

The Battle of Arnhem: The Deadliest Airborne Operation of World War II

Antony Beevor (Viking, 2018), 480 pp., illustrations, glossary, maps, bibliography, notes, index.

Reviewed by Leslie C.

That no plan survives being set into motion is axiomatic. That the enemy gets a vote is a cliché. Both nevertheless apply to Operation Market Garden, the disastrous September 1944 British, American, and Polish attempt to use airborne troops to seize bridges over the Maas, Waal, and Lower Rhine Rivers in eastern Holland, well behind German lines. The paratroopers were to hold their objectives until ground forces could arrive after traversing more than 100 kilometers of enemy-held territory via a single narrow highway. Had it succeeded, the coup would have sealed off the German XV Army's escape while opening a route into the vital Ruhr region, accelerating the collapse of Nazi arms in the West. That it failed, and why, is the subject of Antony Beevor's *The Battle of Arnhem: The Deadliest Airborne Operation of World War II*.

Beevor is a popular historian who has written best-selling and prize-winning accounts of the Battle for Stalingrad, Operation Overlord, and the Battle of the Bulge, among others. The pleasure of reading a well-crafted history notwithstanding, a casual reader might be tempted to ask, why another book on the European theater of operations? An intelligence officer might inquire of its professional relevance. The answer is that careful reading into what is a compelling episode in its own right offers insight into the assessment and use of intelligence, managing liaison relationships, and examining assumptions as a sine qua non of effective planning.

The Battle of Arnhem follows the Irish journalist Cornelius Ryan's 1974 *A Bridge Too Far*, and the eponymous 1977 film featuring an all-star cast. Ryan's book re-examined a costly failure that previous accounts had either ignored or attempted to spin, primarily in an effort to absolve its architect, Gen. Bernard Law Montgomery. Beevor is more unsparing, stating early that, "Many historians, with an 'if only' approach to the British defeat, have focused so much on different aspects of Operation Market Garden which went wrong that they have tended

to overlook the central element. It was quite simply a very bad plan right from the start and right from the top." (36)

This review is not the place to offer a blow-by-blow summary of the operation; Beevor's narrative does excellent service in that respect. Suffice it to say that—as a number of Market Garden's veterans observed during and after the fighting—everything that could have gone wrong did. In a concession to Troop Carrier Command's fears of flak around the bridges, the drop zones were too far from the objectives, costing the paratroopers their only advantages of timing and surprise. The German response was more rapid and complete than Allied planners anticipated. The single road to the bridges was insufficient for its intended purpose and too easy to stress or cut with counterattacks. In the end, the Germans surrounded and destroyed the British 1st Airborne Division in Arnhem—the site of the "bridge too far" across the Lower Rhine—while the American 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions, together with the British XXX Corps' armored units, engaged in heavy fighting to secure the other objectives and in an effort to force the road open. Allied troops were unable to liberate a thoroughly wrecked Arnhem until spring 1945, and then only long after Allied bombers had destroyed the bridge British paratroopers died to secure.

Allied intelligence on the eve of the operation has been the subject of much subsequent argument. Planners were aware from aerial reconnaissance, reports from Dutch resistance, and SIGINT that elements of the II SS Panzer Corps were in the Arnhem area, but dismissed them as weakened shadows of their former selves. Market Garden was planned within the context of the German retreat in disarray from Normandy and north-central France, coupled with a US 3rd Army advance whose surprising speed after a summer of hard fighting in the bocage was governed more by the availability of fuel than a faltering German defense. Beevor shows that this unrealistic assessment was the product of wishful thinking, and of a desire to avoid discouraging the paratroopers that, with hindsight, seems cynical.

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More difficult to comprehend was the planners' failure to anticipate the German response after five years of fighting. Even as the Germans were quitting France, the Wehrmacht and SS remained formidable formations that might be expected to renew the fight as the Allies approached German soil. Beevor notes, "What all those involved on the Allied side failed to grasp was the extraordinary ability of the German military machine to react with speed and determination. And the two panzer divisions, even in their weakened state, were able to form a nucleus on to which other, less experienced units could be grafted. . . . The vast majority of the tanks which Allied troops faced in Market Garden were not present at the start of the operation, but were brought in from Germany with astonishing speed", and in the face of Allied air superiority. (51)

Dealing with foreign liaison, which is a familiar challenge for intelligence officers, was a key element in the fatal environment of Market Garden. The infamous squabbling between Montgomery and his American counterparts over competing command visions and struggle for operational primacy and priority for limited supplies, especially fuel—which was Eisenhower's particular cross to bear—is not the issue here. Rather, the planners ignored Dutch input. While it may be understandable that the British did not trust the Dutch resistance because they assessed the Germans had penetrated it, far less justifiable was Montgomery's refusal "to listen to the Dutch commander-in-chief Prince Bernhard, who had warned him about the impossibility of deploying armored vehicles off the single raised road on the low-lying polderland

flood plain." (36) Worse, the planners pointedly did not consult Bernhard's staff. As Beevor writes, "The terrain and its difficulties were well known to them, as this very route constituted one of the key questions in their staff college exams. Any candidate who planned to advance from Nijmegen straight up the main road to Arnhem was failed on the spot, and this was exactly what the British were planning to do." (66) Likewise shameful was British commanders' shabby treatment of the Polish Independent Parachute Brigade and its commander, General Stanislaw Sosabowski, during and after the battle, which led to subsequent recrimination.

David Fraser, who fought at Nijmegen, concluded, "Operation Market Garden was, in an exact sense, futile. It was a thoroughly bad idea, badly planned and only—tragically—redeemed by the outstanding courage of those who executed it." (366) I cannot say if professional military education is as likely to conjure lessons from disaster as it is from triumph—Beevor observes that senior Allied commanders tried to forget about Market Garden, both immediately and after the war, in their memoirs. We, however, can still benefit. Examining implicit assumptions about the opposition, its capabilities, and intentions; consulting knowledgeable partners—the Dutch, in this instance; accepting accountability for outcomes, especially when doing so is difficult. All will contribute to a more effective intelligence organization. As for Beevor's well-researched and crafted book, I might question the title. Market Garden transcended just Arnhem, though it was there the consequences of Allied hubris in planning the operation came to their fullest fruition.



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