A BRIDGE TOO FAR:
THE CANADIAN ROLE IN THE EVACUATION
OF THE BRITISH 1ST AIRBORNE DIVISION FROM
ARNHEM-OOSTERBEK, SEPTEMBER 1944

by David Bennett

Background and Chronology of Events

Operation Market Garden was a bold attempt by Field Marshal Bernard Law Montgomery to seize a bridge across the Rhine River, establish a foothold on the north German plain, then sweep across Germany towards the Reich’s capital, Berlin, capturing the industrialized Ruhr heartland en route. Specifically, the operation, conducted between 17 September and 26 September 1944, was an attempt by British Second Army to advance from the Meuse-Escaut Canal in Belgium to the Ijsselmeer in the Netherlands. The advance of the central formation, XXX Corps, was to be facilitated by the landing of three airborne divisions along the route: the US 101st Airborne from Zon to Veghel; the US 82nd Airborne in the vicinity of Nijmegen; and the British 1st Airborne on the north bank of the Lower Rhine near Arnhem. The task of 1st Airborne was to capture the Arnhem road bridge and establish a bridgehead on the north bank of the Rhine. As it materialized, the bulk of the 1st Polish Independent Parachute Brigade was dropped on the south bank of the Lower Rhine, around Driel, on Thursday 21 September (D+4). However, by that time, the British positions on the north bank of the Rhine at the road bridge had been lost, and, since the Driel-Heveadorp ferry had been destroyed, the Poles intended to cross the Lower Rhine and reinforce the British positions opposite them at Oosterbeek. Fifty Poles crossed by rubber dinghy on the night of D+5, and 250 more in assault boats on the following night. By Sunday 24 September (D+7), one British infantry brigade (the 130th) had joined the Poles at Driel, while the remnants of 1st Airborne were confined opposite the relieving forces inside a perimeter at Oosterbeek, just west of Arnhem. On the night of D+7, about half of the 4th Battalion, the Dorsetshire Regiment (4th Dorsets) crossed to the north bank in assault boats. Nonetheless, the operation was going very badly for myriad reasons, and, on that same day, the British made a decision to move from the reinforcement of 1st Airborne...

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across the Rhine to its evacuation. This article will describe and evaluate the part played by two Canadian engineer companies, the 20th Field Company, Royal Canadian Engineers, under the command of Major A.W. Jones, and the 23rd Field Company, Royal Canadian Engineers, commanded by Major M.L. Tucker, in the evacuation of 1st Airborne on the night of D+8 – a story that has thus far been buried in official reports and privately published memoirs.

The Historiography of the Evacuation

The evacuation of 1st Airborne Division over the Lower Rhine from Oosterbeek was carried out by four engineer companies, the 553rd and 260th Field Companies, Royal Engineers, and the 20th and 23rd Field Companies, Royal Canadian Engineers, of which the last of these played, in practice, by far the most important role in the evacuation. In the accounts of the evacuation, the names and identity of these Canadian companies are almost never mentioned beyond the original archival documents, and, occasionally, in unit histories. The most one usually finds are references to motorized stormboats, used by the two Canadian companies, or a reference to the fact that Canadian engineer units were involved. This is certainly the case with respect to two famous accounts of Market Garden, those of Cornelius Ryan and Martin Middlebrook.1 In the latter case, the author downplays the role of the Canadians, stating that motorized stormboats were not used in the 20th Company sector, hardly acknowledging that most of the airborne troops were evacuated by the Canadians. Other standard accounts follow this pattern, with the result that the full, balanced story of the evacuation has not yet been told.

