Arnhem 65 years on

John Booth

Now we've reached the 70th anniversary of the outbreak of the Second World War, we can expect a round of reminders as the dwindling band of veterans gathers to mark the sacrifices their comrades made in the defeat of Nazi Germany. But is it too much to hope as *The Very Best of Vera Lynn* goes on sale that we might experience a little more than nostalgia for a lost sense of national purpose as we again watch *The Dambusters*, *Cockleshell Heroes* and *The Longest Day*?

An opportunity for learning something from the disastrous Arnhem campaign of 1944 came and very largely went with its 65th anniversary in September: few of its participants are likely to be alive come 2014. The limited media coverage of that event was largely devoted to an air drop near the Dutch city watched by a small number of British Airborne veterans. The only mildly controversial aspect focused on complaints about the absence on that occasion of the Prince of Wales, the colonel-in-chief of the Parachute Regiment.

This is a pity as, during a time when British troops in Afghanistan are let down by faulty and inadequate equipment and poor political direction, the Market Garden operation reminds us that this is nothing new. In failing to mark the occasion well – without even a TV showing of Richard Attenborough's 1977 *A Bridge Too Far* – it denies the shrinking number of survivors some of the honour they are due and the rest of us access to a little of our history.

This lack of public awareness is not due to the absence of historical material. Attenborough's film, with its fine script by William Goldman, was closely based on the 1974 book of the same title by Cornelius Ryan, a work that has drawn much praise from Arnhem veterans. The Pegasus Archive[1] assembles a wide range of detailed official and unofficial accounts of the battle; the Hartenstein Airbourne Museum in Oosterbeek[2] adds a Dutch perspective on the events of September 1944; and, for English readers, Robert Kershaw's *It Never Snows in September* brings together some of the many German views on what took place.[3] For those keen to learn about Arnhem there are many other readily accessible sources and, if my experience is any guide, visitors are warmly welcomed by the Dutch whose children pay respectful homage each year at the well-maintained burial places of the British, Polish and other Allied dead.

Urquhart

My own interest was drawn in part by reading the memoirs of Brian Urquhart,[4] who, after the Second World War, helped build the United Nations under Dag Hammarskjold and later headed its peacekeeping force. Urquhart, now 90, lives in the United States, still writes occasionally for *The New York Review of Books* and can be found talking about Arnhem, the United Nations and issues of peace and war.[5] Urquhart was the chief intelligence officer of the British Airborne Division in 1944 under the command of Major General Frederick – 'Boy' – Browning.

The second stimulus came through a Polish friend who alerted me to the life of Stansislaw Sosabowski, who

1 <www.pegasusarchive.org/arnhem/frames.htm>

2 <www.airbornemuseum.nl/>

3 As does the <www.defendingarnhem.com/index.htm> website.

4 *A Life in Peace and War* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1984)

5 At <http://bmrc.berkeley.edu/cwh/urquhart/videopage9.html> and other websites.

commanded the 1st Independent Polish Parachute Brigade at Arnhem. Unlike the middle class Urquhart, (Westminster School and Christ Church, Oxford), Sosabowski was the son of a poor railway worker who, after First World War service, rose rapidly through the ranks of the Polish Army. He fought and was captured by the Germans after the 1939 invasion, only to escape and, upon arriving in Britain, set up the Polish parachute brigade.

These men independently foresaw the problems with Field Marshal Montgomery's Market Garden plan to seize from the air key river bridges in the Netherlands ahead of a ground operation that he believed would take the Allies into the Ruhr and thus end the war by Christmas 1944. Both, in different ways, paid a heavy price for their questioning foresight. It is through their eyes – Urquhart through his book and Sosabowski, who died in 1967, from interviews used by Cornelius Ryan – that I will briefly recount a little of what still largely remains to the British public a part of our hidden history.

