

THE WILLEMSBRUG. ROTTERDAM. MAY 10TH 1940.

A WW2 scenario by Mal.Wright, for Blitzkrieg Commander.

The capture of the Willems Bridge at Rotterdam was an important first day objective for German air landing and Paratroops taking part in the invasion of Holland. These comprised a Railway Bridge and a road bridge known as Willemsbrug. The former was of limited use to the invasion forces because it had been examined pre war and considered not suited to the passage of tanks due to it being on a steep raised embankment that would make getting on and off it difficult. The Willemsbrug was however a traffic bridge which although old, had a good carrying capacity and was reasonably wide. The particular value of these bridges was because they were the only ones across the NieuwMaas River near the valuable shipping port of Rotterdam.

The German main body were to be provided by the Luftwaffe and land at the Dutch airfield of Waalhaven via a Para drop and Ju52 transports. After seizing this they would then press on to other objectives and hold them all until the arrival of major land forces spearheaded by the 9th Panzer Division. The first attackers would be the III battalion, 1st Fallschirmjaeger, supported by a reserve battalion of the II Fallschirmjaeger, who were to secure the airfield to enable transport aircraft of the air landing troops to put them on the ground. These were the 22nd Air Landing Division, some elements of the 16th Infantry regiment. The 72nd Infantry Regiment would form a reserve.

It was decided early in the planning phase that if there was any sort of delay at Waalhaven Airfield, the Dutch may have time to blow the bridges before German forces could arrive. German intelligence had already concluded the bridges would be unguarded but once the Dutch were aware of the German invasion there was uncertainty as to how long it would take the Dutch to prepare the bridges for demolition. Naval Marines stationed in the harbour, were believed quite capable of this, and other depot troops could well be designated for such a task if equipment was available.

A plan was developed by which troops would be landed on the river, either side of the bridges, via some old and expendable He59 floatplanes. A dozen were allocated and modified to carry ten troops each. Each carried several inflatable boats to enable the troops to get ashore. This small force was expected to have to hold on for only a few hours. Rotterdam itself had few troops under arms. Most of the facilities were transit barracks, recruiting offices, and some minor depots. Therefore a small well armed group should be able to seize and hold the bridges. To provide 'back up' a small force of Fallschirmjaeger would parachute into the football stadium south of the bridgehead.

The He 59's swept in over Rotterdam around 0500 and in the light of dawn, landed on the Maas. The troops quickly disembarked and paddled ashore where Dutch civilians, unaware war had broken out, were on their way to work. The civilians watched with amazement, many apparently believing these were visiting troops and even helped them up the steep embankment from the river. It would take some time for most of the civil population to realise what was going on, after which their curiosity and determination to be spectators caused them to become something of a nuisance. The invaders quickly moved to hold both ends of the Willemsbrug while small parties took up position in some nearby buildings and used the higher railway bridge to gain elevated firing positions. The only incident occurred when some Dutch Police attempted to stop them putting up roadblocks and were killed. ObLt. Schrader commanding the assault group was now in charge of the bridgehead.

Meanwhile the Para drop at the Stadium had resulted in the troops becoming rather scattered and it was feared the delay may be fatal for the success of the operation. However passing trams were commandeered and the group successfully rattled its way to the bridgehead. Once united the two sections of the German force used parked cars, the tram, and other items to block the approaches from the north, in expectation of a Dutch counter attack.

Gradually the Dutch had been recovering from the initial surprise, and working out what could be done. Engineer Colonel Scharroo was in command, but had only a few troops who were armed and combat trained. Fortunately nearly all of them were on the northern side of the river. During the day groups of men became available as soldiers on leave from various Dutch regiments reported in to the nearest barracks on hearing war had broken out. As this group grew it was realised that there were only sufficient weapons for about one in seven. Rotterdam was not a major training centre and had only a small armoury. Most weapons were given to the most competent or best trained. Fortunately the 39th Infantry, who had been responsible for guarding various areas, had their own.

