

OPERATION MARKET GARDEN

THE BATTLE FOR ARNHEM

By Captain Brodie K. Hoyer

Each session of the Engineer Captain's Career Course (ECCC) is required to write an article analyzing a historical battle, and the best overall professional article receives the Thomas Jefferson Writing Excellence Award. This article was judged the best article of ECCC 4-07.

For the paratroopers of Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) John Frost's 2d Parachute Battalion, success in Operation Market Garden must have seemed almost inevitable. After an unopposed daylight jump, they were greeted in the Dutch village of Hevedorp—not by German opposition but by throngs of civilians who paraded them through the streets as liberators. Despite this auspicious beginning, LTC Frost and his entire battalion would be lost within three days and the remainder of the British 1st Airborne Division would be forced into a desperate retreat back across the Rhine River.

Operation Market Garden was a World War II attempt by Allied airborne and ground troops to capture a series of bridges over Dutch waterways in order to open a way across the Rhine River into the Ruhr Valley, Germany's industrial heartland. It was the largest airborne operation of the war and the costliest. The British assault on the Dutch town of Arnhem was the biggest failure of the operation because the British landed too far from their targets and German defenses were

much stronger than expected. Of the 10,000 British airborne troops who landed around Arnhem, 1,130 were killed and 6,450 were captured.¹

Battle for Arnhem

The battle for Arnhem (17-26 September 1944) was fought between the 1st Airborne Division under the command of Major General (MG) R.E. Urquhart and hastily formed elements of the German *Kampfgruppe* (KG) (or Task Force) *Hohenstauffen*, commanded by LTC Walther Harzer. The outcome of the battle was unexpected, primarily because of the original comparison of forces. The 1st Airborne Division was a fully manned division, comprising three British airborne brigades, an airlanding brigade, and a Polish parachute brigade in reserve. KG *Hohenstauffen* was a division on paper only, with a true strength of little over 3,500 men.² In reality, it was the battle-worn remnants of the 9th Schutzstaffel (SS) Panzer Division *Hohenstauffen*.

There were several reasons for the stunning defeat.

- The British forces were unable to achieve surprise and concentration early in the battle, allowing the German defenders to set the tempo of the battle.
- MG Urquhart, commander of the British division, lost command and control of the battle at a very crucial point.

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- The Germans, because of the experience of their commander, were able to correctly identify and attack the airborne force's center of gravity.

First Key Event

The first key event in this battle—the fact that the British first wave consisted of only half of the 1st Airborne Division and was forced to land 7 to 9 kilometers from Arnhem—emphasizes the importance of concentration and surprise to an offensive. Field Manual (FM) 3-0, *Operations*, defines four characteristics of offensive operations:³

- Surprise
- Concentration
- Tempo
- Audacity

It states that *surprise* is achieved by attacking at a time or place or in a manner for which the enemy is unprepared and cautions that tactical surprise is fleeting and must be exploited before the enemy can react.⁴ *Concentration* is “the massing of overwhelming effects of combat power to achieve a single purpose.”⁵ In addressing *tempo*, the FM states that “a faster tempo allows attackers to disrupt enemy defenses quicker

than the enemy can respond.”⁶ *Audacity* “is a simple plan of action, boldly executed.”⁷

Causes. The causes of this first key event lie primarily in the planning of the operation. From the outset, Allied air forces did not have sufficient gliders and transport aircraft to move the entire division in one lift. This deficiency was compounded by the fact that the division was forced to give up a battalion's worth of lift assets in order to tow elements of the corps headquarters, a force whose presence at the front was largely unnecessary.⁸ In an effort to allay the shortage of aircraft, commanders from all the divisions involved suggested that two troop lifts be performed on the first day, thus doubling the initial troop strengths. However, the Allied air transport commander, United States Army Air Force (USAAF) MG Paul Williams, refused, claiming that his air crews would be exhausted and that his ground crews would need time to repair the damage he expected the aircraft to suffer during the first landings.⁹ USAAF concerns also forced the landings to more distant drop zones (DZs) and landing zones (LZs) since it was feared that zones nearer to Arnhem would expose the transports to German antiaircraft (AA) fire.¹⁰

