

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 456

“A Bridge Too Far”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

The Western Allied advance toward Germany stalled in September, in part because the Germans had set up defenses along the Siegfried Line.

The situation was frustrating for Allied commanders; so much so that the usually cautious Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery proposed a risky paratrooper operation that if successful might allow the Allies to bypass the German defenses.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 456. A Bridge Too Far.

Last time, I told you the story of how Bernard Montgomery proposed Operation Market Garden and persuaded Dwight Eisenhower to approve it. The date chosen to begin the operation was Sunday, September 17, 1944.

Preparations were already underway on September 15, two days before Market Garden was to begin, when Eisenhower received word from the code breakers at Bletchley Park that the 2nd SS Panzer Corps had been stationed near Arnhem for rest and refit. Arnhem was the final goal of the operation, but the thought of lightly armed parachute units going up against panzers was disturbing.

Eisenhower passed this information on to Montgomery and asked whether Market Garden should be cancelled. Montgomery dismissed the 2nd SS Panzer Corps as a shattered formation. It had fewer than 20 operational tanks and would not, in Montgomery's view, be able to put up much of a defense.

And so, the Allied airdrops went ahead as planned on September 17. Unlike at Normandy, where the paratroopers were dropped in the middle of the night and many of them landed in the wrong place or got lost or got killed, these airdrops would take place in the middle of the day, as Allied

commanders judged that Allied air supremacy was sufficient to protect the transports from the Luftwaffe.

The initial landings went rather well. The US 101st Airborne Division landed near Eindhoven and quickly captured four of their five assigned bridges. They were delayed in reaching the fifth bridge because of a few German 88s, which bought the Germans enough time to blow up that bridge. Still, not bad.

Farther north along the road, the US 82nd Airborne Division landed near Nijmegen and captured five out of six of its assigned bridges. Unfortunately, and apparently due to a delay caused by a miscommunication, the 82nd was unable to take its last and most important objective, the bridge over the River Waal at Nijmegen. The Waal is a branch of the Rhine River and is quite wide. This bridge, built in 1936, was over 600 meters long (that's about 2,000 feet.) The Waal is too wide to be easily crossed by Bailey bridge, so capturing this bridge was vital. To fail would mean the failure of the entire operation.

But because of the delay, the Germans were able to reinforce the bridge. Fortunately for the Allies, although the Germans had wired the bridge for demolition, they held off on blowing it up.

At the far end of the highway, the 1st British Airborne Division landed outside Arnhem. Their job was difficult from the start. Because of the terrain, the British were forced to land at sites to the west of the town, some as far as ten kilometers, and since the Allies lacked transport aircraft sufficient to drop three divisions at once, only part of the 1st was dropped on the first day. Some of these units were meant to hold the position around the drop site so that more units could land the following day. The others were supposed to advance into the town of Arnhem.

Here were a railway bridge and a road bridge across the Rhine River itself. The Germans blew up the railroad bridge, but a single battalion of British paratroopers managed to capture the north end of the road bridge by evening. The Germans still held the southern end.

As it happened, Field Marshal Walter Model, commander of the German Army Group B, had set up his headquarters in the village of Oosterbeek, just five kilometers west of Arnhem. Model's Sunday luncheon was interrupted by the alarming news that British paratroopers were landing all around him. In fact, the British were landing all around him, and Model at first assumed, not unreasonably, that the British objective was to capture the army group headquarters, including Model himself and his staff, but when word arrived of the American landings at Nijmegen and Eindhoven, he quickly deduced the Allies' real plan. This was a blow to the Allied operation, as one of the key advantages of an airborne assault is surprise, but in this instance, Model had figured out the Allied plan far earlier than anticipated.

Model, Hitler's best defensive general, immediately called for armor reinforcement at Arnhem. He divided the 2nd SS Panzer Corps into its two constituent divisions. One was to counterattack

the British at Arnhem; the other was to move south and counterattack the American paratroopers at Nijmegen.

While it was true that these SS panzer units hardly had any tanks and were under strength after the battering they'd gotten in France, they were still hardened veterans of the elite SS, experienced in combat against the Western Allies and going up against paratroopers who by their nature carry light arms. Model saw an opportunity not only to defeat the Allied plan to capture Highway 69, but to counterattack, destroy the Allied airborne units and perhaps even force the Allied front line to retreat. It was a gamble, but this was why the German engineers did not blow up the bridge at Nijmegen; Model ordered them not to, hoping to use that bridge for his own counterattack.

