

## Why Did Operation Market Garden Fail?

Numerous historians have heard of the Battle of Arnhem or have seen the film *A Bridge Too Far*, and the failures of Market Garden are well documented and the majority of blame has already been apportioned to Montgomery and Urquhart. As Max Hastings argues in his book *Armageddon*, it was a “rotten plan, poorly executed.”<sup>1</sup> However, fresh analysis<sup>2</sup> has come to light regarding the battle about who was really to blame for its failure, which challenges (or augments) previous assumptions. In fact, this essay’s objective is to correct these inaccuracies by outlining the real reasons for this operation’s historic failure, which not only rests on someone in particular, but somewhere. Namely, that Browning, Gavin, and the botched operation at Nijmegen represent the real linchpins of this operation’s demise. To accomplish this task, this essay will first address the operation’s overall historical context, followed by an assessment of operations surrounding Nijmegen, along with Browning’s and Gavin’s questionable decisions.

By the autumn of 1944, Allied advances had undermined the strategic preponderance of the German Reich and the Wehrmacht, resulting in an increasingly desperate situation for Hitler and his Axis Allies. On the Eastern Front, they had suffered several crushing defeats, such as at Stalingrad and Kursk, and even more recently during Operation Bagration in the summer of 1944, when the German Army Group Center was effectively annihilated.<sup>3</sup> In the south, the Allies had defeated the German Afrika Korps in the desert and were now slowly working their way up the Italian peninsula in 1943. In the west, on the 6th June 1944 the Allies had landed in Normandy and had destroyed the German 7th Army led by Generaloberst (Colonel General) Freidrich Dollman at the Battle of Falaise Pocket. They had also liberated Paris and were now on their way to Germany, where it seemed to most Allied commanders that the Wehrmacht was thoroughly beaten and the



Third Reich was about to fall. To these commanders, it was just a question of time. Since Normandy, the Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force, Dwight D. Eisenhower had been in charge. Knowing that the Germans were now over extended after Falaise, he favoured a broad-front strategy whereby he would march his armies forward on all fronts to overwhelm the enemy by sheer weight of numbers. However, supply and logistical issues arose quickly. As Frederick II, Holy Roman Emperor once said, “without supplies, no army is brave.” As such, Allied logistics could not keep up with the demand of supplying all the armies in France while simultaneously attempting to advance on all fronts. The result was that the Allied armies were stopped dead in their tracks by late August 1944. Desperate times, it seemed, called for desperate measures.



<sup>1</sup> Max Hastings, *Armageddon*. London, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> <https://media.library.ohio.edu/digital/collection/p15808coll15/id/6393>

<sup>3</sup> <https://the-past.com/feature/operation-bagration/>

This gave Field Marshal Montgomery the chance he had been waiting for. Montgomery believed that he had a plan that could defeat the Germans with a decisive blow, provided he was given logistical priority. In his mind, he believed that the allied forces could bypass the Siegfried Line by advancing through Holland, crossing the Rhine and thus occupying the industrial heart of Germany, which was the Ruhr. Consequently, in his view, this would enable the Allies to win the war by Christmas. Confronted by severe logistical issues and knowing that fighting would be brutal on the Siegfried Line, Eisenhower approved the plan and Operation Market Garden was born.



Montgomery's plan was to drive XXX Corps (a British armoured and motorized infantry corps) led by General Sir Brian Horrocks over the bridges of the Lower Rhine and thrust deep into Germany. This was the 'garden' element of the plan. Bridges of course would be of no use if the Germans were able to destroy them.

Therefore, the bridges would need to be secured for the armoured corps in advance. Montgomery sought to achieve this by laying an airborne carpet of roughly three and a half infantry divisions totalling around 33,971 men, which would land on day one behind the enemy lines and secure the bridges and the road to Arnhem. The American 101st, led by General Maxwell Taylor, would then land at Eindhoven, while the American 82nd led by General Gavin would land at Nijmegen, and the British First Airborne Infantry Division led by Major General Roy Urquhart



(and supported by the Polish Brigade, led by General Sosabowski) would land at Arnhem. But as we shall see later on in this essay, the plan could only be as effective as the commanders leading it, which would prove to be a fatal lapse in the instances of Browning and Gavin and the fiasco that occurred at Nijmegen.<sup>4</sup>



In addition, there was another element to the plan whereby at the moment the armoured corps were over the bridges, another division, the 52nd Lowland Infantry Division, would be flown in by air on the fifth day after the Deelen airfield had been captured. The plan was of a much wider scope than is commonly known.

