

UNITED STATES MILITARY ACADEMY

THE BRITISH FAILURE AT ARNHEM

HI302: HISTORY OF THE MILITARY ART

SECTION H1

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SIGNATURE

Operation Market Garden was an attempt by the Allied forces to quickly cross the Rhine River, the last major geographical barrier to Germany itself. The airborne forces employed in the operation were given the task of seizing bridges over the major waterways leading up to the Rhine with the British First Airborne Division seizing the farthest bridge over the Rhine at Arnhem. The operation as a whole and the airborne component in particular failed, but was the failure of the British airborne forces that fought at Arnhem more attributable to poor planning or poor execution? The historical evidence overwhelmingly shows that the British First Airborne Division lost the Battle of Arnhem because of poor planning.

Montgomery's plan for the operation did not incorporate all four fundamentals of airborne operations as given in FM 90-26. Doctrine changes over time and Army doctrine in World War Two was different from modern Army doctrine as described in field manuals such as FM 3-90 and FM 90-26. Airborne operations were new in World War Two and most of the major armies of the world were still pioneering them and experimenting with them. However, modern doctrine does provide a useful framework for explaining the failure of the British at Arnhem. The British First Airborne Division that fought at Arnhem was the main effort for Operation Market, the airborne part of Operation Market Garden.<sup>1</sup> The four fundamentals of airborne operations according to FM 90-26 are troops, surprise, the reverse planning process, detailed planning along with aggressive execution.<sup>2</sup> Of these four fundamentals, Montgomery's plan for the airborne operation did not fully incorporate any of these four fundamentals.

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Middlebrook. *Arnhem 1944: The Airborne Battle* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), 9.

<sup>2</sup> US Army. *FM 90-26: Airborne Operations* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1990), 1-5.

The first fundamental of successful airborne operations is specially trained, highly disciplined soldiers and leaders.<sup>3</sup> This is the only fundamental of airborne operations that Operation Market came close to achieving. However, despite the fact that the individual soldiers involved in Operation Market were, on the whole, well trained and disciplined, there were some limitations in the leadership that hurt the operation's chances of succeeding. Major General Roy Urquhart, who commanded the British First Airborne Division at Arnhem, was new to the airborne arm and Operation Market would be his first airborne operation.<sup>4</sup> Montgomery and Brereton, who was the overall commander of the First Allied Airborne Army, both had little experience in airborne operations.<sup>5</sup> LTG Browning, Brereton's deputy, had experience in airborne operations, but it was limited to the staff level.<sup>6</sup> Although the individual soldiers that would plan and carry out the Battle of Arnhem were well-trained, some of the key leaders had weaknesses that limited the ability of the operation to succeed.

The second fundamental of successful airborne operations is surprise.<sup>7</sup> The airborne assault initially caught the Germans by surprise. However, the British airborne division and the attached Polish Parachute Brigade were to be dropped at Arnhem in three lifts over several days.<sup>8</sup> The decision to use multiple lifts to get the British force on the ground near Arnhem meant that the Germans were already alert by the second lift and were ready to oppose it.<sup>9</sup> Private Jock Keenan, who jumped with the second lift, later recounted that he "could see some of the Germans on the edge of the trees" and that they

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<sup>3</sup> *FM 90-26*, 1-5.

<sup>4</sup> Carlo D'Este. *Eisenhower: A Soldier's Life* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 2002), 613.

<sup>5</sup> D'Este, 610-5.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *FM 90-26*, 1-5.

<sup>8</sup> James M. Gavin. *On To Berlin* (New York: Viking Press, 1985), 150.

<sup>9</sup> Middlebrook, 234.

