

A week in Oosterbeek September 1944



George Nattrass

Introduction

A lot of personal accounts on the fierce fighting in Arnhem and Oosterbeek have been published over the last decades. Some are published as part of a comprehensive overview of the battle during the memorable days in September 1944 and some individually published as personal accounts or diary. The war diary of Sergeant George Nattrass, D Company, 7th (Galloway) The King's Own Scottish Borderers, is one of those personal stories. In 1983 his account was published in a Dutch monthly magazine "Documentatiegroep '40-'45" and in 1984, Nico van der Meer translated and published this account in a book called "Door de Hel van Oosterbeek 1944". An English edition of this personal account has never been published, not by George himself nor by his descendants.

As the Dutch publications are not literally translations of the original war diary, and translating from English to Dutch and again reverse to English will, of course, do harm to the original text, we believe it is still worthwhile making this account available for a larger (non-Dutch) audience.

On the next pages (numbered as in the original article as pages 446 to 462) the translated text of the 1983 article, as published by the "Documentatiegroep '40-'45", is included.



October 2020

The Dutch text was translated by Roland de Kwant and edited by Paul Pariso. As the original text as prepared by George Nattrass is not available, it is not possible to verify if the errors in the Dutch text are the result from the first translation of the English diary (done in 1983) to the Dutch article published by the "Documentatiegroep '40-'45" or that the original diary also include these mistakes. Notes have been added to this translation to clarify certain aspects or possible errors and clear omissions.

A week In Oosterbeek September 1944 –

It all seemed to go well...

By early 1944 there were numerous military camps in England and a lot of airfields had been constructed, and all harbors and river mouths were full with Naval ships. Also around the villages in Lincolnshire, soldiers were billeted in wooden, draughty barracks. The 1st British Airborne Division was also accommodated in this area. This unit previously distinguished itself amongst others in the fighting in Africa. This division at first was commanded by General Down, but at a later stage, a capable soldier, though inexperienced as Airborne Commander, General Urquhart, was given the command.

One of the many thousands of soldiers of the 1st Airborne Division was George Natrass, Sergeant of 15th Platoon, D-Company, 7th Battalion King's Own Scottish Borderers, a true Yorkshire-man. In civilian life he was a waiter in a well-known restaurant in Thirsk, a man enjoying his job. He was a cautious man, respected by his superiors as well as by his men for his thoughtfulness. Lieutenant Kipping, a Canloan officer, was commanding 15th Platoon. George felt he would be up to something big and as he was heavily involved, he decided to make notes of his events.

Next we present the notes he made.

In one day the entire 1st Airborne Division was transferred to the Stonehenge and Bulford area, where together with the 6th Airborne Division a big exercise would be held ("Exercise Rags"). It was the end of May, and there was a rumor the Normandy invasion was about to start. The men were anxious and very curious what tasks would be assigned to the 1st Airborne Division. The almost endless practicing and exercising made the soldiers get bored. They wanted to see some real action now.

The 6th Airborne Division got the orders to get ready for action in France and would be involved in the coming invasion, but the 1st Division should wait and be 'stand-by'.

This announcement was a big disappointment for the men of the 1st Airborne Division and men were shouting and blaming all and everyone. The days were continuing and we felt miserable and bored due to the fact that there was no action.

When we were ordered to move out again, the men were very disturbed.

We now were billeted in the Down Ampney area, where large airfields were constructed. After three days, the soldiers were allowed to visit their friends and family, most of them for the last time....

After this big leave all returned to the camp and we were informed that we would be in action soon ("Operation Market Garden").

Our Division would be deployed, with the main objective the Rhine-bridge (Rijnbrug) at Arnhem. The bridge should be seized and kept secured until the arrival of the Second Army. The American 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions would land in the south of Holland to occupy the bridges at Son, Grave and Nijmegen.

Our Colonel had drawn the routes of the various Battalions in the sand covered table and I as well updated my staff maps. At the point of rendezvous on the Ginkel Heath, the place my unit would jump, a piper would play "Blue Bonnets over the Border".

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After a restless night, due to all the excitement we did not get much sleep, we had to prepare ourselves early that morning. We were transported to the airfields by trucks. The gliders were loaded with jeeps, Bren Carriers and six-pounders and everything else needed for an army that is preparing for a battle. On a number of aircraft slogans were written with chalk, like: "Stragglers", "Kipps Red Devils, here we come!" and "Cream", but some joker had changed this to "Scream".

