

A Bridge Too Far: The Canadian Role in the Evacuation of the British 1st Airborne Division from Arnhem-Oosterbeek, September 1944.

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Arnhem Bridge.

A BRIDGE TOO FAR: THE CANADIAN ROLE IN THE OF THE BRITISH 1ST AIRBORNE DIVISION FROM OOSTERBEEK, SEPTEMBER 1944

by David Bennett

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Background and Chronology of Events

Operation Market Garden was a bold attempt by Field Marshal Bernard Law Montgomery to cross the Rhine River, establish a foothold on the north German plain, then sweep across to the German capital, Berlin, capturing the industrialized Ruhr heartland en route. Specifically, the operation between 17 September and 26 September 1944, was an attempt by British Second Army to cross the Meuse-Escaut Canal in Belgium to the IJsselmeer in the Netherlands. The advance of the British Airborne Corps, was to be facilitated by the landing of three airborne divisions along the route from Zon to Veghel; the US 82nd Airborne in the vicinity of Nijmegen; and the British 1st Airborne in the Lower Rhine near Arnhem. The task of 1st Airborne was to capture the Arnhem railway bridgehead on the north bank of the Rhine. As it materialized, the bulk of the 1st Polish Airborne Brigade was dropped on the south bank of the Lower Rhine, around Driel, on Thursday 17 September. However, by that time, the British positions on the north bank of the Rhine at the road crossings since the Driel-Heveadorp ferry had been destroyed, the Poles intended to cross the river at the British positions opposite them at Oosterbeek. Fifty Poles crossed by rubber dinghies and 250 more in assault boats on the following night. By Sunday 24 September (D+7), one

130th) had joined the Poles at Driel, while the remnants of 1st Airborne were confined inside a perimeter at Oosterbeek, just west of Arnhem. On the night of D+7, about half the Dorsetshire Regiment (4th Dorsets) crossed to the north bank in assault boats. Nonetheless, things were going very badly for myriad reasons, and, on that same day, the British made a decision to send a reinforcement of 1st Airborne across the Rhine to its evacuation. This article will describe the role 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, under the command of M.L. Tucker, in the evacuation of 1st Airborne on the night of D+8 – a story that has been covered in reports and privately published memoirs.

Maj Tucker

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Major Michael L. Tucker, DSO.

The Historiography of the Evacuation

The evacuation of 1st Airborne Division over the Lower Rhine from Oosterbeek was carried out by two Canadian 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 engineer units are never mentioned beyond the original archival documents, and, occasionally, in unit histories. The accounts usually finds are references to motorized stormboats, used by the two Canadian companies. The only fact that Canadian engineer units were involved. This is certainly the case with respect to the evacuation at *Market Garden*, those of Cornelius Ryan and Martin Middlebrook.¹ In the latter case, the role of the Canadians, stating that motorized stormboats were not used in the 20th Company's evacuation, acknowledging that most of the airborne troops were evacuated by the Canadians. O

follow this pattern,² with the result that the full, balanced story of the evacuation has

Why this glaring omission? The answers are speculative by this writer, but they are like the British commands, from XXX Corps on down, botched the attempt to reinforce 1st Airborne at Oosterbeek. Though bridging units were available in the vicinity of Nijmegen, no attempt was made to move forward until midday on D+7; they were then immediately stood down from reinforcement and replaced by the plans for an evacuation. The four engineer companies came under the command of the unit, the 204th Engineer Company, Royal Engineers. At some level, quite probably at the unit level, the engineers were reluctant to employ the motorized stormboats, on which only the British were trained, either for the reinforcement operation or for the evacuation. The British approach was to use Middlebrook furthered this legacy when he rather smugly suggested that the stormboats were not to be used in the 20th Company sector, and that they would give away the evacuation process. It is possible that the British did not want to admit that the evacuation only succeeded because of the equipment in which they had no confidence, and whose use they had attempted to suppress. The 1st Airborne Corps commander, wrote to the Commanding Officer (CO) of the 4th Dorset, thanking the battalion for “the magnificent show you put up in enabling the survivors to withdraw across the river.”³ As will be seen, this is exceptionally misrepresentative. One criticism 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 attitude of 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 evacuation efforts, none of their members have been made welcome at anniversary celebrations at Oosterbeek, not even the 4th Dorsets, who suffered grievously in the battle, and a few Canadian soldiers in the Oosterbeek perimeter after their crossing on the night of D+7. The Canadians’ association with the relieving forces, despite the fact that, without them, the evacuation would have failed. Two Canadian officers, Major Michael L. Tucker, DSO, CO of the 23rd Company, 1st Airborne, and Russell Kennedy, MC, the unit’s Reconnaissance Officer, deserve a place in the memories of the operation’s legendary heroes, such as Lieutenant-Colonel Reuben Tucker and Major John Frost of the 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment – remembered for their part in the assault crossing of the Lower Rhine. Lieutenant-Colonel John Frost, whose reinforced 2nd Parachute Battalion defended the bridge until D+3.

