



THE DEVIL'S BIRTHDAY

THE BRIDGES *to* ARNHEM 1944



GEOFFREY POWELL

FOREWORD BY GENERAL SIR JOHN HACKETT



THE DEVIL'S BIRTHDAY

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THE DEVIL'S BIRTHDAY

The Bridges to Arnhem, 1944

Geoffrey Powell

Foreword by

General Sir John Hackett,
GCB, CBE, DSO, MC, MA, BLitt., LLD, DL



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‘We have no regrets’

Major-General R.E. Urquhart, CB, DSO
*The concluding words of his official
report on Operation ‘Market’*

FOREWORD

by General Sir John Hackett, GCB, CBE, DSO, MC, DL

A striking phenomenon in military commentary in our time upon World War II, high in volume and still rising, has been the attention given to Operation 'Market Garden'. What we loosely call in Britain the battle of Arnhem and in the Netherlands they refer to as the battle of Arnhem-Oosterbeek was a major part of this. The reasons are not hard to find. 'Market Garden' was a bold attempt to bring the 1939-45 war to an early conclusion. It embodied the first, which may well be the last, use of large formations of airborne troops in a role uniquely their own. It offered the first real glimpse of a hope of liberation for a brave and peaceful nation from Nazi rule. It was carried out by airborne soldiers and, as these were a true élite in every proper sense of that much misused word, it brought forth a display of fighting skills, fortitude, courage, endurance and compassion not easily matched elsewhere. It was acted out on a stage set apart in some detachment from the main theatres of continuous action in World War II, as the Dardanelles operations were in World War I, and like them has invited study as a complete whole, in its own right. It was, moreover, so fully packed with action, drama, miscalculation and mischance as to offer an absorbing field of study which is by no means yet fully exhausted.

Here is another book about these events, worth careful attention for several reasons. The first is that the author was a fighting infantryman, a company commander in a battalion as good as any

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in the whole action. Geoffrey Powell had a company in 156 Battalion in my own parachute brigade and brought the remnants of the whole battalion out from the long agony of Oosterbeek with high panache. We shall come back to that.

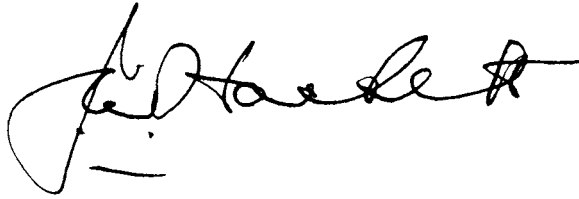
The second reason for looking seriously at this book is the rarity of lucid and informed comment on the whole untidy business of war, and above all on these operations in particular. Were they justified? Were they successful, and if so in what degree? If they were not successful why not? Could the use of British airborne troops, at this stage in the war, have been avoided? Can you lock up some of a nation's finest fighting men in wartime in a chest you cannot broach, except in dire emergency? Was this a dire emergency? Is it sensible, when good fighting men after years of war are scarce, to do this anyway? These are some of the questions to which answers are still sought. To those who ask them this book will be of help.

Thirdly, I do not myself know of any book written on our side of the Atlantic which has yet done anything like justice to the performance of those two magnificent formations, the 82nd and 101st US Airborne Divisions. We in Britain talk about Arnhem and sometimes forget that the hardest and the longest pounding, with the worst casualties, took place not around the Arnhem bridge, vital though that was, but in Oosterbeek a few miles away. We talk about the splendid performance of the men in our 1st British Airborne Division, which was indeed beyond all praise, and forget the Americans. What was left of us came out. The Americans stayed on, when the drama of the airborne carpet to end the war had been played out. They had already done magnificently but were kept in the line for a long time yet. Geoffrey Powell's book does a measure of justice here which is long, in British writing, overdue.