“had been told that it was going to be a quiet area, and it was a surprise to find them on the DZ.”<sup>10</sup> MG Urquhart, the commander of the British First Airborne Division, later wrote that “[e]ver since the first landing, Bittrich and his staff had expected [the British] second lift.”<sup>11</sup> He also wrote that the Germans had provided early warning measures for follow-on lifts and knew about the second lift 45 minutes before it reached the drop zone, which allowed them to divert anti-aircraft guns that were being used in the ground battle to the drop zone in order to oppose the landings.<sup>12</sup>

Some historians who argue that the failure of Operation Market was due primarily to poor execution might argue that the Allies lost the element of surprise when a German soldier searched the debris of a downed Waco glider near General Kurt Student’s headquarters and found a set of papers with the complete battle plan for Operation Market.<sup>13</sup> Although this breach in operations security gave the Germans a clearer picture of what the Allies were doing, the Germans reacted quickly enough and with enough force that the intelligence didn’t do much good. On 17 September, the first gliders landed at 1300 and the first parachute troops landed at 1350.<sup>14</sup> General Bittrich, who commanded the II SS Panzer Corps was already receiving enemy situation reports by 1330 and by 1340, he had issued his first warning order.<sup>15</sup>

Another aspect of the plan that took away the element of surprise was the decision to drop the airborne force away from the objective, then have them move to the objective. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Parachute Battalion of the 1<sup>st</sup> Parachute Brigade, commanded by LTC John Frost,

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<sup>10</sup> Middlebrook, 236.

<sup>11</sup> MG R. E. Urquhart. *Arnhem* (London: Cassell and Co., Ltd., 1958), 73.

<sup>12</sup> Urquhart, 73.

<sup>13</sup> Robert J. Kershaw. *It Never Snows in September: The German View of MARKET-GARDEN and The Battle of Arnhem, September 1944* (Hersham, Surrey: Ian Allan Publishing, 2004), 71.

<sup>14</sup> Middlebrook, 98.

<sup>15</sup> Kershaw, 73.

had to move about seven miles from the drop zone to their objectives, the road bridge at Arnhem and railway bridge south of Oosterbeek.<sup>16</sup> The leading elements of Frost's battalion did not reach Arnhem until 1930.<sup>17</sup> The decision to drop the paratroopers so far from their objectives gave the Germans time to rig the railway bridge at Oosterbeek with explosives so that the bridge was blown up just as Frost's men were capturing it.<sup>18</sup> Experienced airborne commanders like General James M. Gavin, who commanded the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division in the operation, knew that it was a bad idea to drop the British paratroopers so far from the Bridge at Arnhem. Gavin later wrote that "[they] had learned, from the very beginning in Sicily, that it was better to land near an objective and take heavy landing losses rather than to have to fight on the ground to get it."<sup>19</sup> For airborne operations, it is not enough to just surprise the enemy. It is also necessary to take advantage of that surprise and move quickly before the enemy can react. Although the Germans were initially surprised by the massive airborne assault, they were able to quickly react and turn the situation in their favor because the plan for Operation Market did not capitalize on surprise.

The third fundamental of airborne operations is that the reverse planning process must be used.<sup>20</sup> The reverse planning process is based on the idea that the ground tactical plan should drive the other three phases of airborne operations: the landing phase, air movement phase, and marshalling phase.<sup>21</sup> This was not the case in Operation Market. As General Urquhart, the commander of the British First Airborne Division, explains in

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<sup>16</sup> Middlebrook, 122, 142-3.

<sup>17</sup> Middlebrook, 152.

<sup>18</sup> Major-General John Frost. *A Drop Too Many* (London: Cassell and Co., 1980), 211.

<sup>19</sup> Gavin, 147.

<sup>20</sup> *FM 90-26*, 1-5.

<sup>21</sup> *FM 90-26*, 2-3 through 2-6.

his account of the operation, he was told that “because of the limited number of aircraft available, [he] would have to go in three lifts” and that “[his] plan had to be tailored to fit three lifts.”<sup>22</sup> LTC John Frost later wrote that one of the main factors that limited the chances of success for the British forces at Arnhem was the “unwillingness of the air forces to fly more than one sortie in the day.”<sup>23</sup> Another aspect of the plan where the air movement plan drove the ground tactical plan was in the selection of drop zones. John Frost wrote that they “had the D.Z.s selected by the Air Force.”<sup>24</sup> Frost is essentially saying that the Air Force drove the ground plan by selecting drop zones based on what was best for the air movement plan. This should not have been allowed by the planners of Operation Market. The ground plan for the British First Airborne Division was driven by the air movement plan, which was disastrous.

