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The rebuilt 'Bridge Too Far' in Arnhem, where Allies were forced back by German troops in September 1944 – It is now part of the Liberation Route Europe, which allows travellers to follow the Allies' advance

September marks 70 years since the historic battle for 'A Bridge Too Far' in Arnhem.

It is the first of a series of events to commemorate the end of the Second World War. It is also part of the Liberation Route Europe, a new tourism and educational project that follows the advance of the Allies through France, Holland and Germany to Berlin and the end of the war in Europe.

On September 17, 1944, the largest airborne invasion in history, named 'Operation Market Garden', left these shores for Holland and, potentially, a strike at the heart of Germany and the foreshortening of the end of WWII. It was a massively ambitious endeavour but one which, because of bad luck, bad weather and bad judgement, would end in chaos and military disaster.

The mission was for the paratroopers to capture and hold four bridges for two days until the British 2nd Army arrived from the south. The first three bridges were captured relatively easily by American and Canadian troops, but the fourth bridge, at Arnhem, and afterwards named 'A Bridge Too Far', was lost to overwhelmingly superior German forces and of the approximately 11,500 British and Polish paratroopers who landed there, 6,525 were captured, 1,485 were killed and only 3,910 were able to withdraw to safety.

Arnhem, Nijmegen and the Gelderland region, as this part of south-east Holland is called, is not at all like the rest of the Nether-

lands. Instead of endlessly flat and monotonous countryside, this distinctive area enjoys gentle rolling hills dotted with vineyards, asparagus fields, rivers, historic cities and delightful towns. The locals call it the 'Tuscany of Holland' and it's very much like Gloucestershire.

It is also very close to the German border. The brooding and densely wooded hills of Germany are on the horizon and it's very easy to imagine what it must have been like to have been a paratrooper descending slowly and helplessly to be met by two fresh SS panzer tank divisions that had, by sheer bad luck, chosen Arnhem to rest, refuel and re-arm before the defence of Germany itself.

Nijmegen, one of Holland's oldest cities is relatively unscathed by the war and it is now the home of the National Liberation Museum 1944-1945, situated in the nearby village of Groesbeek. This museum tells the story of Operation Market Garden and it contains very moving monuments to the British, American, Canadian and Polish soldiers who lost their lives during this campaign and the much less well-known episode in early 1945 when it was the departure point for Operation Veritable, the final invasion of Germany by a huge army of 500,000 Allied troops.

Just 16 miles north of Nijmegen lies the historic city of Arnhem which, unlike Nijme-

gen, was all but destroyed in 1944 and 1945 by both the Allies and the Germans in turn. It is now a delightful and authentic city full of bars, cafes and restaurants, fashionable stores and boutiques, students and shoppers.

The 'Bridge Too Far' is still there, renamed the John Frost Bridge in dedication to Lt. Col. Frost, who, with just a handful of troops, defended the north end of the bridge against overwhelming odds for six days. Eventually, they simply ran out of food and ammunition and were forced to evacuate under heavy fire taking great losses as they tried to cross the river to safety. Today the bridge seems strangely silent, even though used by traffic. You can't take your eyes off it.

These terrible events are brilliantly captured in the Airborne Museum Hartenstein, which is located in the former headquarters of the British forces before their eventual surrender after days of fighting with only small arms against Tiger tanks and German heavy artillery. The near-dark basement replicates street fighting and the noise and fury of the house-to-house, hand-to-hand fighting are particularly realistic and not for the faint-hearted.

This museum also tells the story of how the British troops and the Dutch civilians lived side by side, trying to survive days and nights of unrelenting danger, and it reflects the strong bond between our two nations. Our guide was the daughter of a British paratrooper who returned to Arnhem after the war to

marry the Dutch woman who had sheltered him during these terrible events.

The nearby Oosterbeek war cemetery is a very beautiful and deeply peaceful location and it contains 1,759 war graves, the final resting places of Allied servicemen who lost their lives in the Battle for Arnhem and Operation Market Garden.

The battlefield sites in and around Arnhem and Nijmegen have information boards which have 'audio spots' where detailed information can be downloaded from www.liberationroute.com through local wi-fi. This is a really excellent website which has full information about Liberation Route Europe and is a brilliant teaching aid and an excellent tourist guide.

Here's how to do it...

Getting there

The overnight ferry from Harwich to the Hook of Holland by Stena Lines takes about six hours. It is then a further two hours to reach Arnhem and Nijmegen by train, coach or car.

Getting around

Holland has a nationwide bike-sharing programme called 'OV-fiets', with 6,000 bikes available all over the country, especially at railway stations, and there are free 'white bikes' in parks and leisure areas.

Where to stay:

There are plenty of hotels, hostels, guest-houses, campsites and group accommodation in Holland, but if you want a memorable experience the Bilderberg hotel group offers luxurious accommodation in historic buildings, such as the Hotel de Keizerskroon in Apeldoorn, 30 minutes from Arnhem.

Further info: www.airbornemuseum.nl; www.bevrijdingsmuseum.nl; www.bilderberg.nl; www.cwgc.org; www.krm.nl; www.liberationroute.com; www.liberationtour.nl; www.qadmc.nl; www.paleisshetoo.nl; www.arnhemnijmegenregio.com; www.marketgarden70.nl



Information boards can be found at battlefields around Arnhem and Nijmegen