

A REFIGHT OF THE BATTLE AT THE FORMER HQ ARNHEM AT ARNHEM

“From which direction did you approach the Museum?” It so happens that the Oosterbeek Airborne Museum sits in a park area along a main road and visitors can only approach from the west or east. Whichever direction they had come from, they would have driven, in a manner of speaking, across one of our tables and would certainly have passed some of the buildings on display in this room.

By Guy Bowers, Jasper Oorthuys, and Nick Skinner

It was a simple question, but it was found to work very well as an ice-breaker. After all, visitors to the Airborne Museum already expected to be confronted with military history, albeit not with a scaled, 3-D representation of the building and the surroundings they were in this first weekend of October. The answer to the question allowed us to point the visitors to the relevant table, and recognition came (fortunately!) almost always immediately. And then you're off. Pretty soon, we had visitors on a day out rolling dice to see if their 17-pounder could take out the Char B flamethrower tank...

SERENDIPITOUS CHAIN OF EVENTS

In the end this affair came down to Covid, really. Jasper was preparing a gaming day in the Arnhem area back in October 2020, when the epidemic and the lockdowns suddenly made that impossible. He hadn't yet settled on

a location for where this would take place, though various Arnhem-related options were available. The Rijnhotel, for instance, or the neighbourhood centre behind the Urquhart House would both be historically appropriate locations for any WWII-themed wargaming event (in fact, S.P.I.T. Wargames usually organizes a gaming weekend at that Rijn-hotel during the commemorations).

The real prize, of course, would be the Airborne Museum itself, the former headquarters of the British 1st Airborne Division during the battle. Jasper initially discounted that option, however. Most museums have limited space for a bunch of gaming tables and an open museum with visitors coming and going necessarily changes the character of the event. Not to mention the fact that it'd require the goodwill of the museum to even host a bunch of wargamers. So, that idea ebbed away while we all went into lockdown. And yet, something stuck at the back of Jasper's mind.

By the fall of 2021, the Netherlands were out of lockdown for a bit, and as a board member of the Society of Friends of the Airborne Museum, Jasper had started to get to know the brand new director of the museum. He'd come from the Dutch National Army



Museum, so it seemed he might at least have some idea of what wargaming was. And a museum coming out of lockdown might be interested in an event.

Jasper knew Nick Skinner of TooFatLardies was a fellow 'Arnhem aficionado' who had already been working on a large supplement of scenarios and campaigns for *Chain of Command*. Perhaps something could be combined here. Jasper asked the Lardies whether they'd back him up if he could arrange something. The hoped-for response came very quickly and eagerly, so an appointment with the museum was soon made. With a 28mm para in his pocket, Jasper met with the museum director. “Ah, my brother had figures like that for D&D!” was his first reaction. (Ice-breakers are a theme here...) Soon we had a rough idea, a space, and even a date. Now what?

FRAMING OBJECTIVES

With the museum, Nick, and Richard Clarke on board, we'd now have to decide what kind of event this would be. As stated, any war-



← The Battle of Arnhem is famous for the desperate efforts to resupply the troops in the perimeter. This hamper, at least, made it.

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The salon of the Museum, with the team busy and the event in full swing.



SS Grenadiere advance along Utrechtseweg with a SdKfz 251/9 in support.



Every table had a small, bilingual sign to explain what the visitors were seeing.

gaming at a museum would obviously have to have an entirely different character than any 'regular' gaming day with friends. We would have to avoid the dreaded 'backs around a table' that would turn visitors away and make it seem as if the event was something private for a bunch of weirdos. It was decided that the first priority would be a successful event from the museum's point of view – something that created a good 'vibe' for the weekend and that truly added value to the public's visit to the museum.

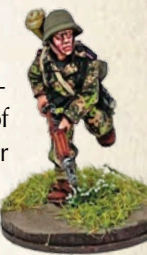
To do that, we decided the tables would have to look as good as we

could possibly get them to be. Tables that catch the eye, that look almost like a diorama, would engage the public just by themselves. Most visitors are familiar with dioramas at museums after all, and a great display appeals to people with all kinds of hobbies, from railroad modellers to dollhouse-collectors. And it would have to be 'Arnhem'-related. In the end, we decided to focus as locally as we could. It would be the view from the window; tables that represented the Oosterbeek perimeter on the last days of the battle, when the defence was coordinated from the site we'd be in and the eastern and western ends of the bridgehead

could almost be seen from the front porch of Hotel Hartenstein.