The British XXX Corps began its advance Sunday afternoon. This was an experienced unit. You may recall that XXX Corps fought under Montgomery in North Africa and participated in the invasion of Sicily. After Sicily was secured, the corps was relocated to England in preparation for the Normandy landings and had participated in the fighting at Caen and the advance from Normandy to the Dutch border.

The corps commander hoped to reach the Americans at Eindhoven by sundown, but that proved far too optimistic. XXX Corps reached Eindhoven by noontime on Monday the 18th and linked up with the Americans soon afterward, but were stymied by that one bridge, across the Wilhelmina Canal, that the Germans had destroyed before the 101st could capture it. The many troops and vehicles of XXX Corps were backed up along the road and in the streets of Eindhoven as the call went out for a bridging unit in the rear of the column to come forward and put a Bailey bridge over the canal. The British engineers accomplished this overnight.

Meanwhile, at Nijmegen, the SS units Model had sent south along the highway arrived and secured that crucial bridge over the Waal. The units of the 82nd Airborne Division had all landed on the south side of the bridge. A frontal assault against the SS units defending the bridge was out of the question; the Americans had no choice but to wait for the arrival of XXX Corps and hope that they could take the bridge together with the British. At least the Germans hadn't destroyed it.

At Arnhem, the situation was deteriorating rapidly. More British airborne units had arrived, but so had the Waffen-SS. The Germans secured control over the town of Arnhem and were able to hold it against several British attacks. The single battalion that had captured one end of the bridge over the Rhine was able to hold their position against German attacks, but they were surrounded and isolated from the rest of the British paratroopers.

The British position was complicated by the fact that the Germans had captured the ground just outside Arnhem that had been designated the site where transport planes would drop supplies. And if that wasn't bad enough, the paratroopers' radios weren't functioning very well. Paratroopers had difficulty communicating with each other to coordinate their actions, or to

communicate with XXX Corps or with Montgomery's headquarters. They couldn't even contact the RAF to tell them they were dropping their supplies behind the German line.

The next day, Tuesday the 19th, XXX Corps reached the American 82nd Airborne Division south of Nijmegen. The commanders met and agreed to coordinate attacks on both the road and rail bridges across the River Waal. They began their assaults that afternoon, but it soon became clear that both bridges were well-defended by those SS troops Model had sent.

A direct assault on the bridges might take days, and the British and Polish paratroopers at Arnhem couldn't wait that long. The only alternative was risky. Allied infantry would have to cross the broad Waal River by boat and capture the north ends of the two bridges, which would mean surrounding and isolating the German defenders holding the south ends of the bridges. But this plan required boats, and there were no boats. A call had to be sent back to the Allied line in Belgium to gather some boats and transport them to Nijmegen by truck.

At Arnhem, the situation was going from bad to worse. Bad weather in England delayed the arrival of the Polish parachute brigade. Renewed efforts to break through the German line and reinforce the beleaguered battalion at the bridge failed. That afternoon, the RAF sent 160 aircraft to drop supplies to the paratroopers on the ground at Arnhem, but Model anticipated just such a supply drop and had brought in antiaircraft guns. Ten British planes were shot down; most of the rest unwittingly dropped their supplies behind the German line. Less than 10% of the supplies dropped reached their intended recipients. It was not nearly enough. That afternoon, the first Polish airborne units landed.

The boats the troops at Nijmegen called for did not arrive until the afternoon of the next day, Wednesday, September 20, the day the battle plan called for XXX Corps to reach Arnhem. The boats were 26 folding canvas rowboats, delivered by truck. These boats were intended for use by engineers putting up a bridge after the battle; they were never meant to be used by infantry under fire. But that was a moot point.

It was already late in the afternoon, but commanders on the scene judged they couldn't afford to wait until tomorrow morning; the river crossing would have to begin at once. XXX Corps attacked the south end of the Nijmegen Bridge to distract the Germans, while British engineers escorted American paratroopers across the river, a few at a time in the boats, then turned back to get more. There weren't enough paddles to go around; some American soldiers used their rifle butts.