It was Sunday September 17, 10.00am. This would be the biggest airborne operation in history. Doors were closed and the sound of the engines was getting louder as the machines came up to

speed. The weather was beautiful and there was a cheerful mood aboard.

Finally all planes were in the air and after formations were set up, we went on, towards Arnhem ...

I looked around and saw the faces of the young soldiers, aged between 19 and 26. Some were joking, others were reading or were thinking, eyes closed. Lieutenant Kipping was bending over his staff map and made some notes. I looked at my watch and saw it was 1.30pm. The fighter planes protecting us were flying over and along the sticks, but there was no sign of the enemy. There was no flak either.

The relative silence within the plane was suddenly broken by the voice of the pilot. Over the intercom he shouted that we'd nearly arrived at the dropping zone. The men came alive and prepared to jump out. *[Note: Sgt Natrass went to Arnhem aboard Glider Chalk No.282. He did not parachute in].* We saw the smoke from the smoke-pots and there were markers laid on the landing grounds by 21st Independent Parachute Company, who were dropped just before us to mark the ground and give us cover when we were landing.

After we had landed we took our jeeps, weapons and ammunition from the gliders that have landed as well.

The other Companies assembled as well. Including the 1st Parachute Regiment led by Brigade General Lathbury *[Note: Brigadier Gerald Lathbury was commanding Officer of the 1st Parachute Brigade].* We took positions around the landing grounds to cover and protect the remaining Brigades of the Division.

Various Battalions took off instantly, on their way to our main objective, the Rhine bridge, approximately 13 kilometers to the East. There still was no contact with the enemy and we believed we could take the Rhine Bridge by surprise.....

I said to Lieutenant Kipping, it just looked like an exercise, but he answered it looked a bit too quiet

It was 3.00pm when we reported at the HQ. We were ordered to keep the landing grounds clear of

Germans, until the next day when Hackett's 4th Parachute Brigade would land.

Just as we were starting to execute the orders, a young French Lieutenant came running towards us shouting there were many Germans seen on the road Arnhem – Utrecht.

We then hurried ourselves to the place we were sent to, and the first accident happened. Driver Fairlane *[Note: Lance Corporal Peter MacFarlane, 3194351, died on 18th September 1944, now buried at Oosterbeek (23.A.2)]* shot himself with his own Sten Gun through his head.

As we gathered at the grounds, the Germans began to fire at us instantly. When it began to get dark they used mortars as well.

Major Hill shouted he had shot two Germans. Tragically, he himself was killed that night. Enemy fire intensified and eventually we had to crawl over the ground to avoid being hit.

As no.16 platoon was engaged to keep our left flank clear of Germans, Major Sheriff *[Note: Major Charles Gordon Sherriff, 65928, Commanding Officer D Company]* crawled to me and told me Lieutenant Kipping was dead.

The Major told me, I was now the platoon commander and Sergeant McLellan would take over my tasks.

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After we'd crawled through the woods, we reached the edge of the forest, and saw a piece of land, approximately 200 meter wide. To reach our next position, we had to cross these grounds. Rogers was shot through his hand and Major Sheriff *[Note: Major Charles Gordon Sherriff]* was wounded as well, but after treatment by a Medic they caught up with us. As No.16 Platoon was still heavily engaged with Germans on our left flank, I ordered section by section to cross the open field. We reached the remainder of the Battalion. We then took positions around the landing grounds, the grounds where Hackett and his 4th Parachute Brigade would land the next day.

There was heavy and concentrated fire on our positions now, but thanks to the accurate fire of our Vickers-machineguns and the lighter weapons, the

German attacks were countered. We lost one man. Two soldiers were wounded. Sergeant Graham especially distinguished himself during these fights by his brave performance.

Hours went by slowly, and the endless waiting lasted until midday the next day. Something must have gone wrong in planning, as the 4th Brigade was hours behind schedule.

Finally the Paras and gliders landed and they were assembling.

Suddenly we heard more planes. First we thought Spitfires, but a moment later it turned out to be German fighters, shooting with all their guns on the landing grounds and at our positions.

After this attack I looked over the landing grounds and I saw gliders crashed. Disorderly groups of Paras were gathering their supplies, while German mortars and shells from armored guns exploded between them.

