

Operation "Anger": The Little Known Canadian Victory at Arnhem in 1945

by Captain S.F. King, CD

A note from the Managing Editor: Over the last several years, a number of regiments have received battle honours that were not previously granted due to oversight or ignorance of a unit's operational record. For example, in the 1990s a staff officer at the Directorate of History and Heritage discovered that an honour had not been given to the Lincoln and Welland Regiment as no one had noticed that the official list was printed on both sides of the document! Awarding honours becomes even more difficult when a regiment such as The Princess Louise Fusiliers never fought as a battalion and provided company level support to the infantry brigades of the 5th Armoured Division. While the role of the 11th Independent Machine Gun Company (The Princess Louise Fusiliers) in the battle of Arnhem was not pivotal, its

story in that battle has never been fully described nor reflected in the unit's Battle Honours. Captain Sanchez King, a member of The Princess Louise Fusiliers, has spent several years attempting to prove that The Princess Louise Fusiliers were eligible for the "Arnhem 1945" award. Facing many research challenges and some mild opposition to the entire project, Captain King's determination did not waiver and the fruits of his work culminated in the award of "Arnhem 1945" to his regiment in 1999. Congratulations are due to Captain King for his skilful research, perseverance and steadfastness and to The Princess Louise Fusiliers for this distinct honour. The article below tells the story of the battle fought by The Princess Louise Fusiliers and others in 1945.

Grave, Nijmegen and Arnhem. Running in a straight line, south to north, these towns dominated the vital bridge crossings of the several water obstacles that could halt any armoured advance. The plan called for the 101st US Airborne Division to capture Eindhoven and several bridges to the north. The 82nd US Airborne Division would secure the towns and bridges of Grave and Nijmegen. Thus secured, a path would be created for Horrocks' armour heavy forces. The key, however, was the bridge at Arnhem. Without it, Allied forces could not make their swing into the heart of Germany. The task of capturing Arnhem would be assigned to the 1st British Airborne Division, with the 1st Polish Independent Parachute Brigade Group under command.¹

Arnhem. The name instantly conjures up images of British and Polish parachutists engaged in a doomed but heroic struggle against overwhelming enemy forces. At the same time, one might think of the Arnhem Bridge, so crucial to the Allies efforts to end the war by the end of 1944. These images are well formed in the popular culture of military history largely due to Cornelius Ryan's epic book, *A Bridge Too Far*, and the film of the same name. The glory and tragedy of the first battle of Arnhem tend to overshadow the efforts of Canadian and British ground troops, some six months later, to liberate this important Dutch town. The Battle of Arnhem 1945 is not generally the subject of historical analysis or dramatic retelling, but, as with many Canadian battles of the Second World War, it certainly deserves at least a casual examination.

After the invasion of Normandy in June 1944, Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces realized

that if the war were to end quickly, the Allied armies would have to reach the industrial heartland of Germany. The focus of the Allied advance was to cut off the retreating German forces in northern Holland and to swing eastward into the Ruhr Valley. Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery believed that to achieve this goal, a bold plan was required. He had one.

Montgomery's plan, which would be named "Market Garden," looked great on paper. The "Market" part of the operation was a massive airborne assault to be carried out by the Allied First Airborne Army. The "Garden" operation consisted of ground forces, primarily the tanks of Lieutenant General Brian Horrocks' XXX Corps, racing to link up with the glider and para troops. The Dutch towns selected as targets for the airborne assaults were Eindhoven,

Initially, the plan was almost universally opposed. In late August, with the campaign in Europe stalled, General Eisenhower was forced to agree with Montgomery's plan. After several false starts, Market Garden was set for mid-September.

The airborne drops commenced on September 17th. In short order, the 82nd and 101st Divisions were able to achieve their objectives. At Arnhem, however, things did not go so well for the British. From the beginning, the British paratroops were hampered by

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poor communications. It took two days to drop all the 1st Airborne Division's troops, and they found themselves heavily engaged by greater than expected numbers of enemy troops. Only a small force, based on the 2nd Battalion, the Parachute Regiment,

made it into Arnhem and the vital bridge. Under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel John Frost, this group gallantly held out for nine days. By the time that XXX Corps, slowed by boggy terrain and narrow roads, reached the Arnhem Bridge, the Germans were firmly in control. Market Garden had failed, and with it, hope for a quick victory faded.²

By March 1945, the situation in Holland had changed considerably. The port of Antwerp had been liberated, and the hard fought battle of the Scheldt Estuary had been won. In the east, the Netherlands was free of the German army. In the western region of Holland, however, the German army remained entrenched, and pressure on the Allies from the Dutch government in London was mounting. The Dutch wanted the Netherlands liberated at the earliest possible opportunity, whereas Montgomery wanted to destroy the German army in the field and felt that liberating western Holland would divert scarce resources from this task. The Germans would withdraw soon enough, he reasoned.

