counter-argument, it must be added that it is often audacious plans and gambles that have changed the fortunes of military campaigns. If Operation Market Garden had succeeded, World War II could have ended by December 1944, the Western Allies would have been in Berlin weeks before the Russians, and the course of history, particularly Europe, might have been very different. Eventually, the Russians did manage to capture Berlin and hoist their flag over the Reichstag in May 1945, signalling the end of the war.

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Bibliography and Recommended Reading

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