I come back to the author. This was a great fighting man in a great tradition, that of the company officer in a British county battalion of the line, competent, courageous and self-effacing. I saw a good deal of Geoffrey Powell in the last stages of that grim battle in the battered houses and sad groves of Oosterbeek, when he was commanding a little mixed force which included the few men still in action of his own battalion. I rather think I irritated him a little once, though he was too courteous to suggest it at the time, when I protracted a conversation conducted in the open rather longer than the enemy's fire made healthy. But we had each other's confidence

Foreword

and that is what makes battle fighting possible. His was a splendid performance which I shall always admire. It did not end when the remnants of my own parachute brigade, of which this was pretty well the last company commander in action, was withdrawn across the Rhine on the night of 25 September. You will read in these pages that after the rain-soaked, shell-stricken crossing over the swirling Lower Rhine that night, when the men who came through were being brought together, one company, all of fifteen strong, formed up in style and marched off with sloped arms. They were withdrawn but undefeated. What the author does not tell you is that this 'company', with pretty well all that was left of the whole battalion in it, was his own. It was Geoffrey Powell, the author of this book who brought it out like that.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Geoffrey Powell', with a stylized flourish at the end.

PREFACE

It is all but impossible for a writer to eradicate personal bias completely, however hard he or she may try to do so, and however closely the available sources have been studied. It is, therefore, important that I should make clear the influences which may possibly have produced bias in this book. Without doubt, the most important is that I served in Operation 'Market' as a company commander. It was a battle in which I lost many close friends, one of whom was especially dear to me. Secondly, I have always profoundly admired the achievements of the late Field-Marshal Lord Montgomery, even though I saw and listened to him only from afar: he was the man who conceived the operation. Last, I have worked and studied with officers of the United States Army over the years. My respect and liking for them is considerable.

I have received unqualified help from nearly everyone who I approached. That they did assist me does not mean that they will all concur with everything I have written. Some will disagree, possibly vehemently, about some of the conclusions I have reached. This is inevitable if I were to try to tell an honest story, but I hope that I will not have caused anyone needless pain. It has been impossible to avoid dwelling upon what went wrong in the battle, and I have certainly laid myself open to the accusation of being wise after the event. To defend myself, I can only quote the author of the report of the part played by 38 Group, Royal Air Force, in the operation. 'Wisdom after the event', he wrote, 'is the precise aim of any record of lessons learned.' The lessons were learned forty years ago, but

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they concern the way people behave under stress, both physical and mental. Perhaps some may still be relevant today.

Outstanding among the many people who have helped me in the writing of this book has been my friend, Drs Adrian Groeneweg, the Director of the Arnhem Library. As well as spending long hours extracting information from both his personal and his official archives, he has provided me with the benefit of his encyclopedic knowledge of the events of the autumn and winter of 1944. His advice, so wittily and modestly offered, has always been sound, and he has been especially generous in letting me have prints from his extensive collection of photographs. As well as discussing the battle with me, Major-General R.E. Urquhart has been kind and trusting in lending me his personal papers for over eighteen months; Sir Edgar Williams, Major-General J.D. Frost, Brigadier G. Taylor and Colonel John Waddy have also loaned me papers as well as providing advice and information. Among others to whom I am grateful for helping me in a variety of ways are Mrs Ellen Belchem, Colonel R.G. Collins, Mr Leo Cooper, Lieutenant-Colonel D.E. Crawley, Mr John Fairley, General James A. Gavin, Major-General R.F.K. Goldsmith, Mr Nigel Hamilton, M. Stephen de Prémol Higgons, Mr Richard Lamb, the late Mr Ronald Lewin, Brigadier C.B. Mackenzie, Mevrouw Jeanne M. Melcheks, Mr J.H. Money, Brigadier E.C.W. Myers, Dr D.E. Olliff, the late Professor John Pringle, General Sir Charles Richardson, Mr Peter Robinson, Mijnheer Joop Sieperman, Brigadier J.O.E. Vandeleur, Mijnheer Robert Voskuil, Mevrouw Kate ter Horst, Brigadier A.G. Walch, Colonel Graeme Warrack, Mr Philip Warner and Colonel Carel Wilhelm.