After XXX Corps had crossed the bridges, they intended to drive even further north towards the Zuiderzee (a large sea that sits in the middle of Holland and that is connected to the North Sea). The reason why people tend not to hear about this is because it never took place, but in essence this was the true goal of Operation Market Garden. In

<sup>4</sup><https://www.quora.com/Would-Operation-Market-Garden-have-turned-out-differently-if-the-plans-hadnt-been-found-by-the-Germans-in-the-crashed-glider-on-day-1>

charge of the airborne carpet was Lieutenant General Sir Frederick Arthur Montague “Boy” Browning. He was the father of British airborne operations and was the one who allegedly said, “I think we may be going a bridge too far.” He was entrusted with the challenge of making the plan a success, which ultimately proved to be no easy feat. Indeed, it was proven impossible—and, as we shall see later on, it was in no small measure because of Browning himself.



It is worth noting that paratroopers were the new innovation in warfare during this period. They were used to great success during the German invasion of Crete and proved useful in the Normandy Invasion. However, airborne assaults depended greatly on the element of surprise. In the case of Market Garden, this element was lost by the decision to paradrop in daylight; moreover, the decision was taken to not support the paradrops with air support, which meant that for the first time the Germans could freely move and reinforce their divisions: something they had not been able to do in



Normandy, Italy or Africa. Furthermore, in overall command of the German forces was Field Marshal Walter Model, who was commonly known as the ‘Führer’s Fireman’ based on his astute planning skills and defensive genius. Commanding the 2nd SS Panzer Korps was Wilhelm Bittrich, who had distinguished himself in previous campaigns such as in Normandy. His SS Panzer korps consisted of roughly 7,000 men of the 9th and 10th SS panzer divisions Hohenstaufen and Frundsberg, who were respectively led by Harzer and Harmer. Despite the impressive résumé of the German leaders, the division was only at roughly thirty percent strength. This was in fact the basis for Robert Kershaw’s argument that it was less of an Allied defeat and more of a German Victory. In Kershaw’s book, *It Never Snows in September*, he argues that the Germans outfought the Allies.

This does hold a grain of truth as the Germans did extremely well despite the little resources they had, namely the two depleted panzer divisions. The divisions had been preparing for enemy air assaults for a number of months, further contributing to the slight loss of surprise for the allied forces, but overall the paradrop did possess an element of surprise. This was made clear when Model immediately left his Headquarters fearing capture. This could be argued as an oversight on Montgomery’s part which led to an insurmountable obstacle for Browning and Gavin. However, one event that Montgomery could not foresee was when an Allied glider containing the plans for Market Garden crashed near General Kurt Student’s headquarters, which enabled the Germans to predict some of the Allied movements.

When trying to understand precisely who and what was to blame for the failure of Operation Market Garden, one must look to the experiences and insights of Lieutenant John Frost for clues. Afterall, it was Frost who led the Second Battalion of the British First Airborne Division to Arnhem Bridge on the 17th September, 1944. On the surface, his campaign may seem successful, as his battalion was indeed one of the only battalions to reach their objective. He was likewise acknowledged as the most experienced paratroop commander in the whole of the First Airborne Division. But according to his book, *A Drop Too Many*, which was published after Cornelius Ryan’s book, *A Bridge Too Far*, the reason for the failure of

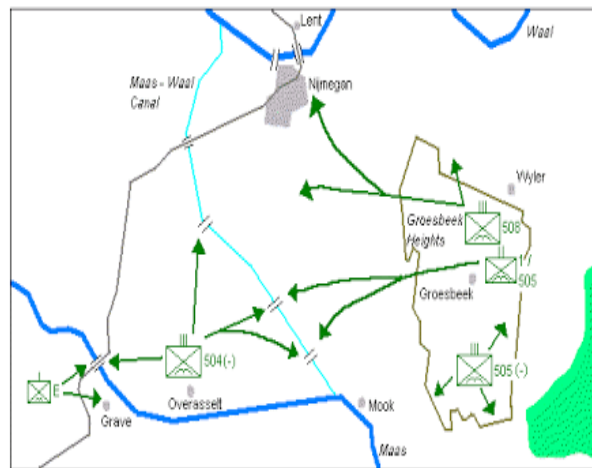


Operation Market Garden was the order that was given to Gavin telling him to halt the advance on Nijmegen bridge.