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

Of Major Tucker, Russell Kennedy wrote, “He led us into France through the N.W. European theatre of war in England with unvarying fairness and with a judicious mixture of firmness and fatherly concern. My criticism of Westmount, Quebec, was “a very kind fellow... the only criticism that I would voice was that he was always ready to take on any job that his superiors offered him. I figured if the war went on long enough, he would be all killed... eventually!” Kennedy also said that Tucker was an “impulsive Irishman.” There is no indication at all that Tucker’s impulsiveness led him to poor judgment.⁴

On 20 September, D+3, it became clear to Tucker that since the British had lost the bridge, the Canadians would be required to conduct an assault crossing of the Lower

Companies, along with the 10th Field Park Company, Royal Canadian Engineers, asse Leopold-Hechtel road and were then rushed to a point just south of Nijmegen on D+ rafts and stormboats accompanied the convoy, still part of the engineers' supply poc specific companies. The Canadians were then placed under the overall command of Royal Engineers. One platoon of the 204th Company was sent forward to take the Pol second crossing. For reasons that are not entirely clear, this platoon did not take par untrained Poles had to man the assault boats, with the result that only 250 troops cro D+6. Lieutenant Kennedy, attached to the 204th Company on D+4 for reconnaissance "didn't learn much," implying that he was not present at the launching of the assault Stanislaw Sosabowski, the Polish brigade commander, wondered afterwards why the equipped for assault crossings, had not done the job.