As always, libraries and other institutions have provided me with unstinting help. My thanks are due to the Regimental Museum of the Border Regiment and the King's Own Royal Border Regiment, the Chipping Campden Branch of the Gloucestershire County Library, the London Library, the Air Historical Branch (RAF) of the Ministry of Defence, the Doctrine Retrieval Cell of the Ministry of Defence, the Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, King's College, London (for the use of the Alanbrooke Papers), the Institution of the Royal Engineers, the Regimental Headquarters of the Royal Green Jackets, the Sikorski Institute and the Robert F. Simpson Research Memorial Centre. Particular mention must be

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made of the Airborne Museum at Oosterbeek (especially for the loan of photographs), and of the Royal United Services Institute for Defence Studies for allowing me access to material from their 1978 seminar on the Battle of Arnhem and for help generally. Mrs Tineke Pugh and Mrs Rosanna Viita were kind enough to help me in the translation of documents, as was Major Lorys of the Sikorski Institute.

Four other persons deserve special mention. My old brigade commander, General Sir John Hackett, was generous in finding the time in an over-busy life to read the typescript, to criticise it incisively, and to write the Foreword. Mr Charles Boydell was all that an able research assistant should be – assiduous, imaginative and cheerful. Mr Toby Buchan, my publisher and editor, provided far more encouragement and detailed assistance than any author could reasonably expect. And lastly, my wife shored me up in her usual unselfish way, as well as reading and amending two of the many drafts.

Never to be forgotten are the words on the memorial to the dead of 21st Independent Parachute Company. It stands in Oosterbeek, at what was to be known as the 'MDS crossroads', and the words read: 'To the people of Oosterbeek who suffered so much to give their support'.

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Mrs Ellen Belchem for extracts from the correspondence of the late Major-General R.F.K. Belchem; General James A. Gavin; Major-General A.G.C. Jones for the extract from his letter to the *Royal Engineers Journal*; Major-General R.E. Urquhart; Messrs Leo Cooper Ltd and Messrs Sidgwick & Jackson Ltd for material, respectively, from *A Full Life* and *Corps Commander* by Lieutenant-General Sir Brian Horrocks; The United States Department of the Army for extracts from *The Siegfried Line Campaign* by Charles B. MacDonald. Other valuable works have been *The 43rd Wessex Division at War* by Major-General Hubert Essame (William Clowes, 1952); *The Brereton Diaries* (William Morrow, New York, 1946); *The Grenadier Guards in the War of 1939-1945*, Volume I, by Nigel Nicolson and Patrick Forbes (Gale & Polden, 1949). Transcripts of Crown Copyright material in the Public Record Office appear by permission of the Controller, Her Majesty's Stationery Office; material from the Alanbrooke Papers by permission of the Liddell Hart Centre for Military Studies, King's College, University of London; material from the 1978 Seminar on the Battle of Arnhem by permission of the Director, Royal United Services Institute for Defence Studies. Details of books and documents listed in these acknowledgements will be found in the Notes and Sources, as will details of other works consulted.

PREFACE TO THE NEW EDITION

With this new edition, I have been able to correct a few errors, typographical and factual, which found their way into the book when it was first published. Most came to light when Drs Adrian Groeneweg produced a Dutch translation; to him I must once again express my deep appreciation and thanks. Others who have helped have been Mr D.J. Beynon, Mr C. Cricket, Dr Ian McKay, Mr F. McKay, Mr Ian Lowe and Mr F.M. Young. My thanks are due to them all.

Since I finished writing this book nearly ten years ago, much has been written about 'Market Garden' and its background, but it is surprising that so little that is new has come to light. Two notable exceptions must, however, be mentioned.

Firstly, Lieutenant-Colonel Robert Kershaw, in his rightly acclaimed *It Never Snows in September: The German View of 'Market Garden'*, demonstrated that German written sources on the battle were to be found in quantity, material that I, among others, had failed to track down; the author has, however, been kind enough to say that the information he discovered in no way contradicts *The Devil's Birthday*.

