

CROSSROADS BRABANT 40-45

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The liberation of North Brabant, from Market Garden to Moerdijk

How did the liberation of North Brabant fit into the Allied strategy in the autumn of 1944?

In fits and starts

The liberation of North Brabant can be compared to a commuter train that travels short distances and then stops. As early as 11 September 1944 the first British liberators, a reconnaissance patrol, arrived close to Valkenswaard before retreating. After that it took almost two months before the Allied advance was completed. One part of the province, the 'Land of Heusden and Altena', would only enjoy liberation after the German capitulation in May 1945. Why? Anyone studying the events in detail will soon discover that liberation happened in three phases. The story begins with the landing of paratroopers and gliders on 17 September 1944.

Airborne landings

Market Garden was undoubtedly one of the most spectacular operations of World War Two. With the exception of D-Day and the fighting in Normandy, no battle conjures up the imagination in the way this one does. Why was this? After German defeats in France in the summer of 1944 it seemed that the end of the war in Europe was in sight. The liberation of Antwerp on 4 September was like a clarion call that seemed to be announcing the end. However, before advances into Germany could be made, various waterways had to be crossed, something that always posed problems for the armies. The greatest obstacles were the North Brabant canals and the Maas, Waal and Rhine Rivers. British field marshal Bernard L. Montgomery and his staff conceived a plan whereby airborne landing troops would capture the bridges (*Market*) so that ground troops could pass over these barriers without too much delay (*Garden*). The operation began in North Brabant on Sunday 17 September 1944 when the American 101st *Airborne Division* landed on the ground near Veghel and Son.

A tank battle in North Brabant

The planned capture of the bridges was not a complete success and it was the following day before Eindhoven was in American hands. It was only after a bridge was taken across the Wilhelmina Canal during the night that British tanks could push on towards Nijmegen. The city centre and the bridge across the River Waal were still in German hands, and it was 20 September before the Waal was crossed. But the tide was starting to turn. Fierce German counterattacks on the main British route, nicknamed '*Hell's Highway*' by the Americans, delayed the arrival and required countermeasures. This led to the only tank battle on Dutch soil in the area between the River Dommel and Nuenen, which also took place on 20 September. Meanwhile two flanking manoeuvres had begun to the east and west of the main Eindhoven-Veghel-Grave route. But progress was slow and when Market Garden ceased on 24 September the Allied advance was stalled. Montgomery's daring operation had failed and North Brabant

was divided by a long corridor of liberated territory. The flanking manoeuvres were stopped in the middle of the Kempen region and north of Overloon. The first phase was over.

Bungling in the side lines

After the failure of Market Garden, Montgomery once again had to reflect on his next strategy. The British field marshal did not realise that the situation had changed and that momentum had been lost. He also ignored the fact that the main part of the German 15th Army (general Erich von Zangen) had meanwhile arrived in Central and West Brabant. Montgomery still wanted to enter Germany with his main forces from Nijmegen. At the same time the First Canadian Army unit was to advance from the south via Tilburg to 's-Hertogenbosch in order to drive back the German troops in North Brabant to the area above the main rivers. To make this possible the sections at the front were divided up again. The Peel area was assigned to the Americans, the idea being to drive the enemy away beyond the River Maas. Montgomery's plan quickly became a blunder and both operations failed. The advance to Tilburg, in which the Polish also took part, was intercepted at Goirle by the 'fire brigade' of the 15th Army, the '*Kampfgruppe Chill*'. An attempt near Woensdrecht to force a breakthrough towards South Beveland and Walcheren also met a bloody end by the same *Kampfgruppe* which had regrouped extremely quickly. Meanwhile, the Americans at Overloon in the Peel had been fighting in vain against well entrenched German troops. The British took control again and the new attack started on 12 October. Overloon was liberated and the British began to get back up to speed. A few days later and completely unexpectedly, came the order to abandon the operation. What was happening?

Because of Antwerp

The strategically important port of Antwerp had been in Allied hands since the beginning of September. In reality, it could not be used as long as the enemy still had control over the regions of Walcheren and *Zeeuws-Vlaanderen* (Dutch Flanders) and over the access points. The Allied supreme command waited impatiently for the moment that the Germans would be driven out. Montgomery had assumed that the Canadians would purge North Brabant and force entry into Walcheren, while he continued to concentrate on Germany. That turned out to be a misconception. By the middle of October, patience at the top was exhausted and Montgomery was called to order by his superior, the American general Dwight D. Eisenhower. Now things changed course and everything focussed on liberating the access routes to Antwerp. Montgomery's new directive meant that the Canadian Army had to advance north (operation *Suitcase*), towards the Hollands Diep waterway, while the British advanced through 's-Hertogenbosch towards the same destination (operation *Pheasant*). The Canadians were temporarily reinforced by an extra American infantry division to speed the whole thing up. Both operations continued in fits and starts, but the outcome was clear from the start. Bergen op Zoom and 's-Hertogenbosch were pivotal points, so German occupation was at its strongest there. Meanwhile Von Zangen - against Hitler's express orders - had been planning the retreat for some time and his troops managed to move back behind the Maas and the Hollands Diep with relatively small losses. The British, Poles, Canadians and Americans arrived there at the beginning of November, and North Brabant was liberated. Only the Land of Heusden and Altena remained under German occupation. That was a logical result of this decision, as the operations

were geared totally to liberating the port of Antwerp. The area to the north of the Bergse Maas was not part of that plan. And the Peel? A new operation (*Nutcracker*) continued there until the beginning of December. The incredibly swampy land, poor infrastructure, harsh weather and fierce opposition meant that the last of the German troops only retreated beyond the Maas on 3 December, almost three months to the day after Antwerp had been liberated.

Conclusion

The liberation of North Brabant was a three-pronged strategy. First Market Garden, followed by the failed operations in the flanks and finally the combined *Suitcase* and *Pheasant* operations. These three show clearly why the liberation of North Brabant eventually lasted for two months, leading to large-scale material damage and very many civilian casualties. The Allied approach was: first shoot, only then attack. That is why hardly any village or town in the province emerged unscathed from the battle. The same went for the newly liberated area north of the Bergse Maas which remained on the front line until May 1945, with all the misery that brought. The operations that followed were all the result of Montgomery's decisions; he admitted frankly after the war that he had made serious errors of judgement. It's clear that liberation had never been an end in itself. To put it bluntly, the province was completely irrelevant; the only aim was, and remained, to defeat the German military power, and so put an end to the war. But there was still one factor that had played a role; the slow progress of the liberation was also the result of German tactics. The *Wehrmacht* military command had become experts in delayed fighting, which had just one aim, to win as much time as possible and to cause heavy losses to the opposition. Without doubt the *Generalleutnant* Kurt Chill mentioned earlier was the absolute master of this. More than any other German commander, he left his mark on the progress of the liberation of North Brabant.

Bibliography:

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