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# ops

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## FROM THE BRIDGE TOO FAR TO THE PRAIRIE SKY

Dedication to service led paratrooper from Battle of Arnhem to western Manitoba

JOHN RALSTON SAUL

**C**OL. John Waddy, an English war hero who loved Manitoba, has died near his birthplace in Somerset, England. He was 100 and one of the last surviving airborne officers from the turbulent, tragic Second World War Battle of Arnhem where he was wounded three times. Three-quarters of his brigade were killed, wounded or captured. It remains the central mythological battle of the British Airborne.

What is rarely mentioned is Canada's role — three very precise interventions, the second an almost miraculous success.

Arnhem made up one-third of the airborne Operation Market Garden — the British third. Undertaken Sept. 17-26, 1944, it was the largest airborne attack ever attempted. The big strategic idea was to leap right over the German front with three massive jumps, each one deeper behind their lines, in order to capture three strategic bridges, the last being Arnhem, 100 kilometres behind German lines in the Netherlands.

Arnhem was the "bridge too far" as Frederick "Boy" Browning, the commanding general of the British Airborne, called it.

The ground part of the operation was an equally massive tank charge — like a Guderian style blitzkrieg — racing down a single narrow road, across the bridges in sequence the moment they were captured by the paratroopers. Finally, the tanks would cross the Lower Rhine at Arnhem and the road to Germany would be open. And the war would be over by Christmas.

Altogether it was a brilliant, imaginative plan, with remarkable leaders and soldiers. Everywhere there were acts of courage and desperate attempts to alter the destiny they were presented with once they hit the ground. This was one of those great British conflicts — the mythological battle of the Parachute Regiment, Lost. Not won. But somehow a deep expression of who they were.

As John Waddy stood in the open jump door, getting ready, the plane next to them went down in flames. When he jumped he saw the Germans below organized and firing at the plane door. Sixty men in his battalion were dead before they landed. This was not the surprise they had been promised. Once on the ground they knew they had to turn the situation around very fast, as skirmishes quickly turned into increasingly difficult clashes and tanks began to appear. Partway through the second day his company came under destructive fire from a flak gun about 150 metres away. Waddy and a few of his men crept through the woods to within 15 metres, only to find themselves under sniper fire. With men dying around him, Waddy ended up in a lopsided fight — his pistol against a sniper rifle. Pistols are pretty useless at a distance. He was badly wounded, only to be saved by a large Rhodesian private who grabbed him and ran 200 metres. Then from one field hospital to another. The first, British, was blown up, killing most of the wounded British and Germans around him. He was captured and eventually operated on by a German doctor in a small hotel on a billiard table. Then he was wounded again as the area was decimated. He was thrown on a pile of dead men, then pulled off it. Death was everywhere.

Yet the battle was far from over. Almost 9,000 paratroopers were trying to get into the battle to stabilize the situation in order to break through to the bridge. The Polish Brigade and the Dorset Regiment were trying to get into the battle for support. Among the paratroopers were some 30 Canadian lieutenants and captains lent to the British, who were short of officers. They commanded platoons. Only three were rescued. The rest were killed, wounded or captured. Much has been said by the British paratroopers about the toughness and courage of these young Canadians.

A 24-year-old lieutenant, John Wellbelove from Eston, Sask., is often evoked as a hero. His platoon was overrun by four tanks and a large group of German soldiers. He was last heard taunting the attackers as he fired his Sten gun, rallying

### BOOSTER ROCKET TO MEMORIALIZE LOST SHUTTLE ASTRONAUTS

The age of the space shuttle is over. But its memory isn't — and now a blatant piece of equipment used to put shuttles in orbit will become a memorial to its fallen astronauts. A 150-foot-long space shuttle rocket booster recently took a trip to the March Field Air Museum in Riverside, Calif., where it will serve as the centerpiece of a planned memorial garden for the two NASA crews who lost their lives during shuttle missions.

Once on display at the Kennedy Space Center, the boosters were the most powerful solid rocket motors ever flown. Each provided more than three million pounds of thrust — enough to push the shuttle's tank and orbiter into orbit before dropping into the Atlantic Ocean. About 270 boosters were built over the life of the space shuttle program, from 1981 until 2011. The rocket played a pivotal role in the 1986 Challenger disaster, when a leaky seal in one

of the shuttle's boosters caused its fuel tanks to collapse and the orbiter to break apart. All seven of its crew members died.