Watson and Crewe [*Note: Pte G.W.J. Crews, 6920710, 15 Platoon, D Company*] fired their Brens to ease the pressure on these Paras that just had landed, but in doing so they drew the German fire to our positions as well.

On our right flank men of 21st Independent Parachute Company, together with part of Recce Battalion [*Note: 1st Airborne Reconnaissance Squadron*], kept the enemy at a distance.

I met Major Wilson, who asked me what Battalion I was with. I informed him and showed him our positions on the staff map. The Major told me, our battalion should move to the higher grounds near Wolfheze.

With this route marked on my map, we went on. We got ourselves caught in the cross fire of two parties fighting. When we were able to move on, we found a few soldiers of 156 Parachute Battalion that had been ambushed. They were all dead. I was told, after Wolfheze, we had to occupy the grounds around hotel "Dreyeroord", an area not far from station Oosterbeek-Hoog. On our way to the hotel we killed a few German soldiers, walking unsuspecting towards us from the opposite direction. Almost at the same time a jeep stopped on a sand track just behind us and Major Sheriff and his driver Blackie turned up. After we had examined the German bodies, it turned out we had

to deal with men of a SS-Panzer Division – one of the best in the German Army!

Our group climbed onto the jeep as best we could and we drove to the Battalion Headquarters, picking up one Jerry, who surrendered, on our way. He had to keep his balance on the hood of the jeep, not an easy task, but he managed!

Finally we reached Sergeant McLellan and the rest of my platoon, that had dug in around Hotel Dreyeroord, together with the company led by Swanston. We immediately named the Dreyeroord, "The White House", because it was completely plastered white. It turned out that there were no signals from No.14 Platoon since the landing and No.16 Platoon was destroyed completely.

Swanston told me, B and C Company were at our left and right flanks and the Battalion HQ was in the lower parts of the "White House" grounds.

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The man in the front with the board is Lt. Kipping. To his left Sergeant Nattrass, the author of this article. Top row, third left is Ure, the one that was killed in the "White House". The picture is 15 Platoon D Company, 7 KOSB and is taken in August 1943 in Scarborough, England (Archive L.P.J. Vroemen – Kamerik, 2867 – 296)



*The "White House" as it looked before the war. (Hotel Dreyeroord)
(Picture 1917, received from Mr. A. v.d. Straaten)
2867 - Collectie L.P.J. Vroemen 2867 – 175*

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I saw our Medics running up and down the ground to the Medical Aid Post, despite the heavy enemy fire. Captain Devlin was in charge of these men. This Aid Post was situated at the beginning of the driveway of the "White House" and had been the porter's lodge in earlier days.

The Major ordered me to take a patrol down the road to the bridge over the Arnhem – Utrecht railway line. I took McClure, Ward, Anderson, and Murray with me, and we went on our way, through the thick bushes along the road. Before we reached the end of the road, we heard German voices and the sound of halftracks driving up and down. We looked at their movements and we estimated their strength at one company.

We returned and I reported to the Major and told him what we had seen.

The enemy shelling of our positions continued and later that evening intensified even more. I thought about the aircraft with the supplies, taking so much trouble to bring us the supplies we needed so badly, but so much of it got lost and fell into German hands.

The enemy had stopped the water supply to the houses and we had only brought with us enough supplies for four days. At night it was a bit quieter. As we, tensed, stayed in our trenches, we heard footsteps coming towards us. I called this person to a halt, but did not get a reply. The password for this night was "Market" to call and "Garden" for an answer, but I did not get a reply on my call.

Murray fired his Bren and immediately we heard a cry from a woman or young boy. Blackie and Murray crawled to the place the cry had come from and a moment later they returned with the body of a young woman. I saw she was seriously injured in her legs and I called for the Medics. They took her to the dressing station.

After this we retook our positions. Directly we heard a lot of stumbling and smothered shouts behind us. After a bit the Major and a German soldier, who had infiltrated our lines, rolled over the ground, fighting. A moment later the Major strangled the German to death.

Now it was Tuesday morning, 05.30am. On my right I saw Graham and Bryant, behind their Bren gun, waiting for the Germans to attack. The attack that was inevitable.

Suddenly all hell broke loose, enemy mortars exploded within our positions and the Germans gave us all they had. Cassidy [*Note: Possibly Pte Samuel Patton Cassidy, 14207764, Anti-Tank Platoon, C Company. It is believed he died when a*

Bren gun he was trying to un-jam went off and shot him in the head. He has no known grave.] and McClure were seriously wounded, while our company clerk lost half of his jaw.

