



September 20, 1944, Operation Market Garden: Paratroopers of the 82nd Division assaulting the Waal River

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On **20 September 1944**, on the fourth day of Operation Market Garden, paratroopers of the **82nd Airborne Division** carried out one of the boldest actions of the entire campaign in the Netherlands: crossing the **Waal** river in broad daylight, under German fire, to outflank the defenses of Nijmegen and capture from the north the bridges essential for the advance of the British XXX Corps toward Arnhem.

The action was entrusted mainly to the **3rd Battalion of the 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment**, commanded by Major **Julian A. Cook**. An assault conducted on fragile canvas and wooden craft, against a firmly defended bank and without the benefit of surprise.

The objective was simple to state but difficult to achieve: **to open the road to Arnhem before it was too late.**

Market Garden and the Nijmegen junction

Operation Market Garden had begun on **17 September 1944** with an extremely ambitious plan. Allied airborne divisions were to capture a succession of bridges in the Netherlands, while British armored forces of the **XXX Corps** would advance along that narrow corridor to Arnhem.

The **101st Airborne Division** operated in the Eindhoven area; the **82nd Airborne Division under General James M. Gavin** was assigned Grave, Groesbeek and especially Nijmegen; further north, the **1st British Airborne Division** was to capture the bridge over the Lower Rhine at Arnhem.

The strategic objective was to overcome the major Dutch river obstacles, outflank the Siegfried Line and create conditions for penetrating northern Germany.

But German resistance proved far more solid than expected.

At Nijmegen the problem quickly became evident: **the major road bridge over the Waal had not been captured in the first days of the operation.**

Every hour lost meant one more hour for the Germans and one fewer hour for the British paratroopers now fighting in isolation at Arnhem.

The decision: crossing the Waal

Faced with the stalemate, General Gavin decided to attempt something extremely risky: to cross the Waal several kilometers downstream of the bridge, establish a bridgehead on the northern bank and attack the German positions from behind.

The task was entrusted to the **504th Parachute Infantry Regiment.**

The first wave would consist of the **3rd Battalion**, led by Major Julian Cook. Once the bridgehead was established, the **1st Battalion of the 504th** would follow the assault to consolidate and expand the position.

The main problem was finding the boats.

The British XXX Corps managed to bring up **26 small assault boats**, light structures with canvas frames and covering. They were craft intended for tactical crossings, certainly not for ferrying an entire unit across a major river under direct enemy fire.

The boats arrived only in the afternoon.

There was nothing left but to attack **in broad daylight**.

September 20, 1944, 3:00 PM

Just before 3:00 PM, artillery, British tanks, and Allied aircraft opened fire on German positions on the northern bank.

An attempt was also made to create a smoke screen, but the wind quickly reduced its effectiveness.

Around **3:00 PM**, paratroopers began dragging the boats toward the water. With them were men from the **Company C of the 307th Airborne Engineer Battalion**, tasked with piloting the boats and, after landing the first paratroopers, bringing them back for subsequent waves.

About a dozen men found space on each boat.

But even oars were lacking.

Some paratroopers were forced to use **rifle butts and hands to push the boats toward the opposite bank**.

Before them was the Waal, several hundred meters wide in that section.

On the opposite bank awaited machine guns, mortars, light weapons, and German cannons.

The Waal Becomes Hell

As soon as the boats left the southern bank, the Germans opened fire.

Machine gun bullets and shrapnel struck the boats, while mortar and artillery fire fell in the water around the paratroopers.

The current further complicated the crossing.

Major **Julian Cook** was in the first wave and personally led his men during the crossing.

His conduct during the action would later earn him the **Distinguished Service Cross**.

Of the **26 boats** used at the start of the operation, many were hit, damaged, or rendered unusable during subsequent crossings.

Yet the paratroopers continued to advance.

From the Bank to the Bridges

Reaching the northern bank did not mean the mission was complete.

It was only the beginning.

Once ashore, the men of the 504th crossed the embankment and began eliminating the German positions that dominated the river.

The companies of the 3rd Battalion then moved east, toward two decisive objectives: **the railway bridge and the large road bridge at Nijmegen.**

Combat continued through fields, embankments, roads, and fortified positions.

Meanwhile, from the southern part of the city, other units of the 82nd Airborne and tanks from the **British Guards Armoured Division** pressed toward the southern approaches of the bridges.

The Germans thus found themselves under attack **from both directions.**

The paratroopers from the Waal reached the railway bridge sector first and subsequently continued toward the road bridge.

At the same time, British tanks managed to cross the Nijmegen bridge from the south.

The maneuver had worked.

The Price of the Crossing

Success came at a high cost.

Dozens of Allied soldiers were killed and over a hundred were wounded in the fighting related to the crossing and the capture of the bridgehead.

The figures relating to the first wave alone vary slightly in different reconstructions, but all agree on the exceptional intensity of losses suffered during the crossing.

The result, however, was decisive on a local level.

By the evening of **20 September 1944**, the bridges of Nijmegen were in Allied hands.

A victory that came too late

The paradox of the Waal Crossing is that one of the most spectacular tactical victories of Market Garden failed to save the operation as a whole.

To the north, at Arnhem, the situation of the **1st British Airborne Division** was now desperate.

The men who had defended the bridge over the Rhine had been progressively overwhelmed, while the rest of the division continued to fight in the Oosterbeek pocket.

The road through Nijmegen was finally open, but **the time consumed in the preceding three days could no longer be recovered.**

Market Garden thus failed to obtain the bridgehead beyond the Rhine envisaged by the original plan.

The memory of the Waal Crossing

The crossing of the Waal remains one of the symbolic episodes in the history of the **82nd Airborne Division** and the **504th Parachute Infantry Regiment.**

An attack across a major river, carried out in broad daylight, on extremely vulnerable vessels and against an enemy prepared to await them.

Even today Nijmegen remembers those paratroopers through monuments and commemorations. Every evening on the pedestrian bridge **De Oversteek**, built near the crossing point, the **Sunset March** takes place: a commemorative march during which veterans, military personnel, citizens and visitors cross the bridge at sunset in silence, paying tribute to the Allied soldiers who fell during the Battle of Nijmegen and the crossing of the Waal.

On **20 September 1944**, on the waters of the Waal, the 504th PIR succeeded in the mission that had been ordered of it: to cross the river, break the German defense and contribute to the conquest of the bridges of Nijmegen.

The road to Arnhem was finally open. But the race against time was now almost lost.