

22 Walburgisplein

During the Battle of Arnhem virtually all the buildings in Walburgisplein were destroyed by fire. The fourteenth-century catholic St. Walburgiskerk was also badly damaged at that time. [1]

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The church tower

On 19 September 1944 the wing of a German Messerschmitt Me109 fighter aircraft accidentally struck one of the church towers. Late that afternoon the pilot of the aircraft, Unteroffizier Schmidt, had taken off with his comrades of the first 'Gruppe', Jagdgeschwader 76 (I./JG 76), from Störmede airfield in Germany. His unit's orders were to bomb the British parachutists at the Rhine Bridge in Arnhem.

Schmidt's Me 109 was carrying a bomb slung underneath the fuselage, which was to be dropped on the allied positions. He was then supposed to strafe (machine gun) the parachutists from the air. [2] The British Captain Eric Mackay in the Van Limburg Stirumschool in Eusebiusbuitensingel saw how the machine, which he incorrectly identified as a Focke-Wulf 190, flew into one of the St. Walburgiskerk towers:

"Around 3.30 pm something miraculous happened. The Luftwaffe had been increasingly busy all day. A Focke-Wulf 190 flew over the bridge from the south and tried to bomb the school. The bomb came down in the street and failed to explode. In trying to avoid our machine guns the Focke-Wulf flew into a church tower, lost its left wing and crashed in the square (Lauwersgracht) about 400 metres away. Great joy all round." [3]

The south tower of St. Walburgiskerk was badly damaged in this incident. Unteroffizier Schmidt was killed when his aircraft came down. [4] Very few people in the neighbourhood had been in a position to see this crash. Most were in their cellars or looking for refuge elsewhere. One of the Walburgisplein inhabitants kept a diary:

"18 Sept. 1944 – I get up at half past six. I don't think I have slept. I am tired, but so what? At 7.30 am I suddenly hear heavy gunfire coming from the same direction as in the night. That means the Germans are still in the city. So we are not free. The shooting gets heavier. I go up to the attic and look around through my binoculars to see where the shooting is coming from. To my horror – as if they could see me – I see Germans, armed to the teeth, in positions behind the trees by the Dam and Buitensingel. Some have entered the Sint Walburg rectory garden. If my eyes do not deceive me I see a few figures in black (clergymen?) hastening to the house of the sexton. [5] Although I cannot hear it, I see a number of windows in the upstairs room of the rectory [at Walburgsplein 1] shatter and fall. So a gun-battle is raging there too. [6] (.....)

While wandering through our house that evening (.....) I suddenly see the glow of a fire against the sky, a seething sea of fire which grows by the minute. From here I can't see which house it is, but through the binoculars I see people running up the street, probably the victims of desperate fear. It is a dreadful fire; in my mind I hear the roar of the flames. It illuminates the entire Walburgskerk, which also allows me to see that, thank the Lord, the church is undamaged. According to me it must be close to Agnesschool. (I heard later that it was the house of Schilder the tailor, and that the inhabitants were able to save themselves by climbing out of the cellar. The elderly folk from the small Walburg Court were forced to flee as well). Will the fire reach the church? From here it looks like a question of metres, of minutes.

Tuesday 19 Sept. 1944 – Early in the morning searched the surroundings of Sint Walburg again. The church remains undamaged, but gaps have been blown in the townscape, worse than anywhere else. This confirms the suspicion that the battle for the bridge has indeed started. This, too, is still intact. Nevertheless, a terrible gun battle is being fought out in the vicinity, and in the middle of these furious fires I saw that the fire brigade had been called out to see if they can quench last night's fire. The Huns do not object, and it does seem that the efforts to extinguish the fire have succeeded; at least I don't see any more smoke now. (.....)

The British are at Rijnkade. Unbelievable but true. I have spoken to people who have seen them; have even had them in their house. They had British cigarettes with them as proof." [7]

A cease fire

The night of 20/21 September 1944 also saw Walburgisplein become one of the last scenes of action of the British 1st Parachute Brigade. During the night of 20 September the Allies had to withdraw from the burning houses in Eusebiusbinnensingel and Marktstraat. The number of wounded among them was considerable, and they had just (approximately) 250 deployable officers and men left. A similar number of wounded were lying in the cellars of the Rijkswaterstaat building in Eusebiusbinnensingel, in danger of being burned alive if they were not brought out. This building had also been used by the British as their brigade HQ and artillery observation post.

