

A Short Summary of the Battle of Arnhem

(version 8 July 2011)



Utrechtseweg 232
NL-6862 AZ Oosterbeek
Tel.: 0031 26 3337710
airbornemuseum.nl

The beginning of World War Two

In 1933 Adolf Hitler rises to power in Germany. He wants to turn Europe into one large German empire. From 1938 onwards his German army conquers large parts of Europe, and on 10 May 1940 they invade the Netherlands. The occupation means that the Germans are in total control. There is no freedom for the people, and it is very dangerous to say what you think. The Western Allied campaign for the liberation of Europe starts on 6 June 1944 in France with a major attack: D-day. At the beginning of September 1944 the Allied reach the border between Belgium and the Netherlands!

The Battle of Arnhem

The photograph shows Allied paras landing near Arnhem. The day is 17 September 1944. The southern part of the Netherlands has already been liberated. The Allies made plans to conquer the main bridges at Arnhem, Nijmegen and Eindhoven, in order to liberate the rest of the Netherlands and to push through into Germany and defeat Hitler. This operation is called "Market Garden" and the Battle of Arnhem is an important part of this operation.

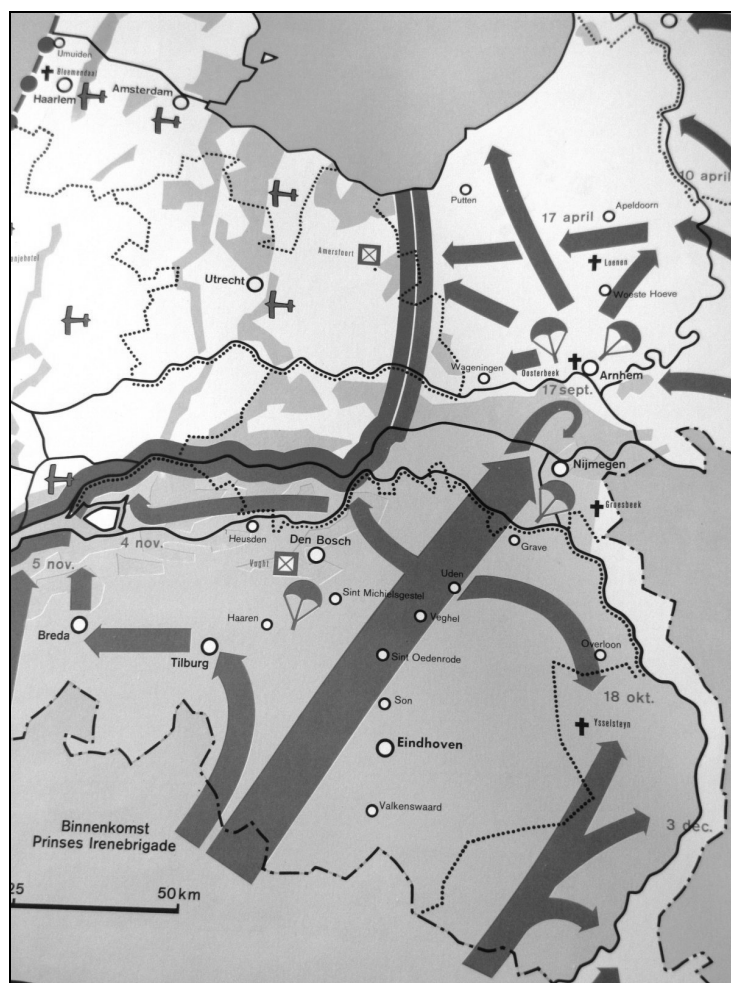
More than 10,000 soldiers were involved in the Battle of Arnhem. This battle was part of the largest Airborne landing operation ever. This mission should have been a surprise, but the Allies ran into bad luck. A strong German army with tanks and heavy artillery happened to be in the area. Heavy fighting took place for nine days, and only 600 paras were able to reach the bridge over the Lower Rhine. They held it for a few days, but had to surrender as the German force was too strong. During the Battle of Arnhem more than 1,800 Allies, and about the same number of German soldiers, were killed, as well as 1,000 Dutch civilians. Only 2,300 Allies succeeded in a safe retreat across the Rhine, the others were captured or injured. More than 1,700 Allies, including Polish and Canadian soldiers, are buried on the Airborne Cemetery at Oosterbeek.

