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It's not often that you have the opportunity to relive a piece of history; especially when it involves jumping from a 65-year-old Second World War aircraft, complete with bullet holes! Last September, a colleague from the RDF and I, along with others from many parts of the world, experienced this unique insight into military history when we marked the 62nd anniversary of the Battle of Arnhem by jumping into the original 1944 drop zone (DZ).

The Battle of Arnhem (September 17th-26th 1944) was part of Operation 'Market Garden', which was planned by General Montgomery, who incidentally hailed from Co Donegal. The objective was for 1st British Airborne Division to seize the road and rail bridges over the Rhine at Arnhem to allow the British 30th Corps to advance into Germany, cut the German Army's supplies from factories in the Ruhr and end the war by Christmas.

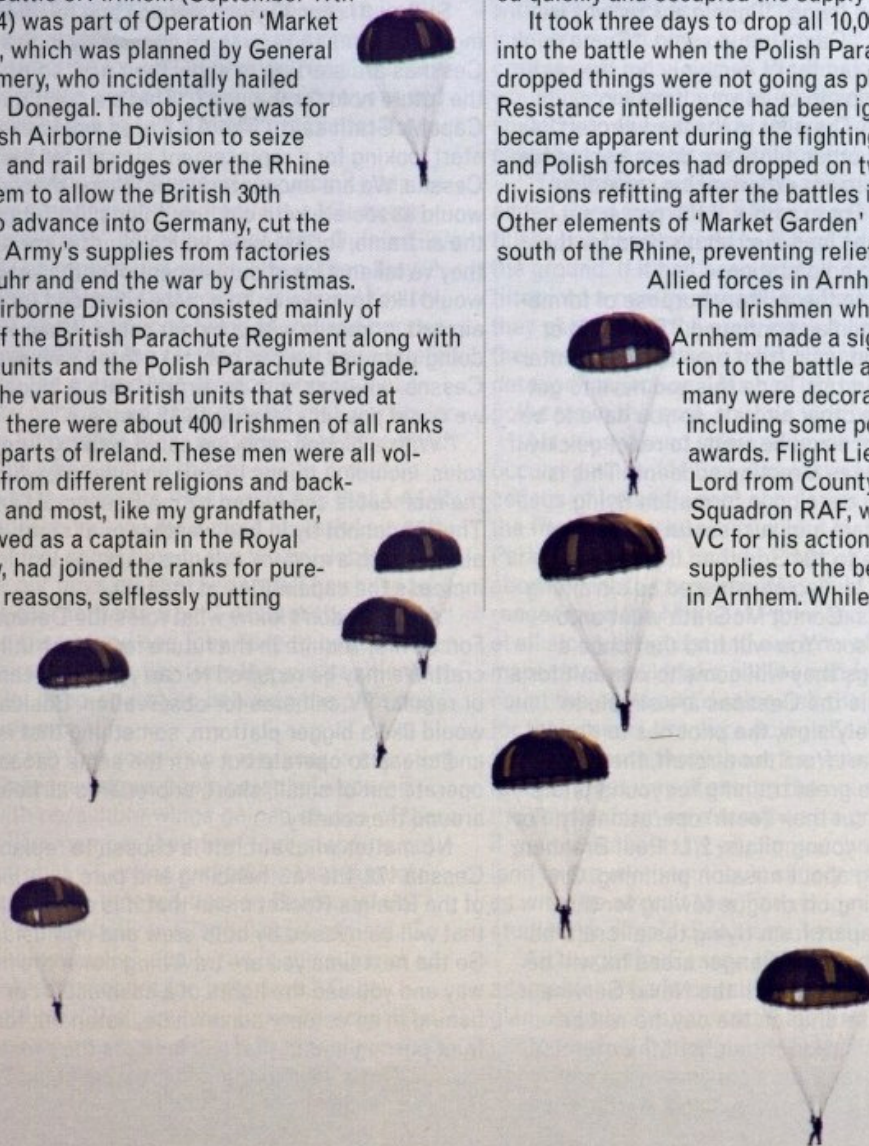
1st Airborne Division consisted mainly of troops of the British Parachute Regiment along with support units and the Polish Parachute Brigade. Within the various British units that served at Arnhem there were about 400 Irishmen of all ranks from all parts of Ireland. These men were all volunteers from different religions and backgrounds and most, like my grandfather, who served as a captain in the Royal Artillery, had joined the ranks for purely moral reasons, selflessly putting

themselves in harm's way to liberate Europe from the grasp of Nazism. Many paid the ultimate price, and we young Irish people owe them a great deal for this.

The British operations at Arnhem were hampered by the fact that not all of the troops could be dropped in the one day and many were also dropped too far from their objectives. In addition, the widespread forests in the area reduced the effectiveness of the troops' radios. Also, the German commanders reacted quickly and occupied the supply dropping zones.

It took three days to drop all 10,000 men. Five days into the battle when the Polish Parachute Brigade dropped things were not going as planned. Dutch Resistance intelligence had been ignored and it only became apparent during the fighting that the British and Polish forces had dropped on two elite SS panzer divisions refitting after the battles in Normandy. Other elements of 'Market Garden' were also stalled south of the Rhine, preventing relief of the encircled Allied forces in Arnhem.