The second exception is Mr Lewis Golden's *Echoes From Arnhem*, published in the same year as my own book. Mr Golden was Adjutant of the 1st Airborne Divisional Signals during the battle, and from his first-hand knowledge he has been able to prove convincingly that too much blame for the tragic outcome of the battle has been attributed to communication failures.

Preface to the new edition

I said in the Preface to the first edition that some might disagree vehemently with some of my conclusions. The forecast was correct and I can do no more than apologise once more to any whom I have upset. For all that, only in two places have I felt the need to modify my previous views. I can only say that I hope that I have not been too arrogant, but that I have done my best to be historically objective.

GEOFFREY POWELL
1992

INTRODUCTION

Overhead, two parallel lines of Bofors shells scored the sky. Fired from the far side of the river, the red tracer gave direction to the long lines of soldiers stumbling down through the woods, past the broken houses to the water. There boats should be waiting for them.

In one hand each man held the loosened tail of the airborne smock of the soldier ahead of him, in the other he gripped his weapon – rifle, Sten or Bren, or a German Mauser picked up during the battle. Filthy, haggard faces had been further blackened with soot, nailed boots muffled with strips torn from curtains or blankets, loose equipment tied down to avoid it rattling. When the news had come through that they were to withdraw south of the river that night, a few had found razors to scrape away a week's stubble. It was a final gesture of defiance, futile but proud.

For days these soldiers had fought within an ever dwindling perimeter, cursing the troops who had failed to arrive to relieve them. They had been told that the link-up would occur about two days after they had first landed, but except for a few Polish paratroops and infantrymen of the Dorsetshire Regiment, no one had come. As hope had drained away, annihilation had seemed even more certain. At no time, however, had the exhausted and starving men, fighting from their slit trenches in the woods and once-trim suburban gardens, expected an order to pull out. So, when the news arrived, many had responded with rage. For the few bemused survivors of the units which had landed west of the Dutch city of Arnhem more than a week before, to leave in this manner was to

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abandon all they had fought for. The loss of their friends had been pointless. The battle had been just purposeless waste. But relief had quickly replaced the rage, relief at the unexpected chance of survival if they could succeed in getting away. Many judged the odds to be poor. With Germans shooting at them from the next-door house, or waiting for them in the woods, the chances of reaching the river unheard and unseen seemed to be meagre.

The rain helped them. No more than a thin drizzle when the first troops left their positions, it quickly developed into a harsh downpour, trapped by thirsty men in open mouths as they stumbled along. To the noise of the storm was added the din of the bombardment from the British guns across the river, hammering the Germans around the perimeter, and forcing them to crouch for shelter. Then the German guns and mortars opened up as well.

Glider pilots directed each small party along one of the two routes that they had reconnoitred during the afternoon. In order to help keep direction, difficult sections had been marked with parachute cord or tapes tied to the trees, while overhead the tracery of the Bofors shells bisected the sky. Soon after the withdrawal began, the Germans heard the noise of the outboard engines, but it was midnight before they realized that the British were abandoning their positions, and not staging a fresh assault across the river. Blazing houses and flares fitfully lit the dark woods and streets; streams of red tracer bullets appeared to float lazily across the sky. Away to the west, the glare from a burning factory outlined the high ground of the Westerbouwing ridge.

Whenever one of the guides stopped to check his route or clamber over an obstruction, the line of men behind him jerked to a juddering halt. Columns split, small parties became detached and veered away towards the encircling Germans. Men came face to face with grey-clad figures. Spandaus rasped, and soldiers fell, some to be left where they lay, others to be dragged on towards the river by their comrades. But there was little panic, and the spent men trudged on past the debris of war, the shattered church, the body of a Dutch girl sprawled across the path.

As the troops neared the river bank, their way lay across flat meadows, cut by steep-sided ditches through which they floundered waist-deep, until suddenly the river was ahead of them, the Neder Rijn, seen now by many for the first time. Its width shocked them.