Arnhem, a deserted city

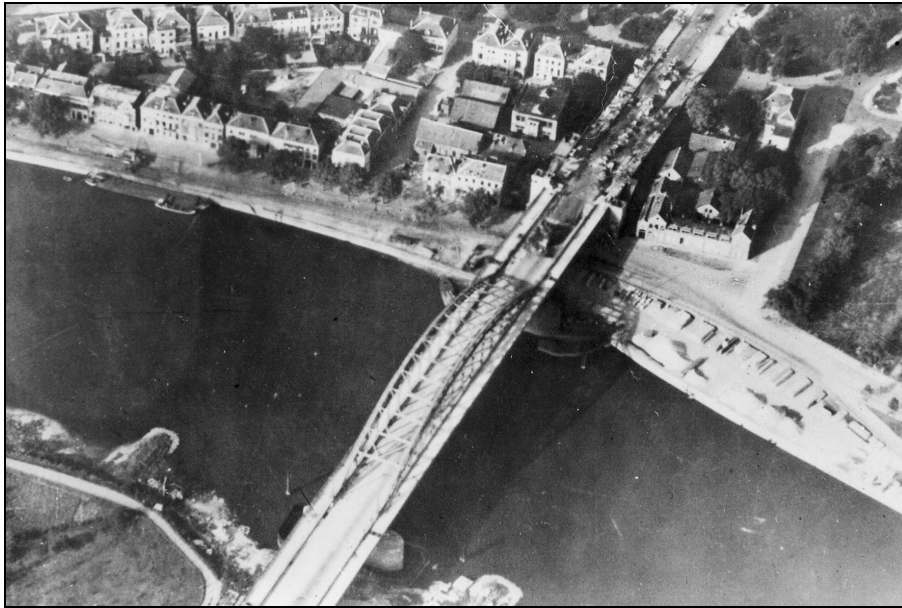
After the landings and the fighting at Arnhem bridge, the Germans gave orders to evacuate all civilians. All the people living in Arnhem, Oosterbeek, Renkum, Heelsum and Wageningen were evicted from their homes and forced to find shelter elsewhere. Their abandoned homes were then systematically looted by the Germans. Lorries, trains and ships were loaded with furniture and other goods and brought to Germany. At the end of September 1944 Arnhem was a deserted city, and at the end of the war the city was largely destroyed, including the road bridge which was hit by an allied bombardment in October 1944. Out of more than 23,000 houses, only 145 were left undamaged.

The Hunger Winter ("Dutch Famine")

The result of the failure of the Battle of Arnhem was that the western and northern part of the Netherlands could not be liberated before the winter of 1944. After the call from London by Queen Wilhelmina, the Dutch railway workers went on strike in order to aid the Allied September advance. The Germans banned all inland freight movement, thus preventing food being transported to the Dutch people. Hunger and cold caused more than 20,000 deaths amongst the Dutch population in the Hunger Winter.



Background information on the Battle of Arnhem



The Arnhem bridge plays a mayor role in the liberation of the Netherlands. It is September 1944. Our liberators, the British, the Polish and the Americans, try to take the bridge, but fail. The German defence is too strong.

At war

In 1944 the Netherlands have already suffered for four years under German occupation. The Germans not only control the Netherlands, but a large part of Europe. But liberation is at hand.

6 June 1944

On this day American, British, Canadian and French troops (the Allies) land on the beaches of Normandy on the French coast. They move to the north in the direction of Belgium and the Netherlands. They plan to go to the German capital Berlin and defeat Adolf Hitler, the German dictator. Heavy fighting takes place in France and Belgium, and thousands of soldiers and civilians are killed. But the Allies keep on going, and liberate one city after another. Paris is liberated at the end of August 1944, and Brussels and Antwerp follow suit.

Montgomery's plan

British Fieldmarshal Bernard Law Montgomery launches a plan for a swift liberation of the Netherlands. His plan is called "*Market Garden*". **Market** stands for the securing of the bridges over the major waterways (the rivers Meuse, Waal and Rhine) by Airborne Forces. **Garden** stands for the advance of the ground troops (XXX Corps) from Eindhoven, in order to reach the bridge at Arnhem within three days. As soon as the bridges are secured, the Allied Forces will move on to IJsselmeer. Then they will turn east and move into the industrial heart of Germany (Ruhr), thus bypassing the German Siegfried Line. It is a complicated plan, as the bridges are deep in enemy territory, a long distance from liberated Belgium. But Montgomery is optimistic, and he does not expect much opposition by the Germans.

17 September 1944 : Operation Market Garden begins

On Sunday 17 September the first planes with Airborne Forces take off from several airfields in England. The 1st British Airborne Division lands near Arnhem, and American paras are dropped at Son, Veghel and Sint Oedenrode. The Germans are completely surprised by this sudden attack, and therefore there is not much resistance on this first day. An hour after the landings, the Americans secure the bridge over the river Meuse at Grave, and a bridge over the Meuse-Waal canal. According to plan they are to move to Arnhem via the bridge over the Waal river at Nijmegen. But the Germans have regrouped, and put up a hard fight.