The multilift concept of Operation Market Garden did not simply mean that MG Urquhart had fewer forces on

the ground. Because the lifts would be accomplished over several days, it was necessary for the 1st Airlanding Brigade under BG Philip Hicks to secure the DZs/LZs in the interim to prevent German counterattacks against vulnerable landing forces.¹¹ Thus, of four brigades under his command, MG Urquhart's initial attacking force consisted of only the 1st Parachute Brigade under BG Gerald Lathbury.¹² By dividing an already diminished force, MG Urquhart had effectively sacrificed his ability to concentrate forces toward the attack into Arnhem. This would prove especially detrimental since poor weather at the departure airfields would delay the landing of the British second wave by almost nine hours,¹³ and would ground MG Stanislaw Sosabowski's Polish Parachute Brigade for two days.¹⁴

Had it not been for the great distances between the DZs/LZs and Arnhem, it might have been possible for MG Urquhart to overcome his initial lack of forces by moving swiftly into the city and securing defensive positions around the bridge. By all accounts, the German defenders were not expecting an airborne operation at Arnhem. As the first wave landed, LTC Harzer was

Photo courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London No. BU 001144



Soldiers of the 1st Airlanding Brigade take up positions on the outskirts of Arnhem on 18 September 1944. The Soldier on the left is manning a British antitank weapon, a Projector, Infantry, Antitank (PIAT).

attending a military parade,¹⁵ while Captain (CPT) Sepp Krafft and his SS training battalion—which would quickly become the cornerstone of the German defense—were merely conducting training exercises west of Arnhem.¹⁶

Unfortunately, the distance between the DZs/LZs and Arnhem, combined with the fact that most of his forces were dismounted, prevented MG Urquhart from properly exploiting the initial surprise of the attack. By the time the battalions of 1st Parachute Brigade were formed and ready to move, CPT Krafft had already placed two of his companies into hasty defensive positions and called up his third company as a reserve.¹⁷ This would prove crucial since his blocking position would blunt the advance of both 1st and 3d Parachute Battalions, giving the Germans time to reinforce Arnhem and control the tempo of the battle to their advantage.

Lesson Learned. The lesson to be drawn from this event is that the attacking force must immediately seize the initiative, set a faster tempo in the battle, and keep the defender off guard for an offensive operation to be successful. Failure to do so will give the defender an opportunity to slow the tempo, improve their defenses, and redistribute combat power to the points of attack. Attacking forces can gain the initiative by achieving surprise and massing combat power quickly against key defensive points.

Second Key Event

The 1st Airborne Division's inability to attain surprise was further hampered by a second key event: documents detailing the 101st Airborne Division's orders for Operation Market (the airborne portion of Operation Market Garden) were recovered by the Germans and delivered to General (GEN) Kurt Student's headquarters.¹⁸ Beyond the obvious operations security (OPSEC) implications, this event and GEN Student's swift reaction emphasized the importance of identifying and attacking an enemy's center of gravity to achieve victory. FM 3-0, in discussing operational design, defines a center of gravity as "those characteristics, capabilities, or localities from which a military force derives its freedom of action, physical strength, or will to fight."¹⁹ Moreover, it states that identifying and neutralizing an



Photo courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London No. BU 001091

British Soldiers march with their vehicles and equipment along a road toward Arnhem.

enemy's center of gravity is the "most direct path to victory."²⁰

Cause. The cause of this event was simply a blatant OPSEC violation. The documents were discovered on the body of an American officer whose glider had been shot down near GEN Student's headquarters in Vught.²¹ Although the documents did not include any information on the 1st Airborne Division's mission, GEN Student was able to combine the information from them with the reports he had received on the landings to determine that the bridges were the Allied objectives. The capture of this information would prove especially catastrophic for the Allies because of GEN Student's experience in leading German airborne operations in Italy and Holland.²² He knew that an airborne force's center of gravity lay in its ability to strike quickly and exploit the element of surprise to secure objectives. He also understood that airborne forces had two inherent vulnerabilities: They would be comparatively lightly equipped and would have no established lines of communication, relying instead on aerial resupply and reinforcement. His defensive plan was thus based on two objectives: slow the British forces until KG *Hohenstauffen* could be reinforced with more men and heavier armaments, and seize the British DZs/LZs to interdict aerial resupply and reinforcement.

In order to wage an effective defense, it was first necessary for the Germans to organize several disparate company-size



British prisoners march away under guard of their German captors. Some 6,450 of the 10,000 British paratroopers who landed at Arnhem were taken prisoner. (German photograph)

elements operating in the Arnhem area into KGs. Within hours of the landing, two such task forces had already begun to form. KG *Spindler*, initially comprising CPT Krafft's training battalion, an engineer company, and an artillery battery, was tasked with establishing a defensive line west of Arnhem.²³ Similarly, KG *von Tettau*—formed from such varied units as a battalion of Dutch SS troops, an artillery unit with no guns, and students of an SS noncommissioned officers academy at Arnhem—was tasked with seizing the British DZs/LZs.²⁴ Although both KGs were skeletal at first, GEN Student pushed for and received reinforcements over the course of the next five days, again capitalizing on his ability to slow the tempo of the battle.