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The far bank, glimpsed for a moment in the light of a flare, was a long way off across the dark, rushing water. Enemy shells and mortar bombs raised spouts of spray, and tracer indicated the machine-guns enfilading, from both flanks, the 600-yard stretch of river bank from which they were to embark.

Boats were scarce and became scarcer as the night dragged on. The flat, punt-like storm boats, with their outboard engines, were robust enough, but the canvas assault boats, propelled by paddles, were too often carried downstream. Some were hit and sank, their passengers struggling in the grey water for a short time until they too went under. On the north bank, the queues lengthened. Once, panic erupted, and men rushed the boats, but officers quickly restored order. The patient waiting continued.

When the German realised that the defenders were withdrawing, they sent out fighting patrols to harry the retreat. The plumes of spray and spattering of bullets on the water grew more dense, while mortar bombs, dropping along the river banks, threw up blankets of mud from the soggy polder.* The current quickened with the heavy rain, and the crews of the assault boats had to be increased, first to six and then to eight men.

When one of the boats reached the far bank, its passengers heaved themselves out of it into the water, and then pushed it back into the stream to start yet another journey. It was no place to linger, but often the men paused to shout a word of thanks to the crew before making for the high dyke they could see ahead of them, 200 yards away. Scrambling up its steep face, they tumbled down to the comparative safety of the far side. It was as though a curtain had dropped behind them. They were alive.

Guides were waiting to direct them to Driel. Short though the distance was, it was hard to summon up the strength and willpower for this final challenge. Some men shambled off down the path in twos and threes. Others collapsed after a mile or so by the side of the track. But most, clinging to the life-line of their discipline, kept together in their groups, some even marching in step. One fifteen-man strong remnant of a parachute battalion arrived at Driel marching to attention in threes, with their rifles at the slope, just as if they were returning to their barracks in England: it was disciplined

* Low-lying, flat reclaimed land.

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pride of this calibre that had kept them together through the eight-day battle.

In the hot and crowded schoolroom at Driel the stench of wet, filthy clothing and bodies was overpowering. Mugs of tea, well laced with rum, were thrust into outstretched hands, but the plates held no more than minute quantities of the hot stew; it was not that there was any shortage of food, just that the doctors had advised of the danger of overburdening starving stomachs.

On the next day the roll-call was taken. Of some 10,000 officers and men who had been dropped by parachute or had landed by glider north of the river, less than a quarter answered their names. The two parachute brigades had brought back little more than 100 men each. Among those who had returned there was a deep sadness, but few regrets. They had been given a job to do and they had done it: their 1st Airborne Division had been ordered to hold the Arnhem road bridge for forty-eight hours, and this they had accomplished.

But, over the years, many have wondered how it all happened as it did, and why it had to happen at all.

CHAPTER ONE

‘COINS BURNING HOLES IN SHAEF’S POCKET’

Before the invasion of Normandy in June 1944, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, the Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Forces in North-West Europe, had been badgered by his superiors in Washington about the way he should use his American and British airborne divisions. The concern was perhaps understandable. The resources, both in men and in hardware, that the two Allies had committed to this radical form of warfare had been vast. By the end of August that summer, Eisenhower had under his command in Europe twenty-five infantry and thirteen armoured divisions, more than half of them American – two million men in all. In addition, he had five airborne divisions, three American and two British, together with an independent Polish parachute brigade and a British air-transportable division; organised as the First Allied Airborne Army, these formations were the only strategic reserve the Supreme Commander had at his disposal, about one-sixth of his total fighting strength. And, so far as the British were concerned, their three divisions were all they still had available to commit to the battle. The flow of fresh American formations across the Atlantic was still in spate, but Britain’s reserves of manpower had been exhausted after five years of war.