Fighting at Arnhem bridge

Only a small force of some 740 British troops under the command of Lt Col John Frost, CO 2nd PARA Bn, is successful in reaching the Arnhem bridge over the Lower Rhine. As they manage to hold one end of the bridge for a couple of days, but are continually attacked, shelled and mortared, before being forced to surrender. The Germans appear to have a lot of heavy guns, and they block all roads into Arnhem. The other Airborne soldiers fail to reach the small force at the bridge, who are left to their own devices. Nijmegen bridge should have been secured on Mon 18 Sep, but that only happens on Thursday 20 September. They are running out of time. The longer the delay, the heavier the German resistance.

What goes wrong?

Many things go wrong with Montgomery's plan. For a couple of days England is covered in fog. The second airlift has to be postponed, hampering reinforcement. Some of the dropzones have been captured by the Germans, who lay their hands on ammunition and other supplies. Another problem is the failure of the British Airborne's radio communications. The loss of communication between the British and American troops means they are not able to pass on information about new and safe dropzones. But the biggest setback is the presence of German tanks. Nobody expected them to be there.

Hartenstein Hotel Oosterbeek

Major-General 'Roy' Urquhart, Commander 1st British Airborne Division, is using the Hartenstein Hotel in Oosterbeek as headquarters. He leads his men from this position. After the fighting at the bridge has ceased, the remnants of the Division retreat to Oosterbeek. Hartenstein becomes the centre of the battlefield. The British troops fight courageously for a couple of days, but the supply drops are almost all collected by the Germans. Soon there is a shortage of food, medicines and ammunition, and on 25 September the decision is made to withdraw the remnants of the Division across the river Rhine. The withdrawal (Operation Berlin) is carried out in the night of the 25 and 26 September.

The Polish forces at Driel

The original plan was to drop the 1st Polish Independent Parachute Brigade on the southside of the bridge at Arnhem on 19 September. Their commanding officer is Major-General Stanislaw Sosabowski. But because of unfavourable weather conditions, the Polish paras end up two days later in the Driel area (on the other side of the river Rhine). Instead of going to the bridge at Arnhem, their new task will be to reinforce the British troops at Oosterbeek. Eventually, under heavy gunfire and after suffering many casualties, about 200 Polish paras succeed in crossing the river Rhine in some dinghies.

A bridge too far

After they fail to establish a bridgehead over the Lower Rhine, the Allies have to cease fighting at Arnhem. Their plan to move from the Belgian border all the way to the Arnhem bridge in only three days proved to be too optimistic. They managed to take the bridge at Nijmegen. But Arnhem proved to be "**A Bridge Too Far**".

Facts

- In 1944 the Netherlands had suffered already four years under German occupation. But liberation was at hand!
- On 6 June 1944, American, British, Canadian, and French troops land on the shores of France. This day is called **D-Day**.
- It is a speedy advance. Paris, Brussels and Antwerp are liberated.
- Montgomery makes a plan for a swift liberation of the Netherlands. He wants to secure the bridges over the main waterways, move to IJsselmeer, and then move east into Germany.
- It is an audacious plan. But Montgomery thinks the German army is not so strong anymore.
- On 17 September 1944 the first planes take off from England. The Germans are taken by surprise, but they soon regroup and fight back.
- Only a small force of British soldiers reach the Arnhem bridge over the Lower Rhine.
- They are enclosed by the Germans. The other Allied troops are unable to come to their aid, and they are eventually forced to surrender.
- The Allies have failed to secure the Arnhem bridge.
- After nine days the British troops withdraw across the Rhine. The Battle of Arnhem is over.

Do you know this?

Montgomery's plan is known as "*Operation Market Garden*". Do you know what the words **Market** and **Garden** mean in this context?

A British Airborne Intelligence Officer, Major Brian Urquhart, told Montgomery that he had seen reports and air-reconnaissance photos of German tanks around Arnhem. He was worried about the plan. Montgomery thought he was troubled and sent him home on sick leave. Afterwards it turned out this officer had been right!

The southern part of the Netherlands had been liberated in September 1944. The northern part on the other side of the main waterways was not yet free, and suffered during the long Hunger Winter. About 20,000 Dutch civilians died.

After the Battle of Arnhem the people who lived in Arnhem were forced to leave their homes. Arnhem had become a ghost town. The Germans emptied factories, offices, warehouses and houses. Furniture, bedding, clothes and other things were systematically taken. Even a few bank safes were robbed. Arnhem suffered severe damages. Do you know what the Germans did with all those goods?

At the beginning of the Battle of Arnhem the Dutch railway workers complied with the Dutch government's appeal for a nationwide strike. Trains stopped running completely. The Germans brought their own trains to the Netherlands for their own use.

In August 1944 Anne Frank and her family were betrayed and taken from Amsterdam to Westerbork concentration camp. On Sunday 3 September, only two weeks before the start of the Battle of Arnhem, the **very last** train left Westerbork for Poland. Anne and her family were taken to Auschwitz on this train.