THE PERIMETER

When the attempts to reach Frost's forces at Arnhem bridge had failed, units of 1st Airborne Division naturally fell (or were pushed) back into a perimeter – variously described as horseshoe- or thumb-shaped – with the Rhine river and 1st Airborne's HQ at Hotel Hartenstein at its heart. The hotel sits on Utrechtseweg, the main east-west road through Oosterbeek and Arnhem that eventually leads to Ede and Utrecht. Very roughly, positions to the west



THE DREAM WARGAMING VENUE?

Visiting the Airborne Museum in Hotel Hartenstein, Oosterbeek, the former HQ of the British 1st Airborne Museum, is undoubtedly on the bucket list of many wargamers. Playing games there was obviously a huge added appeal for the team. It is equally certain that the Museum didn't exactly know what was in store and it was very important that the trust extended wasn't abused. Fortunately we seem to have succeeded.

Similar venues certainly exist elsewhere. If anything, this article shows that making connections and putting in the effort can result in an event "you'll tell your grandchildren about. And mightily bored they'll be."



The Airborne Museum in Oosterbeek by twilight.

© Alexander Heusschen



The dense, urban terrain setup on the northern table provided a very different gaming experience that reflected the historical issues of attacker and defender.



"Für sie, der Krieg ist aus" - The Brits are taken prisoner.



The MDS crossroads was reconstructed in great detail, including the burnt-out milk truck and downed lines.



BUILDING 'ARNHEM'

Al Sheward and Ade Deacon built the MDS crossroads which, more than the other two tables, had some very iconic buildings on it. Ade: "I was responsible for the buildings on the Pietersbergseweg and the allotments behind them. Although not the iconic buildings on the main Utrechtseweg, these were very recognisable in their own right, chiefly a shop and a garage which are still there today! They were designed and printed by Paul Edwards of Sabotag3d. The allotments were scenic items of various scale railway makes mounted on MDF bases from Warbases." Al built the hotels and mansions on that table, as well as the Hartenstein. Most were based on a skeleton of MDF while many of the added details (windows, shutters, chimneys, etc) were 3D-printed. The roads – mostly herringbone brick patterns with, in some cases, tramways embedded in them – were also 3D-printed. These thin sheets required backing to prevent warping.

were held by 1st Battalion the Border Regiment among villas, wooded areas, and estates. To the north, between the railway and the Utrechtseweg, was an early twentieth-century neighbourhood with houses and well-kept and fenced gardens. The Reconnaissance Squadron, 7th Battalion King's Own Scottish Borderers, and the remains of 156 Battalion the Parachute Regiment held this area. To the east, this neighbourhood was edged by a north-south road to the train station, crossing the Utrechtseweg a few hundred metres east of Hotel





COPYING THE PHOTOS

Martin Niklaus built some vignettes to grace the tables: "For the StuG vignette I used a StuG III model from Rubicon with figures from Artizan, Empress, Warlord, the Perry twins, and Offensive Miniatures. The StuG got a layer of *Zimmerit* made from putty and a home-made stamp to recreate the pattern. Some of the miniatures were converted to fit their position and the look as seen in the original photos. The smaller vignette, representing a scene from after the fighting where a German *Fallschirmjäger* inspects an abandoned jeep, was done using a Rubicon Willys Jeep together with a Warlord plastic *Fallschirmjäger*.



Recreating a famous photo of a StuG and British POWs.



Hartenstein. Around this crossroads, the Field Ambulance units of 1st Airborne Division had set up their Main Dressing Stations (MDS) in several large villas and hotels in the first days of the battle. Unfortunately, now that the perimeter was being formed, they were in the front line. The area from this crossroads down to the river was defended by the remnants of the other battalions of the division.

In another case of (historical) serendipity, this layout of the perimeter could naturally be divided into four tables: the Hartenstein, always meant as a

display model; an open, trees-and-parkland table in the west; a very urban-looking table for the northern perimeter; and the MDS crossroads with its large hotels and stately mansions in the east. That would provide variety both in look and style of gaming, and offer plenty of opportunities to recreate some well-known photos as vignettes – a plan for a true wargamer's smörgåsbord with ample choice for all comers.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Once all this had been decided, and with about a year to go, Nick Skinner and Richard Clarke took the lead. We set about recruiting a team who

could deliver what was needed. We felt it was very important that this was an international team of gamers, as we wanted to show what the international gaming community could do when it came together. Having Brits, Dutch, Belgians, and Germans all on board added hugely to the event. There were no passengers.

