

Whispers and Shadows in the Night – Engineers Rescue Airborne Forces

A memorial at Driel in the Netherlands commemorates the British and Canadian sappers in a little-known WW II operation called Operation BERLIN. That operation was the evacuation of the remnants of British and Polish airborne troops back across the Rhine River on the night of 25/26 September 1944 after the failure of Operation MARKET-GARDEN.



One of the objectives of Operation MARKET-GARDEN was to capture the Rhine bridges between Eindhoven and Arnhem with a combination of British, American and Polish

Airborne Forces. The complete plan is known in perpetuity in the movie “A Bridge Too Far.”

The British 1st Airborne Division was to capture the most northerly bridges over the Neder Rijn at Arnhem and they began dropping west of Arnhem at 1300 hrs on 17 September 1944. These 11,000 troops were supposed to hold the Arnhem Bridge for a maximum of two days until the arrival of 30 Corps. In the end, however, the Airborne Division held for nine days with only 740 of the 11,000 men making it to the objective, among them, sappers of the 9th Field Company, Royal Engineers (Airborne).

Attempts by Allied ground forces to link up with the encircled airborne forces failed and the only option was to evacuate the remnants of the Airborne Division by small boats across the Neder Rijn at night. Four sapper field companies were tasked for Operation BERLIN: the Royal Engineer 260th and 553rd Field Companies and the Royal Canadian Engineers 20th and 23rd Field Companies.

The operation was to start at 2200 hrs on the 25th but the field companies had left many hours earlier and moved through enemy positions to the south bank of the Neder Rijn. In dismal weather and under constant German machine gun, mortar and artillery fire, the boats shuttled back and forth across the wide swift river through the night. The evacuation went on until daylight came and the operation was forced to cease.

The official death toll was 1755 Allied soldiers killed. More than 3000 men were wounded and became prisoners of war. Several hundred escaped on their own aided by the Dutch resistance. Operation BERLIN rescued some 2500 airborne troops. The 23rd Canadian Field Company recovered the majority of the besieged paratroopers by traversing the river with approximately 150 boatloads.

The 23th Canadian Field Company lost seven killed and 14 wounded while five were decorated for their heroic actions. The monument to Operation BERLIN was unveiled on the 44th anniversary in 1989. The inscription on the monument to the British and Canadian Engineers is: "They were just whispers and shadows in the night", the way a British paratrooper had remembered these heroic sappers.