At the far side of the river, German soldiers fired on the boats as British tanks laid down covering fire on them from across the river. Barely half of the boats survived the first crossing, but soon most of an American paratrooper battalion was across the river. They attacked and seized the north end of the bridge, despite heavy casualties. The British were then able to capture the south end of the bridge; British engineers disabled the German demolition charges before the German engineers could detonate them.

Meanwhile, farther north at Arnhem, the weakened British 1st Airborne Division gathered together at the village of Oosterbeek, which ironically, had been the site of Field Marshal Model's headquarters four days earlier. The British paratroopers were no longer in any condition to attack the Germans; their only hope was to occupy the houses in Oosterbeek, hunker down, and try to hold the village against the Germans until XXX Corps arrived. Oosterbeek stood on the north bank of the Rhine, at the terminus of a ferry line, so it might serve as a small bridgehead that maybe, possibly could be of use to XXX Corps in crossing the river. When they arrived.

The RAF carried out another supply drop on the 20th, but this one was hardly any more successful, with only a small fraction of supplies reaching the paratroopers on the ground.

The only British unit not withdrawn to Oosterbeek was that lone battalion still holding the north end of the Arnhem Bridge against German counterattacks. It was surrounded and had no hope of escape. At midday, the commander at the bridge finally made radio contact with his superiors, only to be told not to expect reinforcement or rescue. Late in the afternoon, the British negotiated a two-hour truce so the British wounded could surrender to the Germans. A handful of British continued to hold their position overnight, but resistance ended around dawn on Thursday the 21st. Some reports say the last radio message from the battalion was, "Out of ammunition. God save the King."

Historians have argued that after the bridge at Nijmegen had been secured, XXX Corps should have immediately rushed units north along the road to Arnhem, where they might possibly have reached the bridge and relieved the beleaguered battalion. But to do this would have required those units to advance up the road in the dark, with no moon, with no knowledge of what lay between Nijmegen and Arnhem or what enemy units might have been deployed to block their advance.

In fact, we know in hindsight that the German presence on the road was thin, but in the dark of night they still might have been able to ambush an advancing British force. No one can say for certain. On the other hand, we can say with certainty that the British paratroopers holding the bridge at Arnhem helped prevent the movement of German units south to Nijmegen, which helped insure that bridge could be taken.

On Thursday the 21st, German forces along the highway held back XXX Corps. The rest of the Polish Parachute Brigade took off for Arnhem that day, but nearly half of their planes turned back when they received a call to turn back because of bad weather. Most of the planes, however, did not get the message and proceeded to Arnhem. The embattled British on the ground were able to make radio contact with the approaching planes and informed them that their designated landing site was in German hands. The British instead had the Poles land on the opposite bank of the Rhine, in the hope that they could secure the southern end of the ferry route.

The Poles landed and proceeded to the southern ferry landing, only to discover the ferry boat had been sunk.

The arrival of the Poles forced the Germans to divert some of their troops across the bridge to the south bank of the Rhine, which eased some of the pressure on the British holed up in Oosterbeek. The British had seen the Poles' airdrop, but were unable to reach them by radio. A British soldier swam across the Rhine to deliver a message: they were badly needed to help defend Oosterbeek; the British would attempt to send them some rafts with which they could cross the Rhine.

The Poles waited; the rafts never came. Early Friday morning, the 22nd, the Poles gave up and organized a defense where they were. German soldiers put up a defensive line between the Poles and the bridge to prevent its capture. Polish spirits soared when two British armored cars arrived—they were part of a reconnaissance unit from XXX Corps.

Friday evening, the British managed to send a handful of boats to the Poles, but only about 50 Polish reinforcements were able to make the crossing. More units from XXX Corps were arriving at the Poles' position, including a few tanks.

On Saturday the 23rd, seeing the arrival of British reinforcements south of the Rhine, the Germans redoubled their efforts to capture Oosterbeek before any of those reinforcements could cross the river. The weather, which had been poor throughout the operation, cleared up enough to allow RAF fighters and fighter-bombers to attack the German forces surrounding Oosterbeek. That night, XXX Corps brought up their boats, but only around 150 Polish troops were able to cross the Rhine that night.

The fighting at Oosterbeek continued on Sunday, except for a two-hour truce to allow British wounded to surrender. The German commander at the scene also sent the British some medical supplies. That night, a third attempt to send reinforcements across the river failed. XXX Corps commanders decided on an evacuation. Late that night, they sent an evacuation plan across the river to the British paratroopers.