The fourth fundamental of successful airborne operations is that “[a]irborne operations require centralized, detailed planning and aggressive, decentralized execution.”<sup>25</sup> Although Operation Market was executed aggressively with individual commanders exercising initiative, the planning process was neither centralized nor detailed. First, the planning process was not detailed enough. Eisenhower approved the operation on 10 September and the it began on 17 September, meaning that the entire operation was planned in one week.<sup>26</sup> By contrast, President Roosevelt informed Eisenhower that he would command Operation Overlord on 7 December 1943, meaning that the plan for Operation Overlord took about six months to develop.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Urquhart, 5.

<sup>23</sup> Frost, xii.

<sup>24</sup> Frost, 212.

<sup>25</sup> *FM 90-26*, 1-5.

<sup>26</sup> Middlebrook, 9.

<sup>27</sup> D’Este, 467.

One example of something that the planning process failed to take into consideration was intelligence that showed that two divisions of the II SS Panzer Corps were in the area. Brian Urquhart, an intelligence officer on General Browning's staff, presented his commander with aerial photographs from the RAF clearly showing Mark III and Mark IV tanks near Arnhem, but Browning treated him "as a nervous child suffering from a nightmare", as Urquhart later described it.<sup>28</sup> Allied code-breakers at Bletchley Park also intercepted and decrypted messages that indicated that the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> SS Panzer Divisions were near Arnhem in addition to an assault gun regiment and Field Marshall Model's headquarters.<sup>29</sup> General Gavin was astonished when he heard MG Urquhart brief the plan for the British First Airborne Division and later wrote that the operation "seemed more like a peacetime exercise than war" due to the fact that it seemed to not take into account the presence of the Germans.<sup>30</sup> LTC Frost had no idea that the II SS Panzer Corps was in the area until his men began to interrogate some of the prisoners captured at Arnhem bridge and found that some of them were from the 9<sup>th</sup> SS Panzer Division.<sup>31</sup> The fact that the plan for Operation Market failed to take this intelligence into account by either changing the drop zones, increasing the size the force to land near Arnhem, or sending the British First Airborne Division in with additional anti-armor weapons shows a lack of detail in the planning process.

In addition to the planning process not being detailed enough, it was also not centralized. Eisenhower's Supreme Headquarters for the Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF) was located in Granville, Montgomery's headquarters was near Brussels, the

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<sup>28</sup> Middlebrook, 64-66.

<sup>29</sup> D'Este, 614.

<sup>30</sup> Gavin, 150.

<sup>31</sup> Frost, 224.

armored force that was supposed to relieve the paratroopers at Arnhem was headquartered elsewhere in Belgium, and the First Allied Airborne Army was located in England.<sup>32</sup> These different organizations involved in the operation never met to discuss and resolve the flaws in the plan.<sup>33</sup> Like most other types of operations, airborne operations need to be planned by a single, unified command that has good intelligence and a good understanding of what each individual element will be doing in the operation.

In conclusion, the British lost the Battle of Arnhem for several reasons. First, the key leaders involved in planning the operation did not have enough experience to plan it correctly. Second, the plan did not capitalize on surprise as airborne operations should. Third, the ground tactical plan was driven by the air movement plan, which is not how the reverse planning process works. Fourth, the planning process was not centralized or detailed enough. In short, the Battle of Arnhem was poorly planned. Whether or not Montgomery can be faulted for employing his airborne troops so poorly in Operation Market Garden is debatable since airborne operations were new in World War Two and good doctrine had not yet been developed for them. However, whether he can be blamed for it or not, the fact is that Montgomery misused the First Allied Airborne Army by coming up with a vastly inadequate plan for Operation Market Garden.

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<sup>32</sup> D'Este, 615.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.



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