Why this glaring omission? The answers are speculative by this writer, but they are likely twofold. The first is that the British commands, from XXX Corps on down, botched the attempt to reinforce 1st Airborne Division in Oosterbeek. Though bridging units were available in the vicinity of Nijmegen, no attempt was made to bring them forward until midday on D+7; they were then immediately stood down from reinforcement initiatives, to be replaced by the plans for an evacuation. The four engineer companies came under the oversight of yet another unit, the 204th Engineer Company, Royal Engineers. At some level, quite probably at that of the 204th Company, the engineers were reluctant to employ the motorized stormboats, on which only the Canadians had been trained, either for the reinforcement operation or for the evacuation. The British apparently did not trust them. Middlebrook furthered this legacy when he rather smugly suggested that the stormboats were too noisy to be used in the 20th Company sector, and that they would give away the evacuation proceedings. Therefore, it is quite possible that the British did not want to admit that the evacuation only succeeded because of troops and equipment in which they had no confidence, and whose use they had attempted to subvert. Browning, the British Airborne Corps commander, wrote to the Commanding Officer (CO) of the 4th Dorsets after the evacuation, thanking the battalion for “the magnificent show you put up in enabling the survivors of the 1st Airborne Division to withdraw across the river.” As will be seen, this is exceptionally misrepresentative. The least that can be said about Browning’s words is that this is what the British wanted to believe.

The second reason why the role of the Canadians has not been acknowledged may well be the bitterness felt by the survivors of 1st Airborne towards all the relieving forces, essentially the Guards Armoured Division and the 43rd (Wessex) Division. Though the rank and file of XXX Corps were the least to blame for the failure of the relief efforts, none of their members have been made welcome at anniversary celebrations of the Battle of Arnhem-Oosterbeek, not even the 4th Dorsets, who suffered grievously in the battle, and a few of whom joined 1st Airborne in the Oosterbeek perimeter after their crossing on the night of D+7. The Canadians have been condemned by

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association with the relieving forces, despite the fact that, without them, the evacuation would undoubtedly have failed. Two Canadian officers, Major Michael L. Tucker, DSO, CO of the 23rd Company, and Lieutenant Russell Kennedy, MC, the unit’s Reconnaissance Officer, deserve a place in the memories of Market Garden no less than the operation’s legendary heroes, such as Lieutenant-Colonel Reuben Tucker and Major Julian Cook of the US 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment – remembered for their part in the assault crossing of the Waal – and Lieutenant-Colonel John Frost, whose reinforced 2nd Parachute Battalion defended the north end of the Arnhem bridge until D+3.

The Decision to Move from the Reinforcement of 1st Airborne to Its Evacuation

Of Major Tucker, Russell Kennedy wrote, “He led us into France through the N.W. Europe campaign and back to England with unvarying fairness and with a judicious mixture of firmness and fatherly concern.” Tucker, from Westmount, Quebec, was “a very kind fellow... the only criticism that I would voice at all was that he was very ready to take on any job that his superiors offered him. I figured if the war went on long enough, he would get us all killed... eventually!” Kennedy also said that Tucker was an “impulsive Irishman.” However, there is no indication at all that Tucker’s impulsiveness led him to poor judgment.

On 20 September, D+3, it became clear to Tucker that since the British had lost the north end of the Arnhem road bridge, the Canadians would be required to conduct an assault crossing of the Lower Rhine. The 20th and the 23rd Companies, along with the 10th Field Park Company, Royal Canadian Engineers, assembled along the Bourg Leopold-Hechtel road and were then rushed to a point just south of Nijmegen on D+4. Class 9 (nine-ton) assault rafts and stormboats accompanied the convoy, still part of the engineers’ supply pool and not yet assigned to specific companies. The Canadians were then placed under the overall command of the 204th Field Company, Royal Engineers. One platoon of the 204th Company was sent forward to take the Poles over the river in their second crossing. For reasons that are not entirely clear, this platoon did not take part in the operation: the untrained Poles had to man the assault boats, with the result that only 250 troops crossed the river on the night of D+6. Lieutenant Kennedy, attached to the 204th Company on D+4 for reconnaissance purposes, said only that he “didn’t learn much,” implying that he was not present at the launching of the assault boats. Major-General Stanislaw Sosabowski, the Polish brigade commander, wondered afterwards why the 43rd Division, trained and equipped for assault crossings, had not done the job.

