



Market Garden: the Allied paratroopers' major assault between tactical success and strategic failure

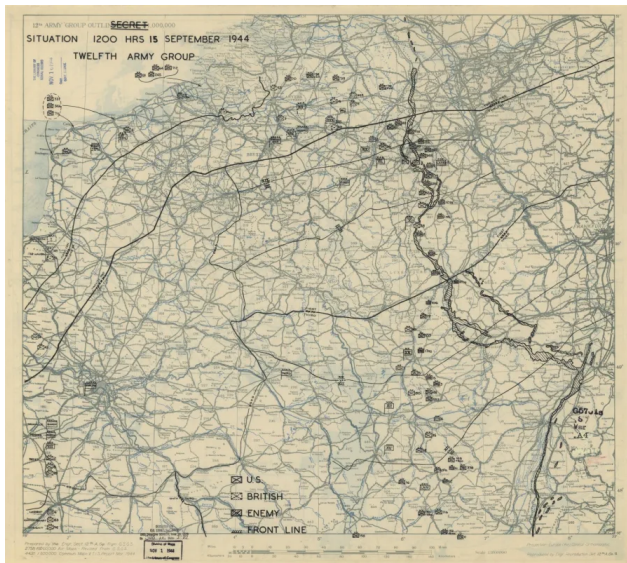
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Between **17 and 25 September 1944**, the Allies launched one of the most ambitious airborne operations of the Second World War in the Netherlands. **Operation Market Garden** was conceived to swiftly cross a succession of rivers and canals, seize the main Dutch bridges, and open a route for ground forces toward Germany's industrial heartland.

The plan called for the coordinated use of thousands of paratroopers, gliders, transport aircraft, and armored columns. The airborne divisions were to seize and hold a chain of objectives from Eindhoven to Arnhem, while British XXX Corps would advance from the south along the corridor opened by the airborne troops.

The operation achieved significant tactical successes and included some of the most famous actions in airborne history, but it failed to achieve its decisive objective: establishing a solid bridgehead across the **Lower Rhine at Arnhem**.

It is precisely the contrast between the audacity of the plan, the results achieved on the ground, and the failure to secure strategic success that makes Market Garden still **one of the most studied episodes of the Second World War and a fundamental reference point in the history of airborne operations.**



Map of the Allied operational situation on 15 September 1944, two days before the start of Market Garden. The map shows the disposition on the Western Front on the eve of the offensive in the Netherlands. Source: Library of Congress.

An extremely ambitious plan

The operation consisted of two closely linked elements.

Market was the airborne component. The U.S. **101st Airborne Division** was to seize the bridges in the Eindhoven and Veghel areas; the **82nd Airborne Division**, commanded by General James Gavin, those in the Grave and Nijmegen areas; and the **1st British Airborne Division** under General Robert Urquhart, reinforced by the **1st Polish Independent Parachute Brigade** under General Stanisław Sosabowski, was to capture the bridges across the Rhine at Arnhem.

Garden, meanwhile, was the ground component: British **XXX Corps** under General Brian Horrocks was to advance rapidly along the corridor opened by the paratroopers, progressively reaching Eindhoven, Nijmegen, and finally Arnhem.

The objective went far beyond capturing several Dutch cities. By crossing the Rhine, the Allies hoped to outflank part of the German defenses, threaten the **Ruhr**, and create the conditions to

drastically shorten the war in Europe.



Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery studies a map with Lieutenant General Brian Horrocks, commander of XXX Corps, and Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands, commander of the Dutch forces under Montgomery's command. September 8, 1944. Photo: IWM (BU 766).

An airborne drop on an enormous scale

On September 17, the operation's opening phases were impressive in their scale, speed and precision.

The airdrop and glider landing operations initially proceeded with considerable effectiveness. Shortly after 2 p.m., approximately **20,000 troops, 511 vehicles, 330 artillery pieces and around 590 tons of supplies** had already been delivered to the ground. Within hours, entire airborne formations had been projected deep into occupied territory, along with vehicles, weapons, ammunition and equipment essential to sustain the fighting in the hours ahead.

The scale of the operation, however, lay not only in the number of men dropped or landed by glider. Those forces had to rapidly seize a series of widely separated objectives, especially bridges and road junctions, before the Germans could reorganize and concentrate their reserves.

It was therefore necessary to seize almost simultaneously a chain of bridges stretching some one hundred kilometers and keep it open long enough to allow the British armored columns of XXX Corps to advance up the corridor from the south toward Arnhem.

This was the most delicate point of the entire plan: airborne divisions could achieve surprise and speed, but once on the ground they depended on linking up with ground forces and on uninterrupted supplies.

It took only one link in the chain to fail, one bridge to be destroyed, or the ground advance to suffer a significant delay for the effects to spread throughout the operation and throw the entire plan into crisis.