Urquhart recounts that in 1941 'Boy' Browning, the youthful, ambitious and well-connected husband of novelist Daphne du Maurier (their daughter was later to marry Montgomery's son), asked him to join his newly conceived British Airborne Forces as intelligence officer. He served in that capacity until shortly before that force took off for Arnhem on Sunday 17 September 1944. Though pleased to join Browning and leave behind the 'by now somewhat humdrum life of an infantry brigade' he was aware, after the German airborne experience in Crete that same year, that while there was potential value in small-scale landings on specific targets, 'organised in large fighting formations – brigades, divisions, and corps such as existed later in the war – airborne forces were a dubious military proposition.'

As the war progressed and after a discouraging big landing in Sicily, Urquhart's doubts about operations with lots

of airborne troops grew:

> ‘To fly them to their targets took huge numbers of transport aircraft which, except at night, were slow and extremely vulnerable. The range of these aircraft was limited. The troops tended to be dispersed on the ground. Once on the ground a large formation of airborne troops, although of elite quality, was something of a white elephant. It had no heavy weapons, very little transport – and that only jeeps – and no logistical back-up. If in action, it was very likely very soon to run out of ammunition. It had to be sustained by air and defended until it was relieved by advancing ground troops. An airborne formation could not be manoeuvred and fought like an ordinary ground formation. It was essentially light and static.’

After D-Day the initial rapid Allied advance, particularly that of US General Patton, led to the repeated cancellation of planned Browning airborne operations, but, recounts Urquhart, ‘after the capture of Brussels there was a general slowing down’. At Airborne this ‘gave rise to all sorts of frenetic planning as we studied various operations to break the logjam.’

Urquhart recalls:

> ‘Nowhere did the desire for action burn more steadily than in the breast of Boy Browning, who had not yet commanded troops in battle in World War II. Holland was the limit of the range of transport aircraft stationed in Britain. The pressure to get into action intensified. Elsewhere similar sentiments were taking hold. Montgomery, chagrined by the spectacular successes of Patton, was seeking, contrary to his reputation for caution, a British masterstroke to end the war.’

Montgomery’s Market Garden plan was for British and Polish paratroops to capture the bridges at Arnhem and for the American 82nd and 101st to take the ones further south and

nearer to the then front line on the Dutch/Belgian border. When news of it reached the ears of Sosabowski, Ryan records him saying:

> 'The British are not only grossly underestimating German strength in the Arnhem area, but they seem ignorant of the significance Arnhem has for the Fatherland.'

The Pole had much experience of fighting Germans and did not expect them, even if they were the low-calibre troops described by Browning, to leave open the gateway to their homeland. Then when Sosabowski discovered that the initial British paratroops were to land at least six miles from the objective – thus losing the key element of surprise – he became even more alarmed.

What neither Sosabowski not Urquhart could have added to their fears for the operation would be the impact upon the Germans of the speech by US Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau the day before Market Garden was launched. In it he threatened to reduce the postwar German economy to little more than pastoral agriculture. If the Nazi defenders of the Fatherland needed any further incentive to resist, Morgenthau's Quebec speech duly supplied it.

But Urquhart's general anxieties about large-scale airborne operations had already found sharp focus in the Montgomery plan to seize the great bridges across the Rhine delta. To his strategic concerns were added more personal ones:

> 'I was also worried about the state of mind of General Browning and my brother officers. There seemed to be a general assumption that the war was virtually over and that one last dashing stroke would finish it. The possibility of German opposition was scarcely considered worthy of discussion. The Market Garden operation was constantly referred to as "the party". It was said that

> Colonel John Frost, the gallant commander of the 1st Parachute Battalion, was considering taking along his golf clubs and ceremonial mess uniform.'
>
> 'I do not know what the Americans thought of the plan, although I suspect that Generals Ridgeway and Gavin were less than enthusiastic, but on the British side I found few people to whom I could talk rationally.'