Anyone who has seen the fantastic wargames tables produced by Alan



The presence of Panthers in Oosterbeek is debated, but the photographer let himself go...



17-Pounder gun and tow in its historical location on the Sonnenberglaan.



"But how does it work?" Dick Bax explains the basics of playing a wargame to curiously engaged visitors.



Hotel Hartenstein at Hotel Hartenstein, as it was in 1944.



Paratroopers sneaking through a village garden.



Seward and Ade Deacon over the years would instantly realize why we thought it was essential to have them leading on what we knew would be the prime table, the MDS crossroads, whilst Rich and Nick focused on the other two tables.

Once we considered the needs of the other tables, we knew we were likely to need some specific builds, so we pulled in the talented 3-D genie, Paul Edwards of Sabotag3d, with whom the Lardies had

already worked and who we knew could generate the bespoke buildings that we needed on all the tables. Painting up Paul's prints was a delight, but Nick dares not think how many window frames he had to paint in the past six months, nor how much he spent on tufts and greenery.

But it wasn't just the buildings; we faced some other very specific challenges. We wanted to make the tables as accurate as possible, and this opened some interesting areas of re-

search. We knew, for instance, that there was a tramline that was on the Utrechtseweg as far as the MDS crossroads, but we didn't know exactly where the tramline stopped, or what the stop looked like. It took lots of research before we reached a layout that we thought would pass the scrutiny of local experts. The same situation occurred with the road surface of the Utrechtseweg, which switches from cobbles to asphalt somewhere near the Hartenstein, so we had to put hours of



TEAMWORK

Presenting wargaming to a larger audience means engaging the public when their eye first catches a glimpse of cluttered tables and gamers collected around them, clapping onto the natural curiosity of the museum visitor, and handing them off to the table crew for either an explanation of what they were seeing and how it had been made, or a quick introduction to the game. To make sure that would happen, the team was divided into 'table captains' (who ensured there was always someone at the table to answer questions or run a game) and hosts (who would try to get a conversation started). Depending on the native language of the visitor and their particular interest, they might be passed off to a teammate.



It takes a great team to pull off a great event.



BUILD IT YOURSELF

Most of the 3D designs that Paul Edwards created for this event — both the houses as well as the terrain accessories such as fencing and trenches — are now available as STLs from his website at www.sabotag3d.com. In the EU, Tabletop Studios (www.tabletopstudios.net) sells licensed printed versions of these designs. This should allow for proper Dutch-looking tables in the future!

Hotel Vreewijk (left) and Quatre Bras (center-front) still remain and served as very recognizable landmarks.

research into trying to find out where the transition took place (if you're curious, it was probably at the junction of Steinweg and Utrechtseweg).

And then there were the houses and the gardens. This was over and above what we'd normally do to bring a battle to the tabletop, but our desire to get it 'right' pushed us on. Nick made a couple of recce trips to Oosterbeek, photographing buildings and even the types of metal railings and fences that surrounded the houses.

We'd never ventured into such attention to detail, but this was going to be the first (and maybe the last) time that we would have a chance to take an Arnhem wargame to the Airborne Museum itself, and we all felt that taking the Hartenstein to the Hartenstein warranted such deep attention to detail, not just for us, but also for the hobby that we were representing. We were lucky to have Jasper, who was always available to help figure out what that curious blob



WEEKEND HIGHLIGHTS

Two days went by in a blur, but we asked the members of the team for their favourite memories.

Ade Deacon: "Getting to meet with the current residents of the garage which had been in their family since before the war. Seeing their reaction to my building of their home and hearing all the stories about it was VERY special indeed."

Al Sheward: "In the end it was every single aspect of it. From being there and being there as a wargamer, the warmth of the Museum staff, the team that Richard and Nick had put together who were awesome, the friendliness and interaction with the general public, the wargamers who travelled to see it, and in the end the sheer spectacle of it all. Pure gold."

