

## 24 Duivelshuis

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### Germans in Koningstraat on Sunday 17 september 1944

As was the case with the nearby City Hall and St. Eusebiuskerk, the Duivelshuis (Devil's House) suffered in the hostilities of September 1944. From his house at Koningstraat 31 the 67 year-old architect Hendrik Tiemens had a fine view of the church and the Duivelshuis. He wrote about the evening of 17 September in his diary:

In the living room we are now going to make up temporary beds for everyone (...) and around 9 pm we dress for bed to try to get some sleep (or at least to rest a bit). The police have announced 'No one is allowed on the street on Monday'. There is not much question of sleep. At 1 o'clock we hear from Ad at the door that there are British in the city, through Oeverstraat and Broerenstraat, and that they have taken the bridge. It is still fairly quiet, then street fighting, shooting. Markt, Eusebiusplein and various streets. The Willemskazerne (barracks) burns all night long, there are almost continuous explosions. There are fires in other places as well. A big fire in the direction of Eusebiusbinnensingel, also towards Beekstraat.

There is a lot of shooting in Koningstraat. German soldiers in the doorways and in the alley to Mensens, next to our garden. They complained that the promised reinforcements have not turned up. Later on an artillery piece opens fire at the Markt from Koningstraat. Gouvernement building. British soldiers have also been in Menthenstraat."[1]

### Panzer Grenadier Horst Weber's baptism of fire



It was in the Battle of Arnhem that 18 year-old Horst Weber experienced his first action as a soldier with the 21. SS-Panzer Grenadier Regiment. This photo dates from 1943 when, as a 17 year-old, he was trained as an SS soldier in Brünn (Photo via Horst Weber. Freedom Trail Arnhem collection, Gelders Archive)

The German soldiers seen by Tiemens possibly belonged to 1. Kompanie of 1. Bataillon, 21. SS-Panzer Grenadier Regiment. This regiment was part of 10. SS-Panzer-Division "Fruntsberg", an experienced panzer unit which had suffered heavy losses in France, and which from its original 15,000 men had just 3,500 left. Most of the division's officers were dead, wounded or POW. The units had been broken up into loose Kampfgruppen (battle groups) which made their disorganised withdrawal to the Netherlands. There, new recruits, weapons and material would be brought from Germany for rebuilding the division.

A few days before the Battle of Arnhem soldiers from 1. Kompanie of the 1. Bataillon, 21. SS-Panzer Grenadier Regiment were housed in Diepenveen. About 80 men of the company remained, some of whom were in the village itself with the rest elsewhere in its surroundings. One of them was 18 year-old Horst Weber. Up until then he had never been in battle. In July he and others from the same camp had indeed been sent from the German army barracks at Brünn to France. After the destruction of the Frundsberg division there, he and the other men, led by Karl Stroppe, returned by rail to the Netherlands in two railway wagons. There were numerous stops on the way because of continuous allied aircraft attacks. As far as weapons were concerned, Weber and his youthful comrades had none.

Horst Weber remembers Sunday 17 September:

"A few dozen men of the 1st Battalion were stationed in Diepenveen and were allotted accommodation there. I stayed at the inn next to the church. On Sunday morning 17 September 1944 my group numbered 30 to 35 people. We came from all over; some were radio-telegraphists, some were riflemen. The group was scheduled to be an addition to the newly-to-be-formed 1st Battalion.

At the beginning of Sunday afternoon all sorts of vehicles drove up and we learned of the airborne landings: "The British have landed and want to capture the bridges". None of us knew whether or not he would be a good soldier. Most of us had only had three months training at Brünn. After my initial three-months training I spent three more three-month periods as an instructor, so had been at Brünn for a year." [2]

The men were driven to Arnhem in lorries and cars commandeered from the local population. Some, like Rudi Trapp, cycled. Horst Weber and about thirty others went in a large truck. The men were allotted vehicles haphazardly and didn't know one another, or at most only from the three days in Diepenveen. There were no officers among them.

The lorries stopped at Velperweg in Arnhem and the men were told to de-bus. Someone standing there told them to make their way into Arnhem on foot. At that point it was not exactly clear where the British were and it was considered too dangerous to continue by lorry. Weber knew a few of the men in his group, among them panzergrenadier Pochert who carried a Funkgerät (radio) on his back. They marched on, still unarmed, under the Velperpoort towards the centre of Arnhem. They advanced using both sides of Steenstraat with a five metre gap between each man. Weber had but one thought: "Wie kriegen wir die erste Feindberührung hin? Sofort agieren oder aus der Deckung reagieren?" (How do we cope with our first enemy contact? Do we act or do we react from cover?)

