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MARKET GARDEN:
WAS INTELLIGENCE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE FAILURE?

by

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Abstract

Why did Operation MARKET GARDEN fail? Was it due to poor decision making, faulty planning, or bad intelligence? After outlining the operation's plan and objectives, this paper evaluates several theories about one of the most famous military failures of World War II. Each theory is examined in light of historical records and biographical accounts that detail what MARKET GARDEN planners and commanders knew, and when they knew it. The paper concludes that, while intelligence analysts could have done a better job, it is unfair for them to shoulder most of the blame. Strategic and operational planners were also at fault for pressing forward with the operation, in spite of known risks, in order to test airborne operations before the war ended. Furthermore, Field Marshal Montgomery, the operational commander, must take responsibility for dismissing intelligence reports that contradicted his situation assessment and challenged the wisdom of his decision to execute Operation MARKET GARDEN as planned.

Chapter 1

Introduction

In *Captains Without Eyes*, Lyman Kirkpatrick mentions several possible reasons for the failure of Operation MARKET GARDEN. He comes to the conclusion that poor intelligence was the undoing of the operation. Others disagree, blaming operators for failing to heed valid intelligence and for being too hasty to implement such a daring plan. A third school of thought suggests that the Germans miraculously recovered just in time to make one last stand at Arnhem, and this recovery was beyond the capability of the intelligence community to predict. Certainly, there are many other factors that contributed to the failure of the operation, to include bad weather, but this paper will focus on the role intelligence played in the failure of MARKET GARDEN.

First, a brief description of the plan is necessary. Three months after the successful Allied amphibious assault at Normandy, German forces had retreated to the Netherlands. On 17 September 1944, the Allies attempted to exploit previous success with the largest airborne operation in history, MARKET GARDEN. The size of the operation was enormous: it included over 5,000 transport aircraft, 2,613 gliders, and almost 5,700 sorties of bombers, fighters and other close air support aircraft.¹ The plan was implemented in the hopes of bringing a swift end to the war against Germany. By early September the collapse of Germany seemed imminent. A much quoted intelligence

summary from the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces G-2 expressed the situation in this manner: “The August battles have done it and the enemy in the west has had it. Two and a half months of bitter fighting has brought the end of the war in Europe within sight, almost within reach.”² By September, however, one problem remained: the Allied breakout following Normandy had been too successful and the Allies had outrun their logistics tail.³ Particularly frustrating was the fact that, even though the Allies had liberated Brussels in August and captured the port at Antwerp in September, they were unable to open the port because the sea approaches remained in German hands. This left the enormous Allied military expedition with no major European supply port near enough to be useful.⁴ These circumstances put enormous pressure on Eisenhower to prioritize logistics between two of his subordinates, Montgomery and Patton. Both generals tried to convince Eisenhower that their effort was worthy of all available resources. Somewhat owing to politics, Eisenhower eventually gave in to Montgomery.⁵

Notes

¹ Piper, Arnold C., Major (USA), “Intelligence Planning for Airborne Operations: A Perspective from Operation Market-Garden,” Fort Leavenworth Kansas, School of Advanced Military Studies, United States Army Command and General Staff College, 1997, p. 2.

² Kirkpatrick Jr, Lyman B., *Captains Without Eyes*, London, the Macmillan Company, 1969, p. 204.

³ Ibid, p. 205.

⁴ Urquhart, Brian, *A Life in Peace and War*, New York, Harper and Row, 1987, p. 69.

⁵ Piper, p. 10. “The opportunity to make a swift advance through German defenses to seize operational decisive points such as the Ruhr, Saar and bridges across the Rhine before the German army could regain the initiative was irresistible to Eisenhower. Eisenhower commented after the war that he was willing to wait on all other operations to gain a bridgehead over the Rhine River.”