At about 8 pm it became clear that a cease fire would have to be arranged because the situation in the building had become intolerable. It would be far better for the wounded to be handed over to the Germans than have them die in the fire. Some weeks later, Tony Hibbert, Brigade Major of the 1st Parachute Brigade and now in command of the British parachutists in the Rijkswaterstaat building, wrote in his reconstructed diary:

"Seeing that brigade headquarters was in flames the order was given to move the wounded to the house held by Captain Bell. [This house was diagonally behind the Rijkswaterstaat building] However, the available room was totally inadequate because the only undamaged part of the house was the space under the stairs and a bit of the corridor. There were about 250 wounded and the available space was quickly filled.

At that point the Germans began to employ the tactics that appeared to have been so successful at brigade HQ [shooting at the building with phosphorous shells], and because the house was made mainly of wood it began to burn quickly and fiercely. I was away temporarily, reconnoitring some houses to the north [in Walburgisplein] which I found unoccupied. I left a section [of about 10 soldiers] in the houses and returned to brigade HQ, where I found considerable confusion. Both houses were ablaze: all corridors were blocked with wounded, and a large number of wounded men lay in the square between the houses. They were being shot at and were under mortar fire. Add to that the fact that we still had a number of frightened refugees and German prisoners with us.

I reported to Major Gough, who had spoken to Lieutenant Colonel Frost. [8] It was decided to arrange a 'cease fire' while our wounded were evacuated and handed over to the Germans. There was no alternative because we no longer occupied a place where they would be safe, and we could no longer offer them the medical treatment they needed.

At the same time it became necessary to re-locate brigade headquarters and the RASC buildings because the houses were burning fiercely and would soon become untenable. [9] I told Major Gough that it could be possible to move everyone to houses to the north. This was agreed and we succeeded in getting roughly 130 men away. Sadly enough the houses I had inspected ten minutes earlier, and which formed a long terrace, had also become untenable because the fire in another house at the end of the row had spread.

Meanwhile, on seeing this Captain Miller had carried out a quick reconnaissance. He found a large school, l' Ecole de Ste Marie, approximately 135 metres further away, and the men were housed here." [10]

Insula Dei

l' Ecole de Ste Marie, better known as the Roman Catholic Girl's School, was located at Walburgisplein 18. This primary school had been under the patronage of the Roman Catholic Liefdesgesticht (Charity Institution) 'Insula Dei'. [11] The institution also offered accommodation to more than four hundred inhabitants: elderly ladies and orphaned girls in the left wing, and elderly men and orphaned boys in the right wing. A number of refugees from destroyed houses in the vicinity of the bridge sought refuge here as well until Tuesday morning. But on 19 September the Germans ordered the inhabitants to leave the premises because they were in the line of fire. [12] Curate G.J. Jansen recalled later:

"Never has the name "Insula Dei" – 'God's Island' – seemed more apt than in these dark hours. By the time the clergy from Sint Walburg fled the church about 450 people had already found accommodation. And while the guns rumble and the churches and houses are pounded to rubble, they lie in the corridors and doorways, where, whatever the situation, the Sisters look after them with coffee and food, mattresses and blankets. It seems like an idyll in the midst of this pandemonium. (.....)

And then this suffering receives its crowning: they are driven from their last refuge, from this 'God's Island', where as drowning people they had been brought together like so much flotsam: "Sofort hinaus" [Out, quickly]. There is no argument. Just the blind following of an ice-cold order. Out. Leave the house, leave the institution, away from this anchor, this shelter, this island: to the street, amid falling masonry, over rubble and fragments.

It doesn't matter if you are old and tired. (.....) Out. It doesn't matter if you are an orphan or as scared as a rabbit, trembling and shivering all over your emaciated body. Who cares if you are God's priest and old? You are just one of the cattle stumbling through a city that burns, stinks and smokes. Through treacherous streets, past locked houses whose windows stare at you as if in fever.