Pearce [*Note: Sgt R. Pearce, 3191876, Support Company*] of Mortar platoon opened fire with everything he had. Vickers, Brens and other guns intensely fired at the Germans.

On the command "Attack!" we jumped out of our trenches and ran at the Germans with our bayonets on our guns and forced them back to the woods they had come from. Graham believed he alone had killed sixty Germans with his Vickers.

Now the Germans started to fire mortars at us and fired with heavy guns. I lost all hope and believed this would never end.....

Anderson was killed and McLellan was seriously wounded. He also did not survive.

The men sat in their foxholes and slit trenches with blood red eyes, desperate for water and food.

We heard that many of the men fighting at the Rhine bridge were killed and Frost was wounded.

The 1st Battalion nearly no longer existed and 3rd Battalion had lost three quarter of its soldiers, while the South Staffords were engaged in heavy fighting. Heavy losses were suffered throughout the Division.

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Radio communications were very poor or not working, orders of Headquarters were therefore not received or only with great delay or were outdated completely. I saw burning houses and other buildings, and smoke like giant mushrooms reached to the sky, the image of a horrendous war.

I took Blackie and Ure with me and told them to prepare a Bren gun position, on the second floor of the "White House", out of the window overlooking the road that led from the train station to the Hotel "Tafelberg". Upstairs we stacked tables, chairs, beds and other furniture in one of the bigger rooms of the building, what must have been a luxurious hotel in peacetime.

Just before I went to go downstairs to get Murray and his Piat, there was an enormous explosion. We were covered with chalk and dust and fell to the first floor. I fell on my shoulder very hard, and Blackie lay on the ground, totally stunned.

After five minutes we recovered a bit, and concluded we were not hurt, although blood was coming out of our ears and noses. That was due to the air pressure.

We clambered back onto our feet, and wondered how Ure was, as we climbed up the heavily damaged stairs. Entering the room we saw nothing was left. Horrified we saw the remains of Ure's body sticking to the wall, where I had previously seen a crucifix hanging. Shocked I grabbed Ure's identity tag from the bloody mess and put it in my pocket.

We looked at the road below us with our binoculars and saw, half covered by a fence, a Tiger tank with the barrel of the gun pointing directly at our position. I shouted at Blackie to get the hell out of there. We stumbled down the half missing stairs, ran out the back door and reached the positions of our platoon.

After a bit, I crawled to the Major and suggested I take Murray and Watts to try to knock out the tank with a Piat. Arriving at a point where we could have a clear view over the road in front of us, we noted our target had disappeared.

The intense and concentrated fire of the enemy kept on and when we were back in our trenches we noted the French Lieutenant and Sergeants Rae and Ferguson were killed and Pierce was seriously wounded in his leg. When I looked at the "White House", a symbol for us now and forever, I saw Lieutenant Hunter killed.

It was now 2.00pm September 21st. There was still no trace of Second Army! We heard at a later stage the troops coming from the south ran into heavy opposition on their way to Nijmegen and Arnhem. The 1st Airborne Division was supposed to keep the Arnhem bridge for 48 hours, but by now we had been in a fierce battle for five days. We had not received any food since the landings and now we were eating tomatoes, apples and raw potatoes from the gardens around us, if we could.

Gibson crawled to me, and gave orders to try to occupy the houses opposite the "White House". I took Crewe [*Note: Pte G.W.J. Crews*], Blackie and Ward with me and we ran to the houses assigned to us.

We were shot at by a Spandau machine gun, but we safely got across the street.

We took the front and backside of the houses. I saw Keyes and his men took a six-pounder in position to cover the street in which we had seen the Tiger-tank. While Blackie shouted from the

backroom that a number of Germans were coming, a halftrack turned up in front of the house we were in. The vehicle had this troublesome German cross painted at its side.

We heard an enormous explosion and a few seconds later we saw Keyes and his men had hit the halftrack. I went to Blackie and saw some 15 Germans coming towards us.

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We took them all out with our Bren guns.

Later that day we were ordered to return to our initial positions at the "White House". Running across the street, Ward was shot in his thigh. We dragged him to the slit trenches, where he got medical treatment from our Medics.