Scharroo did however have a full battery of twelve 10.5cm Bofors Howitzers which could command most of Rotterdam without even leaving their barracks. In addition he was reasonably well served by AA units, which although most were light, several were stationed along the NieuwMaas. One of these batteries was of 20mm Oerlikon and was on the north side of the river and subsequently able to provide AA fire during bombing attacks by German support aircraft.

Scharroo's position was not helped by confusing intelligence coming into his HQ. From this, it appeared other small groups of Germans had parachuted in to various parts of the north Rotterdam, where they were spreading panic. Some were even supposed to be disguised as Police, Nuns, and Postmen. Although investigating these reports did draw off some of his men, he realised that the main enemy objective would be the bridges and commenced concentrating his forces. The first to be sent to the bridges was an under strength machinegun company of the 39th Regiment. They were ordered to take up positions from which they could prevent any further German advance into North Rotterdam.

On the southern side, a company of the 39th Infantry regiment were re-enforced by some strays from the Dutch Jaeger Regiment originally at the airfield, and some other depot type troops. Lacking other orders they decided to set up an ambush in the streets leading from the Waalhaven to the bridges. This would delay the main body of air landing troops for nine hours before they succeeded in breaking through, although some small units found ways around the ambush area.

COUNTER ATTACK

The exact time of the Dutch counter attack is not recorded, but it developed in the late morning. For the purposes of the wargame we will consider the start time to be 1100 hrs. Move 5 of 12. There will be no Dutch activity during the first five moves so these are used to enable the Germans to establish themselves. Some forces of both sides will arrive after move 5.

DUTCH FORCES DAY ONE

(Organised for Blitzkrieg Commander)

Colonel Scharroo. CO base.

39th Infantry Regiment.

HQ base.

1 company of 3 infantry bases. Data as per BKC rules.

1 machinegun company of 3 MG bases. Data as per BKC rules.

These troops start from Wijnhaven (Street).

Dutch Marines.

2 companies. Total 6 bases plus a HQ.

These troops start from Oosterkade (Street). Data as per BKC but allow 7 hits instead of 6.

Military Academy Cadets.

1 company. Total 3 bases. Data as per BKC but reduce attacks to 2/30* and allow only 5 hits instead of 6.

These troops start from Wijnhaven (Street).

Artillery.

FAO base.

3 models 10.5cm Howitzers. Only use HE due to high angle fire, so increase attacks to 5.

Off table.

NAVAL SUPPORT.

The old torpedo boat Z5. 2 x 75mm guns. 1 Machinegun. Direct fire from the South West. (See map)

MTB-51. 2 x 20mm. Direct fire from the South West. (See map)

AVAILABLE FROM MOVE 7.

1 Marine machinegun coy. Under strength, 2 bases of machineguns. Data as per BKC.

Naval company of sailors from ships in harbour. 2 bases total. Reduce attacks to 2/30*. Reduce hits to 4.

These troops start from Oosterkade (Street).

AVAILABLE FROM MOVE 9.

1 Recruit company Dutch Marines. Total 3 infantry bases. Reduce attacks to 2/30*. Reduce hits to 4.

1 Recruit company Dutch infantry. Total 3 infantry bases. Reduce attacks to 2/30*. Reduce hits to 4.

2 Companies 39th Infantry regiment. Total 6 bases. Data as per BKC rules.

These troops start from Wijnhaven (Street)

Objectives.

Day one objective is to push the Germans out of their bridgehead on the northern side of the railway and Willemsbrug.

Secondary objective is to capture and hold the Insurance Building. Moves from 5 to 12 are daylight. Moves from 13 to 14 are night. The scenario ends at move 14.

Dutch victory conditions. Capture the Insurance Building and Force the Germans to retire to the south side of the bridges.

Dutch minor victory. Prevent any German re-enforcements crossing the NieuwMaas to join their bridgehead.

