

# From the bridge too far to the Prairie sky

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

by John Ralston Saul © Winnipeg Free Press

Col. 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 battalion 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 to give 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 those 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 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 by the most senior officers who decided to ignore the intelligence about the presence of armoured forces.

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 Bouthillier 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 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 1964 became Colonel SAS; that is, the Director of Special Forces, which he modernized.

In 1957 in the midst of all this he went off with his wife Anne for a two-year exchange with the Canadian Airborne School in Rivers Camp, 30 km from Brandon. In the manner of a Russian novel by Lemontov or Tolstoy, there it was — out on the steppes, the great rolling prairies in all their grandeur, an encampment of a few thousand men and their families, flying everything from fighters to transports and jumping out of the sky.

Unlike the steppes, there were no defensive walls! Except the walls of nature. Enormous wheat fields, dense low forests, bald rolling prairie, all of it constantly changing between amazing colours, extreme temperatures and

*Below: Paratroopers and gliders landing in Arnhem, Netherlands*





*Above: John Waddy (left) and Bill Saul, Fort Benning 1957*

School. The two men quickly became close friends. My father hadn't become a paratrooper until transferring in the post-war years to the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, freshly converted into a parachute regiment.

During the war he had been a Winnipeg Rifle, first fighting on loan to the British in North Africa, then back with his regiment landing on the first wave at Juno Beach on D-Day, then briefly in the Netherlands before he was wounded.

In any case, they spent a lot of time joking together, leading the jumps. I've been told that sometimes in the middle of conversations they had thrown themselves out of the rear of the crazy looking C-119 Flying Boxcar transports a little too soon, ending up in deep snow somewhere off in the distance. I was just over 10, but I remember Maj. Waddy well — relaxed, smiling, self-confident, with the aura of someone who had experienced almost everything war could deliver and had survived. So far.

It is hard to explain life at Rivers. Not something most people would know about. During recess we would pile out to see if there was a jump going on, and whether we could identify our fathers in the sky. When a snowstorm removed all visibility and the winds and temperatures were dangerous, big white Bombardier military carriers would appear out of the obscurity to take us to school. No

*Above: Col Waddy is carried to his grave in Pitminster, England by soldiers of the 4th Battalion, The Parachute Regiment*



extreme winds.

As it happened, when John Waddy arrived in Rivers, a Winnipegger, my father Lt.-Col. Bill Saul, was commanding the Airborne

cancelled school days. The soldiers and the children loved the atmosphere of adventure. The wives were stranded and not particularly happy.

John Waddy seemed to feel completely at home in the relaxed Canadian atmosphere, the mysterious rolling prairies, the extremes of nature. He and his wife Ann seized every free moment to go off camping somewhere, the more isolated the better.

Until just a few years ago, older men would come up to me to say, "Your father gave me my wings" and "Do you remember that crazy Englishman?" Immediately that whole out-of-the-ordinary life would come flooding back. John Waddy had been deeply affected by it. In later years he would constantly say those were the best years of his military career.

The night before he died, he was talking about Rivers and Canada and his friendship with my father. That friendship was kept up by my brother Alastair, who had a dream of serving in The Parachute Regiment. He moved to England and fulfilled it as a young officer for several years.

As for Arnhem, the frustration of 1944 was erased in 1945 — on April 13-14 with Operation Anger. Again there is the Canadian link. The city and the area were taken and freed by First Canadian Corps, commanded by Gen. Charles Foulkes. First Canadian Corps was then made up of Canadian and British soldiers. Foulkes gave the Brits the honour of leading the attack on Arnhem. History demanded this.

More precisely, it was quite rightly the mythological property of their Airborne forces. This second battle of Arnhem was not the most dramatic, but nor was it easy. Two days of heavy fighting. Not a battle to be forgotten. And it was the final act of Canada's Arnhem role — the sacrifice of the CANLOAN officers, the miraculous Canadian Engineers rescue, the final victory at Arnhem by First Canadian Corps.

When John Waddy died, the desire of the Regiment for a grand celebration of his life was limited by the COVID-19 pandemic. All the same, as many paratroopers as could be there stood outside around the church.

He was carried to his grave and lowered into it by men of the 4th Battalion, The Parachute Regiment, successors of the men with whom he had leapt into the Battle of Arnhem.

**John Ralston Saul, novelist and essayist, has a growing impact on political and economic thought in many countries, most recently with his book *The Collapse of Globalism*. *Voltaire's Bastards* includes a long reflection on irregular warfare, and is often taught at staff colleges. As International President of PEN, his approach to activism included negotiating with dictators and speaking out for endangered languages. As a leading voice on immigration and refugees, he is the co-Chair of the Institute for Canadian Citizenship.**