From the woods across the open grounds in front of the "White House" heavy fire was brought on us. I saw dead cows, horses and pigs on the open grounds, lying there with stomachs burst open and the air was filled with an awful smell, mingled with the smoke of burning houses.

On our left flank a Spandau started to spit bullets in our direction, and I suggested to Major Sherriff to silence that thing together with Blackie.

Protected by the thick hedges we crawled towards the Spandau, covered by the fire of our men, we got to within 5 metres of the Germans. Blackie then threw a hand grenade at the German position, killing the crew and destroying the gun.

The Germans then stopped firing for a moment, indicating a new attack.

Then the relative quietness was broken by a voice from a loudspeaker that said in perfect English that we were surrounded and we had to put down our weapons. This invitation was loudly and rudely answered by the men.

Again the Germans started their assaults. Mortar and gunfire signaled this new attack.

This attack was again countered, but now amongst the wounded were Major Sherriff, Capt. Clayhills, Pte Crewe [*Note: Pte G.W.J. Crews*], and Drum Major Tate¹ [*Note: Probably Sgt A. Tait, 3186501, HQ Company*]. Gibson was shot in his neck, while Cummings and Husband were missing.

The sun had gone down, but the burning houses made it even lighter than during daytime.

We only had twenty men left and as there were no officers anymore, Swanston was appointed leader

¹ There were only 2 officers at Arnhem with the surname of Tate. Major Francis Raymond Tate of HQ Coy, 2 Para and Lt Joseph Tate of 1st Borders. Both were killed at Arnhem.

of the group. Between the exploding shells I crawled to Graham and asked him for an update of the situation.

B Company turned out to be lost completely and C Company had suffered severe losses.

Major Coke managed to stop a Tiger Tank and arrange a short ceasefire, so Captain Devlin and his medical staff had an opportunity to bring the wounded to an aid post. Later, while talking to Graham, Coke was killed instantly, and his body slipped into the slit trench, with his lifeless blue eyes looking straight at me.

I got very desperate and wondered if I would ever see my beloved ones again.

Now it was raining hard, and we let the water run over our faces and into our mouths.

I asked Swanston permission to take a patrol to find out what the situation was further down in the perimeter.

Together with Murray and Watts I crossed terrain where we saw some greenhouses in the dusk. When we were halfway, we stopped for a moment to orient ourselves and we took cover in a glass grape greenhouse. We could see the pale moon through the rain drizzled glass, and I felt around and grabbed something soft and wet, and a hand glided up to my face.

I was shocked seeing, in the half dark, numerous heavily mutilated Airborne corpses, stacked on top of each other. I shouted to the others: "Get the hell out of here!" We were used to a lot these days, but this horrific sight made us tremble.

Carefully we moved further and met the poor remainders of the Glider Pilot Regiment, men that, although not equipped to fight, did a fantastic job. They told us 4th Parachute Brigade - or what was left of it - was at Hartenstein, our Divisional Headquarters. It was said there were also German intruders within our lines, dressed up like Airbornes.

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This announcement caused a lot of disturbance! Also the survivors of Reconnaissance Battalion [Note: *Reconnaissance Squadron*] were wandering aimlessly, with others, through the streets of Oosterbeek, in the area of the Stationsweg / Utrechtseweg crossing.

When we arrived back at our lines at the "White House", we were ordered to move 200 meters south and take positions there. It now was 1.15am, Friday September 22nd. My stomach made a noise, almost louder than the enemy mortar fire. I had to think about the delicious liver- and kidney-pies and

other delicious things I had to serve in Civvystreet. The "White House" that had changed 'owners', three or four times now, definitely came into the hands of the Germans. It went silent and every moment we were expecting a German attack, but, apart from a single shot, nothing happened that night. We were scared stiff that night by, what we thought was, an armored halftrack driving into our lines with great speed and one of the occupants screaming loudly asking where D Company was.

A spark of hope glimmered, as we thought this might be Second Army advance troops, but at the same time we thought it could be a German trick as well, we therefore kept silent. The voice however kept on calling and asking where D Company was, and after a while I recognized the voice of Lieutenant Hannah. We reported to him and he told us that it did not look good for the Division. Some Dorsets had tried to cross the river Rhine. They however suffered heavy losses.