Suddenly a shot rang out from the left and Pochert fell dead in the street. He had been shot through the heart. There was no sign of a gunman anywhere. It was then about five in the afternoon. We now know that there were no British parachutists in the city at that time, so the shot was probably fired by a member of the resistance.

Pochert's body was placed in a wheelbarrow and taken along with the group, which continued past the Wehrmachtheim (see point 30 - Musis Sacrum) to Velperplein. They had to halt in front of the V&D chain store. There Weber was appointed commander of the 30 to 35 man group, and recalls the moment:

"An officer asked our group who was in charge and a few of the men called out that I was. The officer asked me if that was correct and when I agreed he said to me: 'You take command. There is a pile of weapons at the other side of the square. Just look something out.' There was also contact between the various groups of men and further re-allocations were made." [3]

As soon as everyone had grabbed a weapon and some ammunition Weber was asked if he was interested in a 7.5 cm anti-tank gun (PAK) and a two-man gun crew. There was no drive unit for the gun which was usually towed behind a vehicle. Weber was very happy to accept the offer and had the men push the gun. He was told he had to make for the Grote Kerk (St. Eusebiuskerk). The route of advance was given: Roggestraat and at the second crossroads left into Koningstraat. There was no map available.

According to Weber the soldiers were not too pleased about being sent into battle in this makeshift way. It was not only the poor weaponry but the fact that for the most part the men were strangers, and were therefore not interacting. Despite this, it is the battle cry that Weber remembers: "Egal, viel Feinde, viel Ehre." (Whatever, many enemies, lots of glory) Towards late afternoon they reached Koningstraat. Dutch people were walking in the streets but dashed away as soon as they saw the group of SS soldiers approaching. Weber's group was the first to arrive there.

They had hardly entered Koningstraat when the next German soldier was killed. Weber and his men suspected that the shot was fired from the Eusebiuskerk steeple by a sniper. The artillery piece was manoeuvred into position and a shot was fired at the steeple. For more details on this, see point 25 - Eusebiuskerk.

At about 8 pm the group arrived at the Kippenmarkt. They halted there and took a look at the situation. A noise was heard on the south side of the Markt, seeming like the start of a fire. So it was not safe there. Weber saw the Duivelshuis as a good place for the Gefechtsstand (command post) [4] of his group. The men were positioned in the vicinity of the Duivelshuis. Weber gave the men instructions.

## Weber's reconnaissance

Late in the evening when it was dark Weber went on reconnaissance. He wanted to take a look at the British target, the Rhine Bridge. In order to reduce the risk of running into the British to a minimum he decided not to go directly to the Rhine via the Markt. He took a roundabout route, going first a little to the west and then walked "mutig aber vorsicht" (brave but careful) via Rodenburgstraat to the Rhine. About 50 metres from the river he got a German soldier to follow him to provide cover. It was quiet everywhere and Weber reached the Rhine unhindered. It was so quiet that he could walk up as far as the quay wall and look at the Rhine undisturbed. Weber now knew how his battle zone was situated relative to the bridge. He returned to the Duivelshuis, again via Rodenburgstraat.

Weber's group would take no further action that night.

## Monday 18 September 1944



In the morning Weber's first assignment was to clear the houses in Koningstraat of any possible British infiltration. After all, you couldn't allow any opposition to be behind you. He entered Koningstraat with a few other Germans, and went into the houses with a couple of men to check for British. A few other Germans remained in the street to give cover. In a Kino (cinema) Weber discovered a group of British lying between the bench seats. Weber and his men captured the British without resistance. They were taken along by Weber's group in its further clearance of Koningstraat. While Weber took responsibility for Koningstraat, another German unit was screening Beekstraat. According to Weber Koningstraat continued to be used over the following days as a Nachschub (reinforcement depot?) "Immer wieder trafen kleine gruppen mannschaften ein die fragten wo sie hin mussten". Again and again small groups arrived, and they would ask where to go.

At around 10 am Weber and his British prisoners - 12 to 18 of them - were between the Duivelshuis and Eusebiuskerk. He was not sure what to do with the prisoners. At that point the Germans had made no arrangements with respect to British soldiers captured at Arnhem. Weber says that at the beginning of the fighting in Arnhem there was a great deal of improvisation going on. All at once an ear-splitting German artillery bombardment opened up from nearby. It was probably not aimed at them but they couldn't remain standing there. Weber put the prisoners in some alcoves in the church and went off to see if the Duivelshuis had a suitable place for them. It seemed to him that the cellar in the Duivelshuis fitted the bill. The British were taken there at about 14.00 hours and would remain there for the coming two days. Later on more prisoners would be housed here and wounded British would also be cared for here. British Army doctor James Logan was involved in that care.