Chapter 2

The Plan

The key objective was to gain a bridgehead over the Rhine River.¹ The timing was urgent because Eisenhower did not want the Germans to regain the initiative. Due to the level of urgency, Montgomery's troops had only one week to plan, with D-Day set for 17 September. According to Lyman Kirkpatrick, Montgomery's plan was bold and daring: "He proposed with one blow to cross all the water barriers standing between the western Allies and the key German industrial area of the Ruhr, to turn the end of the Siegfried line in the north and to open the way across the North German plains."²

With the Rhine River crossed, the heart of Germany would be exposed. The plan called for forces under Montgomery to seize six bridges from northern Belgium north through Holland, with the bridge at Arnhem the last and most crucial. Anticipating that ground forces could not move fast enough to capture the bridges before the Germans could destroy them, Montgomery planned to drop airborne troops in the area of these bridges to secure them until the ground forces arrived. The airborne part of the operation was code-named MARKET.

The 2nd British Army, with the 30th British Corps as the armored spearhead, planned to attack along the narrow axis seized in advance by the airborne formations.³ This was the GARDEN portion of MARKET GARDEN. If successful, this ground

operation would cut off the land exit for the Germans in western Holland. The advance was to be on a very narrow front, with only one road most of the way.

Notes

¹ Hamilton, Nigel, *Monty*, New York, Random House, 1981, p. 447. Mentioned by Eisenhower in a conversation with Montgomery.

² Kirkpatrick, p. 208.

³ Piper, p. 16.

Chapter 3

Results and Assessments

The battle of Arnhem, as MARKET GARDEN is also called, lasted from September 17 to September 26. It failed to accomplish its objective of securing a crossing of the Lower Rhine. It failed also to open a passageway across the North German plains to Berlin. Total casualties, including both airborne and those from 30th Corps, topped 11,000.¹ While five of the six bridges were successfully captured, the bridge at Arnhem was not. Airborne troops could not hold the bridge at Arnhem long enough for armored reinforcements to arrive due to greater than expected German resistance both at Arnhem itself and along the route traveled by 30th Corps. Most importantly, the operation did not cause a German collapse, as Montgomery had hoped.²

There are many theories as to why the operation failed. The one most often given is that the operation failed as a result of major intelligence errors, specifically in two areas, a gross underestimation of the enemy and serious misjudgment of the terrain.³ At face value these concerns sound like failure of the intelligence community to provide adequate information. However, some have made the case that adequate information was available and that this information was overlooked due to euphoria brought on by recent successes.

As the most critical case in point, let us examine intelligence information for the battle at Arnhem. Defeat at Arnhem was in part due to the fact that Allied paratroopers were told to expect light resistance from no more than 2,000 recruits just learning the rudiments of soldiering, when instead the Allies were met by 6,000 battle-hardened veterans, equipped with artillery and tanks.⁴ Were intelligence reports about troop strength at Arnhem inaccurate? The answer may be that it depends on which report you chose to believe.

Major General Roy Urquhart, the commander of 1st British Airborne Division, was in charge of planning airborne operations into Arnhem. He stated that there was little information at his level concerning troop strength at the target. However, his superior, LTG Browning, told him that his forces “were not likely to encounter anything more than a German brigade group supported by a few tanks.”⁵ While the lack of detailed intelligence on German troop strength did not keep Urquhart and his men from planning, there nevertheless was more complete intelligence available at higher levels. In fact, the 10 September 21st Army Group intelligence summary (INTSUM) stated that “elements of the Second SS Panzer Corps, the 9th (Hohenstaufen) and 10th (Frunderberg) S Panzer Divisions, were reported to be refitting in the Arnhem area.”⁶

The information in this intelligence summary confirmed information from another source, the Dutch resistance forces.⁷ This information was eventually made known to MG Urquhart and his men. But now they were faced with conflicting intelligence. Lyman Kirkpatrick believes that this conflict was excusable given that planners only had one week to plan a very complex operation and there simply was not time to collect additional information on the enemy forces in the area. Major Brian Urquhart, the staff

intelligence officer for the 1st British Airborne Corps under LTG Browning and no relation to MG Urquhart, disagrees with Kirkpatrick. He personally ensured that Browning saw the 10 September INTSUM but was told by Browning “that the reports were probably wrong, and that in any case the German troops were refitting and probably not up to much fighting.”⁸ To convince Browning otherwise, Major Urquhart ordered that oblique photographs be taken of German troops in the area of the Arnhem drop zone from low altitude. The pictures confirmed the 10 September INTSUM and showed German tanks and armored vehicles parked under the trees within easy range of the 1st Airborne Division’s main drop zone. Browning again dismissed this evidence.⁹