And while this procession of the exhausted and ejected looks for the way to goodness knows where, a fire begins behind them, blazing like a torch: Van Leeuwen's house, opposite Insula Dei, has been set on fire. No-one doubts that the "Insula Dei" itself will soon be burning like a furnace, and then what have they left other than their own exhausted, worn out, worked-to-death body? So, stupid, dulled and with senses blunted, this procession arrives in Van Slichtenhorststraat and looks about it, stupefied. Has there ever been a war?" [13]

Nearby Beekstraat, including the fire station, also had to be cleared. [14] An improvised fire station was set up in Rozendaalsestraat, a long way from the city centre. [15] After the departure of the firemen the Germans were free to set fire to the Van Leeuwen family's house at will. By illuminating Walburgisplein they hoped to have a better overview of the battle scene, but the British parachutists still succeeded in reaching the above-mentioned school unseen.

The school turned out to be too small for the 130 survivors of the 1st Parachute Brigade, so Captain Miller took 30 men to St. Eusebiuskerk on the Markt. Walburgisplein and Walburgstraat were soon crawling with German soldiers. The British had a good view from the first floor windows of the church, and watched as German infantry dug in on both sides of the bridge ramp. German machineguns and anti-tank guns were also deployed. But the distance was too great for engaging the Germans and the British could only look on helplessly.[16] Major Hibbert continues his account:

"Just after we arrived a large number of our walking-wounded were taken away past the front of our building. And shortly after that the Germans drove off in four of our jeeps and a carrier, to be followed by a group of our unwounded airborne soldiers who were being led away northwards. From this, and after a reconnaissance had been carried out, we concluded that the 2nd Battalion had been overrun or forced to withdraw to another area. No trace of them could be found. [17]

It was now midnight and a decision had to be made about further action. The men had already been grouped into two platoons, each consisting of five sections with an officer heading up each section. I asked each section commander for a report, and they told me that the ammunition situation was worrying. In general there was just one magazine left per Bren and Sten. The men were also close to exhaustion.

We had been given to understand that XXX Corps could be expected the following morning, but it was already night and there was no sound of artillery fire or gunfire to be heard. The Germans in front of us seemed to be going about their work in an unworried and unhurried manner, which would not have been the case if XXX Corps was on the way. Because there was no sound or sign of XXX Corps on the south bank, I judged that they would not be crossing to the north bank until next day.

The school we were holding was not ideal for defence and could have no effect on the bridge. It was impossible to reoccupy the old brigade headquarters and RASC buildings within the next twelve hours until they had cooled down a little. The shortage of ammunition and lack of anti-tank shells, and taking into account the number of German tanks and guns in the vicinity, led me to the conclusion that we would be able to hold out for about five or six hours tomorrow morning, but not much longer, and if we didn't control the bridge we could not really influence the battle.

Therefore, I decided we were needed more by the main force of the division, and seeing that we had so many officers the best way of reaching the main force would be to permeate through the streets in sections, each section led by an officer. I called the section commanders together and gave the order that they were to take their sections and break out as far as possible westwards towards Oosterbeek during the hours of darkness. Naturally there was still the hope that XXX Corps would reach them, which would ease the second part of the journey and discourage the Germans from sending anyone in pursuit of them on Thursday.

Lieutenant Harvey Todd's section would leave first and was given the task of informing Captain Miller in the cathedral [St. Eusebiuskerk] of our plans and telling him to do the same. I went to the cathedral later but could find no sign of Captain Miller. I concluded that he had left. The message had not reached him however, and he and his men remained hidden in the cathedral.

On leaving, two of the first three sections were shot at from close range. The whole area was under incessant mortar fire which caused no [personal] damage. Finally the entire area [Walburgisplein] became clogged with sections intermingled with one another. This came about because various sections were coming back, having encountered Germans [in Walburgstraat] and been unable to break through. I therefore decided to hold back the last three sections and wait till everyone had regrouped and gone.

