07 St. Elisabeths Gasthuis

Previous history

The hospitals in Arnhem in 1944
Of the three Arnhem hospitals – the Diaconessenhuis, the Gemeenteziekenhuis and St. Elisabeths Gasthuis – the last-mentioned was the only one to be caught up in the front line in the Battle of Arnhem. The building dates from 1893 and was the only Roman Catholic hospital in the city. The Diaconessenhuis catered for the Protestant patients and is the oldest Arnhem hospital, while the Gemeenteziekenhuis treated all patients irrespective of religious belief. This division was in accordance with the Verzuiling in Nederland (Denominationalism in the Netherlands), which was only done away with in the nineteen-sixties. In February 1995 the Arnhem hospitals were amalgamated to become the Rijnstate Ziekenhuis in Wagnerlaan. St. Elisabeths Gasthuis was then redeveloped into an apartment complex. The sisters’ accommodation and a number of post war extensions were demolished.

Foundation
St. Elisabeths Gasthuis was established in 1878 by Deacon J.H. van Basten Batenburg, who was the priest at the small St. Eusebiuskerk at Nieuwe Plein in Arnhem. The name of the hospital was taken from the German Saint Elisabeth van Thüringen (1207-1231) who, in 1227, was robbed of all her possessions by the nobility of Thüringen after her husband Earl Lodewijk IV died during the Fifth Crusade. With what remained of her money Elisabeth had a hospital built in Marburg where she spent the rest of her life caring for the poor and the sick. She was declared a saint in 1235, just four years after her death.

German Franciscan nuns from Münster were the Arnhem hospital’s initial personnel, later augmented by qualified medical staff and, from 1921, by a medical director. The nuns continued working in the hospital, even during the German occupation. From 1934 onwards they lived in a new convent complex behind the hospital.

Location
In 1893 St. Elisabeths Gasthuis was established in a building in Utrechtseweg, east of the fork in the road at ‘Bovenover/Onderlangs’. During the Battle of Arnhem the front line moved back and forth several times between this fork and the Municipal Museum. The museum is on the opposite side of the road, approximately 200 metres east of the hospital. The hospital changed ‘ownership’ twice in the course of the fighting.

Map showing the situation around St. Elisabeths Gasthuis in 1944 (Copyright F. van Lunteren)
The British move in on Sunday evening 17 September 1944, the British 16th Parachute Field Ambulance commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Eric Townsend arrived at the hospital, intending to use it as an emergency hospital. St. Elisabeths Gasthuis became ‘British’ for the first time. Townsend and one of his surgeons, Captain A.W. Lipmann-Kessel, were taken to the medical staff room where they were introduced to the Dutch surgeons and the medical director, Doctor J.L. Siemens. Lipmann-Kessel was South African and greeted them in Afrikaans because he thought it was like Dutch. However, the doctors didn’t understand him and replied, ‘But you are Tommies! Use your own language. We don’t like hearing German, even from a Tommy!’ In spite of this awkward first meeting the Dutch and British doctors worked together closely over the coming weeks. The British were also given the use of two operating theatres where the wounded, British and German, were treated. Later on the wounded were treated in the ground floor corridors as well. Dutch patients were taken to the first floor.

In order to identify the building clearly to friend and foe alike, medical orderly John Battley hung a huge Red Cross flag above the main entrance of the hospital. But German soldiers of 9. SS-Panzer-Division ‘Hohenstaufen’ did not adhere to the Geneva Convention, and in the morning of 18 September virtually the entire 16th Parachute Field Ambulance was taken prisoner, the exception being two operating teams. A number of German doctors were assigned to various locations throughout the hospital. This was in total contravention of the laws of war: it is forbidden to take medical personnel prisoner.

British wounded
The provincial commissioner of the Red Cross in Gelderland, Squire Dr. J.N. van der Does, remembered the event quite differently. On 17 September 1944 he was at the Central Post of the Red Cross in Roermondsplein (see also point13). That evening four British wounded were brought in, one with a bullet wound. At that time there was no telephone contact possible with St. Elisabeths Gasthuis, and so, on the off chance, his column took the wounded to the hospital under the protection of the Red Cross flag:

“...In St. Elisabeths Gasthuis it appeared that other British had already arrived and the wounded were handed over to the excellently-equipped British medical staff. The rest of the night was spent in St. Elisabeths Gasthuis. (.....) It was impossible to leave the hospital throughout the entire Monday. Telephone contact was only possible with the Central Post, the Diaconessenhuis and private houses. A few car journeys in ambulances were still made during quieter moments in the morning until one of the cars was hit by bullets. (.....)

German artillery was firing at the British from the Betuwe and a few shells hit the main building of St. Elisabeths Gasthuis. Even though this building had been partially cleared as a precaution, there were some victims. (.....)