Lieutenant Hannah now ordered us to new positions north of Divisional Headquarters, Hotel Hartenstein. Then he jumped into the Bren Carrier and disappeared with great speed into the darkness. I have never seen him again and wonder what has become of him. On our way we met Swanston with the remainder of the Company and together we moved back, picking up lost men of other battalions on our way.

It no longer rained and I saw silhouettes of Airbornes slipping from house to house. I realized, when it was daylight it would be difficult for all these men as Germans walked around in our jackets and wearing our berets. Much of the supplies brought to Arnhem by airplanes fell into enemy hands. Swanston, who had been to Battalion HQ, announced that of B, C, D and Support Company - or what was left of these units - our total strength was nearly 240 men. Our task now was to keep our Division HQ clear of the enemy.

We learned that Hackett and his men of 4th Parachute Brigade were dug in at the little church in Oosterbeek. This group consisted of remainders of the 10th, 11th and 156 Battalion, while a small group, consisted of lost men of the 1st and 3rd KOSB [Note: *Parachute Battalion*] and South Staffords, were under command of Major Thomson [Note: *Major Thompson*] of the Royal Artillery. This all was commanded by Major Lonsdale. The small fighting forces would be known as 'Lonsdale-forces'.

Meanwhile our positions were heavily shelled, setting many houses on fire.

We knew all hopes for the Second Army to set us free, was gone. Our ammunition and medical

supplies were diminishing fast, and food or water was completely absent. The men were exhausted by the continuous shelling and the lack of food and water. The situation was very critical. You could hardly raise your head, without being shot at by the many German snipers that were located in houses around our positions.

Swanston, together with Watts went out on a reconnoitering expedition, but they were hindered a lot by the many garden fences of the local houses. Blackie, Murray

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and I took a Piat with us and eliminated a few snipers.

We carefully walked into a house, the one we had just shot at with a Piat-grenade to dislodge a sniper and we climbed the stairs. At the window where the soldier had been, we found countless empty bullets and his rifle. We could not use the rifle as there was no ammunition anymore. We had a great view over the surroundings from the splintered attic. North of our positions I saw Airbornes running through the gardens like ants, slipping from one house to the next, whereas to the left men of 4th Parachute Brigade were dug in within the perimeter. Below I saw some men of B and C Company trying to eliminate snipers that were shooting at everything and all that moved. Behind me I spotted the remainders of my own Company and platoon, whereas there were also men of The Glider Pilot Regiment dug in at the edge of a small wood, which was heavily fired upon.

I had quite a good overview of the situation and returned to our positions together with Blackie and Murray. When we walked through the kitchen I could not refrain myself to open the water tap, but not a drop came out. Before I could stand up, there was the tinkling of glass and I knew I'd been spotted by a sniper. We barely could reach our positions, crawling on our hands and knees. I found out Swanston had been wounded.

He was lying two gardens further ahead. Watts and Weir accompanied me to this spot, while the enemy systematically was shooting the houses to pieces one by one now, the debris was flying around us. After we had found Swanston, he seemed to be shot in his kneecap. He was in great pain. Before the Medics came for him, I wondered what the snipers would do if they saw the Medics, but nothing happened. Covered by the Medics we slipped back to our positions.

At the evacuation of the Medical Aid Post, that was set on fire, the commanding officer had

surrendered and was taken prisoner. Afterwards he managed to escape and reach Nijmegen.

The wounded men were taken care of by the Medical orderlies and spiritual assistance was given by Captain Reverend James Morrison, who gave comfort and encouraged the men, treating them as well as possible with the little medical supplies available.

In the meantime a 20mm gun started to fire upon us, the enemy pressure was getting harder and harder. Tanks and other mechanical guns supported German infantry trying to break through our lines. With deadly precision the grenades fell between us and our men were heavily put to the test.

The effort of the men was unbelievable, the morale outstanding. Jokes were made everywhere.

Despite all there were even smiling faces.

The battle did not slacken, on the contrary, the attacks and assaults on our positions increased. At night the enemy patrolled and tried to take up positions nearby our locations. The Glider Pilots had to take over positions time and time again. The strength of our Battalion was reduced from 800 to 200, and I turned out to be the remaining senior Sergeant left.

While we were in our trenches, we heard some clattering on the attic of a house nearby and we immediately thought of snipers.

Together with Weir and Watts, I crawled, with the Sten gun in my hands, into the house and carefully climbed the stairs.