Pressure from the Dutch continued to increase, and the enemy, not subject to Montgomery's wishes, failed to withdraw. On April 5th, Montgomery directed General Crerar's First Canadian Army to make one of its corps available to commence the methodical clearing of western Holland. This task fell to I Canadian Corps under Lieutenant-General Charles Foulkes. Foulkes' corps included the 5th Canadian Armoured Division, recently

The main channel of the Rhine comes up from the southeast to a point, sixteen kilometres east of Nijmegen, where it

The Princess Louise Fusiliers [came] under command of the 49th Division Machine Gun Battalion ...

splits into the Waal and the Neder Rijn. The Neder Rijn runs northwestwards toward Arnhem, and the IJssel River splits off just above the city. The Neder Rijn turns westward past Arnhem. North of Arnhem, the land rises to a height of approximately 100 metres above sea level, but along the channels of the Rhine and up the IJssel, the countryside is a network of canals and irrigation ditches.⁴

Part of the grandly titled *Festung Holland* (Fortress Holland), the area around Arnhem, was defended by the German 346th Division, consisting of the 858th Grenadier Regiment and miscellaneous units, including a divisional Battle School. The exact strength and composition of the German forces at Arnhem were not known, so little would be left to chance.⁵

Initial planning for the operation against Arnhem had been underway since late March. The I Canadian Corps plan was to secure the "Island" south of the Neder Rijn. Known as Operation "Destroyer," this was to take place in early April. Once 5th Armoured secured the "Island", the 49th Division, under the command of Major-General S.B. Rawlins, would conduct the assault on Arnhem. Once the British troops had secured the bridgehead, 5th Armoured would push through and

conducted in three phases. First, 56 Infantry Brigade Group was to conduct the assault crossing of the Neder Rijn

west of Arnhem, secure a limited bridgehead and clear the southern sector of the town. Next, 146 Infantry Brigade Group was to pass through 56 Brigade and enlarge the bridgehead. Finally, the 147 Infantry Brigade Group would secure the high ground west of Arnhem.⁷

Support for the operation was considerable. Under command was an assortment of engineer units, amphibious vehicle units (including both Buffaloes and DUKW amphibious vehicles) and two Canadian units, the 11th Canadian Armoured Regiment (Ontario Regiment) and the 11th Independent Machine Gun Company (The Princess Louise Fusiliers).⁸ For the operation, the Ontario Regiment was to support the brigades in the assault, while The Princess Louise Fusiliers (PL Fus) were to be under command of the 49th Division machine gun battalion, 2nd Battalion, Kensington Regiment.⁹

In support were several Canadian units including the artillery groups of the First Canadian Army and 5th Armoured¹⁰ as well as the 1st and 10th Field Squadrons, Royal Canadian Engineers. The Royal Navy was to provide the 552 Landing Craft Flotilla and the Royal Air Force would provide air support in the form of Spitfires and Typhoons.¹¹

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arrived from Italy, and the British 49th (West Riding) Division. The Corps had arrived in the Arnhem area on April 2nd and had taken part in operations to expand the "Island" south of the Neder Rijn (Lower Rhine) River.³