Kennedy’s reconnaissance party was “to look for sites from which stormboats may be operated, if required. We feel that stormboats should be used in the first place, but they (the British) have no confidence in them and it looks as if we and our boats have just come along for the ride.” The Canadian engineer companies played no part in the Polish crossing on D+6: “Why won’t they let us play?” asked Tucker, certain only that the 20th Company would be called in to do assault rafting. On D+7, Tucker recorded, “At last we are to be used,” clearly for a night assault crossing to reinforce 1st Airborne Division. The two companies prepared to move off from their positions south of Nijmegen, the 23rd Company with the stormboats and the 20th Company with the assault rafts. The movement order was given at midday, but perhaps as early as 1400 hours, the order was cancelled and “we return disappointed to our bivouac area.” The reason was that one of the higher commands had made the decision to move from the reinforcement of 1st Airborne Division to its evacuation, although this does not explain why no engineer units were involved in the assault crossing that night. On reflection, Kennedy later speculated that the alert on D+7 was indeed for that purpose.

Originally, the crossing on D+7 was to be carried out by the Polish brigade and the 4th Dorsets. Sosabowski had been promised motorized stormboats by Brigadier Ben Walton of 130th Infantry Brigade. Walton, naturally enough, knew that the Canadians were ready and available. But then the Polish operation was cancelled and Sosabowski was obliged to hand over his small stock of assault boats to the Dorsets. The reason for the shortage of assault boats is inexplicable: five engineer companies were in the vicinity of Nijmegen, with a platoon of the 204th Company, at least, up at the front line. Whatever the reason, the Canadians spent the night of D+7-8 south of Nijmegen. By this time, the life seems to have gone out of the XXX Corps leadership and its subordinate formations: after the lightning advance of the engineers, in which the route was cleared of all traffic from Hechtel, through Eindhoven and Grave to Nijmegen, command was paralyzed in supine stagnation.

That night, 350 Dorsets set out for the north bank, of whom 315 arrived ashore. Why they were sent at all is not clear. Formally, the evacuation order from Second Army was not issued until the following day. Both Sosabowski, and, initially, Lieutenant-Colonel Gerald Tilly of the Dorsets were under the distinct impression that the crossing was to be the prelude to a bigger crossing on the following night. Again, formally, this has been the rationale of XXX Corps for the operation. The
reality was different. Just before the operation, Brigadier Walton told Lieutenant-Colonel Tilly that the purpose of the crossing had changed: Tilly was now to hold the base of Urquhart’s perimeter while the 1st Airborne Division was withdrawn. Walton did not even believe in this reduced role, since he ordered a maximum of 400 Dorsets to cross, with the quite remarkable rider that Tilly himself need not go. Tilly, who led his men across and into captivity, considered that his battalion had been sacrificed – “chucked away” – a view endorsed by Martin Middlebrook.8

Officially, the role of the Dorsets was to cover the left flank of 1st Airborne’s withdrawal.9 Yet this mythology – to use a charitable categorization – determined the tactics used in the evacuation on the following night. The engineers, under the command of the 204th Company, and possibly under the influence of the 43rd Division engineer commander, Lieutenant-Colonel W.C.A. Henniker, were given to understand that there would be two major evacuation points, both with very substantial numbers of evacuees. That is why two engineer companies were assigned to each sector: the 553rd Royal Engineers and the 20th Royal Canadian Engineers in the west, and the 23rd Royal Canadian Engineers in the east, with the 260th Royal Engineers just to their left. At the same time, the idea that the Dorsets would cover the withdrawal was reduced to a cypher, since the western crossing, opposite the Dorsets, was to commence a mere two hours after that of the eastern crossing. That the 204th Company assigned most of the stormboats to the eastern crossing proves nothing. The British did not rate them highly, and, in the event, declined to use them on the western crossing. This was not their finest hour. Kennedy’s impression was that it “didn’t really appear that the generals had expected us to bring out many survivors.” The decision to divide the evacuation into two equal projects was deeply misguided and disingenuous. What saved the evacuation from failure was a matter of shrewdness and superb soldiering – shrewdness in Kennedy’s choice of the eastern crossing point, and superb soldiering on the part of the 23rd Company.