The evacuation would begin Monday night, meaning the troops at Oosterbeek would have to hold out one more day. The German attacks increased in intensity, including the use of newly arrived Tiger tanks, the best in the German arsenal. The Germans attempted to claim the riverbank, which would have isolated the British and made an evacuation impossible, but that effort failed.

A heavy rain began to fall on Monday night, which helped cover the British withdrawal. About 2,400 British and Polish soldiers were evacuated on boats and rafts conducted by British and Canadian engineers. About 300 wounded were left behind; some of them fired weapons to disguise the withdrawal.

On Tuesday, the 26th, the Germans began another attack on Oosterbeek, not realizing that most of their enemy were gone. They took about 600 prisoners; that would be the 300 left behind and another 300 who had been in isolated positions and were not aware of the evacuation. A hundred or so other British and Polish soldiers evaded capture with the assistance of the Dutch resistance and were later rescued by Allied troops.

Altogether, Allied forces suffered around 16,000 casualties—that's killed, wounded, or captured. Perhaps a thousand Dutch civilians were killed or wounded during Market Garden. German losses are hard to pin down, but were around 10,000 killed and wounded. The Allies withdrew from Arnhem, but maintained their hold on Nijmegen and its bridge. This left the British holding a long, narrow salient through the German front line. German forces repeatedly attacked the salient, but the British were able to hold it.

Operation Market Garden was and is the most controversial Allied military action on the Western Front. It failed, though it came agonizingly close to success, with XXX Corps advancing all the way to Arnhem, but not quite making it across the last bridge. Afterward, Winston Churchill admitted it was unsuccessful, but said he had no regrets about the attempt, because of what success could have gained the Allies: possibly British and American soldiers marching into Berlin before Christmas. Bear in mind that had it succeeded and had the war ended that way, I would be here today telling you that the Western Allies brought an end to the war in just six months thanks to a series of brilliant military operations, culminating in the amazing Operation Market Garden, one of the most daring actions in military history.

But I'm not telling you that, only because the Allies came up one bridge short. Bernard Montgomery said afterward that Market Garden was 90% successful, which is true as far as it goes, but as Air Chief Marshal Arthur Tedder, no fan of Montgomery's, pointed out, you could jump off a cliff and declare the operation 90% successful. It was only the bit at the bottom that went wrong.

Tedder's remark underscores the strongest criticism of Market Garden: every step of the operation had to go exactly as planned or else it would end where it in fact did end, with an "almost win" that was in fact a loss.

Those most sympathetic to the plan point to missed opportunities that might have made it work. The plan called for the British 1st Airborne Division, a green unit untested in battle, to undertake the most difficult part of the operation, while the two battle-hardened American airborne divisions got easier assignments. This is true as far as it goes, but it overlooks the political dimension that was surely part of this decision. Imagine an American airborne division taking the bridge at Arnhem, only to be defeated and captured because the British Army failed to mount a timely rescue, and it's easy to see why it had to be British paratroopers dropping at Arnhem.

Both the US 82nd Airborne and the British 1st Airborne were dropped at landing sites some distance from the bridge that was their most important target. In the case of the British

paratroopers, most of them landed more than ten kilometers from the Arnhem Bridge, and all of them were dropped on the north side of the Rhine, meaning they had to fight their way through the town of Arnhem to get to the bridge, and then fight across the bridge to take the opposite side.

The choice of landing sites was made by the air forces involved. They were perhaps too cautious in their choices, but remember they had to think about not only paratroopers but of glider landings. Gliders landing on terrain that was too bumpy or too wet (remember we're talking about the Netherlands here) would likely be destroyed, killing anyone inside them and rendering whatever equipment they were carrying useless. If they had chosen closer but riskier landing sites, Market Garden could well have failed for that reason alone, and I'd be here today blaming the failure on them.

Some blame the failure on the lackluster performance of XXX Corps, which advanced in a slow and cautious manner over the first two days. A quicker advance might have allowed XXX Corps to reach the Arnhem Bridge before the paratroopers there were defeated. Or even if not, XXX Corps might have tried a Rhine River crossing somewhere else, while the Germans' attention was fixed on Arnhem. This might have forced a German withdrawal to avoid encirclement. On the other hand, by the time the lead units of XXX Corps reached Arnhem, they had two 100 kilometer long flanks to protect, and the Germans were repeatedly attacking those flanks. It would have done no good for XXX Corps to take Arnhem, only to get cut off and isolated themselves.