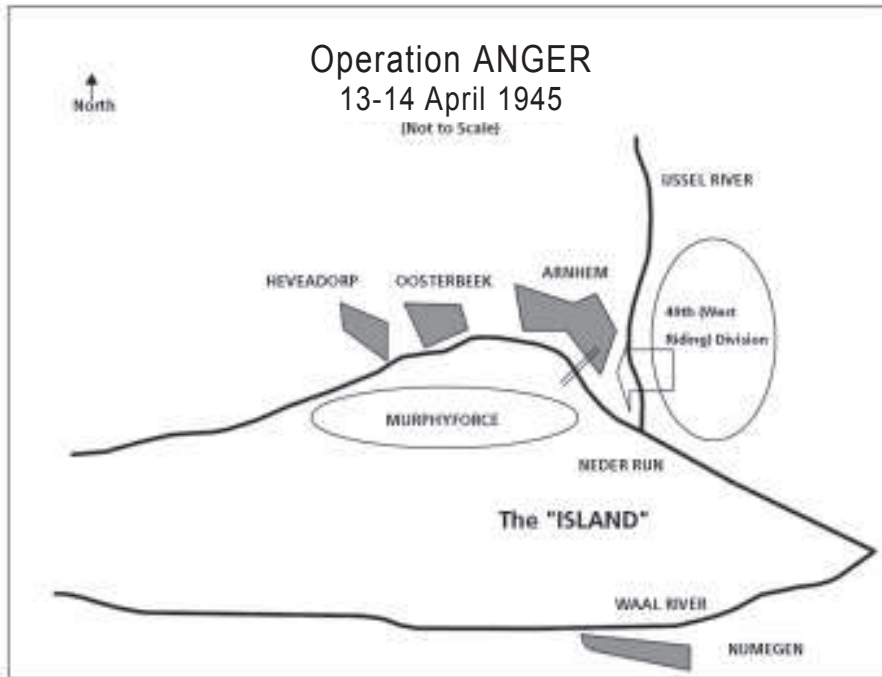
Geographically, the area between Nijmegen and Arnhem is part of the Rhine Delta and known as the "Island."

make a dash for the Dutch town of Otterloo.

On April 2nd and 3rd, Operation "Destroyer" was conducted, allowing the corps to secure and expand the "Island." Detailed planning for the 49th Division assault began immediately. Operation "Anger,"⁶ as it would be known, was to be an assault river crossing. Rawlins plan was to be

Preparations for Operation "Anger" included the creation of one rather unique structure; Canadian engineers had prefabricated a Bailey pontoon bridge upstream at Doornenberg and had floated it to a waiting position near the IJssel. The intent was to slip this bridge downstream and into position, thus taking the enemy by surprise and dramatically increasing the 49th Division's ability to get troops and vehicles across the river.¹²

During the evening of April 4th and early morning of April 5th, patrols from



crossing. Several problems, however, began to develop. Twelve landing craft, due to arrive at 2100 hours, turned up late. They had encountered a “traffic jam” on the river with several barges loaded with divisional supplies. The late arrival was compounded by the discovery that charges on the enemy side of the bank, designed to facilitate the landing, had been disrupted by the RAF sorties and had failed to detonate. The Buffaloes had to find whatever pathway they could, delaying the landings.¹⁶ It was not until 2315 hours that the first battalion of infantry gained a foothold on the north bank of the IJssel.¹⁷

Despite the piecemeal landings, the build-up was proceeding well. The heaviest resistance encountered at the onset was at the old fort. Supported by The Princess Louise’s machine guns positioned well forward,¹⁸ troops of 56 Brigade overcame enemy land mines and heavy fire to pacify the strongpoint. Soon the situation was stabilized to the point that by 0050 hours on the 13th, the prefabricated pontoon bridge could be launched. By 0700 hours, all three infantry battalions of 56 Brigade had landed but tank support, in the form of A Squadron, the Ontario Regiment, would not arrive until the ferries were operational, at approximately 0845 hours. By 1045 hours, the engineers and the Royal Navy had moved their bridge into

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position, enabling phase two to commence. 146th Brigade, along with C Squadron, the Ontario Regiment, were able to quickly cross the bridge, and by midday, they had passed through 56th Brigade.¹⁹

Fighting in the built-up areas of Arnhem proved to be a challenge. The Ontario Regiment official history records that: “Fighting throughout the city was slow, due to the necessity for clearing machine gun posts and snipers from the buildings as the advance progressed.”²⁰

several of the infantry battalions crossed the Neder Rijn in an effort to gain more accurate information concerning enemy positions. Little concrete intelligence was gathered except to confirm that the enemy occupied a factory complex on the eastern side of Arnhem.¹³

Late on April 7th, the plan had to be amended. General Foulkes decided that Arnhem should be approached from the east, across the IJssel River, rather than from the west. The Germans, protecting the route into the Ruhr, had designed the positions at Arnhem to defeat an enemy approaching from the west. Foulkes had also become concerned that smokescreening efforts, intended to cover reconnaissance and dumping activity along the Neder Rijn, had not been effective. He feared that the defenders would have plenty of time to prepare for a western assault. Foulkes set H-Hour for after dark on the 11th of April.¹⁴

The days of April 8th to 10th were spent in regrouping and adjusting within the formations. On April 10th, H-Hour was amended. More time was required for several other Canadian units and formations to get into position to support the operation. On the left, along the southern bank of the Neder Rijn, an organization, known as Murphyforce, had relieved elements of 5th Armoured.