The Evacuation

Sometimes during the morning of D+8, Tucker learned from Lieutenant-Colonel Henniker of the plan to evacuate 1st Airborne Division. At least one reconnaissance was carried out, by Lieutenants Russ Kennedy and Bob Tate. This was the only time that Tucker sent another officer with Kennedy on a reconnaissance – fortunately, because a small bridging operation was required, the nature and location of which Tate knew from his expedition. The purpose of the reconnaissance was top secret, no doubt for routine security reasons, but also, possibly, to preserve the charade, perpetrated inside XXX Corps, that the purpose of the evening’s operation was a continuation of efforts to reinforce 1st Airborne Division. The party reconnoitred the difficult route and the terrain up to the river. Much of the terrain was under German artillery observation and fire, which fell both on the reconnaissance party and the convoy of the 23rd Company in the evening. The reconnaissance party also selected a crossing site:

A few hundred yards from the Rhine was the main or winter dyke, 18 or 20 feet high, with very steep sides. No cultivation of crops was allowed in front of it. Then perhaps 400 yards closer to the water, was the summer dyke, 7 to 10 feet high. ... It was
poor territory for a night action, but some sites were possible. The best seemed to be a fair-sized orchard just south of the winter dyke and located within the sector which had been indicated. It could be reached down a narrow muddy lane which was separated from the orchard by a ditch. If boats were to be taken in on trucks, the ditch would have to be bridged.10

While the reconnaissance was taking place, the 20th and the 23rd Companies, with 12 fitters and carpenters from the 10th Field Park Company, moved from the Nijmegen assembly point to a staging area at Valburg, about midway between the Waal and the Lower Rhine. At 1800 hours, Tucker learned that the 23rd Company was to take the eastern crossing point, with 14 stormboats and half the tradesmen from the 10th Field Park Company. The 20th Company was assigned six stormboats and the balance of the tradesmen. Tucker stated, “The lion’s share of the equipment has been allotted to us, because it is thought that the main body of Airborne survivors are opposite our site.”11

The 23rd Company was required to have the boats in operation by 2140 hours, the 20th Company two hours later, with an artillery barrage starting at 2100 hours.

The 23rd’s convoy from Valburg consisted of three jeeps, one scout car with a radio and 20 three-ton lorries carrying the stormboats and equipment. The stormboat lorries arrived at the orchard shortly after 2000 hours, the leading one having gone off the road as it entered the orchard. The first stormboat was launched at 2130 hours. What an extraordinary achievement this was! The 23rd Company had no training in manhandling the boats, which was to be done normally by the assaulting infantry being transported, with prior training in the role. Routinely, the stormboats were stacked three-high on three-ton trucks, with a derrick used to offload them, but no derrick trucks were available in this case. The 23rd Company then had to carry each boat over a quarter of a mile in the dark and rain, through the mud and over two dykes, in terrain interdicted by artillery fire. Prior to departure from the orchard, each boat had to be equipped, engine fitted and fuelled. The Evinrude engines were two-cycle and were fuelled from jerry cans ready mixed with oil and gasoline. Dry and empty, the stormboats officially weighed 500 pounds, up to half as much again when wet and fully equipped.

Hand ropes are fixed, but even with these, it is only with the greatest difficulty that we get the boats up and over.” The hand ropes were affixed because “it was unbelievably difficult to climb the winter dyke,” which was wet and slippery.12 Carrying bars for the stormboats were fitted only after the operation. Spare engines also had to be manhandled down to the shore. The fitters “worked like fiends to keep us supplied with engines that will run.” They changed or serviced ten engines.

At the western crossing, 46 Dorsets were brought back, all in the British assault boats. On some trips, according to Martin Middlebrook, the crews comprised four, six, even eight men at the paddles. With a current even swifter than the motorized Canadians had trained on, “the crews are worn out after a couple of trips.” The figure of 46 includes a section of the Dorsets who crossed in an assault boat that they found on the north bank.13 In the event, none of the six Canadian stormboats were launched. Towards the end of the night, an attempt was made to send four of the stormboats across the 1500 yards to the eastern site. One boat was sunk by mortar fire, and a second, under machine gun fire, was abandoned when its engine failed. “No other stormboats were launched.”14 The reason for this was that German machine-gunners had pinpointed the Canadian positions.15 In the 23rd Company sector, what saved the operation from disaster was that the German machine-gunners had to fire downwards from the Westerbowing Heights, rather than simply traversing fire across the river.