During the late 1930s, Russia and Germany had developed the concept of landing troops by glider and parachute in the rear of an

enemy, but Germany had demonstrated its feasibility during the invasion of the Low Countries in 1940, and again at Corinth, during the Greek campaign, and in the invasion of Crete in 1941. But to some American officers it had been a matter of pride that their army had first conceived this novel form of warfare: in October 1918, Brigadier-General 'Billy' Mitchell had gained acceptance of a plan to drop the larger part of an infantry division behind the German lines at Metz, and he had given the task of working out the details to a young staff officer by the name of Lewis H. Brereton. The Armistice of November 1918 had overtaken events, and post-war financial stringency had limited the development of the idea to a single small experiment in 1929, even though it possessed just the novelty to appeal to the American imagination. So it was that the successful use of this new weapon in Belgium and Holland by the Germans stimulated not only Winston Churchill, but also the United States War Department into raising and training airborne formations. General George C. Marshall, the US Chief of Staff, believed that airborne forces offered a simple method of breaking the tactical deadlock in the ground battle, the hallmark of twentieth-century warfare until 1940. Equally enthusiastic was General 'Hap' Arnold, the commanding general of the United States Army Air Force, his attitude being in marked contrast to that of most of the British air marshals, faced as they were with the problems of defending the United Kingdom from attack, carrying the bomber offensive into Germany, and providing tactical and strategic support for the ground forces in all theatres.

Brigadier Orde Wingate's first and brigade-sized long range penetration into Burma in February-March 1943, when the Chindit columns had been fully supplied from the air, had especially impressed Arnold, although the boldness and imagination of the operation had concealed the fact that it had been a costly failure, lacking any tangible return except for the boost to morale produced by the discovery that the Japanese could be tackled in the jungle. Churchill, however decided that Wingate would accompany him to Quebec in August of the same year for the planning conference with President Roosevelt, and there the young brigadier was provided with the opportunity to propound his plans for a second and glider-borne incursion at division strength, and to obtain the unique luxury of his own private and self-contained American air force, not

only to carry his force into battle, but also to protect and supply it.

Although some purists have refused to acknowledge the Chindits as airborne troops, it was this so-called 'strategic' use of the new arm, the 'vertical envelopment' of the enemy, to use the jargon of the time, that had impressed Arnold, and Marshall as well. During the planning for the Normandy invasion early in 1944, both men had become concerned because Eisenhower's staff officers limited their plans to using the available airborne divisions to protect the flanks of the bridgehead from counter-attack. Arnold visualised something much bolder, the use of the airborne troops to strike well behind the German lines, aiming for the enemy's reinforcements and supplies. Marshall was of the same mind. When, in February 1944, he sent staff officers to London to suggest a plan for forming an airhead of three airborne divisions south of Evreux, some ninety miles from the invasion beaches, Eisenhower refused, understanding full well the vulnerability of lightly armed airborne forces to armour, and their all but complete lack of mobility once on the ground. Insisting that the first task of the Allies was to establish themselves on the Continent and seize a port, the Supreme Commander had countered with sound argument Marshall's emotive contention that 'The trouble with this plan [to land airborne forces near Evreux] is that we have never done anything like this before, and frankly, that reaction makes me tired'. Eisenhower, diplomatic as ever, assured his senior that 'I instinctively dislike ever to uphold the conservative as opposed to the bold'. Needless to say, the commanders of both British Twenty-First Army Group and US First Army (the forces that would bear the brunt of the invasion), General Sir Bernard Montgomery and Lieutenant-General Omar N. Bradley, stood firm in support of their Supreme Commander.

Eisenhower's position was none too strong, for he had in the past shown little enthusiasm for the new airborne arm. After the invasion of Sicily in July 1943, when most of the British and American airborne troops had been put down by raw transport pilots wide of their targets, some of them in the sea, he had declared to Marshall that he 'did not believe in the airborne division'. It was easy, therefore, to see why Arnold should have pressed Eisenhower so hard to make good use of the vast resources the US Army Air Force had invested in transport aircraft, men and material that might otherwise have augmented the strategic bomber force, the arm that

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many of its supporters still believed could win the war on its own.

