

# *Ignored Intelligence: The Cost*

Market Garden.

No! Rid yourself of all nice thoughts of an idyllic thatched cottage, roses twining round the door, rows and rows of lettuces, spring greens or runner beans in the field. Think, rather, Second World War, September 1944, Belgian/Dutch border, and Highway 69 from Leopoldville to Arnhem.

Operation Market Garden.

Field-Marshal Bernard Montgomery's plan was in two parts: Market and Garden. Market would capture (intact) the various bridges along the road (remember, Holland is a land of waterways, dykes, canals and rivers) by the largest-ever (until then) drop of paratroops (American, British and Polish), in order to keep the only road open for Garden, an assault by the British army up the road. The immediate object was to take and secure the vital, massive Arnhem bridge over the Rhine, to enable, in the ultimate, Allied ground forces to pour into the Ruhr, thus producing an early German collapse, and so 'bringing the boys home by Christmas'.

There were some successes, but as a whole the operation was a failure. In a personal sense – in particular, for the civilian citizens of Arnhem, and especially for the British and Polish paratroops spearheading the attack at Arnhem, and the Americans killed or injured taking the intermediate bridges, and for the hapless Dutch trapped in their subsequent prolonged subjection under the Nazis leading to many thousands of deaths, and the long, slogging-battle throughout the winter that followed the fiasco – it was a catastrophe of the first magnitude.

Why?

I am not a military historian, and this is not intended to be an article for military buffs, but when all the reasons – and excuses – are weighed – the intransigence, arrogance, over-confidence and

impatience of the planners, fuelled by the mutual loathing of Bernard Montgomery and George Patton, fog in England, the breakdown in communications, poor tactics, the marshy terrain, the accidents of war, the clogging mass of jubilant citizens freed from years of jackboot tyranny, and so on – Market Garden was a disaster *even before it started*.<sup>1</sup>

In saying this, I intend no slur whatsoever on the courage, heroism and grievous, indescribable suffering of the troops on the ground: the rank and file involved deserve nothing but praise. The Americans (with increasing difficulty) succeeded in capturing the lower bridges, not all, alas, intact. But it was at Arnhem where the failure was fatally evident. And, remember, Arnhem was key. Again, this is to cast no slur on the British (joined later by Polish) paratroops who formed the spearhead of the operation at Arnhem. Criticism must be directed much higher up the chain, much higher.

How high?

The very top, including Dwight Eisenhower and, especially, Bernard Montgomery.

Why?

It was not a failure, as was so often said – and is still being said – because of a lack of intelligence. Almost the exact opposite is the case. Intelligence there was in plenty; the failure came about because the top planners chose to ignore the facts. Early writers of the history of the operation, perhaps, had an excuse for not apportioning blame where it truly belongs. Those writers laboured under a grievous disability: they were simply unaware of – or, at least, were only dimly aware of – Operation Ultra.

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<sup>1</sup> For the military aspects of this article, I have relied on Joel J. Jefferson: ‘Operation Market-Garden: Ultra Intelligence Ignored’, a thesis presented to the Faculty of the US Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 2002; Ronald Lewin: *Ultra Goes To War: The Secret Story*, Penguin Books, London, 1978, pp346-351,355,357; Wikipedia.

Operation Ultra was the top, top-secret organisation at Bletchley Park which was established to crack German codes and so supply the Allies with high-grade intelligence. This secrecy was successfully maintained for years, even after the war. It was initially relaxed in 1978, and even more so in 1989. As Adrienne Wilmoth Lerner reports:

The veil of secrecy extended to the wartime staff of Bletchley Park, none of whom disclosed information about Ultra until the project was officially declassified in 1989.<sup>2</sup>

But now that this secrecy has, to a large measure, been relaxed, we know the real reason for the disaster at Arnhem. When all the other reasons and excuses are factored in, the truth is *Operation Market Garden was absolutely doomed before it started. More than that, the top brass knew it was.*

By this stage in the war, Bletchley was supplying first-class, highest-grade intelligence of the German plans. Ultra had cracked the German codes, and were translating German radio traffic so that all who were in the know at the Allied uppermost level of Market Garden were being supplied with a stream of up-to-date intelligence of the enemy, his dispositions, and his plans. Ultra was not faultless in this complicated affair – an early, vital decrypt was passed on with slightly lower grading of importance than it deserved. But, even so, the top brass planning Market Garden knew it all.

And the precise information they were receiving told them that the British and Polish paratroops would be slaughtered, and that, consequently, there was no chance whatsoever that the Arnhem bridge would be secured for a bridgehead into the Ruhr.

Why?

In mid-June, Hitler had transferred a crack SS Panzer (tank) Corps to the West, a Corps which had fought savage battles on the Eastern front. They were battle-hardened. On 4th September,

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<sup>2</sup> Adrienne Wilmoth Lerner: 'Ultra, Operation', encyclopedia.com website.

Hitler put von Rundstedt in charge of the German army in northern France, Belgium and Holland, with the aim of halting the German disintegration. Rundstedt knew that the Panzers, key to his defence against the inevitable Allied onslaught, urgently needed rest and re-equipment, and for that reason he selected a quiet spot to which he could move his tanks – Arnhem. The German decision was entirely fortuitous, but Rundstedt had unwittingly put his finger on the key spot. The unavoidably lightly-armed, temporarily-supplied, British (and, later) Polish paratroops were going to be dropped virtually on top of a crack tank Corps. It was like sending men with pea-shooters, with a limited supply of peas, against a castle manned by cannon. It was going to be nothing but a rout and a slaughter, a massacre.