I then gave the order for the last three sections to leave and I took command of the last group. By now it was almost light, so I decided to find somewhere to hide as quickly as possible. I found the burnt-out ruins of a building and I ordered the men to spread out and hide themselves under the rubble until nightfall. [18]

It soon became evident that this was impossible because the ruins and ashes were far too hot. I then moved the men to the garden of the adjacent house where we met Major Munford and his section. While I was reconnoitring the garden I was nearly shot by Major Munford, who mistook me for a German. I added my group to his, placed two men in a work-shed and barricaded the rest in a bedroom. Dennis Munford crawled under a wooden chest, while Anthony Cotterell and I hid in a coal-house." [19]

Majors Hibbert and Munford and their group were captured in the morning of 21 September and taken away to St. Eusebiuskerk. The remnants of the 2nd Parachute Battalion were also taken prisoner at the Provinciehuis building and the Rijksarchief. And this brought the battle for the Rhine Bridge in Arnhem to a close.



Restoration

Among other things, the calendar page for the months of January and February 1948 included a photo of the front of St. Walburgiskerk taken by Herman Truin after the liberation in 1945. (Gelders Archive, documentation collection Second World War, inventory number 238)

When the city council and religious leaders returned to Arnhem in the spring of 1945 the extent of the damage in Walburgisplein became clear. The damage to the "Insula Dei" institution looked irreparable. The entire inventory of St. Walburgiskerk, with the exception of the Sacred Hosts and a chalice, was destroyed. Only the walls were spared, but not much was left of the towers. A huge hole gaped in the south tower which had been hit by the Messerschmitt of Unteroffizier Schmidt. An upper side wall of the tower had collapsed. The cockerel that had stood atop the tower steeple had been found on Tuesday 24 October 1944 by Peter C. Heiser. Peter was a member of the Technische Nooddienst (Technical Emergency Service) which had been permitted to remain in the city. [20] Later, the cockerel would once again 'crow' from the new tower spire.

The Comité Opbouw St. Walburgiskerk (Committee for the Rebuilding of St. Walburgiskerk) was set up to make the repair of the church financially possible. With the sale of a calendar with photos showing the church surroundings before and after the battle, and the organizing of a rebus competition, money, among other things, was collected. These actions could not begin until the autumn of 1948, because the Ministry for Reconstruction only issued the permit for the restoration of the church building in the summer of that year.

During the reconstruction not everything was brought back precisely to its 1944 state. The neo-gothic choir was lower compared to its pre-Battle of Arnhem situation, when it was as high as the rest of the church. [21] On Wednesday 28 November 1951 St. Walburgiskerk was once more consecrated by Arch-Bishop B.J. Alferink from the Utrecht diocese in the presence of burgomaster Chris Matser, aldermen Tak and Verberk, the Commissaris der Koningin (Queen's Commissioner) C.G.C. Quarles van Ufford and various priests and curates. Deacon Stockman was missing; he died during the evacuation of Arnhem in September 1944. [22] The Insula Dei institution was found new accommodation elsewhere in the city. The present-day police station in Beekstraat was built on this site. [23]

An image in relief by designer Eduard L.W.R. baron Speyart van Woerden was added to the façade of Walburgisplein 10. Above and below the relief, which depicts Walburgisplein, is a poem by Bernard Verhoeven:

HET BLOED VERKREEG EEN NIEUWE VAART
 MAAR 'T OUDE STADSHART BLEEF BEWAARD
 WAAR SINT WALBURG WIJDT DE TIJD
 TOT VOORPORTAAL DER EEUWIGHEID

THE BLOOD WAS GIVEN A FRESH IMPULSE
 BUT THE OLD HEART OF THE CITY REMAINED INTACT
 WHERE SAINT WALBURG BLESSES THE TIME
 TO THE GATEWAY OF ETERNITY

Baron Speyart van Woerden was very familiar with Walburgisplein because a niece of his lived there. With this relief he wanted to show what the square looked like before the war. The concrete for the relief was supplied by a concrete company in De Steeg, where he made the relief. Bernard Verhoeven's text was also added by Speyart van Woerden. [24]