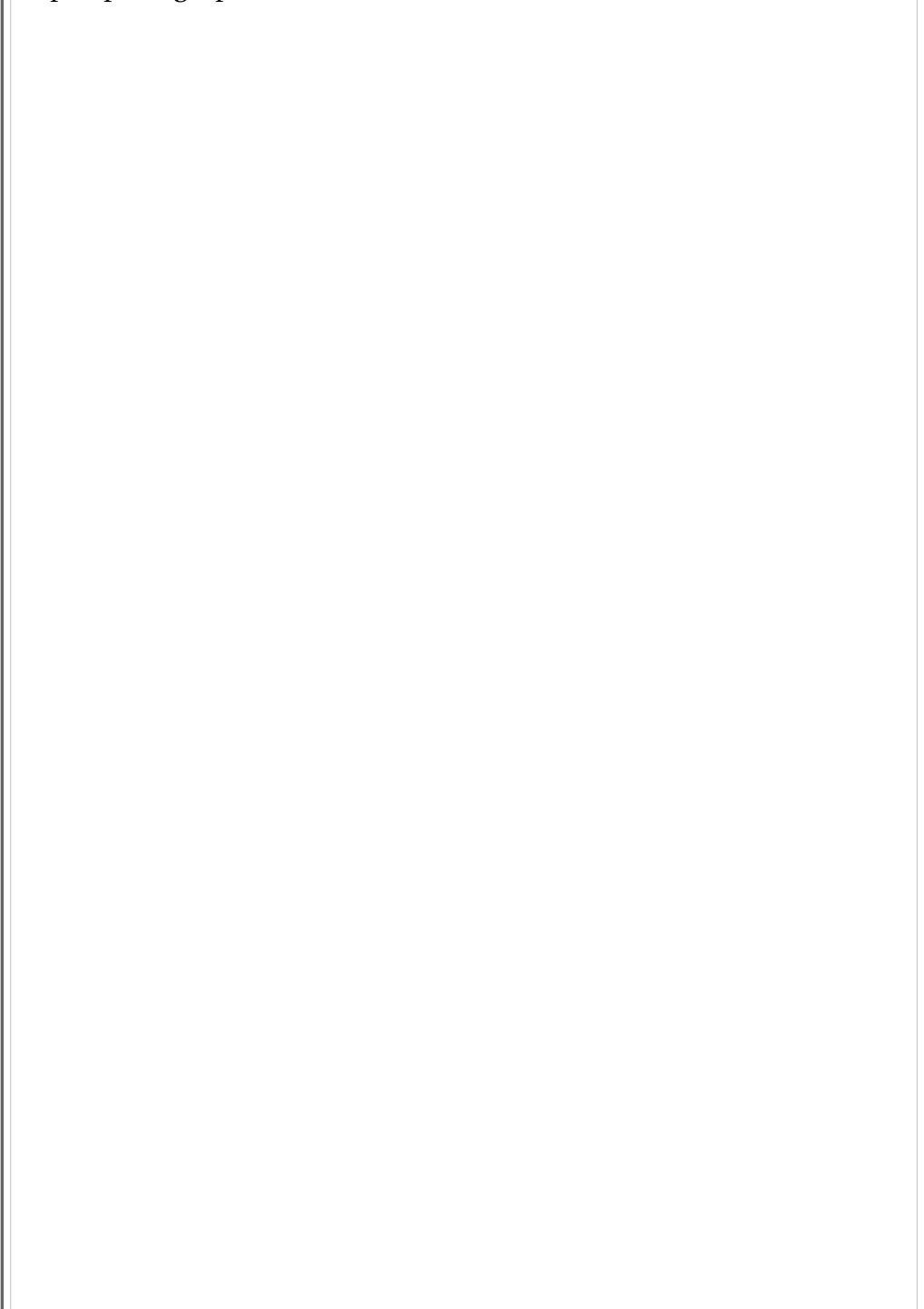
Kennedy's reconnaissance party was "to look for sites from which stormboats may b feel that stormboats should be used in the first place, but they (the British) have no c looks as if we and our boats have just come along for the ride."⁶ The Canadian engin in the Polish crossing on D+6: "Why won't they let us play?" asked Tucker, certain on would be called in to do assault rafting. On D+7, Tucker recorded, "At last we are to l assault crossing to reinforce 1st Airborne Division. The two companies prepared to n south of Nijmegen, the 23rd Company with the stormboats and the 20th Company wi movement order was given at midday, but perhaps as early as 1400 hours, the order disappointed to our bivouac area."⁷ The reason was that one of the higher command move from the reinforcement of 1st Airborne Division to its evacuation, although thi engineer units were involved in the assault crossing that night. On reflection, Kenned 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 been promised motorized stormboats by Brigadier Ben Walton of 130th Infantry Brig enough, knew that the Canadians were ready and available. But then the Polish oper Sosabowski was obliged to hand over his small stock of assault boats to the Dorsets. of assault boats is inexplicable: five engineer companies were in the vicinity of Nijme 204th Company, at least, up at the front line. Whatever the reason, the Canadians spe of Nijmegen. By this time, the life seems to have gone out of the XXX Corps leadershi formations: after the lightning advance of the engineers, in which the route was clear through Eindhoven and Grave to Nijmegen, command was paralyzed in supine stagn

That night, 350 Dorsets set out for the north bank, of whom 315 arrived ashore. Why clear. Formally, the evacuation order from Second Army was not issued until the foll and, initially, Lieutenant-Colonel Gerald Tilly of the Dorsets were under the distinct i was to be the prelude to a bigger crossing on the following night. Again, formally, thi XXX Corps for the operation. The reality was different. Just before the operation, Brig Lieutenant-Colonel Tilly that the purpose of the crossing had changed: Tilly was now Urquhart's perimeter while the 1st Airborne Division was withdrawn. Walton did not role, since he ordered a maximum of 400 Dorsets to cross, with the quite remarkable not go. Tilly, who led his men across and into captivity, considered that his battalion 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. The use of a charitable categorization – determined the tactics used in the evacuation on the western crossing. The engineers, under the command of the 204th Company, and possibly under the influence of the senior engineer commander, Lieutenant- Colonel W.C.A. Henniker, were given to understand that the major evacuation points, both with very substantial numbers of evacuees. That is why the units were assigned to each sector: the 553rd Royal Engineers and the 20th Royal Canadian Engineers in the west, the 23rd Royal Canadian Engineers in the east, with the 260th Royal Engineers just to the east. The idea that the Dorsets would cover the withdrawal was reduced to a cypher, since the crossing point opposite the Dorsets, was to commence a mere two hours after that of the eastern crossing. The 204th Company assigned most of the stormboats to the eastern crossing proves nothing. The 204th Company highly, and, in the event, declined to use them on the western crossing. This was not surprising. The impression was that it “didn't really appear that the generals had expected us to bring our own boats.” The decision to divide the evacuation into two equal projects was deeply misguided and contributed to the evacuation from failure was a matter of shrewdness and superb soldiering – shrewdness on the part of the eastern crossing point, and superb soldiering on the part of the 23rd Company.

