

Operation Market-Garden 1944 (2): The British Airborne Missions

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Text by Ken Ford; illustrated by Graham Turner

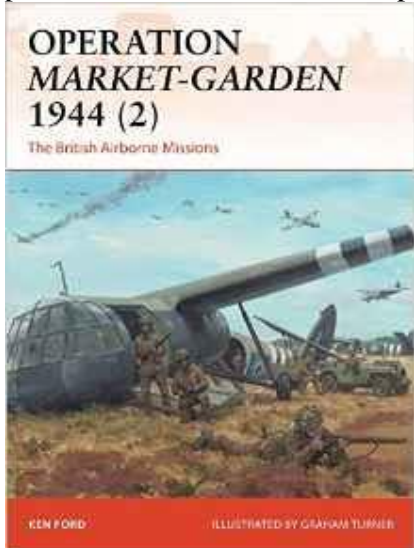
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Review by Jonathan Aird

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This is one of three Campaign volumes covering Operation Market-Garden, mostly from the point of view of the Allies. This particular book covers the British airborne missions at



Arnhem, the attempt to capture the river crossings in advance of the arrival of an armoured column that would sweep across the Rhine and advance the Allied cause dramatically. And the first point to note ó which is done early on in the text -- is that despite the sub-title, of course, the British airborne troops also included the Polish 1st Independent Parachute Brigade.

Arnhem was an audacious plan, conceived by Field Marshal Montgomery, in part, Ken Ford suggests, to give a reason for an exhausted Britain to have maintained an expensive, air-deployable, elite force. The suggestion being that the war was entering its final stages ó so these troops needed to see action. This is given some credence by Market-Garden being the second such plan Montgomery developed. Over three days, waves of troops would be airlifted to Arnhem

and a major bridge across the Rhine would be secured and held until the tanks of British XXX Corps arrived ó their rapid advance being facilitated by US airborne troops capturing all the bridges they required to traverse on the route to Arnhem. Why this plan failed is neatly explained in the sections on opposing forces and opposing plans ó in effect, there were a lot more German troops than had been anticipated and these were able to put up a more stubborn resistance than had been planned for.

The main part of the book covers the three days of the assault in some detail, and it is hard ó especially with hindsight ó not to see that this was a plan doomed to failure from the start. The original plan had been to deploy all the troops on the first day ó but there was a lack of transports, which necessitated the adoption of three waves of deployment. Due to the perils of a night landing it was decided to land in daylight ó the landing zones were a little outside Arnhem itself but it was thought that a swift deployment of troops would counter the light German resistance. Only the German resistance was more formidable than anticipated and it took longer than planned to get the first forces organised and despatched from the Landing Zones ó the upshot of which was that the German forces were not surprised by the attack and had already deployed a stiff force to defend the approaches to Arnhem. To make matters worse, the Allied command structure included men who felt the need to insert themselves into the action ó rather

than despatching orders from their HQs. So it was that when the initial attempts to rush the Arnhem bridges failed, the overall commander Major General Urquhart, abandoned his HQ to deliver revised orders to Brigadier Lathebury, commanding the 1st Parachute Brigade. However, Lathebury had left his HQ in order to communicate with his 3rd Battalion. Urquhart headed off in a jeep to find Lathebury. The overall commander and the commander of the 1st Brigade were thus both out of the communications loop, injecting an element of confusion into an already rapidly developing situation. Worse would occur on Day 2 ó with British troops having gained a toehold on the main bridge, reinforcements were pushed forward to support them ó into the teeth of German armour. In the thick of the action, Lathebury was injured and had to be left behind, and Urquhart was forced to take cover in a house and so had no means of communication with the troops under his command. Brave ó certainly, and Ken Ford is clear on that, but also hints that, having established a HQ, a commanding officer shouldn't abandon it on the first excuse possible.

The rest of the plan was also falling apart -- the reinforcements on Day 2 were delayed by bad weather, when they did head across Holland they were expected and met heavy flak. Resupply was also undertaken ó but due to the lack of establishing radio communication from the first days forces this followed the original plan and saw the majority of the resupply dropped into areas still under German control. Day 3 was also plagued by early morning bad weather and a further delay in deploying the third wave of troops. Again, troops were lost on the way and some vital equipment ó such as anti-tank guns ó did not survive the landing when it did arrive. Troops were unable to join up ó 2,000 men were needed to hold the road bridge until XXX Corps broke through ó there were never more than about 700 men on the bridge. When the news eventually got through that XXX Corps' advance had stalled, the operation became one of a managed withdrawal of as many men as possible.

Ken Ford fleshes out these bare bones with good descriptions of both the major battles on each day and also key skirmishes which crucially fed into the final outcome. There are incredible stories of heroism ó and plenty of inspiration for games large and small, although defining victory conditions that would allow either side to öwinö may be difficult ó for example, the South Staffordshire's attacks, with almost no anti-tank weaponry, on well-protected and positioned tanks, has a grim inevitability to it.

Ken Ford's analysis makes it quite clear that this was a reckless folly of an assault: it's only possible to say that there was bad luck ó with transport availability, with weather, with supply, with radio equipment, with dispersal from landing zones, with senior officers being wounded or hiding from enemy troops, with damage to vital equipment, with the defending force having an SS-Panzer Korps that hadn't been detected from aerial reconnaissance ó until the idea of öbad planö enters the mind. Ken Ford finally attributes blame to Montgomery as the architect ó but this is perhaps a little unfair, as he says himself öOperation Market-Garden was approved by Eisenhower on 10 September.ö Montgomery may have laid a bad plan, but Eisenhower hatched it.

If there is a problem with this book, it is that the German's are treated almost like an Artificial Intelligence opponent who just öreactedö to whatever the British were doing. Of course, the clue is sort of in the book's sub-title, but in a Campaign series one usually expects both forces to get roughly equal airtime ó but the viewpoint is mostly a British one. That aside, this is an admirable summary of a famous undertaking, well balanced between telling the overall strategic story and small incidents of human (and gaming!) interest and so is very useful for the late WWII wargamer.