

29 Lauwersgracht

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"de Burgerklok" monument

Every year on 17 September and on 4 and 5 May, the Burgerklok in the Lauwersgracht is rung in memory of the people of Arnhem who lost their lives as a result of war. On 17 September 1956 burgomaster Chris Matser received the gift of a bell from the Citizens' Committee in recognition of his part in the rebuilding. He himself unveiled the bell in Velperplein.

At the beginning of the sixties it was decided to alter Velperplein to accommodate the increase in road traffic. This meant there was no longer room for the Burgerklok so a new location had to be found. If placed in the middle of the Lauwersgracht the bell would be a less attractive target for vandals. Therefore, in 1961 the colossus was relocated on an artificial island in the water and is now only accessible by boat. By 1990 the old bell was past its best and was replaced by an exact copy.

The first skirmishing at the Lauwersgracht

In September 1944 the Lauwersgracht's immediate surroundings, Eusebiusbuitensingel, was the scene of a violent skirmish in which the first group of British soldiers in inner Arnhem were taken prisoner by the Germans. Late in the evening of the seventeenth 'C' Company of the 3rd Parachute Battalion, led by Major Peter Lewis, entered the inner city via the Utrecht-Arnhem railway line (see also point 36 Nieuwe Kade). The company searched the almost deserted station without incident and then carried on to Velperplein. Here, at about 10.45 pm, a short exchange of fire took place with a few enemy soldiers who were in an armoured vehicle that drove into 7 Platoon of Lieutenant Peter Hibburt. The British parachutists dashed into a side street while the Germans disappeared into central Arnhem.

Regrouping and patrol

Because the regrouping of 7 Platoon would take some time, and 8 Platoon and company HQ had gone on, Lieutenant Len Wright with his 9 Platoon took over command of both platoons. His platoon went ahead of 7 Platoon and advanced some distance along Eusebiusbinnensingel. The lieutenant positioned his unit at the north-east corner of Nijmeegseweg at the crossing with Eusebiusbuitensingel, while Lieutenant Hibburt's 7 Platoon took up positions in Eusebiusbinnensingel, level with the Walburgiskerk and Lauwersgracht. By then it was about 11 pm.

A three-man patrol was sent out to find company HQ. Shortly afterwards the men returned with the message that Lieutenants Hibburt and Wright had to report to Major Lewis. While they were gone Platoon Sergeant Eric L. "Tiger" Tims, of 7 Platoon became concerned, and decided to go ahead himself to find out what was going on. [1] But no sooner had he turned the corner of Eusebiusbinnensingel and was within sight of the bridge when he walked into the arms of a small group of German soldiers. Tims was promptly taken prisoner but succeeded in escaping and rejoining the rest of 7 Platoon. [2]

Lieutenant Hibburt left his meeting with Major Lewis near the bridge at about the same time with orders to send his platoon forward. It is possible that he was killed shortly after. His body was never found. [3]

The bigger clash some time later

At the Lauwersgracht it came to an exchange of fire when a unit of some 250 German soldiers, including an armed platoon of the Reichsarbeitsdienst, inadvertently marched through the waiting 7 Platoon. At first both parties thought it involved their own reinforcements until a few soldiers began to speak to one another in German and English. General confusion ensued. Within seconds the Reichsarbeitsdienst platoon had lost fifteen men dead or wounded. It was hard to distinguish friend from foe in this chaotic situation: sometimes comrade fired on comrade. The Germans withdrew to the grass strip and the shrubs near the Lauwersgracht. [4]

Capture of the British

Sergeant Tims and his orderly ran towards the bridge but just before reaching their objective they were re-captured. A second escape attempt was foiled. That night the entire 7 Platoon and more than half of 9 Platoon were seized by the Germans and were held for a few days in Arnhem until transport became available. However, Tims was separated from the rest and locked up alone. Every day he was interrogated in a German headquarters where two maps hung on the wall. They gave precise details of an elapsed flight route and the exact details of the flight path used by allied pilots in transporting the 1st Airborne Division to Arnhem.

Eventually Sergeant Tims, from whom the Germans learned very little, was taken to a prisoner-of-war camp in Germany. [5] Although 7 Platoon and part of 9 Platoon never got to the bridge, they did account for about half of some 250 Germans in the confrontation at the Lauwersgracht. [6] Not bad for a group of about 65 men.

The German fighter aircraft

On Tuesday afternoon 19 September 1944 the Lauwersgracht was again the scene of hostilities when a German Me 109 fighter aircraft came down in the small lake (see point 22 Walburgisplein).

[1] L. Wright, Draft Account 3rd Parachute Battalion, "C" Company, (1998), 9-11. Gelders Archive, Documentation collection Second World War, inventory number 1378.

[2] The written distillation of a telephone conversation between an employee of the American author Cornelius Ryan and Eric Tims, 21 December 1967 (Airborne Museum collection, Oosterbeek).

[3] Wright, Draft Account 3rd Parachute Battalion, 11.

[4] C. Ryan, A Bridge Too Far (London, 1974), 230-231.

[5] Telephone conversation between an employee of the American author Cornelius Ryan and Eric Tims.

[6] Ryan, A Bridge Too Far, 231.