Map depicting Operations Market Garden.



CMJ map by Monica Muller

Operation Market Garden, 17-26 September 1944.

The Evacuation

Sometime during the morning of D+8, Tucker learned from Lieutenant-Colonel Henry H. Tucker, 1st Airborne Division. At least one reconnaissance was carried out, by Lieutenants Russell and Kennedy. This was the only time that Tucker sent another officer with Kennedy on a reconnaissance. This was a small bridging operation was required, the nature and location of which Tate knew. The purpose of the reconnaissance was top secret, no doubt for routine security reasons. 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 terrain up to the river. Much of the terrain was under German artillery observation and was used by the reconnaissance party and the convoy of the 23rd Company in the evening. The reconnaissance party selected a crossing site:

A few hundred yards from the Rhine was the main or winter dyke, 18 or 20 feet high, cultivation of crops was allowed in front of it. Then perhaps 400 yards closer to the water was another dyke, 10 to 10 feet high. It was poor territory for a night action, but some sites were possible. A fair-sized orchard just south of the winter dyke and located within the sector which had to be reached down a narrow muddy lane which was separated from the orchard by a ditch. If 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 trucks and the 10th Field Park Company, moved from the Nijmegen assembly point to a staging area midway between the Waal and the Lower Rhine. At 1800 hours, Tucker learned that the eastern crossing point, with 14 stormboats and half the tradesmen from the 10th and 20th Company was assigned six stormboats and the balance of the tradesmen. Tucker said, "The equipment has been allotted to us, because it is thought that the main body of Airborne will be at our site."¹¹ The 23rd Company was required to have the boats in operation by 2140 hours, with an artillery barrage starting at 2100 hours.

Map depicting evacuation across the Neder Rijn, night 25-26 september.



Map by Monica Muller

Evacuation across the Neder Rijn, night 25-26 September.

The 23rd's convoy from Valburg consisted of three jeeps, one scout car with a radio and a truck carrying the stormboats and equipment. The stormboat lorries arrived at the orchard, the leading one having gone off the road as it entered the orchard. The first stormboat was in operation by 2140 hours. What an extraordinary achievement this was! The 23rd Company had no training in the operation which was to be done normally by the assaulting infantry being transported, with prior experience. Routinely, the stormboats were stacked three-high on three-ton trucks, with a derrick to lift them. No derrick trucks were available in this case. The 23rd Company then had to carry each boat a mile in the dark and rain, through the mud and over two dykes, in terrain interdicted to the enemy. At departure from the orchard, each boat had to be equipped, engine fitted and fuelled. The stormboats were two-cycle and were fuelled from jerry cans ready mixed with oil and gasoline. Dry an engine weighed 500 pounds, up to half as much again when wet and fully equipped. Even with these, it is only with the greatest difficulty that we get the boats up and over the dykes. They were affixed because "it was unbelievably difficult to climb the winter dyke," which was why the stormboat bars for the stormboats were fitted only after the operation. Spare engines also had to be carried.

the shore. The fitters “worked like fiends to keep us supplied with engines that will run ten engines.

At the western crossing, 46 Dorsets were brought back, all in the British assault boats. Martin Middlebrook, the crews comprised four, six, even eight men at the paddles. More than the motorized Canadians had trained on, “the crews are worn out after a couple of days.” This paragraph includes a section of the Dorsets who crossed in an assault boat that they found on the river. None of the six Canadian stormboats were launched. Towards the end of the night, a boat was sent across four of the stormboats across the 1500 yards to the eastern site. One boat was sunk by German machine gun fire, was abandoned when its engine failed. “No other stormboat was launched for the same reason for this was that German machine-gunners had pinpointed the Canadian position. The reason for this was that German machine-gunners had pinpointed the Canadian position in the sector, what saved the operation from disaster was that the German machine-gunners were firing 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 from shore.¹⁶ Under fire from artillery, mortars and machine guns, the second and third were lost. Of these two, the former, led by Lieutenant Russ Martin, was lost with all four crewmen when the passengers instinctively threw themselves to one side at a mortar round detonated with a shriek, on the other boat. Only five of the complement on this boat returned to the shore. The subsequent runs returned, initially overloaded with wounded men, being cared for by a Catholic padre, Captain Jean Mongeon. The engineers’ first aid post treated about 600 men, including walking wounded before they were transported by lorry to Driel.¹⁷ The medical facilities were overwhelmed by the casualties. By 0330 hours, all of Tucker’s 14 boats were in operation, one was sunk or disabled. A crossing took three or four minutes, but there were several reasons for returning stormboats back and forth.