Murphyforce was a mixture of armour and infantry, largely from the 1st Canadian Armoured Brigade, whose job would be to provide a diversion. Additionally, more time was needed for the 11th and 12th Regiments, Special Air Service, to jump in behind the enemy so as to support the division’s activities. The new H-Hour was fixed at 2240 hours on the 12th of April.¹⁵

During the daylight hours of April 12th, the RAF supplied 36 Spitfire and 83 Typhoon sorties to soften up the German positions around Arnhem, focussing much of their attention on a strongpoint located in an old Dutch fort. At 1940 hours, Murphyforce opened up with their diversionary fire plan in the area of Heveadorp, the original location for the 56 Brigade assault. The retaliation from the German positions certainly hinted that they were well prepared for an assault from the west. At 2040 hours, the artillery and supporting fire plans kicked off. The sound of the salvos fired by the rocket batteries had a distinct psychological effect, even on the friendly troops. The machine guns and mortars of the Kensingtons and The Princess Louise’s concentrated their fire in an effort to suppress the enemy firepower during the initial

At a factory east of Arnhem, operations had stalled. This complex “had been converted into an improvised fortress. It was so desperately defended that the advance was still halted at 1100 hours.”²¹

By the afternoon of April 13th, the 4th Lincoln Regiment, a battalion of 146 Brigade, was tasked to capture the factory east of Arnhem. The 4th Lincolns were supported by a troop of Canadian tanks commanded by Lieutenant H.W. MacDonald. It was during this action that an interesting example of infantry-tank co-operation occurred.

[Lieutenant MacDonald’s] tank was working through the city with a platoon of infantry when both the platoon officer and the sergeant were killed. The platoon became disorganized and the advance halted. Leadership was promptly provided by Lieutenant MacDonald. He vaulted out of his tank, rounded up the stragglers and laid down a new plan of action with the section leaders. Within a few minutes the platoon was back in action. During the day, Lieut. MacDonald’s troop collected 200 prisoners.²²

For his actions that day, MacDonald was awarded the Military Cross.

By nightfall of April 13th, German resistance had largely crumbled. The hours of darkness were used, primarily, to consolidate the bridgehead and to move 147 Brigade across

the Ijssel and into position to breakout the next morning. Infantry patrols found little sign of the enemy and by dawn, the brigades were ready to continue with the clearance of Arnhem. By 1600 hours, the brigades had met their objectives and Allied traffic was now moving across Arnhem

the innovative use of the prefabricated pontoon bridge, but much of the operation was simply by the book. Assault water crossings, fighting in built-up areas and infantry-tank co-operation, by this stage of the war, were all second nature to these troops. What is interesting about Operation “Anger”

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Bridge. In all, 49th Division had captured 601 German prisoners. 5th Armoured was now prepared to move through 49th Division and carry on toward Otterloo. Operation “Anger” was complete.²³

The war had taken a great toll on the town. The war diary of 49th Division noted that “the enemy had systematically and wantonly looted every house and building in Arnhem, carrying off much furniture, destroying the majority of what they left, and damaging every house ... a town had never been more wantonly destroyed.”²⁴

In the final analysis, Operation “Anger” and the capture of Arnhem was not a spectacular action. Certainly, there were noteworthy aspects, such as

is that it provides a glimpse at these Canadian and British units and formations as well trained, experienced organizations, possibly at the peak of their efficiency; methodical, yet with a touch of originality. The legend of Arnhem may always be the domain of the Parachute Regiment, but the pride of victory belongs to the regiments who carry Arnhem 1945 as a battle honour.²⁵



ABOUT THE AUTHOR...

Captain Sanchez King joined The Princess Louise Fusiliers in 1982 and was commissioned in 1984. He received a degree in History from Mount Saint Vincent University before pursuing advanced studies at the Atlantic School of Theology. Captain King is also a graduate of the Canadian Land Forces Command and Staff College. He has held numerous command appointments within his Regiment and within various training establishments. He has also held staff appointments at brigade, division and land force area level. Currently, he is the Civil-Military Cooperation Plans Officer at Land Force Atlantic Area Headquarters.