

# Arnhem by Antony Beevor - review: our greatest chronicler of the Second World War tackles a heroic failure

Antony Beevor is once again at his best with a forensic description of the Allied attempt to capture bridges across the Rhine

-Robert Fox, The Evening Standard Newspaper, May 2018



At the annual ceremony held every September to commemorate the battle of Arnhem, the Allied attempt to capture nine bridges across the Netherlands in the autumn of 1944, local schoolchildren lay a single flower on each of the graves of the Commonwealth War Grave cemetery in Oosterbeek. It is a very particular ritual, involving primarily the Dutch, the British, Americans and Canadians. For very good reasons, the Poles hold their own separate commemoration at their cemetery. There is no German presence, despite several overtures to attend in a

spirit of reconciliation. Local representatives don't want them. Reading Antony Beevor's latest Second World War epic, one can understand why.

The story gets the full Beevor Stalingrad treatment — an approach that has proved so successful in his half-dozen battle and campaign chronicles of the war. The drama of manoeuvre and counter-thrust, the courage and cowardice of soldier and civilian, the follies and vanities of commanders, which are especially rich in this story, are deployed with colour and humanity.

His fans will love it. Arnhem is one of the great British heroic defeats, along with Dunkirk and Sir John Moore's failure at Corunna. With a cold eye, the whole plan looked shaky from the off, a little bit barmy even. The idea was to get the Allied forces to the Dutch border with Germany as quickly as possible, and into the Ruhr by early winter.

This demanded a massive leap forward by a huge airborne force of British, Americans, Poles and Canadians, landed by parachute and glider. The mixed forces were to take bridges around Eindhoven and Nijmegen, while an almost entirely British force led by the Airborne Division was to capture Arnhem.

The attack depended very much on surprise, good intelligence and a highly flexible plan — all of which were in short supply. Field Marshal Montgomery and above all General "Boy" Browning in charge of the British Airborne Corps didn't heed the new intelligence about a growing presence of German Panzer units around Arnhem. He tried to send the officer who warned him, Major Brian Urquhart, subsequently Under-Secretary General at the UN, on sick leave.

The paratroopers were dropped at Oosterbeek, which meant a long march to the bridge at Arnhem. The enemy was warned and Field Marshal Walter Model reacted with two simple moves by his Panzer forces — first to stop the British getting to the shore at both ends of the bridge, and then to hold up the advance on Nijmegen to the south.

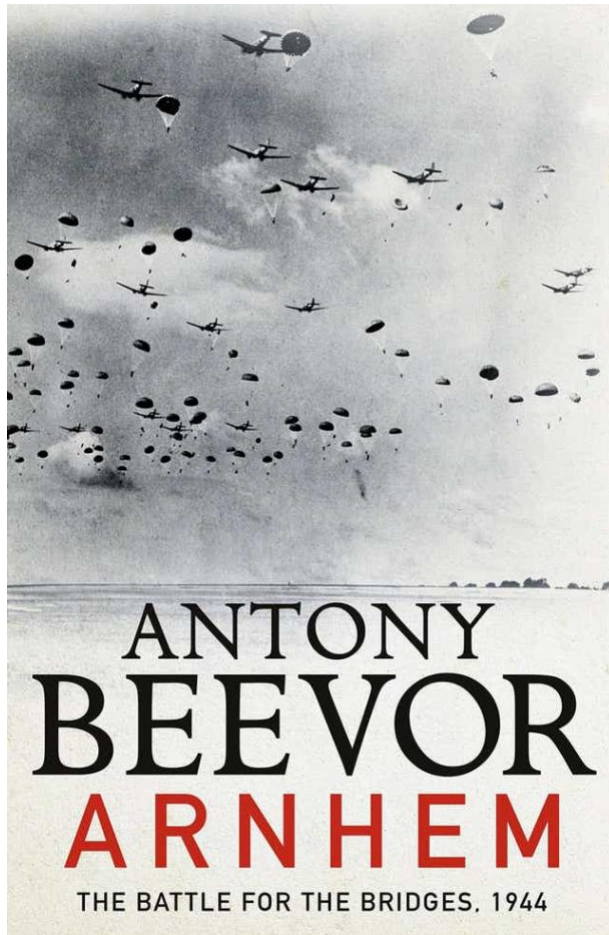


Road to nowhere: Allied tanks crossing a bridge during the battle / Corbis via Getty Images

The airborne forces were only supposed to hold Arnhem and Nijmegen for two days before the main force arrived by road from the Belgian border. The advance of this force, led by General Brian Horrocks's XXX Corps, was at times leisurely, disorganised and badly planned for the difficult countryside of canals they had to move through — useless for tanks, ideal for defence.

Horrocks's disingenuousness and vanity matched Browning's — and they both tried to dump their failures on Brigadier General Stanislaw Sosabowski of the Polish Parachute Brigade, who Much of this has been told before. "Everything that could go wrong, did go wrong," said Brigadier John "Shan" Hackett, brightest and bravest of the commanders.

The most powerful element in this telling is what happened to the Dutch. Arnhem and Oosterbeek were trashed and their populations cleared out, dozens were shot as declared “terrorists”. Worse came when the Nazi authorities deliberately set out to starve the occupied areas, particularly Amsterdam and Rotterdam. At least 20,000 starved to death. The Swedish air force stepped up by airdropping food.



Beevor doesn't mention this, nor does he mention the terrible effect of those crucial months of malnutrition on a generation of infants and schoolchildren. The memories still haunt. My wife, who survived in her grandmother's basement in the leafy suburb of Baarn, was musing with her sister-in-law, then in hiding as an infant in Amsterdam, how they got through it.

The occupiers claimed that the Dutch were their kin, though a country-bumpkin version maybe. But they liquidated more than three-quarters of the Jews, starved the people in the winter of 1944-45 and deliberately looted Arnhem in a peculiar act of spite. It makes for a very tangled legacy for both the Dutch and Germans today.