Sosabowski had a similar experience when he attended the briefing by the British commander, Major General Robert – 'Roy' – Urquhart [no relation to Brian Urquhart] five days before the attack. In it Urquhart spelled out the distance his paratroops would have to cover between the chosen dropping zones west of Arnhem and the objectives within the city. Ryan records Sosabowski:

> 'I remember Urquhart asking for questions and nobody raised any. Everyone sat nonchalantly, legs crossed, looking bored. I wanted to say something about this impossible plan, but couldn't. I was unpopular as it was, and anyway who would have listened?'

Urquhart found himself unable to hide his feelings

> 'and became obsessed with the fate of Market Garden. I was desperately anxious to go on the operation, but I was even more anxious for it to be considered carefully."

As chief intelligence officer he

> 'had to drive incessantly between Moor Park, Allied Airborne Army Headquarters at Ascot, Medmenham Air Photo Centre, and the 1st Airborne division, collecting, analyzing and disseminating the latest intelligence. On these long drives I agonised over the situation, sometimes wishing the jeep would crash and take me out of it all. My short nights were sleepless.'

In the same final week in which Sosabowski had been appalled by the British briefing, Urquhart

> 'noticed a more or less casual remark in a 21 Army

> Group Intelligence Summary that elements of the Second SS Panzer Crops, the 9th (Hohenstaufen) and 10th (Frundsberg) SS Panzer divisions, were reported to be refitting in the Arnhem area. This was confirmed by the Dutch resistance. This was appalling news. Even if these formidable fighting units had been badly mauled in Normandy and were short of armoured vehicles, they were a deadly threat to lightly armed airborne troops landing in their vicinity.'

After unsuccessful efforts to persuade Browning and other senior officers of the enormous risk these battle-hardened troops presented to Market Garden, Urquhart arranged for low-level oblique photographs of the area to be taken by a special Spitfire squadron based at Benson in Oxfordshire.

> 'These pictures when they arrived confirmed my worst fears. There were German tanks and armoured vehicles parked under the trees within easy reach of 1st Airborne's main dropping zone. I rushed to General Browning with this new evidence, only to be treated once again as a nervous child suffering from a nightmare. Even in my overwrought state I got the message very clearly. I was a pain in the neck, and only our long association and his natural kindness prevented the general from saying so.'

Sidelined

Browning's natural kindness or no, that was the end of Urquhart as chief intelligence officer and – as events were to prove – of his life in Britain. Later that same day:

> 'Colonel Eggar, our chief doctor, came to visit me. He informed me that I was suffering from acute nervous strain and exhaustion and ordered me to go on sick leave. When I asked him what would happen if I refused, he said, in his kindly way, that I would be

arrested and court-martialed for disobeying orders. I begged him to let me go on the operation in any capacity. He refused. I tried to explain the cause of my anxiety and asked if there was no way of stopping, or at least reshaping, the operation. He again said no, but I had the feeling he understood me better than discipline allowed him to say.'

'Thus at 5pm on September 15, two days before operation Market Garden, I handed over to my deputy, David Ballingall, and drove down to Amberley in Sussex where Alfreda, expecting our first child, was now living. She was surprised to see me and even more surprised at my gaunt and haunted appearance. Since I could not, for security reasons, explain what had happened, she very sensibly set about trying to cheer me up. Nonetheless it was a desolate and miserable time.'

Urquhart was in Sussex when Market Garden was launched on the morning of Sunday 17 September. Fog in England delayed the drop of Sosabowski and his Polish brigade until four days later, by which time the Arnhem part of the operation was in chaos. Speedy German reaction, the capture of Allied plans, faulty communications equipment, the difficulty of resupply, delays along the single-track road bringing ground forces north, plus mounting Airborne casualties both at Arnhem bridge and in the Oosterbeek pocket to the west meant the trumpeted headline success of Monday had quickly become muted.

Urquhart records:

'At the end of the week I was called to the War Office and told to report at once to Northolt airfield outside London where arrangements would be made for me to rejoin Headquarters Airborne Corps in Nijmegen... I do not know why I was ordered to return at this juncture and can only assume in the debacle that Operation

> Market Garden had become, it looked odd for the Airborne Corps chief intelligence officer to be absent on sick leave.'