And the top Allied planning brass – because of Ultra transcripts – knew all this, and knew it down to the finest detail. And knew it in good time.

And as if this was not enough, Dutch resistance intelligence independently confirmed aspects of all this. So much so, air reconnaissance took photographs to verify it all, clearly showing camouflaged German tanks in the vital area.

All this extremely high-grade intelligence was dismissed out of hand by the powers-that-be. Major Brian Urquhart, Air Intelligence, who warned I British Airborne Corps commander, Lieutenant-General Frederick Browning, was waved away as hysterical, and ordered on sick leave. Even higher up the chain, Major-General Sir Kenneth Strong, Eisenhower's Chief Intelligence Officer, took the evidence to the Chief of Staff at headquarters, Bedell Smith, and the latter warned Montgomery. 'I got nowhere', Smith recorded. 'Montgomery simply waived my objections airily aside'.

Not a scrap of all this essential intelligence was passed down the line to the lower commanders, nor the men, who under them, would have to face the tanks – tanks – with nothing but light arms, facing overwhelming armour while short of ammunition, food and medical supplies. (The Germans held the pre-arranged dropping zones for supplies. None, therefore, reached the

stranded British. The Germans got it all). The British paratroops were entirely ignorant of what was waiting for them. (The Poles were going to be detained in England by fog). Of course, the Germans, too, were not fully aware of what was coming, and they made their mistakes, but as soon as they woke up to what was happening on the ground, it was just a question of time. US losses were nearly 4000; British and Polish (those who had to face the Panzers) about 12000.

Joel Jeffson began the conclusion to his thesis:

Operation Market Garden did not fail as the result of a major intelligence error, as stated by numerous authors. Information was available that clearly showed that the German situation in Holland changed dramatically from 4th September to 17th September. While the intelligence community, as a whole, was slow to respond to this change, it nevertheless did. Their warnings though came after the decision to execute the operation had already been made, and the senior commanders were unwilling to cancel the operation. Ultra, the tool that helped Montgomery succeed in Africa, was regrettably set aside in Holland. The intercepts that told the Allies that panzer divisions were relocating to the vicinity of the planned drop zones and airborne objectives were discounted within Montgomery's 21st Army Group, and this information was not passed down to the combat units that were tasked to execute the operation. Even the commander of the British XXX Corps later said: 'I had no idea whatever that the 9th and 10th Panzer Divisions were refitting just north-east of Arnhem'.<sup>3</sup>

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I have said this is not an article for military buffs. So... who is it for? And why have I re-told this tragic saga?

Because it contains invaluable lessons – lessons far beyond military operations. It is altogether too easy for us to have first-class warnings about some impending disaster, and yet ignore them and press on regardless. It might be for reasons of arrogance, over-confidence, or whatever, but ignoring clear

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<sup>3</sup> Jeffson p80.

warnings carries a big price tag. But not, as in Market Garden, for others, the men on the ground, at the sharp end of the battle, *but for ourselves*.

I am speaking spiritually. Don't switch off! We ignore spiritual warnings, spiritual intelligence, at our peril, *our own peril*.

God has warned us all:

[God] commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed [that is, Christ]; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead (Acts 17:30-31).

God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God... Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him (John 3:16-18,36).

Paul was a preacher who warned all his readers and hearers (Acts 20:31; 1 Cor. 4:14; Col. 1:28; 1 Thess. 5:14). So was Ezekiel (Ezek. 3:17-21; 33:3-9). And that is what I am doing here. Reader, I am warning you.

The psalmist was warned of God, so was Cornelius, and so was Noah, and they all three were glad of the warning and acted on it. They did not shrug their shoulders and move on (Ps. 19:11; Acts 10:22; Heb. 11:7).

Alas, I feel like Jeremiah, and have to speak as he did:

Hear this, O foolish and senseless people, who have eyes, but see not, who have ears, but hear not (Jer. 5:21).

To whom shall I speak and give warning, that they may hear? Behold, their ears are closed, they cannot listen; behold, the word of the LORD is to them an object of scorn; they take no pleasure in it (Jer. 6:10).

‘Walk in all the way that I command you, that it may be well with you’. But they did not obey or incline their ear, but walked in their own counsels and the stubbornness of their evil hearts, and went backward and not forward. From the day that your fathers came out of the land of Egypt to this day, I have persistently sent all my servants the prophets to them, day after day. Yet they did not listen to me or incline their ear, but stiffened their neck. They did worse than their fathers. So you shall speak all these words to them, but they will not listen to you. You shall call to them, but they will not answer you. And you shall say to them: ‘This is the nation that did not obey the voice of the LORD their God, and did not accept discipline; truth has perished; it is cut off from their lips’ (Jer. 7:23-28).

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Let me bring this to a close with two episodes which highlight the choice I am putting before you.

*First*, Abimelech, a king of Gerar (Gen. 20:7-18). He was warned of God. He heard that warning. He heeded that warning, and acted accordingly. And God spared him.

*Secondly*, the prospective sons-in-law of Lot (Gen. 19:14). Lot warned them of impending disaster. They treated it as a joke. They perished in the succeeding destruction.

Which of the two are you?