The British were loathe to seek assistance from the Dutch resistance, which had been compromised by the Germans, episode 403. This had only been uncovered a few months earlier and left the British wondering whether anyone in the Dutch resistance could be trusted. The Americans had fewer such qualms and benefited from the aid of the resistance. You could imagine that the British paratroopers at Arnhem might have gotten support from the resistance as well, which would have been especially helpful given all their communication troubles.

Perhaps the strongest criticism of Market Garden is that it consumed valuable fuel and supplies that might have been better used clearing the Germans out of the Scheldt Estuary before they had time to reinforce their positions, and thus making Antwerp available as an Allied port much sooner. Had Allied supplies begun landing at Antwerp in September rather than late November, that might have better aided the Allied cause than even a successful Market Garden could have.

One criticism you can't make is to fault the performance of the soldiers involved in Market Garden, who fought with dedication, particularly the airborne units and especially the British 1st Airborne Division. Dwight Eisenhower was moved to declare of the 1st, "In this war, there has been no single performance by any unit that has more greatly inspired me or more highly excited my admiration..." Bernard Montgomery, channeling William Shakespeare, wrote that "in years to come, it will be a great thing for a man to be able to say: 'I fought at Arnhem.'"

[music: Elgar, *Serenade for Strings*.]

During Market Garden, the rest of the front line was relatively quiet. German commanders took advantage of the lull to rebuild their front line.

I told you that Field Marshal Walter Model was appointed both commander of Army Group B and the overall commander in the West on August 17, after Hitler relieved Kluge. Model was the commander Hitler always turned to when he needed a leader to rally battered troops and rebuild the front line after an enemy offensive. But the two roles were more than even Model could handle at the same time; even Model himself agreed with that, so he was replaced as the overall commander in the West after just 17 days on the job. Model would continue to command Army Group B.

To fill the position of commander in the West, Hitler went back to Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt, who had held the position before Kluge. You'll recall that in early July, Rundstedt had concluded the war was lost and told his superiors, "Make peace, you fools!" Wehrmacht commander Wilhelm Keitel had gently suggested that the strain was getting to him, and so Hitler relieved him.

Now Rundstedt was back. This move had political value; Rundstedt was the most senior active officer in the Army, so his appointment helped bolster German morale, while creating unease among the commanders of the Western Allied forces, who viewed Rundstedt as the most skillful German commander and credited him as the mastermind behind the dramatic German military successes in the first two years of the war. In truth, though, Hitler regarded Rundstedt as a figurehead. Model was the real leader. In time, Rundstedt himself accepted his own marginalization.

Rundstedt set up his headquarters at the German city of Koblenz, since French chateaux were no longer available. Koblenz lies at the confluence of the Moselle and Rhine Rivers. The city was originally founded as a Roman Army outpost during the reign of the Emperor Augustus by the Emperor's stepson Nero Claudius Drusus. The modern name of the city is derived from the Latin *confluentes*, meaning "at the confluence."

In Rundstedt's view, the obvious place to rebuild the German defensive line was along the River Rhine, the most formidable natural barrier on Germany's western frontier. That idea was anathema to Hitler, as it would have meant ceding a significant piece of the Reich to the Allies. Hitler ordered the defense be made along Westwall, which ran along Germany's pre-war western border. Hitler gave his usual order: hold Westwall at all costs and fight to the last bullet.

This is where the "delusional" part comes in. For the first two years following the invasion of the Soviet Union, Hitler argued that the defeat of the USSR would force Germany's other enemies to talk peace. By autumn of 1943, that was no longer a credible path to victory, so Hitler had devised a new one: the Atlantic Wall. The Western Allies would attempt to return to continental

Europe, but they would be defeated on the beaches and driven back across the Channel. Afterward, they would be forced to seek peace, leaving Germany free to concentrate its efforts on the Soviet Union.

By July 1944, after it was clear the Allies had successfully breached the Atlantic Wall and weren't about to be driven back, Hitler began talking about his V weapons and how they would lay London to waste and force the Western Allies to capitulate.

Now it was mid-September 1944. Thousands of V-1s had already been launched at London, and although the weapon generally worked as intended, its effect on the British war effort was minimal. Now Germany was beginning its V-2 campaign, but there was little reason to hope the V-2 would accomplish anything more than had the V-1.