The Irishmen who served at Arnhem made a significant contribution to the battle at all levels and many were decorated for bravery, including some posthumous awards. Flight Lieutenant David Lord from County Cork, of 271 Squadron RAF, was awarded the VC for his actions while dropping supplies to the beleaguered troops in Arnhem. While flying through



A Jump to Remember



In this feature Cpl Stewart Fitzell, B Coy, 62 Res Inf Bn, tells us about his experiences when participating in an annual parachute jump at Arnhem to commemorate the exploits of Allied airborne troops at that famous battle in 1944.



heavy anti-aircraft fire his aircraft was hit twice. He made two passes with a wing and one engine burning. After dropping all his supplies he ordered the crew out while he continued to fly the aircraft, which was rapidly losing altitude. He was killed when the plane crashed into the ground.

Eighteen-year-old Private Samuel John Kendrick from County Wexford, of 1 Parachute Battalion, was initially not required to go to Arnhem due to his age. At the last minute, however, he was drafted into the support company to replace someone AWOL. Private Kendrick's platoon suffered severe casualties and he was taken prisoner at the end of the battle.

The group we jumped with was the Pathfinder Parachute Group, originally just British but now an international association of people interested in round-canopy parachuting. We gained contact with this group, which consists mainly of serving and ex-airborne soldiers from all over the world and they



were very happy to welcome us. I had heard about this group since my first parachute jumps two years earlier and had looked forward to one day jumping at Arnhem in memory of those brave men who fought and died there.

A week before the jump we met for the first time with the men who would be jumping with us. They included French, Belgians, Dutch, Scottish, English, South Africans, and Americans. I was pleasantly surprised when I met with three other Irishmen (of Dutch and South African birth) who also would be jumping with us.

Since the 1950s a major part of the commemorations to mark the Battle of Arnhem has been the parachute drop over the original drop zones. Usually the bulk of the drop is by 4 Parachute Battalion of the British Territorial Army. This year, due to commitments in Afghanistan and Iraq, the usual 400 British paratroopers were cut to about 100. There were also troops from the US 82nd Airborne Division. The Pathfinder Parachute Group act as a historical reenactment group as most of our jumpers wore 1944 uniforms. Religious, social, cultural and racial differences are left aside and all of us share the common bond of being parachutists. Once the Irish flag could not have been flown at such events but now there is more widespread recognition of the contribution that Irishmen made to the British airborne forces and other units in the Second World War.

Having revised our ground training, finished our practice jumps and packed many parachutes we moved to Oosterbeek, outside Arnhem, for the main event. This small, picturesque Dutch village becomes

the centre of the annual commemorations and a Mecca for an international crowd of re-enactors, military historians, soldiers, veterans and people who just wish to pay their respects. We were greeted when we arrived at our campsite by 1944-style cookery, complete with what seemed to be the original tents, safari beds, not to mention trucks.

At 5.15 am on the morning of the jump we woke and prepared to fulfil what was for many of us a life-long ambition. Once at the Dutch Air Force base we were geared up for the jump along with troops from the 82nd Airborne Division, and the British Parachute Regiment. Before long we were being checked, briefed and in the aircraft on the way to the DZ. The flight in the Dakota C-47 was memorable and within minutes we were stood up, hooked up, checked and ready to jump. Our jump height was 700ft, and within seconds the first man was out the door and the rest of my stick of thirteen ran after him in a continuous line. "1,000... 2,000... 3,000... Check canopy!" and I was under my parachute descending towards the ground. Having never attempted a jump this low before I had to be fast to get a few snapshots with my camera and assess my drift. Within about 20-25 seconds of jumping I had landed on the sandy soil of Ginkel Heath (DZ 'Y' in 1944), some 12kms from Arnhem Bridge.

The 20,000 or so spectators who turned out were treated to a further three drops by our group, along with the American and British army parachutists. Walking back to our vehicles carrying our parachutes through the thousands of spectators and veterans I felt a great surge of pride to have participated in this memorial. The most amazing part of the day has to have been the veterans of the original 1944 drop jumping in on tandem parachutes.

The next part of the day was the customary visit of all jumpers, veterans, families, and spectators to the Airborne Museum, located in the Hartenstein Hotel, Oosterbeek. This served as the divisional headquarters during the battle. Here everyone was given the chance to get a look at what the battle was like, as it was packed with re-enactors dressed in 1944 uniforms. Most of the long convoy of vintage jeeps, trucks, etc, made their way to here. It was strange being shown old Browning automatic pistols and Bren guns, weapons which are still very familiar to most Irish Reservists.

Later that evening meeting with some of the veterans of Arnhem was for me another amazing experience. All of them were at least into their 80s but many of them still retain the spring in their step and the determination that brought them to this place 62 years earlier. It's important that we cherish these men while they are still with us and continue to pay respect to them when they pass on.

Dutch civilians, the 1944 veterans and relatives alike were touched by this small gesture we made to remember those tumultuous events. The Battle of Arnhem is remembered by most as being a glorious British defeat in the crusade against Nazi aggression. Among the flags of the nations who fought at that battle, this time there also hung a tricolour to honour our Irish heroes. ■

SOURCES

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