The situation was such that the Arnhem (eastern) side of St. Elisabeths Gasthuis was German and the Oosterbeek (western) side British. In between was the Gasthuis, which ran from the railway yard to the slope between Onderlangs and Bovenover. In St. Elisabeths Gasthuis itself the British were performing operations and the German doctors were also treating patients. The relationship between the two groups of doctors was correct.

An incident occurred when a message came in to the effect that German Sanitäters outside the Gasthuis had been hit by hand grenades, possibly thrown from the building. The building was then in German hands.

Fortunately, the German head surgeon in command, SS-Obersturmführer Delner, Feldpost No. 2411a, kept a strictly professional attitude with the leader of the British contingent, Colonel Townsend, and they reached a ‘gentlemen’s agreement’ whereby the undersigned served as interpreter. The relationship between both physicians was absolutely proper.”[5]
SS guards outside the operating theatre
In his report to the executive board of the Red Cross, Van der Does did not mention that a large part of the British staff was taken away as POWs. After the war Captain Lipmann-Kessel, one of the two surgeons allowed to remain, wrote this about the German occupation of the hospital:

“At a certain moment two SS guards were stationed just outside the door to the operating theatre; I heard how they had been making life difficult for the medical orderlies in the preparation room. We were about to begin an upper leg amputation and the clatter of boots and the fact that the doors were struck at regular intervals with a rifle butt certainly didn’t make things any easier.

“What are we going to do, Captain?” Corporal Meakin, my operating assistant, looked at me across the table. Whenever the mortar shells seemed to be getting more dangerous we usually dragged the operating table out of the theatre into the preparation room where we continued, and where there was less chance of being hit by shrapnel. We made grateful use of a few dull thuds to make the move, and we positioned the table in such a way that the two SS guards had a good view of the wounded leg. (.....)

I worked on, brandishing the scalpel unnecessarily. “Saw please.” The toughest soldiers are usually the most squeamish. Even before I had sawed halfway through the bone anaesthetist Peter Allenby, who from his position at the patient’s head could keep a weather eye on the sentries, announced that one was already retching and the other was on his haunches, green-faced and holding a hand to his forehead. By the time I had finished stitching the wounds they had disappeared, and we never had any more trouble with guards in the operating theatre.” [6]

Back in British hands
Early on Tuesday morning 19 September St. Elisabeths Gasthuis returned to British hands during an attack by the 2nd Battalion The South Staffordshire Regiment and the 11th Parachute Battalion. A number of guards were taken prisoner. The COs of both battalions met in front of the hospital entrance to discuss the next moves, but were kindly requested by some doctors to hold their deliberations elsewhere. The liberation was short-lived because both battalions were overrun by a German counter-attack shortly after midday. The hospital was once more ‘German’.

Over the following days the number of British wounded grew enormously as officers and men who had fought at the bridge were also brought in. A few, including Major A.D. “Digby” Tatham-Warter and Captain Tony Frank of the 2nd Parachute Battalion, succeeded in escaping and were taken into the care of the Dutch resistance. Brigadiers Gerald W. Lathbury and John W. Hackett were also brought to St. Elisabeths Gasthuis. Hackett was given a lower rank and a different name in order to mislead the Germans. Had they discovered that they had a high-ranking officer in the hospital he would have been taken immediately to another hospital far behind the German lines, where the chance of escape would be minimal. Both would eventually get away: Lathbury under his own steam and Hackett with the assistance of Ir. Piet Kruijff and other resistance members.[7]

Evacuation to the Diaconessenhuis
On Tuesday afternoon Squire Van der Does decided to evacuate the majority of civilian patients to the Diaconessenhuis, further away from the battle zone:

“Fortunately St. Elisabeths Gasthuis is a very solid building with excellent cellars. (.....) The situation was nevertheless critical, and it was decided to take the bulk of the patients to the Diaconessenhuis. The transport column carried out this task to full satisfaction. Numerous journeys were made from the rear of the hospital using their own and borrowed material while, in quieter moments, many patients went on foot, people who beforehand you would hardly have believed capable of daring to undertake such a journey.