At March Field, the booster will memorialize the astronauts who died on the Challenger mission and during the 2003 Columbia disaster, which killed its seven-person crew.

— The Washington Post



John Waddy in North Africa shortly after the Second World War.



Waddy as Colonel of the SAS, 1964.

his men in a helpless cause.

The larger picture was becoming clear. Col. "Johnny" Frost, with 750 lightly armed paratroopers, had almost immediately broken through to their target — Arnhem Bridge. But how could they hold it? Within a day they were in close quarters battle with far larger forces of Germans. And with their tanks. Unexpected tanks. This was a fundamental failure of British Intelligence and decision-making by senior officers.

But Frost and his men somehow held on for almost five days. An amazing accomplishment and sacrifice. They had had two hopes. First, that the rest of their forces — those 9,000 who had been dropped too far away — would somehow break through. What Frost could not know was the impossibility of the situation. The 9,000 fought every way they could, taking enormous casualties. It couldn't be done. The other hope was that the Allied tanks would suddenly appear, having forced their way down the long thin road to Arnhem bridge. They almost made it, arriving not too far away, but 36 hours late. By then, Frost's 200 or so survivors out of the initial 750 had run out of ammunition and been overrun. The overall situation was bleak.

Ten thousand men had parachuted or glided in Sept. 17-18. About 2,400 came out, rescued on the night of Sept. 26-27, almost entirely by the 23rd Field Company of the Canadian Engineers. The miraculous Canadian intervention.

This small group of engineers had first to make their way through German positions to a kilometre from the river, then drag their 20-foot storm boats under terrible conditions, over two steep flood walls to the banks of the Lower Rhine. In fact, there were four engineering companies there to do the job. But it turned out the 20th Canadian Engineers were badly placed to play a major role. And the two British companies had much smaller boats powered only by oars — useless for crossing a raging river.

So, the 23rd, and their 14 fragile boats, equipped with highly temperamental 50-horsepower Evinrude outboard engines — no reverse and no clutch — had to figure out how to cross back and forth over a major river in the pitch black under constant machine gun, mortar and artillery fire, as well cope with a heavy current. Many were sunk. The engines kept dying. So did the soldiers.

Yet almost 2,500 were saved. The engineers had remarkable leaders. Their commander, Maj. Michael Tucker directed it all while exposed to heavy fire. Lt. Russel Kennedy was constantly on the river, organizing, encouraging, himself driving boats across. Sapper Raymond Le Boethier led 26 round trips. Sapper David McCready undertook endless crossings until full daylight made them all clear targets. I have often thought that one of their advantages was typical of so many Canadian boys of every background — from eight or so on they were raised driving tin boats with outboards in rough water. There was an instinctual side to it all.

This rescue story is rarely mentioned. In fact, the whole rescue was left out of the U.S.-funded war epic *A Bridge Too Far*. Not a surprise. In the American-funded *D-Day* epic *The Longest Day*, only one of the five beaches was basically left out of the story — Juno, the Canadian beach.

At Arnhem, the British paratroopers had done everything they could, and so it rightfully became the mythological Parachute Regiment battle. And John Waddy's life was defined by that mythology, as in later years he lectured there and



Waddy prepares for a winter jump at -37 C with the 2nd PPCLI in Edmonton in February 1958.

wrote books about the battle and the errors which had caused defeat and so many deaths.

But military lives do go on, even after the greatest dramas. Waddy's postwar life was inevitably wrapped up in the last days of the British Empire. You would have found him in Palestine — where he was seriously wounded — and in Egypt and Libya. He was also there in the middle of the Malayan Emergency in Malaysia — the first guerrilla campaign won by a mainly western army. He was mentioned in dispatches for his role in that jungle conflict. Then came Jordan and Cyprus. Then Vietnam as an adviser to the British Ambassador. In fact he was regularly out on helicopter patrols. And all the while he was rising in the British two-part system of outside-the-box warfare — the Parachute Regiment and the Special Air Service (SAS). He set up the Para Battle School and in 1966 became Colonel SAS, that is, the Director of Special Forces, which he modernized.



Waddy (left) and author's father, Bill Saul (right) as the Canadian Airborne visited the U.S. Airborne Department at Fort Benning in 1956.



Waddy explains the Battle of Arnhem to Dutch families in 1961.

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The author and his two brothers with friends in Rivers Camp, loving the winter in 1956 as Saul's father and Waddy served at the Canadian Airborne School in Rivers, Man.