Allied paratroopers jump from Dakota aircraft over the outskirts of Arnhem, September 17, 1944. Photo: IWM (BU 1162).

Eindhoven and the 101st Airborne

In the southern sector, the **101st Airborne Division** managed to reach and occupy numerous assigned objectives, securing several key points along the route that XXX Corps was to follow northward. But at **Son**, one of the episodes that would weigh most heavily on the timing of the entire operation occurred: the Germans succeeded in blowing up the bridge over the Wilhelmina Canal just as American paratroopers were attempting to seize it.

That bridge was not a secondary objective. It was one of the essential crossings on the ground corridor to Nijmegen and Arnhem. Its destruction immediately turned a local tactical success into an operational problem for all of Market Garden.

When the advance elements of XXX Corps reached Son, they found the route cut off. The advance had to halt while British engineers worked to build a **Bailey bridge** capable of carrying tanks, trucks, and logistical columns.

The delay at Son brutally exposed the fragility of the plan: **the loss of a single bridge was enough to slow the entire advance northward and give the Germans precious hours to reorganize, concentrate reinforcements, and stiffen the defense of Nijmegen and Arnhem.**

That road would become known among American paratroopers as **“Hell’s Highway”**, the “road to hell.” Tanks, trucks, ammunition, fuel, reinforcements, and engineer equipment all moved along this corridor, all essential to sustaining the advance.

The Germans quickly understood how important it was to strike that line. They therefore launched repeated counterattacks against the corridor, on several occasions succeeding in cutting it or seriously threatening its continuity. Allied units were thus forced to fight not only to advance northward, but also to defend the flanks, bridges, and crossroads they had already captured.

In this sector, one of the operation’s central problems became clear: **the speed of XXX Corps depended not only on capturing its initial objectives, but also on the ability to keep a long line of communication open and secure under constant enemy pressure.**



A convoy of trucks under German artillery and mortar fire on the road between Son and Eindhoven, September 20, 1944. Photo: IWM (BU 1062).

Nijmegen: the success of the 82nd Airborne

Farther north, the **82nd Airborne Division** captured several key objectives, including the long bridge at Grave over the Meuse, essential to keeping the route to Nijmegen open.

The decisive battle, however, centered on Nijmegen.

Here, the problem was even more complex. To allow XXX Corps to continue toward Arnhem, the bridges over the **Waal** had to be seized, but German defenses held firm and time continued to run out. On **September 20**, men of the **3rd Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment** were tasked with crossing the river in fragile assault boats under enemy fire.

It was one of the toughest and most famous actions of Market Garden. The American paratroopers crossed the Waal virtually in the open, reached the northern bank, and attacked German positions from the rear, while other Allied forces pressed from the south.

The maneuver succeeded. The great Nijmegen road bridge was finally captured intact, opening the way north for XXX Corps.

It was one of the greatest tactical successes of the entire operation.

But it came too late. **While the Allies were winning at Nijmegen, the 1st British Airborne Division at Arnhem was already fighting under increasingly desperate conditions.** The time gained by the Germans in the preceding days would prove decisive to the final outcome of Market Garden.



Vehicles of the Guards Armoured Division of British XXX Corps cross Grave after linking up with the U.S. 82nd Airborne Division, during fighting in the Nijmegen and Grave area, September 17–20, 1944. Photo: IWM (B 10133).

Arnhem: “a bridge too far”

At Arnhem, the situation quickly became critical, and it was here that Market Garden encountered its decisive obstacle.

The drop and landing zones of the **1st British Airborne Division** were located several miles from the main road bridge over the Neder Rijn. This forced the British paratroopers to cover a considerable distance before they could even attempt to seize their objective, losing part of the element of surprise and giving the Germans the time they needed to react.

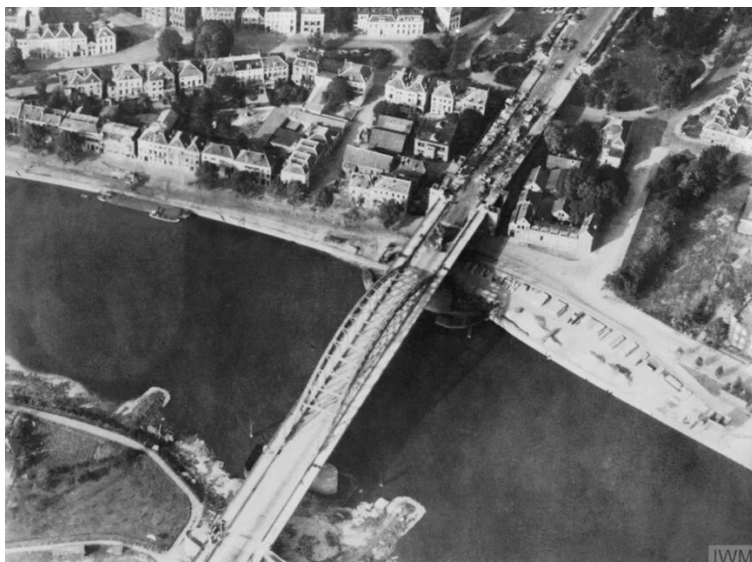
Further complicating matters was the presence in the area of elements of the **II SS Panzer Corps**, which was reorganizing after the fighting in France. Allied intelligence was aware of the presence of German armored forces, but their strength and actual ability to intervene were assessed amid incomplete information and planning conducted under extremely tight time constraints.