Medical staff and wounded British soldiers remained behind in Elisabeths Gasthuis, now POWs of course. The nuns refused to leave the convent and a few Dutch patients stayed on in the cellars.”[8]
The transport column of the Arnhem branch of the Dutch Red Cross in action at St. Elisabeths Gasthuis. (Photo: 19 September 1944; Bundesarchiv collection)

Evacuation of St. Elisabeths Gasthuis during the Battle of Arnhem, shown here near the Municipal Museum in Utrechtseweg on Tuesday 19 September 1944 (Bundesarchiv collection)

Sunday 24 September 1944

Evacuation of British wounded from Oosterbeek

In Oosterbeek units of the 1st Airborne Division fought on and by now the number of British wounded had reached worrying proportions. The buildings being used as emergency hospitals were overfull and medical supplies were almost exhausted. On 24 September Colonel Graeme Warrack, the divisional head of medical services, went to the Schoonoord Hotel, now in German hands, with the Oosterbeek Doctor Gerrit van Maanen and the Dutch officer Arnoldus Wolters. Warrack spoke there with the Austrian army doctor SS-Hauptsturmführer Dr. Egon Skalka of the SS-Sanitäts-Abteilung 9, 9. SS-Panzer-Division ‘Hohenstaufen’. Warrack asked him for a ceasefire so that the majority of British wounded could be taken to St. Elisabeths Gasthuis, which was also in a German-occupied area. Skalka agreed on condition that they got permission from the division commander. He took Warrack and Wolters by jeep to Heselbergh villa at Apeldoorneweg 228 in Arnhem. To hide the fact that he was a Dutch officer, Wolters took the cover name Johnson out of fear that he would be regarded as a Dutch citizen.

At the headquarters of the 9. SS-Panzer-Division ‘Hohenstaufen’, SS-Obersturmbannführer Walter Harzer was sympathetic to the plan, but he too wished to clear it with his superior. A ceasefire was finally agreed upon, to take place between the hours of 3 and 5 in the afternoon. However, the British wounded would then be considered POWs.

After being allowed to fill their uniform pockets with British medical supplies, previously seized by the Germans, Warrack and Wolters were taken back to Oosterbeek by jeep. On the way they made a quick stop at St. Elisabeths Gasthuis to alert the British operating teams to the forthcoming arrival of a few hundred wounded.[9] Most of the wounded from Oosterbeek were actually taken to the Koning Willem III Kazerne (Barracks) in Apeldoorn.[10]
After the withdrawal of the 1st Airborne Division across the Rhine on the night of 25/26 September 1944, the number of wounded being moved from St. Elisabeths Gasthuis to Apeldoorn gradually increased. Members of the Dutch resistance, which included 19 year-old Bert Kuik and his one-year-younger brother Hans, helped a number of lightly-wounded soldiers and medical orderlies to escape. Some of these escapees took part in Operation Pegasus I during the night of 22/23 October. They were picked up near Renkum by an especially sent-out allied patrol from the liberated area, and brought back over the river Rhine. The Kuik brothers were far less fortunate: they were arrested by the Sicherheitsdienst (SD), and on 6 November 1944 they were murdered on the golf course at Apeldoornseweg in Arnhem.

On 13 October the two British operating teams from the 16th Parachute Field Ambulance were moved from St. Elisabeths Gasthuis to the Koning Willem III Kazerne in Apeldoorn. From there they were eventually transported to POW camps in Germany, as were the other wounded and medical personnel.[11]

The majority of the St. Elisabeths Gasthuis original staff stayed on in the city under the direction of Dr. L.D. van Hengel. Van der Does wrote the following about this group:

“After further contact it seemed that people wished to continue working at St. Elisabeths Gasthuis, and received provisional permission to do so by the German authorities. From my side, I empowered Dr. L.D. van Hengel to act as Red Cross representative for this hospital. The staff, led by Dr Van Hengel, fulfilled their task in an exemplary fashion and, partly in the cellars and partly in the out-buildings, went about their work even when the British wounded had been taken away by the Germans. Only when the Germans ordered the evacuation of St. Elisabeths Gasthuis on 10 November did Dr Van Hengel leave. He was the last man to do so.”[12]

Diaconessenhuis
During the evacuation of Arnhem the Diaconessenhuis was virtually deserted. A small nucleus of medical personnel stayed behind to care for the 350 house-bound sick who had been brought to the personnel’s attention. In the main these people were too ill to come to the hospital. However, it turned out that most of them had already been evacuated. The transport column stayed for a few days at the hospital but left the city on 26 September and headed for Otterlo. The presence of German artillery positions near the building and the chance of allied bombardment were considered too risky.[13]

Gemeenteziekenhuis
The Gemeenteziekenhuis was also evacuated, but this was more of a military affair. In 1942 it was partly, and from April 1944 entirely, commandeered by the Germans as Kriegslazarett 1/686. After the war the graves of some 120 Germans were found in the temporary cemetery begun there in September 1944. Twenty British dead were buried elsewhere on the site.[14]
Notes


[7] Lathbury crossed the Rhine on the night of 22/23 October 1944. He had been wounded on 18 September 1944 in Alexanderstraat (see point 8). Hackett escaped in February 1945 following a long period of convalescence. He travelled via Ede, Amerongen, Sliedrecht and the Biesbosch to the Canadian lines at Lage Zwaluwe.