The formation of the First Allied Airborne Army on 8 August 1944 owed much to this pressure from Washington. In any case, there was a clear need for a single commander to control the airborne divisions, both American and British, and the transport aircraft which would carry them into battle, as well as to plan operations and attend to co-ordination with the ground force commander under whom the airborne divisions would be placed for any particular operation. But, by early August 1944, the affairs of airborne forces were somewhat in the doldrums. US 82nd and 101st and British 6th Airborne Divisions had been used in the invasion of Normandy, and had been kept in France to fight on as ordinary infantry while British 1st Airborne Division had remained in the United Kingdom, suffering the frustration of being briefed for one operation after another, each one of which was in its turn cancelled. The feeling was growing among some of the planning staffs concerned that the game was hardly worth the candle. The unpredictability of the weather in North-West Europe, when matched with the diversionary effect that each planned airborne operation had upon other air operations, made it necessary to have contingency plans available in case the airborne side of an operation could not be launched. The effect was to turn each airborne plan into a 'bonus', rather than its being the keystone of an operation. In many respects, First Allied Airborne Army had been born of military and political expediency rather than of real operational need – the need for a formation of sufficient status to ensure that airborne operations were given their full weight. Unfortunately, the headquarters itself was, in the nature of things, a large military bureaucracy, and one that had been thrown together at short notice in the middle of a major campaign.

Eisenhower had given command of this new formation to Brereton, now a war-experienced lieutenant-general who had served in turn as commanding general of the US Far East Air Force in the Pacific and of the US Middle East Air Force, before moving to Europe to take charge of the US Ninth Air Force both before and during the invasion of Europe. As well as the four airborne divisions already mentioned (all of them now in the United Kingdom, the three which had been fighting in Normandy having recently returned), Brereton had under his command US 17th Airborne

Division, newly arrived from the United States, 52nd (Lowland) Division, trained for mountain warfare and now adapted to be air-transportable, and Polish 1 Independent Parachute Brigade Group. To fly these formations into battle were some 1,300 C-47 transport aircraft,* most of them belonging to US IX Troop Carrier Command. On the British side, 38 and 46 Groups, RAF, possessed between them some 250 aged bombers for use as glider-tugs, together with enough Dakotas to lift a single brigade group.

Under Brereton were two airborne corps headquarters: Major-General Matthew B. Ridgway, undoubtedly the most experienced senior airborne commander at the time, was in charge of the US XVIII Airborne Corps; wearing two hats, Lieutenant-General F.A.M. Browning, known throughout the British Army as 'Boy', was both deputy to Brereton and in command of the British Airborne Corps.

When discussing the formation of this new airborne army with Brereton in mid-July, Eisenhower had demanded from his subordinate a plan which would 'have as its purpose a maximum contribution to the destruction of the German armies in western Europe'. As Brereton was to write in his diary, 'He wants imagination and daring', and when he left the meeting he recorded that he told Eisenhower that if he wanted plans with daring and imagination he would get them, but that he did not think that the Supreme Commander's staff or ground commanders would like it. A bold use of airborne forces appealed to the commander of First Allied Airborne Army, and was, of course, precisely the sort of thing envisaged by Arnold and Marshall. On the wall of his office in his HQ at Ascot, Brereton was to hang the words of another visionary American, Benjamin Franklin, written in 1784:

Where is the Prince who can afford so to cover his country with troops for its defence, as that ten thousand men descending from the clouds, might not, in many places, do an infinite deal of mischief before a force could be brought to repel them?

During the first forty days of the life of Brereton's army, his staff was to prepare plans for eighteen separate operations; the aim of

* The military version of the pre-war Douglas DC-3 air-liner. The C-47 was designated the 'Skytrain' by the Americans, and the 'Dakota' by the British.