Communications difficulties and the dispersal of units further worsened the situation. Only part of the British force managed to reach the bridge.

The **2nd Parachute Battalion**, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel **John Frost**, managed to occupy the northern end of the road bridge and hold it for several days. Its men fought in isolation, with increasingly scarce ammunition and supplies, against German forces that grew steadily stronger and were supported by armored vehicles.

Frost's resistance became the symbol of the Battle of Arnhem, but it was not enough to reverse the situation. The rest of the 1st British Airborne Division failed to link up with the battalion at the bridge and was gradually pushed back toward **Oosterbeek**, where an increasingly constricted defensive perimeter was organized.

Arnhem thus demonstrated the harshest limitation of airborne operations: seizing an objective deep in enemy territory could be possible, but holding it without a rapid linkup with ground forces could turn initial success into isolation.



Aerial view of the bridge over the Neder Rijn at Arnhem; British troops and armored vehicles can be seen at the northern end during the fighting of Market Garden, September 1944. Photo: IWM (MH 2061).

A race against time

Time thus became the central problem of Market Garden.

XXX Corps had to advance along a single road, crossing bridges that could be destroyed, overcoming German resistance, and relying on the ability of airborne units to hold their positions long enough to allow the link-up.

Every delay rippled through the entire chain. The destroyed bridge at Son, the fighting along the corridor, and the difficult capture of Nijmegen caused delays which, compounded together, ultimately weighed most heavily on the most distant and vulnerable sector: Arnhem.

By the time the Nijmegen bridge was captured on **20 September**, the situation of the 1st British Airborne Division was already critical. John Frost's men were isolated at the northern end of the Arnhem bridge, while the rest of the division was gradually being pushed back toward Oosterbeek.

Meanwhile, the Germans had overcome their initial surprise. They were concentrating infantry, artillery, and armored vehicles against the airborne bridgeheads and, above all, using every hour gained to strengthen defenses between Nijmegen and Arnhem.

XXX Corps managed to reach the Nijmegen area and cross the Waal, but the window of opportunity to reach Arnhem was closing. The remaining distance was not great geographically, but operationally it had become immense: narrow roads, German resistance, traffic jams,

bridges, and difficult terrain made every mile slower than expected.

The failure of Market Garden also took shape this way: not in a single moment, but through a succession of delays that progressively turned the isolation of the British paratroopers at Arnhem into an irreversible situation.



Cromwell tanks of the 2nd Welsh Guards cross the Nijmegen bridge on 21 September 1944, during the advance of XXX Corps toward Arnhem. Photo: IWM (B 10172).

The evacuation of Oosterbeek

On 25 September, it became clear that holding the British perimeter north of the Rhine any longer was no longer sustainable. After days of fighting, the units of the **1st British Airborne Division** were exhausted, with dwindling ammunition and supplies and an increasing number of wounded.

The **Oosterbeek** perimeter was under constant pressure. German forces had by then tightened their grip on the British defensive area, and the prospect of decisive relief from XXX Corps had vanished.

The decision was therefore made to withdraw what remained of the division. On the night of **25-26 September**, as part of **Operation Berlin**, the evacuation across the Neder Rijn began. The withdrawal took place in darkness, under German artillery and mortar fire, with exhausted men forced to reach the riverbank and cross the river in boats provided by engineer units.

Approximately **2,100 men of the 1st Airborne Division** were successfully evacuated. Many others, too badly wounded to be moved or cut off during the fighting, were left behind and became prisoners. Total British losses were extremely heavy.

The withdrawal from Oosterbeek effectively marked the end of the Battle of Arnhem. The bridge over the Neder Rijn remained in German hands, and the strategic objective that had given purpose to the entire operation had not been achieved.

Market Garden thus ended with a dramatic evacuation: after deploying thousands of men deep behind enemy lines, the Allies had managed to save only part of the force isolated north of the Rhine.



British wounded are carried to the advanced dressing station at Wolfheze, in the Arnhem area, September 1944.

Photo: IWM (BU 1158)

Tactical successes, strategic objective missed

Defining Market Garden simply as a defeat risks oversimplifying a far more complex operational picture.