But Adolf Hitler was still not ready to face the hard reality. Instead, he came up with a new delusion, which was really just a retread of an old delusion. Alliances never last, he now argued. He pointed once again to his hero, Frederick the Great, who was at the cusp of defeat during the Seven Years' War when Russia abruptly broke with Austria and allied with Prussia, forcing an Austrian capitulation and a Prussian victory.

Hitler told his military leaders the same would happen again. The unlikely coalition between the Soviet Union, Britain, and the United States could not hold forever, as the allies had different ideologies and interests. Germany had only to do what Frederick had done: hunker down on the defensive and wait for the inevitable split.

Perhaps Germany could do even more than that. Perhaps Germany could help precipitate the collapse of the alliance against it.

And so, in mid-September, even as Walter Model was still struggling to put together a German defensive line in the West, Adolf Hitler was already thinking about the next German offensive. The German Army and SS still had some solid, veteran armor units that were even now being re-equipped with the latest German Panther and King Tiger tanks, the finest tanks in the world. Soon they would be ready to begin another offensive.

But against whom? German military intelligence believed the Red Army was preparing yet another of its seemingly endless series of offensives that would begin this winter, if not sooner.

That was out. Besides, an offensive in the West would have shorter supply lines, and everyone knew the British and Americans didn't fight as well as the Russians, so the logical place to begin this offensive would be in the West, and the best place in the West would be the boundary between the British and American front lines. That was in Belgium.

A German offensive that knifed into the Allied line at that point would threaten to cut the British off from their supply lines back to Normandy. The Americans would hesitate before using their

own vital supplies and spilling their own blood to bail out the British. Everyone knew the American commanders hated Montgomery, especially Patton, the finest of them all.

An offensive into Belgium would also present an opportunity to make up for the German Army's earlier slipup, when it had abandoned Antwerp with its port facilities intact. At this moment, brave German soldiers were still holding the Scheldt Estuary, preventing Allied ships from reaching the port, but the Canadians were beginning an operation to clear them out.

The beauty of this plan lay in how an advance to Antwerp would not only deny the Allies a critical port; it would also isolate the entire British Army in South Holland. It would be Dunkirk all over again, except this time Hitler would not hold the panzers back. Following the annihilation of their army, the British would have no choice but to sue for peace. And with Britain out of the war, depriving the distant USA of its staging area off the coast of Europe, the Americans would also have to quit Europe and sue for peace. Then the Wehrmacht could at last turn its full attention to the Bolsheviks.

Hitler's generals hated this plan. Rundstedt thought the Army could not afford an offensive. Better to settle into a defensive posture and make the enemy do the attacking. Of course, Rundstedt thought the war would be lost in any event.

Other commanders pointed to the Western Allies' devastating air supremacy. Any armored offensive was doomed once the Allied planes arrived.

But Allied planes could only fly in good weather. What if the offensive began at a time when the weather was not so good...?

But that is a story for another episode. We'll have to stop here for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd like to thank Lea and George for their kind donations, and thank you to Pete for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Lea, George, and Pete help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone always, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, you are most welcome; just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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And I hope you'll join me next week, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we return to the Pacific Theater. Chester Nimitz had his turn, now Douglas MacArthur takes his. He has returned, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. Irish-American author Cornelius Ryan published *The Longest Day*, an account of the Normandy landings, in 1959. It was adapted into a film with the same title in 1962. In 1974, Ryan published *A Bridge Too Far*, an account of Operation Market Garden. It was also adapted into a film with the same title, directed by Richard Attenborough and released in 1977. The film boasts an amazing cast of big-name film stars, including Michael Caine, Sean Connery, Gene Hackman, Anthony Hopkins, Laurence Olivier, Robert Redford...and I could go on.

It was one of the top-grossing films of the year in the United States, although the critics found it bloated. The film reviewer for *The New Republic* dubbed it “A Film Too Long.” It received no Academy Award nominations, although fans of the film explain its poor critical reception to an unwillingness to examine a story of a failed Allied campaign.

For myself, I found it striking at the time that *The Longest Day*, the earlier book and film, came out at a time when earnest admiration of Allied commanders in the Second World War was still the predominant view in the English-speaking world, while *A Bridge Too Far* came out in the cynical, revisionist Seventies. Both films were perfectly in tune with the mood of their time.

[music: Closing War Theme]