Major Urquhart was not the only person worried about German troop strength at Arnhem. In fact, increasing indications of German panzer divisions refitting in the area disturbed Montgomery’s chief of intelligence. Additionally, Montgomery’s own chief of staff warned him about increasing enemy resistance.¹⁰ On 16 September the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces weekly INTSUM confirmed reports of two panzer formations in the vicinity of Nijmegen and Arnhem. This news alarmed General Eisenhower’s chief of staff, LTG Walter B. Smith. Smith tried to convince Montgomery to greatly increase the number of troops dropped into these two areas, but the British general “ridiculed the idea.”¹¹ Obviously airborne troops were concerned about German strength because they would be dropping in with little anti-armor capability. Montgomery, though, seemed to be relying on the fact that the German Army would be too demoralized to put up a good fight. Critics among the intelligence community disagreed even before the plan was finalized, supposing that “even if the German Army

was completely demoralized, it seemed unlikely that they would fail to put up a strong resistance on the borders of the Fatherland.”¹²

While intelligence concerning German troop strength at Arnhem was not perfect, it was plentiful and available to key decision makers such as Montgomery, Eisenhower, Browning, and their staffs. However, assessments done by the various intelligence directorates did not agree concerning the key issue of German resistance. Should this circumstance be construed as an intelligence failure?

There are two major camps on this issue. One camp focuses on the time constraints of leaders and the confusion that results from innumerable publications. To this camp, quantity counteracts quality.¹³ Simply put, commanders do not have enough time to do the analysis themselves, so the intelligence community should weigh all factors and speak with one voice.

Others believe that fostering multiple viewpoints is more prudent. Individuals in this camp believe that no relevant assessments should be suppressed.¹⁴ This approach is more likely to insure that all possible options are represented. The problem, of course, is that this approach demands the operator or commander make the tough choices. According to Richard K. Betts, a Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institute,

In the best known cases of intelligence failure, the most crucial mistakes have seldom been made by collectors of raw information, occasionally by professionals who produce finished analyses, but most often by the decision makers who consume the products of intelligence services.¹⁵

The key element is appreciation of relevant data. This seems to be the case for those planning MARKET GARDEN at the operational level. Commanders at the operational level had sufficient evidence to merit a serious rethinking of the airborne portion of the operation but chose not to believe this information was worthy of consideration. In fact,

the notion that the Germans were a completely beaten enemy incapable of resistance seems to have been a common belief immediately preceding the operation. The Germans seemed ripe for defeat. Consequently, there was an overriding desire to implement the plan as rapidly as possible for several reasons.

First, both Montgomery and Eisenhower were anxious to test airborne operations before the war came to an abrupt end. According to MG Robert Urquhart's biographer, John Baynes,

At the beginning of September, commanders at all levels from Eisenhower down were talking of the war being over before Christmas. For that to happen without having ever made full use of the airborne force, to whose creation so much expense and effort had been devoted, was unthinkable.¹⁶

To some extent it could be argued that previously cancelled airborne operations had been contrived for the sake of using airborne troops as much as to achieve some tactical or operational goal.

Second, Montgomery wanted to secure for Britain the honor of dealing Germany the final blow. This is understandable given the fact that Britain had been fighting the Germans for years before the US entered the war. But the situation became more urgent once Patton's forces successfully broke out of Normandy. Indeed, one source claimed that "Montgomery was chagrined by the spectacular successes of Patton, and was seeking, contrary to his reputation for caution, a British masterstroke to end the war."¹⁷ In fact, during one interview Eisenhower stated that Montgomery was intent on personally ensuring "that the Americans received no credit for their part in the war effort."¹⁸

Inaccurate details regarding geographic features is the other area typically cited as an intelligence failure that caused MARKET GARDEN to be unsuccessful. Planners for MARKET GARDEN needed details on terrain for two reasons—to properly select drop

zone locations and to determine the best avenue of approach to Arnhem and the other five bridges.