The façade relief was unveiled on 30 December 1954 in the presence of burgomaster Matser, and was placed on the initiative of the Kohlmanstichting (Kohlman Foundation) in memory of the destruction caused during the Battle of Arnhem. Originally the relief was positioned elsewhere in Walburgisplein [25] and only later was it attached to the façade of number 10. [26]

Notes

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- [1] Many Arnhemmers know the square as Walburgsplein. In the pre-and post-Second World War address books the square was also referred to as Walburgsplein.
- [2] W. Tiemens, 'Twee verhalen rond een toren' in: Ministry No. 30, Newsletter of the Society of the Airborne Museum No. 42, Oosterbeek 1991, 2.
- [3] E. Mackay, Whoa Mahomet. De strijd om de Rijnbrug (Aalten, 1947), 27.
- [4] Tiemens, 'Twee verhalen rond een toren', 2.
- [5] According to the 1942 address book this was the house of sexton H.M. van der Lelie, Walburgsplein 1a.
- [6] The deacon and priest of St. Walburgiskerk, F.L. Stockman, and his curates lived here.
- [7] 'Het zaad moet sterven, wil het leven. De ondergang van de Sinte Walburgis werd haar nieuwe glorie', Arnhems Dagblad, Saturday 24 November 1951.
- [8] Major Freddie Gough commanded the 1st Airborne Reconnaissance Squadron and, following the wounding of Lieutenant Colonel John Frost earlier that afternoon he, Gough, took over command of all the British troops around the bridge.
- [9] With the "RASC buildings" Hibbert meant the building diagonally behind the Rijkswaterstaat building.
- [10] Major Tony Hibbert's diary, written by him using his own notes made during the battle. L.P.J. Vroemen Collection (Gelders Archive, 2867), inventory number 21.
- [11] Telephone conversation between Frank van Lunteren and Peter Dijkerman, 13 February 2007.
- [12] A.B.C. Schulte and A.G. Schulte, De verdwenen stad. Arnhem voor de verwoesting van 1944-1945 (Utrecht 2004), 42.
- [13] 'Het zaad moet sterven, wil het leven. De ondergang van de Sinte Walburgis werd haar nieuwe glorie'.
- [14] Schulte and Schulte, De verdwenen stad. Arnhem voor de verwoesting van 1944-1945, 42.
- [15] Th. W. Scholten, Enkele aantekeningen over mijn activiteiten bij de ordonnansdienst van de Arnhemse brandweer in de oorlogsjaren 1940-1945 (December 1976), 3. Gelders Archive, documentation collection Second World War, inventory number 8.
- [16] Major Tony Hibbert's diary.
- [17] At that time the remnants of the 2nd Parachute Battalion were in Hofstraat, and in the Rijksarchief and the Provinciehuis buildings in the Markt. See also point 15 Provinciehuis.
- [18] This was probably the Paleis van Justitie in the Markt which had been set on fire by the Germans on 19 September, or the adjacent building.
- [19] Major Tony Hibbert's diary.
- [20] P.C. Heiser, Dagverhaal (z.j.). L.P.J. Vroemen Collection (Gelders Archive, 2867), inventory number B.13.27.
- [21] R. Wander, Kerken. Duizend jaar religieuze bouwkunst in Arnhem (Utrecht, 1997), 55.
- [22] 'Plechtige inwijding van de Sint Walburgis-kerk', Arnhemsche Courant, Wednesday 28 November 1951.
- [23] Schulte and Schulte, De verdwenen stad. Arnhem voor de verwoesting van 1944-1945, 41.
- [24] Telephone conversation between Frank van Lunteren and Eduard L.W.R. baron Speyart van Woerden, Thursday 15 February 2007.
- [25] J. Diender, Mo(nu)menten van Stilte (1996). Guide to the overview exhibition of all war monuments and memorials in the municipality of Arnhem. A digital version of this guide was made available to the author by Mr Diender.
- [26] Telephone conversation between Frank van Lunteren and Eduard L.W.R. baron Speyart van Woerden, Thursday 15 February 2007.