Delays in loading were a factor. The usual manoeuvre was to have one crewman start in the water at the blunt bow, helping the passengers aboard. These two then pushed the boat outwards and then clambered aboard as best they could under the circumstances. The forward and rear depot behind the dykes were under constant fire, all areas by artillery, and the shore points specifically by machine gun and mortar fire. Another reason for delay was that the shore rocks and became useless.”¹⁸ Boats that were damaged when arriving back on the river were abandoned. The most prominent reason for delay concerned the 50 horsepower Evinrude outboards, a *non* of the operation’s success. The Evinrudes had no reverse gear, making the boats difficult to maneuver with a pair of men paddling. They also had no clutch, which meant that a boat whose outboard struck the shore bottom invariably stalled. The Evinrudes were temperamental in ideal conditions, often plagued by electrical failures which sometimes disabled the boats in mid-river, often to the personal experience of Major-General Urquhart, the Commanding Officer of the 1st Canadian Army Corps. If stalled, the boats were then difficult to restart, an operation that demanded a certain stamina, not to mention space in the boat to pull the cranking rope. Kennedy had suggested this was only after this operation that the 23rd Company developed a means of waterproofing the outboards.

Lieutenant Kennedy

Courtesy of Russ Kennedy

Lieutenant Russell J. Kennedy, MC, at
Chiddingfold, Surrey, England in 1945.

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

In his last two crossings, Kennedy was said to have deposited a load of German life jackets. This story is, in fact, false.²⁰ This apocryphal incident has often been recorded, but the high regard of the Canadians is usually only noted briefly and in passing.²¹ The 23rd Field Company's organization of the evacuation to Kennedy, as well as the bringing over of 125 men.²² Tucker himself to fire in the grand manner of Urquhart and Sosabowski, was ordered to cease operations when the western crossing had ceased at 0330 hours. At least 2398 men had been evacuated, including 100 Dorsets. Tucker calculated that his stormboats had carried across all but about a hundred men, for a total of 2400 to 2500 men. The Canadians were warmly praised by Lieutenant-Colonel Tucker. Five were decorated, including the award of a Military Cross for Lieutenant Kennedy for the role the Canadians had performed. Six from 23rd Company were killed and five wounded. Kennedy's 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 Field Company were engaged in operations on the Rhine, taking Resistance members back and forth across the river, including many evaders.²³ The most well-known of these operations was *Pegasus II*, a second attempt to rescue a Division of evaders in the wake of the highly successful *Pegasus I*. In *Pegasus I*, 128 evaders from the 101st Airborne Division paratroopers, were brought out on the night of 22 October 1944, in an assault by the 101st Airborne Parachute Infantry Regiment, under its distinguished commander, Lieutenant Colonel Taylor. The operations were directed by British military intelligence. In *Pegasus II*, the chief British contact was a Dutch Resistance member, Leo Heaps, now working for military intelligence. The operation was intended to get across the river. At the event, 160 of them attempted to assemble on the north bank. For reasons beyond the control of the players, the operation was not a success. For two nights, no signal was received from the Dutch Resistance on the north bank. Tucker himself was said to have led the crossing on the night of 19 November 1944. In fact, the stormboat crew was led by Kennedy. The boat carried 125 men, a paratrooper and two Dutch nationals. The same night, an American crossed in a stormboat and reported by radio that he was picking up one evader. This party was ambushed by German gun fire or underwater debris on the return journey. Kennedy made a further crossing on the night of 20 November, another, which was successful: four men were picked up in a crossing near Randwijk on the north bank, which included tanks, prevented further attempts at crossing, and on 21 November, he reported that his mission had been completed. The Americans, who were commanded by Taylor of the 101st Airborne Division, were most impressed with the performance of the Canadian contact with the Americans was when the 23rd Company ferried 6500 Americans of the 101st Airborne across the Waal, the conclusion to the 72 days they had spent on *Market Garden* and the evacuation of them: "They are as fine fellows as we have ever worked with, or could wish to work with. We would have liked to have done an assault together." The fact was that the Canadian engineers and 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 accounts, a model of small-unit action in the North-West Europe campaign.

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NOTES

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Tanks

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

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