

British Journal for Military History

Volume 6, Issue 1, March 2020

Review of *Arnhem: Ten Days in the Cauldron* by Iain Ballantyne

Stuart Crawford

ISSN: 2057-0422

Date of Publication: 19 March 2020

Citation: Stuart Crawford, 'Review of *Arnhem: Ten Days in the Cauldron* by Iain Ballantyne', *British Journal for Military History*, 6.1 (2020), pp. 95-97.

www.bjmh.org.uk



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.



The BJMH is produced with the support of

Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Iain Ballantyne, *Arnhem: Ten Days in the Cauldron*. London: Agora Books, 2019. 336pp. ISBN 978-19130099244 (paperback). Price £9.99

There have been many accounts written on the Battle of Arnhem, that “glorious defeat” suffered by the British 1 Airborne Division in September 1944 during the Second World War. Best known might possibly be Cornelius Ryan’s *A Bridge Too Far*, which spawned the eponymously titled film starring Sean Connery and a host of others. Books by Maj Gen John Frost (who was there) and Anthony Beevor are also well known.

But where Iain Ballantyne’s book, published on the 75 anniversary of the ill-fated assault from the sky, differs is in the telling of the well-known saga not from the strategic perspective followed by other authors but through the testimonies of those who were at the coalface of the battle, soldiers and civilians alike. We hear the personal testimonies of people like Captain Peter Fletcher of the Glider Pilot Regiment, or 19 year-old Private Frank Newhouse, or the remarkable story of Dutch civilians Frans de Soet and Jan Loos, trapped in cellars in the middle of the fighting. This brings a refreshing immediacy to the tale.

Interestingly, the first chapter of Ballantyne’s book is nothing to do with Arnhem; it is an account of the famous *coup de main* operation which captured the two bridges across the River Orne and the Caen Canal on the night of 5/6 June 1944, the opening act of D Day. This remarkably audacious operation by D Company, 2 (Airborne) Battalion, the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, was known as Operation Deadstick and paved the way for British forces exiting Sword Beach on D Day.

Operation Market Garden, launched in September 1944 and of which the Battle of Arnhem was part, was a hundred times bigger than Deadstick and could hardly be described as a *coup de main* operation. What persuaded the normally cautious Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery, commander of the 21 Army Group (2 British Army and 1 Canadian Army), to go for a highly risky and ambitious operation like Market Garden is beyond the general scope of this book, but go for it he did. Clearly, he was persuaded that it was a risk worth taking.

Britain’s 1 Airborne Division has only been used in its various constituent parts up to that date, not as a whole formation. It had been held in reserve whilst the 6 Airborne Division completed the Normandy landings. 1 Airborne had been stood up, and then stood down, for numerous operations – sometimes after they had boarded the

transports – and there was a genuine fear among commanders that the troops “might go off the boil”.

They need not have worried on that score. Despite the stop/start nature of their previous experiences, it's quite clear that the division was at the top of its game when it landed in Holland. Just as well, because it landed amongst elite Waffen SS troops who were recuperating there, having been mauled in the race across France that eventually followed D Day. As we all now know, the airborne soldiers were more than equal to their opponents but sadly wanting in heavy equipment, and that in the end is what decided the matter. The British XXX Corps couldn't get to them in time.

One constant theme in the book is the Division's poor or non-existent communications once they got on the ground – radios were either lost, not working, or incompatible. We learn from Major Tony Deane-Drummond, who at the tender age of 27 was second-in-command of Divisional communications, that they had more or less known that they would lose comms with the brigades when they left the Landing Zones. That's exactly what happened, so the Divisional Commander, Maj Gen Urquhart, felt compelled to leave his HQ in an attempt to find out what was happening on the ground.

Urquhart gets some criticism from the author for this, but the General was caught between a rock and a hard place. If he had stayed at his HQ, he would have had no idea how events were unfolding at brigade level, but by leaving to see for himself, his HQ could not contact him for decisions. However, Ballantyne labels his perambulations “a wild goose chase”.

At the other end of the rank scale we hear of 19 year-old Private Frank Newhouse of the 10 Parachute Battalion, part of their anti-tank platoon and a PIAT (Projector, Infantry, Anti-Tank) operator. Newhouse was called into action twice to stalk enemy tanks and succeeded in driving them off. The third time he was called upon things did not go so well; he was badly wounded by shrapnel and evacuated to the dressing station.

The book is pacey - and sometimes breath-taking - to read. A few maps help to orientate the reader to the action, although arguably for the younger and/or non-military reader, a larger scale map of the north west Europe strategic context might have been helpful too. There's also a useful glossary explaining military acronyms for the uninitiated and appendices looking at some aspects of the debacle in more detail.

Overall, I thoroughly enjoyed reading this account of the Arnhem battle, adding if you like a trench level perspective to those other accounts written from more senior, and sometimes more detached, point of view. Compulsory reading, of course, for past,

BOOK REVIEWS

present and future members of the Parachute Regiment and thoroughly recommended for military historians of all ages.

STUART CRAWFORD
Independent Scholar, UK

DOI 10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v6i1.1377

Hans Schäufler (trans. Tony Le Tissier), *Panzers on the Vistula: Retreat and Rout in East Prussia 1945*. Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2018. 139pp. ISBN 978-1526734310 (hardback). Price £19.99.

The rapid collapse of German defenses east of the Oder River in early 1945 stranded significant numbers of German soldiers and civilians behind the front. Communications officer Hans Schäufler's 4 Panzer Division, part of Army Group North, was trapped against the Baltic with diminishing hopes for escape and none of victory. Recounting the retreat from Latvia into East Prussia, *Panzers on the Vistula: Retreat and Rout in East Prussia 1945* relates a company-grade officer's attempts to keep his men and equipment together in spite of overwhelming odds.

Translated by historian Tony Le Tissier, the book is divided into eighteen chapters, plus a foreword, maps, and a timeline. The narrative largely focuses on combat between mid-January and war's end, with the three concluding chapters addressing the postwar fate of 4 Panzer Division's men as prisoners. Schäufler writes from a first-person perspective but does not provide context on his own background, including any previous combat in the East, an unfortunate omission.

In January 1945, the 4 Panzer Division was recouping in East Prussia after evacuation from the Courland Pocket. Hastily called into action, the division spent the following months fighting the Red Army in a losing series of battles in and around Danzig. Schäufler's depictions of the chaotic situation reveal the desperate actions of a weak rearguard force attempting to stop the near-inexorable advance of the Red Army. Schäufler's narrative of leading men in the absence of fire support or logistics is a powerful one. The emotional burdens of maintaining morale in the face of overwhelming odds are apparent in the text. His experiences urban combat in and around Danzig are particularly gripping. Under his leadership, the men of Schäufler's section continue to fight against overwhelming odds and at great personal cost though he claims to have known the war was lost much earlier.