The official U.S. Army History of MARKET GARDEN blames Allied intelligence errors regarding terrain and degree of enemy flak for the fact that the British drop zone was placed too far from the objective (some six to eight miles from the bridge).¹⁹ It does seem inexplicable that accurate geographic information was unavailable, especially considering the proximity of the Dutch underground. Here again the problem seems to have been whether or not key persons believed the sources available to them. U.S. Army historians heap glorious praise on the Dutch underground for being “one of the most highly organized and efficient resistance units in all of Europe.”²⁰ However, Montgomery was suspicious and distrustful of the Dutch underground. Interestingly, on 6 September Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands had tried to convince Montgomery that it was in the Allies best interest to drive the Germans out of Holland immediately. Bernhard told Montgomery that Dutch underground reports indicated the Germans were in retreat and would pose little opposition. To this statement Montgomery replied, “I don’t trust these reports...just because the Dutch resistance claim the Germans have been retreating doesn’t necessarily mean they are still retreating.” Bernhard was left with the impression that Montgomery did not trust the Dutch underground at all.²¹ This exchange is telling in two ways. First, it indicates that Dutch intelligence was at least underutilized if not totally ignored. Second, Montgomery’s caution concerning the retreating Germans is in curious contrast to some of his statements made days later that the Germans did not pose a credible threat to MARKET GARDEN.

There is another reason unrelated to terrain for the fact that the Arnhem drop zone was so far from the bridge. The potential problem was the high concentration of flak around the bridge. In fact, according to MG Urquhart's biographer, John Baynes, this concern was the primary reason for not dropping troops closer to the bridge, not soft terrain.²² Here again, from the broader perspective, this concern is not consistent with Montgomery's belief that the Germans would not put up much of a fight. Certainly, Montgomery as the overall commander could have ordered the airlift forces to use the closer drop zone, especially given the relative importance of securing the bridge.

Lyman Kirkpatrick believes that the most costly mistake, beyond misjudging the nature of the terrain at Arnhem or even miscalculating Germany's will to fight, was the assumption that 30th Corps could advance appropriately along the very limited road network between the Belgian border and Arnhem.²³ The terrain between the first bridge across the Meuse canal and Arnhem was a patchwork of polder land, dikes, elevated roadways, and easily defended waterways. Because of these waterways, the texture of the soil, and innumerable drainage ditches and dikes, a vehicular column would be road-bound for a majority of the approach to Arnhem. Perhaps the most striking feature of the terrain is the extent and density of the vegetation. Almost every path and road is lined on either side by trees. Trees or large bushes top almost every field and every dike. The result during spring, summer and early fall is severe restriction of observation.²⁴ On this issue the Dutch clearly should have been consulted. From the moment Dutch generals learned of the route that Horrocks' 30th Corps columns proposed to take, they had anxiously tried to dissuade anyone who would listen, warning of the dangers of using exposed dike roads. "In our military staff colleges," Bernard says, "we had run countless

studies on the problem. We knew tanks simply could not operate along these roads without infantry.”²⁵ General Horrocks, himself, was uneasy about the plan. In fact, in his biography, he gives the indication that he was well aware of the tough terrain, claiming that “the terrain made the desert seem like child’s play.”²⁶ Furthermore, Horrocks states there was only one road on which to make their approach, giving the impression that no alternate routes were considered. This would confirm Prince Bernhard’s claim that the Dutch were never consulted on this important issue. Determining the best avenue of approach, based on terrain and all other factors, would have come under the purview of the intelligence community. In this instance, it seems that lack of complete intelligence did extremely hinder operation MARKET GARDEN.

Notes

¹ Macdonald, Charles B., *U.S. Army in World War II, The Siegfried Line Campaign*, Washington D.C., Office of the Chief of Military History, US Army, 1963, p. 199.

² Ibid, p. 198.

³ Kirkpatrick, p. 223.

⁴ Ibid, p. 219.

⁵ Baynes, John, *Urquhart of Arnhem*, London Brassey’s, 1993, p. 95.

⁶ Urquhart, Brian, p. 72.