Although the Germans assumed a great deal of tactical risk in incorporating these loosely organized units into their defensive plan, it proved worthwhile. KG *Spindler*, with CPT Krafft's battalion, halted the advance of 1st and 3d Parachute Battalions, effectively isolating LTC Frost's 2d Parachute Battalion from immediate resupply or reinforcement.²⁵ The efforts of KG *von Tettau* to isolate the British 1st Airborne Division as a whole proved equally effective. Over the course of the battle, it is estimated that only 7.4 percent of Allied resupply drops were successful.²⁶ The remainder dropped onto DZs/LZs that had been recaptured by the Germans or

fell victim to German AA fires, which were steadily reinforced throughout the fighting. Allied reinforcements fared no better. On 19 September, a portion of MG Sosabowski's Polish Parachute Brigade, traveling in 35 gliders, touched down in an LZ still under German control. Only two anti-aircraft guns and a small contingent of men survived the landing.²⁷ Although the remainder of MG Sosabowski's brigade eventually landed south of the Rhine, it would be another four days before it could cross the river and reinforce the British forces, as all crossing assets were located with the Allied ground forces in Nijmegen.²⁸

Lessons Learned. The most obvious lesson from this event is the need to maintain OPSEC at all times. Especially in today's contemporary environment—where volumes of data on operations, units, and Soldiers can be stored in a single memory stick—constant vigilance is required on the

part of every leader to ensure that information is properly safeguarded. A second and equally important lesson is the value of correctly identifying and neutralizing the enemy's center of gravity while protecting one's own. As with the Germans at Arnhem, doing so can overcome disadvantages in technology, manpower, or firepower that would otherwise prove overwhelming.

Third Key Event

In addition to isolating LTC Frost's 2d Parachute Battalion, KG *Spindler*'s defense against 1st and 3d Parachute Battalions inadvertently contributed to the final key event of the battle. As 3d Parachute Battalion fell back, both MG Urquhart and BG Lathbury were forced to take refuge in an attic. In one instant, the division's two top commanders were denied the ability to command and control their forces.

Causes. MG Urquhart's presence so close to the front can be traced back to communications problems that had plagued the 1st Airborne Division from the beginning of the operation. The radios the British forces were using proved largely unreliable, rendering MG Urquhart unable to communicate with Major (MAJ) Freddie Gough, his reconnaissance battalion commander, or BG Lathbury and 1st Parachute Brigade.²⁹ Frustrated with his inability to monitor the progress



The vital bridge at Arnhem after the British paratroops had been driven back. (German photograph)

of his main effort, MG Urquhart left his headquarters and eventually linked up with BG Lathbury, who was advancing with 3d Parachute Battalion. Communication problems had also forced BG Lathbury to leave his headquarters and join his main effort. When 3d Parachute Battalion's advance against KG *Spindler* was halted, BG Lathbury was wounded, forcing MG Urquhart to move him into a local residence, where both men became trapped behind an advancing German defensive line.³⁰ Ironically, the British communications problems could have been alleviated by effective use of the Dutch telephone system, which continued in service during the battle.

MG Urquhart's absence rendered his headquarters unable to give guidance at a critical decision point. As MG Urquhart joined 3d Parachute Battalion, LTC Frost's men reported finding a ferry west of Arnhem.³¹ Securing the ferry could have negated the need to enter Arnhem, since it could have provided a viable crossing for the Allied ground forces. However, because it was not originally listed as an objective for LTC Frost, and because no command decision was issued after its discovery, the ferry was bypassed. Eventually a sympathetic local cut the ferry free so it would not fall into German hands.³² More importantly, however, the loss of contact with MG Urquhart and BG Lathbury forced BG Hicks to assume command.³³ BG Hicks, who had been securing the DZs/LZs, lacked an accurate picture of the fighting in Arnhem and had to assume that reinforcing LTC Frost directly was the main effort. Thus he committed three battalions into a constricted, 200-meter corridor referred to as the Den Brink Area.³⁴ This would prove a costly mistake, first because the area was bordered to the north by high ground and to the south by the Rhine River,

providing barely enough room for a company to maneuver, let alone three battalions.³⁵ Secondly, the Germans had already arrayed a devastating amount of force along the corridor. To the north, an AA company and an engineer battalion reinforced with heavy weapons occupied houses along the high ground. Along the southern bank of the river, a reconnaissance battalion with heavy weapons occupied a brickworks building. Both had excellent fields of fire over the Den Brink Area.³⁶ The three British battalions marched headlong into a defeat so costly that 1st Airborne Division would not have the manpower for another attempt at reinforcing LTC Frost.