By the time he arrived at Browning's new HQ in Holland the confident and triumphant 'party' tone of the week before had evaporated.

> 'The beleaguered 1st Airborne Division had held the Arnhem bridge against enormous odds for five excruciating days, but when it became clear that they were not going to be relieved, what was left of the division was ordered to get out across the river by night, leaving the wounded behind. Out of 10,005 men, only 2,163 were evacuated in this way, leaving the wounded behind. One thousand two hundred men were dead and 6,642 were missing, wounded or captured.'

Many of Sosabowski's paratroops had been killed before they reached the ground, with others dying in vain attempts to relieve the British trapped on the other side of the river. The Polish commander himself was subsequently accused of criticising Montgomery and lost command of his brigade before the end of 1944. The memorial to General Sosabowski erected by British Arnhem veterans in Driel, where the Polish brigade landed, enshrines their admiration for 'an inspiring commander and fearless fighter for freedom' whose 'outstanding career was ended in unfair dismissal'. When the Soviet Union occupied Poland after the war, Sosabowski brought his wife and child to Britain, spending his later life as an assembly-line worker in a West London factory.

After Arnhem Urquhart requested an immediate move out of Airborne and when the war ended leapt at the chance of working with the nascent United Nations.

His reflections on Market Garden still have the power to move.

> 'The operation which was to end the war in Western

> Europe had been an unmitigated disaster, almost certainly destroying all possibility of an early victory. It had diverted essential support from Patton when he was forging ahead, given the Germans a success on the eve of their total defeat, made a nightmare of the last months of the war for the Dutch, and landed the British Army in a riverine swamp for the winter.'
>
> 'The casualties, both military and civilian, were appalling – more than 17,000 Allied soldiers, killed, wounded, or missing in nine days of fighting, no possible reckoning of civilian casualties, and all for nothing or worse than nothing. Much of the town of Arnhem was destroyed and after the battle, the Germans forcibly evacuated the entire population for the remainder of the war. Small wonder that Prince Bernhard remarked: "My country can never afford the luxury of another Montgomery success."'

Urquhart says he only found out many years later – some of it through Ryan's book – that none of his intelligence material about the waiting German Panzers had been passed to his brave comrades before they took off for Holland. These included the heroic John Frost after whom the postwar successor Arnhem bridge was named. He also recanted his earlier view that Browning was largely to blame, seeing Market Garden as 'the offspring of the ambition of Montgomery, who desperately wanted a British success to end the war.'

Lessons learned

His wider reflections are also worth bearing in mind as, 65 years later, Britain continues to fight wars.

> 'It was, of course, inconceivable that the opinion of one person, a young and inexperienced officer at that, could change a vast military plan approved by the President of

> the United States, the Prime Minster of Britain, and all the military top brass, but it seemed to me that I could have gone about it more effectively. I believed then, as most conceited young people do, that a strong rational argument will carry the day if sufficiently well supported by substantiated facts.'
>
> 'This, of course, is nonsense. Once a group of people have made up their minds on something, it develops a life and momentum of its own which is almost impervious to reason or argument. This is particularly true when personal ambition and bravado are involved. In this case even an appeal to fear of ridicule and historical condemnation would not have worked. The decision had been taken at the highest level, and a vast military machine had been set in motion. The opinions of a young intelligence officer were not going to stop it.'

The Arnhem tragedy, he reflects, made him deeply sceptical about the behaviour of leaders.

> 'I never again could quite be convinced that great enterprises would go as planned or turn out well, or that wisdom and principle were a match for vanity and ambition.'

In the Airborne Cemetery at Oosterbeek is the grave of Corporal James Arthur Jones of the 21st Independent Parachute Company. He was killed on the first day of Operation Market Garden, aged 24. The inscription on his headstone reads: 'I died to save my children. People of the world, see that they shall not die.' They are words to ponder the next time we see the people of Wootton Bassett line their high street as the coffins of young British soldiers are brought home from Afghanistan.