⁷ Ibid, p. 72.

⁸ Ibid, p. 72

⁹ Ibid, p. 73

¹⁰ Hamilton, p. 459

¹¹ Macdonald, Charles B., p. 122.

¹² Urquhart, Brian, p. 70.

¹³ Betts, Richard K. “Analysis, War, and Decision: Why Intelligence Failures are Inevitable,” from *Power, Strategy, and Security*, edited by Klaus Knorr, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1983, p228.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 226.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 211.

¹⁶ Baynes, p. 83. Additionally, Brian Urquhart describes LtG Boy Browning’s (the deputy commander for Operation Market) strong desire to employ airborne troops because “he had not yet commanded troops in battle in World War II.” See page 69 *A Life in Peace and War*. Also, Cornelius Ryan describes how Generals Hap Arnold and

Notes

George Marshall were very anxious to see airborne troops in action and were taking every opportunity to urge Eisenhower to do so at the earliest opportunity. See page 83 of *A Bridge Too Far*.

¹⁷ Urquhart, Brian, p. 69.

¹⁸ Ryan, Cornelius, *A Bridge Too Far*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1974, footnote on page 76.

¹⁹ Macdonald, p. 200.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 184.

²¹ Ryan, Cornelius, p. 80.

²² Baynes, p. 93.

²³ Kirkpatrick, p. 226.

²⁴ Macdonald, pp. 130 and 131.

²⁵ Ryan, Cornelius, pp. 508-510. Particularly interesting is a quote on the bottom of page 509 from a Dutch officer who explained, "one of the problems in the Dutch Staff College examination dealt solely with the correct way to attack Arnhem from Nijmegen. There were two choices: a) attack up the main road; or b) drive up it for 1-2 miles, turn left, effect a crossing of the Rhine and come around in a flanking movement. Those who chose to go straight up the road failed the examination. Those who turned left and then moved up to the river passed."

²⁶ Warner, *Horrocks: The General Who Led from the Front*, London, Hamish Hamilton Ltd., 1984, p. 112.

Chapter 4

Conclusion

It is unfair to say that intelligence oversights and mistakes led to the failure of MARKET GARDEN for several reasons. First of all, it is not true that intelligence failed to paint an accurate picture of German troop strength and capability. The correct information was available along with accurate analysis. True, not all intelligence summaries agreed, but there was enough of a disagreement to warrant more investigation and certainly greater caution. Secondly, it is not true that failure to accurately assess the terrain around Arnhem caused the Allies to pick drop zones six to eight miles from the bridge. In fact, terrain was only a minor issue. Furthermore, on this issue Montgomery was inconsistent. If the German troop strength was deemed too weak to challenge ground forces, then why wasn't it deemed too weak to challenge airlift assets?

The one instance that is clearly an intelligence failure was the lack of coordination with Dutch forces about alternate routes to Arnhem. However, this in itself did not cause MARKET GARDEN to fail. To the intelligence community's credit, they did accurately describe the difficult nature of the route that 30th Corps was to take.

If blame must be assigned, responsibility for MARKET GARDEN's failure can be given to planners at the strategic and operational levels who seemed hell-bent on carrying out the operation for at least two reasons. First, there was an ever-increasing

push to test airborne operations before the war came to an abrupt end. Second, Montgomery pressed the urgency of the operation in part to make sure that Britain got credit for delivering the knock out punch.

On this second point, General Miles Dempsey, commander of the British 2nd Army, provides evidence that the commander of an operation can significantly slant the perspective of the intelligence effort. According to Ryan, Dempsey believed Dutch reports regarding German troop strength but couldn't convince Montgomery. Dempsey did, however, send this information on to Browning's 1st Airborne Corps. But since Montgomery didn't endorse this information it gained no credibility. In fact, according to Ryan, reports of panzers in Holland were completely discounted at Montgomery's own headquarters. In Montgomery's own words, "We were wrong in supposing it (the 2nd S.S. Panzer Corps) could not fight effectively."¹ It might be more accurate to say that Montgomery was wrong and convinced all his subordinates to agree with him.

Notes

¹ Kirkpatrick, p. 224.

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