Lesson Learned. The lesson from this event is the importance of communications in developing situational understanding on the battlefield, and the importance of positioning a commander so that he can best influence the fight. Leaders should lead as far forward as possible, but they must maintain adequate communications so that their forward position does not hinder their understanding of the big picture. Additionally, it emphasizes the necessity of performing proper precombat checks on all vital systems.

FM 6-0, *Mission Command: Command and Control of Army Forces*, discusses the importance of communications to commanders, stating that shortfalls must be corrected to provide full information in order to develop accurate situational understanding.³⁷ It advises that modern information systems can help commanders command forward without losing situational understanding.³⁸ However, without effective information flow, commanders at the front risk becoming overly focused on the fight immediately ahead of them and losing sight of the bigger picture.³⁹

Summary

The 1st Airborne Division's plan in Operation Market Garden represented a tenuous balance between the chance of achieving a great tactical success and the risk of a crushing operational defeat. Although British paratroopers would be conducting a surprise attack against an unsuspecting and demoralized force, they would also be the furthest forward, isolated from the nearest ground forces by nearly 100 kilometers.⁴⁰ The Allied defeat was ultimately a result of failure to capitalize on initial tactical advantage. By placing the concerns of the air forces ahead of the ground tactical plan, the Allies sacrificed both the element of surprise and the ability to concentrate forces on the objective, allowing the Germans to slow the tempo of the battle almost to a halt. This, in turn, allowed the Germans to isolate the 1st Airborne Division logistically. As the Germans received a consistent flow of reinforcements and supply from the rear, the British grew dangerously short of men and resources. To compound problems, MG Urquhart was removed from the fight at a crucial point without having established a clear chain of command or leaving a clear intent with his headquarters. As a result, the 1st Airborne Division committed the bulk of its forces into a disastrous attack into the Den Brink Area. This resulted in a defeat so costly that the paratroopers had no choice but to form a defensive perimeter and endure through the painfully slow advance of the Allied ground forces. Unfortunately, the wait would prove too long for LTC Frost and the men of 2d Parachute Battalion. With casualties mounting, and ammunition, food, water, and medical supplies growing scarce, the battalion could hold out no longer. Almost all of its surviving Soldiers were taken prisoner. 

Captain Hoyer, now with the 10th Mountain Division, has served as a platoon leader, battalion adjutant, and company executive officer at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. He has been deployed to both Afghanistan and Iraq. A graduate of the United States Military Academy, he has also completed the Engineer Officer Basic Course, the Engineer Captains Career Course, the Sapper Leader Course, and Jumpmaster School.

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Endnotes

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⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., p. 7-5.

⁶ Ibid., p. 7-6.

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⁸ Maurice Tugwell, "Arnhem: A Case Study," Thornton Cox Limited, London, 1975, p. 26.

⁹ Lloyd Clark, "Arnhem: Operation Market Garden, September 1944," Phoenix Mill, U.K., Sutton Publishing Limited, 2002, p. 22.

¹⁰ Tugwell, p. 25.

¹¹ Clark, p. 54.

¹² Stephen Badsey, "Arnhem 1944, Operation Market Garden," Osprey Publishing Limited, London, 1993, p. 43.

¹³ Clark, p. 100.

¹⁴ Badsey, pp. 55, 59.

¹⁵ Kershaw, p. 60.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 72.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 71.

¹⁹ FM 3-0, p. 5-7.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Kershaw, p. 71.

²² Ibid., p. 115.

²³ Ibid., p. 103.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 113.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 73.

²⁶ Badsey, p. 85.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 57.

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 71, 76.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 43.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 49.

³¹ Clark, p. 67.

³² Ibid.

³³ Badsey, p. 54.

³⁴ Kershaw, p. 165.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Badsey, p. 25.

³⁷ FM 6-0, *Mission Command*, 11 August 2003, p. 3-17.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 4-26.