The Dutch forces holding a roadblock and ambush positions in South Rotterdam need not be included. Their presence up until move 9 automatically prevents some of the German forces arriving on the tabletop area. The firing from this area can be heard at the bridges until the position is over run, and was encouraging for the northern Dutch group.

GERMAN FORCES DAY ONE

(Organised for Blitzkrieg Commander)

CO base. OberLtn. Schrader.

AIR LANDING GROUP. (All Luftwaffe air landing troops)

One HQ base. One FAC base.

Elements of the 22nd Pioneer Company. Total 4 engineer bases.

Elements of the 16th Infantry Company. 1 MG base. 1 anti-tank rifle/infantry base.

FALLSCHIRMJAGER GROUP.

One HQ base.

Elements of 1st company III Battalion. Total of infantry 2 bases and one MG base.

The above troops can be in defensive positions on the northern side of the bridge area by move 5. Two damaged He59 aircraft remain on the river. One MG base can be placed in the Insurance building and up to one other in support is optional.

AIR SUPPORT.

FAC base can call in 4 Stuka attacks at any time from move 5 to 12. He can also call in 2 Ju88 level bombing attack, between moves 8 and 12. There can only be one air attack of one type carried out per move.

SPECIAL AIR NOTE.

If no units of the Waalhaven group have reached the bridgehead by move 10, one air strike must be cancelled and instead a supply drop takes place. This must land within the German held area. Use the BKC artillery system to determine point where it lands. If it fails, one German base must surrender for lack of ammunition.

WAALHAVEN GROUP.

Mixed elements of the 3rd Battalion. 16th Regiment. 22nd Air landing Division, as below.

One machinegun base. 2 bases of 75mm Infantry guns. 2 PaK36 anti tank guns. One mortar base. 6 bases of Air landing infantry. One base anti tank rifle.

The rest of this force was ambushed in the Rosestraat. The above elements have found a way around the Dutch roadblock and reach the south side of the bridgehead at the Stieltjesplein on move 8.

Objectives.

Day one. Capture and hold the northern side of the railway bridge and Willemsbrug. The initial landing forces are in place but need to be urgently re-enforced. Moves from 5 to 12 are daylight. Moves from 13 to 14 are night. The scenario ends at move 14

German Victory conditions. Retain a bridgehead on the northern side of the bridges and bring across re-enforcements to increase strength. There must be more troops on the northern side at the end of move 12 than there were on move 5, for this condition to be met.

German minor victory conditions. Retain any bridgehead on the northern side of the NieuMaas and get at least three bases of re-enforcements from the Waalhaven group across to join the original two groups.



NORTH

Dotted area represents my wargames tabletop which covers the main area of fighting.



The Insurance building, known as the Het Witte Huis, was the tallest in Rotterdam, being 12 stories high. It provided observation of the whole area. Possession of it also enabled machineguns to dominate the northern side of the bridge area. It was a white building with dark grey roof and very distinctive.

German troops occupied buildings immediately around the bridges where they fronted onto the Hertekade and Boompjeskade. This enabled them to control troops approaching their positions, and which had to therefore cross at least one canal. The Dutch eventually recaptured most of this area but by that time the Germans on the south side were too strong for the bridges to be retaken.

Tramlines ran across the Willemshuisbrug, along the Boompjeskade and up past the Insurance building. Waalhaven airfield is off the south side of the map. German forces did not have this really secure until the end of the first day. By this time it was littered with wrecked aircraft, as were many of the roads around it. This made it difficult to fly in the reserves and the airfield was not really useable in the proper sense until day four. It had been heavily fought over and bombed by both sides during the interval. Its facilities were badly damaged.

The orange dots indicate Dutch 20mm AA positions. There is little mention of these but they seem to have been unmanned during the original landings and had been then knocked out again before the first counter attack took place.

The warships shown were able to manoeuvre within the river as it was very wide. This helped them in avoiding air attacks called in against them.