On Monday evening 18 September Hendrik Tiemens wrote in his diary:

"There is regular gunfire, rifle- and artillery fire. We stay indoors all day, in the kitchen and the downstairs room. The least dangerous parts of the house. The house protrudes further into the southern part of Koningstraat than the other houses which makes the upper rooms dangerous, also because the British are shooting from the side of the Markt.

Before noon shots were fired at the tower. Ad watched as a section of the upper balustrade was shot away and called me. I saw a second shell hit the tower: it ricocheted off the east clock face (between numbers IV and V). Shots are fired from an easterly direction, probably by the Germans who perhaps think that the British are using the tower as a lookout post. Constant heavy fire, sometimes air battles (shooting of aircraft) above us." [5]

## The fighting at the Duivelshuis and the Markt

Horst Weber after the Battle of Arnhem at an officers' school in Prague, December 1944. (Photo via Horst Weber. Freedom Trail Arnhem Collection, Gelders Archive)



The area in which Weber and his group operated was quite small, covering the Grote Markt, Hofstraat, Koningstraat, Walburgstraat and the small path to the jail.

Weber positioned a heavy machinegun in the porch built at the front of the Duivelshuis which was able to cover Walburgstraat and the Grote Markt. At the same time it gave the Germans good cover.

Weber wanted to get into the Huis van Bewaring (HvB gaol), suspecting that the British were there. They attempted this by trying to breach the prison wall using the previously-mentioned PAK. Karl Stroppe took the gun along the small path running from Walburgstraat to the extension behind the palace of justice. Both sides of the path were bordered by high walls. The path came out at the extension to the palace of justice. There was an iron door through which suspects could be taken to and from the court. At the other side was the prison wall. The gun was fixed down and shots were fired at the wall. But nothing happened; the distance was too short for blowing a hole in the wall of the HvB.

Hofstraat was another place where Weber and his men saw action. Because of the constant British sniper activity, entering Hofstraat was to take your life in your hands; "Wer nicht informiert war, war tot" (Anyone who had not been warned, was dead). Weber believed that the British lay behind solid walls from which they had loosened and removed a few bricks. After firing a shot the bricks were slid back into place.

During the Battle of Arnhem, German soldiers regularly fell victim to British snipers who were well concealed. Panzergrenadier Horst Weber was at his group's guard post at the corner of Hofstraat and the Markt when a comrade was killed by a sniper:

"As I was standing there, a German soldier came out of a private house, an older man, perhaps with children. He was a fine chap - an Oberfeldwebel. He didn't have a command function, but just like us was attached to the group in Arnhem. He began to cross the street and was about three-quarters of the way across when he was shot in the neck. He fell dead in my arms. I had said to him: "Warten!" (Wait!) But no, he wanted to cross over... The British killed many of our men in this way." [6]

According to Weber the number of German wounded was small. Many of the Germans were killed by snipers. Very good marksmen in Weber's view.

Weber recalls that the houses on the west side of the Markt were burning: "Die brannten und stürzten zusammen, die Südlichen zuerst" (They were burning and collapsed, the southern ones first).

## **Burgomaster Chris Matser's stained-glass window**

Since 1969, every departing Arnhem burgomaster has made a gift of a stained-glass window to the city of Arnhem. Chris Matser began this tradition with his window which depicts the rebuilt St. Eusebiuskerk in the centre, with left the destroyed city, and right the new city. Matser was absorbed by the Greek myth of the Phoenix, which rose from its ashes. That is how he saw the rebuilding of 'his' city. The Latin text LABOR OMNIA VINCIT (Work conquers all) on the window points to this.

[1] Hendrik J. Tiemens' diary, 18 September 1944. Gelders Archive, Documentation collection Second World War, inventory number 168.

[2] Interview by Frank van Lunteren and Willem Brouwer with Horst Weber, Wednesday 25 July 2007.

[3] Telephone conversation between Willem Brouwer and Horst Weber, 4 June 2007.

[4] The men were positioned around this location. They knew this was the place where they could find the group commander and where they could get orders.

[5] Hendrik J. Tiemens' diary, 18 September 1944. Gelders Archive, Documentation collection Second World War, inventory number 168.

[6] Interview by Frank van Lunteren and Willem Brouwer with Horst Weber, Wednesday 25 July 2007.