Tucker launched the first boat of the eastern crossing at 2130 hours, but this sank, holed by rocks as it was dragged from shore.16 Under fire from artillery, mortars and machine guns, the second and fourth boats were also sunk. Of these
two, the former, led by Lieutenant Russ Martin, was lost with all four crew members. The latter capsized when the passengers instinctively threw themselves to one side at a mortar round descending, with a terrifying shriek, on the other boat. Only five of the complement on this boat returned to the south bank. The third and subsequent runs returned, initially overloaded with wounded men, being cared for under the supervision of the Catholic padre, Captain Jean Mongeon. The engineers’ first aid post treated about 60 stretcher cases and 100 walking wounded before they were transported by lorry to Driel.17 The medical facilities of the engineers were overwhelmed by the casualties. By 0330 hours, all of Tucker’s 14 boats were in operation, less those that had been sunk or disabled. A crossing took three or four minutes, but there were several reasons for delays in shuttling the stormboats back and forth.

Delays in loading were a factor. The usual manoeuvre was to have one crewman start the motor, with two others in the water at the blunt bow, helping the passengers aboard. These two then pushed off, turned the bow outwards and then clambered aboard as best they could under the circumstances. The crossing, reception point and the rear depot behind the dykes were under constant fire, all areas by artillery, and the crossings and launch points specifically by machine gun and mortar fire. Another reason for delay was that “boats were holed on the shore rocks and became useless.”18 Boats that were damaged when arriving back on the south bank had to be abandoned. The most prominent reason for delay concerned the 50 horsepower Evinrude engines, the *sine qua non* of the operation’s success. The Evinrudes had no reverse gear, making the boats hard to manoeuvre, even with a pair of men paddling. They also had no clutch, which meant that a boat whose power drive fouled debris or the shore bottom invariably stalled. The Evinrudes were temperamental in ideal conditions. In the rain, they were plagued by electrical failures which sometimes disabled the boats in mid-river, often under fire. This was the personal experience of Major-General Urquhart, the Commanding Officer of the 1st Airborne Division. Once stalled, the boats were then difficult to restart, an operation that demanded a certain knack as well as patience and stamina, not to mention space in the boat to pull the cranking rope. Kennedy had such a knack, as will be seen. It was only after this operation that the 23rd Company developed a means of waterproofing the engines.19

By 0400 hours, as the first dull light appeared through the darkness and rain, only two boats were still in service. Tucker, directing operations under machine gun fire at the shore, sent the remaining crews, all exhausted, back to the orchard. Kennedy was already tired out from his reconnaissance the previous night. Nevertheless, he found a stormboat, abandoned because its motor had failed, and managed to get it started. He then took it across with Lance Corporal Gillis and Sapper McCready. On the north bank, they encountered an “uncontrollable mass of men.” Kennedy, standing in the stormboat, pulled out his Browning pistol, thought better of it, and then went down with his boat as it promptly sank in four feet of water. After about an hour, the boat was re-floated, then returned back across the Rhine, propelled “with two paddles and some rifle butts.” Kennedy then found another stormboat, managed in turn to get it started and then set out again, towing an assault boat from the 260th Company and the original stormboat, waterlogged and barely seaworthy. The crews were, again, Kennedy, Gillis and McCready. The three boats returned to the south bank, fully loaded. Kennedy described this as the biggest miracle of the night, a “real triumph. Felt great.” On
the third and final run, Russell again took across the working stormboat, with McCready as the sole crewman in a towed stormboat, its engine still dead. However, “discipline had slipped” and both boats were overloaded. Kennedy's engine refused to restart and the passengers in McCready's boat cast off, paddling with rifle butts. It was said that of 25 men in McCready's boat, all but four, including McCready, succumbed to machine gun fire. Kennedy managed to get his motor started and returned slowly in his overloaded boat, machine gun bullets “making interesting patterns around us.” The boat touched the south bank in daylight at 0720 hours. Kennedy was last off the boat, leaving only a dead paratrooper who had been killed beside him.