The **101st Airborne Division** and the **82nd Airborne Division** captured and held numerous key objectives. Eindhoven and Nijmegen came under Allied control, several vital bridges were secured, and XXX Corps managed to advance much farther north than its starting positions.

At the tactical level, therefore, Market Garden produced significant results. Airborne forces demonstrated that they could rapidly seize critical road junctions and crossings, while ground units managed, despite great difficulties, to open and hold a long corridor through the Netherlands.

The problem was that **Market Garden had not been conceived as a series of independent operations**. The success of the entire plan depended on continuously holding the chain of bridges as far as Arnhem and on the rapid arrival of XXX Corps at the Neder Rijn.

It was therefore an operation in which partial success was not enough.

The capture of Eindhoven and Nijmegen could not compensate for the loss of the decisive objective. Without Arnhem and a secure bridgehead beyond the Lower Rhine, the strategic purpose of the entire offensive was lost: to open an Allied axis of advance toward northern Germany and more directly threaten the Ruhr.

The Allies had advanced, liberated territory and achieved significant local successes, but **they had failed to turn those gains into the strategic breakthrough that Market Garden was meant to deliver**.

The front had moved forward. The route to the heart of Germany, however, remained closed.



The population of Eindhoven watches British XXX Corps armored vehicles pass through on September 18, 1944. The city had been captured the previous day by the U.S. 101st Airborne Division: one of Market Garden's tactical successes, which nevertheless failed to achieve the decisive strategic objective of Arnhem. Photo: IWM (BU 945).

The Lessons of Market Garden for Airborne Operations

Market Garden dramatically demonstrated the ability of airborne forces to deploy large units far beyond the front line within hours, seizing bridges, road junctions and key positions before the enemy could fully react.

But it also highlighted just as clearly the limitations of this type of employment.

Once on the ground, **a parachute unit generally fights with less artillery, fewer armored vehicles and more limited logistical capacity than a conventional formation.** Initial surprise and speed can therefore quickly become vulnerabilities if the link-up with ground forces is delayed or if supplies fail to reach isolated units.

Arnhem was the clearest example. British paratroopers managed to reach and occupy part of the objective, but they lacked the mass, heavy equipment and logistical capacity needed to sustain combat for long against increasingly reinforced German forces.

Another decisive factor was **the complexity of the plan itself.** Market Garden required many actions to succeed in the intended sequence. The capture of one bridge determined whether the next could be reached; the advance of XXX Corps depended on the passability of a single route; the paratroopers at Arnhem depended on the arrival of the ground columns; and those columns, in turn, depended on the airborne divisions' ability to keep the corridor open.

The system worked at many points, but failed at the decisive one.

For this reason, in airborne operations, linking up with ground units is not a secondary element: it can become the factor that separates initial success from operational isolation.

Market Garden also highlighted several principles that would remain central in later doctrine:

- **intelligence:** accurately determining the strength, location and capabilities of enemy reserves;
- **speed:** minimize the time between the airdrop, seizure of the objective, and link-up with ground forces;
- **logistics:** ensure continuous resupply even if designated areas are lost, interdicted, or fall under enemy control;
- **flexibility:** avoid making the success of the entire operation dependent on a single road, a single bridge, or an overly rigid sequence of events;
- **communications:** maintain effective links among dispersed units, commands, and relief forces, especially in the first hours after the drop.

Perhaps the most important lesson was this: **a series of tactical successes does not necessarily produce a strategic victory when the final objective depends on the simultaneous success of every component of the plan.**

Airborne troops can rapidly create a favorable situation deep behind enemy lines, but that situation must be exploited and sustained just as quickly. If this does not happen, the very depth that initially represents an advantage can turn into isolation.



British paratroopers land at Wolfheze; sections of gliders used in the operation are visible on the ground, September 1944. The image encapsulates both one of the strengths and one of the limitations of airborne troops: the ability to rapidly project personnel and materiel deep behind enemy lines, alongside the need to subsequently sustain them and link them up with ground forces. Photo: IWM (BU 1163).

The sacrifice of Arnhem

Arnhem would become the symbol of the entire operation.

The resistance of British paratroopers at the bridge and, subsequently, within the Oosterbeek perimeter became one of the most emblematic episodes in the history of airborne forces.

Market Garden did not open the route to the Ruhr as planned, but it demonstrated how far the combined employment of airborne forces, air power, engineers, infantry, and armored units could be taken.

It was an experience paid for at a very high price and, more than eighty years later, it continues to be studied because it encompasses both sides of airborne warfare: **the ability to achieve surprise and rapidly seize objectives deep behind enemy lines, but also the risk of leaving light forces isolated when link-up with ground units does not occur on schedule.**