Jur de Jong: "Playing the 20 year old guy who came along with his

father was fun. Dad wasn't a wargamer and thought it was all pretty strange. But he won the game against his son (with a little help from the dice) and that seemed to please him no end. They stayed around for a few more hours and the son ended up buying the rules."

Dick Bax: "Definitely some of the visitors' reactions. A gentleman from Los Angeles came to the museum straight from the airport because he could not check into his hotel until six. He ended up playing at least two games on different tables. And the fantastic time my wife, Mirjam, had meeting people and playing the game and being badly beaten by Christy."

Nick Skinner: "I wasn't quite ready for the feeling I had when the tables were set up. If ever there was a 'wow' moment, this was it."



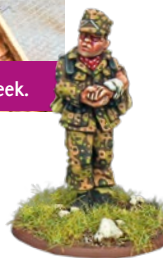
The northern table was largely 3D-printed: houses, fences, and even the road and sidewalk.



1 Border airlanding troops dig in and defend the western perimeter.



The tragedy of Arnhem: liberation turned to destruction in a week.



on an aerial photo might be, so we could include it on the table.

SHOWTIME!

Setup started late in the afternoon on the Friday. Until that point, nobody had seen everything put together. Curious glances from the staff suggested we might be on to something, and our pre-event battlefield tour had charged everyone with some extra inspiration.

We weren't prepared for a group of upper-middle-class retirees who dropped

into the salon half an hour before the Museum was due to open. In fact, even the staff was surprised by their early arrival. That this group of people was admiring our handiwork and playing games on Rich's table within five minutes, and their guide could only hustle them out with some effort twenty minutes later, was probably a good sign.

The real test, for us, was when the local experts arrived, some of whom we'd consulted during the construction process. A planned five-minute visit turned into two hours. Another good sign!

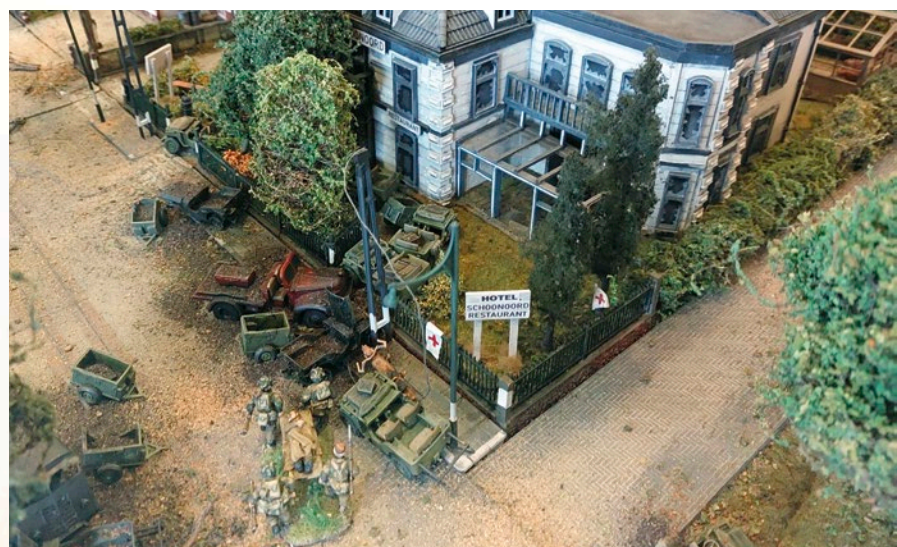
LESSONS LEARNED?

We feel the event proved that wargames can add an extra dimension to the museum experience. While the Museum offers historical photos, uniforms, militaria, and – as in all modern museums – slick audiovisual presentations, a well-crafted wargaming table adds colour and dimension to the photos and artefacts. And for those who got a chance to play in the games, it hopefully provided a glimpse into the particular issues of fighting during those days in September of 1944. **WS&S**



WHAT'S NEXT

The 'day after', saw everyone involved both exhausted and enthused for more. Whether there will be a repeat at the Museum has yet to be decided. The 'northern table' is on tour at various UK shows, and all four – including the Hartenstein display – are planned to be at Partizan in 2023. The TooFatLardies have used their travel time to and from Arnhem, as well as the time there, to resolve some of the final headaches, and work on the supplement is now speeding ahead!



Hotel Schoonoord burnt down after the battle, so our version had to be reconstructed from photos.