In his last two crossings, Kennedy was said to have deposited a load of German life jackets on the north bank. This story is, in fact, false. This apocryphal incident has often been recorded, but the highly significant achievements of the Canadians is usually only noted briefly and in passing. The 23rd Field Company Report credits the organization of the evacuation to Kennedy, as well as the bringing over of 125 men. Tucker calculated that his stormboats had carried across all but about a hundred in 150 crossings, for a total of 2400 to 2500 men. Six from 23rd Company Lieutenant Kennedy, a tangible sign of how well the Canadians were warmly praised by Lieutenant-Lieutenant-Colonel Henniker for this operation. Five were decorated, including the award of a Military Cross for Lieutenant Kennedy, a tangible sign of how well the Canadians had performed. Six from 23rd Company were killed and five wounded. Kennedy lost two close friends, his driver, Sapper Buck McKee, and Lieutenant Russ Martin.

Postscript

From mid-November 1944 into the early weeks of 1945, elements of the 23rd Company were involved in secret operations on the Rhine, taking Resistance members back and forth across the river, as well as bringing out evaders. The most well-known of these operations was Pegasus II, a second attempt to bring out 1st Airborne Division evaders in the wake of the highly successful Pegasus I. In Pegasus I, 128 evaders, mainly 1st Airborne Division paratroopers, were brought out on the night of 22 October 1944, in assault boats crewed by the US 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment, under its distinguished commander, Lieutenant Colonel Bob Sink. These operations were directed by British military intelligence. In Pegasus II, the chief British contact was the Canadian Lieutenant Leo Heaps, now working for military intelligence. The operation was intended to get 120 men across the Rhine. In the event, 160 of them attempted to assemble on the north bank. For reasons beyond the control of the various players, the operation was not a success. For two nights, no signal was received from either the evaders or the Dutch Resistance on the north bank. Tucker himself was said to have led the crossing in a single stormboat on the night of 19 November 1944. In fact, the stormboat crew was led by Kennedy. The boat returned with only three men, a paratrooper and two Dutch nationals. The same night, an American crossed in a canoe prior to Kennedy's stormboat and reported by radio that he was picking up one evader. This party was apparently lost to machine gun fire or underwater debris on the return journey. Kennedy made a further crossing and Tucker led yet another, which was successful: four men were picked up in a crossing near Randwijk. German patrols along the north bank, which included tanks, prevented further attempts at crossing, and on 21 November 1944, Tucker reported that his mission had been completed. The Americans, who were commended by Major General Maxwell Taylor of the 101st Airborne Division, were most impressed with the performance of the Canadians. The last contact with the Americans was when the 23rd Company ferried 6500 Americans of the 101st Airborne Division across the Waal, the conclusion to the 72 days they had spent on Market Garden and its aftermath. Tucker wrote of them: “They are as fine fellows as we have ever worked with, or could wish to work with, and we both would have liked to have done an assault together.” The fact was that the Canadian engineers and the American paratroopers were among the best that their respective nations produced. The performance of the Canadian engineers, particularly the 23rd Field Company in the Arnhem evacuation, was, by all measures, an outstanding small-unit action in the North-West Europe campaign.

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The principal sources for this article are:


**Notes on Operation Berlin** and the manuscript by D. Bennett, *A Magnificent Disaster*, 5 January 2005, “Kennedy Notes.”

Evacuation Reports of the 20th and 23rd Companies, RCE, Canadian National Archives, Files T18399 and T28578.

Russell Kennedy, recorded interview, January 2005.


2. For instance, accounts by John Baynes, William F. Buckingham, Peter Harclerode, A.D. Harvey, Christopher Hibbert, Geoffrey Powell and Roy Urquhart. Many of these accounts are ridden with minor inaccuracies, betraying inadequate research.


8. Middlebrook, pp. 248-22; Ryan, pp. 564-71, equally valuable accounts, the latter based on an interview with Tilly.


12. Ibid, p. 38; *Whispers and Shadows*, p. 38; Kennedy Notes, p. 4.


15. 20th Company Evacuation Report.

16. Heaps, pp. 84-6; *The Twenty-Third Story*, long entry for 25 September 1944.


18. Ibid.


22. 23rd Company Evacuation Report, Canadian National Archives, File T18578.


*NOTES*

Tanks of the Calgary Regiment eventually carry British infantry in the offensive beyond Arnhem, 1945.