“The same voice that had so firmly said to Roy Urquhart: ‘Arnhem Bridge. And hold it,’ had said to James Gavin, G.O.C. of the U.S 82nd Airborne Division, ‘The Groesbeek heights [first]. Nijmegen Bridge later.’” - Frost, *A Drop Too Many*, P. 242.<sup>5</sup>

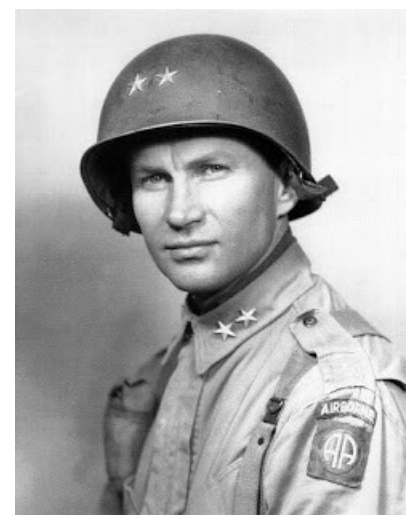
Fatally for the operation, Nijmegen Bridge was not taken on day one, which caused a critical thirty-six hour delay, by which point Frost's battalions at Arnhem were annihilated and Arnhem was solely in German hands. This thirty-six hour delay was caused by the 82nd Airborne Division delaying their advance on the bridge on the first day. Part of the 10th SS Panzer Division advanced and entrenched themselves at Nijmegen, preventing the two platoons of American airborne infantry from taking both sides of the bridge. The following day the platoons were withdrawn back to the Groesbeek heights in order to defend against the German 405th Infantry Division. This division was hardly a division and in no way posed a threat to the 82nd Airborne Division. When XXX Corps arrived on the third day it was they who had to fight for the bridge as well as the town with help from the 82nd Airborne. After the thirty-six hour delay it was too late to save Frost's battalion and Market Garden ultimately failed. Frost lays the blame on the person who caused the delay, namely Browning. For it was Browning who ordered him to secure the Groesbeek heights so that his headquarters could be stationed there. However, despite this it could be argued that Gavin was also partly responsible for the failure of Market Garden as it was his order to prioritise the Groesbeek heights over the Nijmegen Bridge as shown in the report above where it states that Gavin told US Colonel Lindgren not to commit more than one platoon to the acquisition of the bridge.



US 82nd Airborne Division Drop Zones - 17 September 1944

In conclusion and based on the evidence, it is clear that the main proponent of failure at Market Garden was Gavin and to a lesser extent Browning, despite Frost's comments about Browning calling him a “nuisance” and calling Gavin “brave.” Gavin was the one who prioritized the seizure of the Groesbeek heights to protect the allied flank against a non-existent German 405th Division. When asked his reason for not taking Arnhem Bridge, Gavin's response was simply

<sup>5</sup> John Frost, *A Drop Too Many*. 2009.





that "This decision was made by myself and approved by my corps commander."<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, it is appropriate to lay the blame on Gavin and to a lesser extent on Browning. Furthermore, Gavin was the first man to claim that XXX Corps' advance was lackluster and behind schedule, which was what caused the thirty-six hour delay. This is the view that is firmly cemented in the film *A Bridge Too Far*. But Gavin stated this after the battle in order to bend the truth in his favour. Whereas, in reality, the armoured corps was delayed thirty-six hours at Nijmegen Bridge because Gavin and Browning did not take the bridge. The armoured corps had managed fifty miles out of the fifty-eight and had arrived at Nijmegen with time to spare, but unfortunately not enough time to drive the entrenched 10th SS Panzer Division from the Nijmegen Bridge. If the bridge were taken on day one it was likely that XXX Corps would have reached Arnhem and the plan would have succeeded. Finally, with regard to Kershaw's argument, as previously mentioned, while the Germans did extremely well to combat the Allied advance, the original plan of Market Garden was never fully adopted as the Nijmegen Bridge was not taken until XXX Corps had arrived. If the plan had been fully adopted the likely aftermath would have been the crossing of the bridges and advance into the Ruhr. But as we have seen, Operation Market Garden could only have been as effective as the commanders leading it, which in the case of Gavin and Browning, was not an issue of going a bridge too far but rather not going far enough.

Sources: John Frost, *A Drop Too Many*. 2009.  
Max Hastings, *Armageddon*. London, 2004.  
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Major General R E Urquhart, *Arnhem*. 1958.  
Major General Sosabowski, *Freely I Served*. Great Britain, 1982.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://forum.axishistory.com/viewtopic.php?t=139717&start=240>