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several was to cut off the German forces, now retreating across France from the Normandy battle after their collapse when the 'Mortain Pocket' had been sealed off by the closing of the 'Falaise Gap'. Some of these plans were sound, others less so. Second thoughts killed off several of the more fanciful, while others were cancelled because the Allied armour swept forward so quickly, but, by the second week in September, plans for ten separate operations were still in being, ranging from a landing on Walcheren Island in the Scheldt estuary to open Antwerp to sea traffic,* through the capture of various bridgeheads across the Rhine, to the seizure of airfields around Berlin in the event of an unexpected German surrender. The newly formed and largely untried staff was kept busy, if not over-stretched, and the search to find a worthwhile use for the airborne divisions was becoming a little desperate. The airborne forces were, as the official historian of the United States Army so aptly put it, 'coins burning holes in SHAEF's pocket'.

By the end of August the retreating German forces, which Eisenhower had hoped the airborne army might help to destroy, were 'no longer a cohesive force but a number of fugitive battle groups, disorganised and even demoralised, short of equipment and arms'. Thus, in their intelligence summary covering the week ending 4 September, did Eisenhower's staff describe the state of the defeated German army. The authors were by no means alone in their optimism. Major-General J.N. Kennedy, the usually cautious Assistant Chief of the Imperial General Staff at the War Office, noted in his diary four days later that the Allied forces should be in Berlin by the end of the month. Other Allied commanders expressed, at various times and in different degrees, similarly optimistic sentiments.

This euphoria, mirrored in the press on both sides of the Atlantic, was not hard to understand. On 25 August, French and American armoured columns had swept into Paris amid scenes of wild excitement, the flowers, the embraces and the flowing wine caught by the newsreel cameras for the cinemas of Newcastle-upon-Tyne and Pittsburgh. Since D-Day – 6 June – the Allies had killed,

* The speed of the Allied advance through Normandy made it vital that another port should be captured to supply the swift-moving armies. At that time all supplies were brought in through Cherbourg or the improvised harbours at the invasion beaches, now many miles behind the advancing Allied formations.

wounded or taken prisoner half a million German soldiers. On the eastern front, the Russians had, by the end of August, forced the Germans back to the outskirts of Warsaw and had captured the Ploesti oilfields in Rumania, although they still had 300 miles to travel to reach Berlin. There seemed to be little question that the end of the war was in sight. By an odd quirk, the excellence of the Allied intelligence added to the general optimism among the higher command. The select few privy to Ultra, the code-name for the material produced by the highly secret interception and deciphering of enemy radio traffic, received possibly too clear a picture of the German confusion and the paucity of their resources as their troops flooded back towards the Fatherland. In 1918, the German army had surrendered while still in far better heart.

As Montgomery's Twenty-First Army Group rolled forward from the Seine, the German garrisons of the Channel Ports, each held by about one weak division, had been by-passed for attention later, a task which, with the clearing of the Scheldt estuary, Montgomery gave to the six divisions of Canadian First Army. During the month of September, this army was to be busy assaulting and capturing what Hitler had vaingloriously dubbed the 'fortresses' of Le Havre, Boulogne, Calais and Dunkirk; Dieppe and Ostend both surrendered without a fight, but the others were to hold out staunchly.

British Second Army, commanded by Lieutenant-General Miles Dempsey, had been made responsible for the main thrust through Belgium and Holland, but, because of the over-extended lines of communication from the Normandy beach-head, supplies were short, with the consequence that Dempsey had to leave his VIII Corps, together with most of his heavy and medium artillery, behind on the Seine. With XII Corps on the west of the advance keeping in touch with the Canadians, the principal effort was in the hands of Lieutenant-General Brian Horrocks's XXX Corps. Advancing on a fifty-mile front towards Antwerp and Brussels, Horrocks had succeeded in averaging fifty miles daily against only sporadic resistance during the last days of August and the first of September. After the bitter slogging-match of Normandy, it was a time of hope and elation for all, not least the people of occupied Belgium and Holland, who now experienced the joy of watching and hearing the defeated Germans retreating from their countries towards the Reich, some of them on foot, others in every shape of vehicle – truck,