When we reached the attic, to our relief we heard the voices of Airbornes. After the mutual consternation, we welcomed each other.

I made my acquaintance with Sergeant Tilley [*Note: Sgt Russell Frederick Tilley, 552600, 11 Flight, E Squadron, The Glider Pilot Regiment*] and I recognized Ord and Patterson from times way back.

Tilley and I discussed the situation and concluded there was no way out of this cauldron, but we kept this to ourselves.

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We heard that Hackett was seriously wounded to his stomach and would probably not make it, and that the 4th Parachute Brigade had suffered many losses as well.

Tilley and I observed the grounds below us and saw many Germans at the crossroad, some 300 meter away from us, where one of the roads lead to Hartenstein, while halftracks with barreled guns were running up and down.

We only had four Piat-grenades, 300 bullets for our rifles, one-and-a-half magazines for a Bren gun and two clips for the Sten guns. The situation deteriorated by the minute and countless British and Germans dead soldiers were visible around our positions.

Again we received orders to take the remaining men and cross the road and take positions there. During this operation Weir [Note: *Probably Pte Andrew J. Weir, 14213466, 15 Platoon, D Company. He escaped on Operation Berlin*] got killed. I wondered who of our miserable group would be next. Just before nightfall a Bren Carrier came driving into the perimeter at great speed, but we did not move, as we suspected a German scheme. After a moment I recognized the driver, McKnight, of Support Company and I stood up. McKnight shouted to get a Medic instantly, as Hannah was in the vehicle badly wounded. McKnight drove from Headquarters to bring us some ammunition, but he was shot by a 20mm gun.

We got the feeling the next day, Sunday 24th, would bring the final battle and that it would be over for us by then. When it was almost dark we saw a lonely figure, bareheaded, and dazed, walking between the enemy lines. It turned out to be Major Cochrane [Note: *Major Cochrane was killed on 20 September 1944. It is more than likely the man Natrass saw was Captain Steer. Reference is made in Off at Last – page 108*], suffering severe shellshock, walking in circles aimlessly, pretending to be a locomotive.

Despite everything we did to try and get this man into one of our trenches we couldn't and finally he got killed.

With great persistence and accuracy, the Germans kept shelling our positions, it was a miracle we still had survivors.

At midnight the firing stopped and except for a single shot and some sounds from the woods, nothing happened that night.

We were that exhausted and our nerves that stretched, we thanked God for this moment of rest. With our light arms and totally no anti-tank guns left, we did not have a chance against this mighty opponent and the little ammunition left was put on ration. At dawn, the houses were still on fire, flaming like torches, and the air was full with the smell of dead soldiers, powder smoke and the stinking carcasses of dead animals.

While we were stoically waiting for developments to happen, we all understood the enemy would soon wipe us out completely. Our losses increased

and the strength of the Battalion was reduced to some 90 men. Together with Tilley, Patterson, Blackie, Murray and a few others we took out a few snipers with the remaining Piat-grenades and small arms. We then had, not only figuratively but also literally, used up all ammunition.

The Germans swarmed around the Division Headquarters like wasps and we together with C and Support Company formed a horseshoe shaped front against the enemy closing in. Also the remainders of the Glider Pilot Regiment had joined us and put up a fierce fight.

I looked into the desperate faces of the men around me. Their bloodstained eyes had a spooky effect. The seven days of battle had scarred all of them. Their smocks were full of blood from their own wounds, but also that of their comrades they had helped.

Sunday September 24th was hardly a Sunday for fathers and mothers to take their children out for a stroll and feed the ducks! The British stood in their trenches, doing their utmost to keep awake. There were countless bodies of men killed around them.

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The "White House" after the battle.

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The houses were still burning and now and then one of the walls fell over, making a lot of noise. The Colonel came by our positions to see how the men were doing. When he asked for the situation with respect to the ammunition, George answered, that it did not look that good....!

After appreciating the effort and the commitment the men had showed, the Colonel left for a meeting at Division Headquarters. A few moments later Sergeant Tilley came running back towards us

screaming the Colonel had died. They found him in a house. He had jumped into the house and had fallen through the wooden floor. He was, thankfully, not harmed, and after the Airbornes had helped out of his precarious position, he straightened his crumpled uniform and went on his way.

[Note: The text after this point changed in the Dutch article from first person ("I") past simple, to third person ("George"). This is not changed in this translation.]

We were now seven days in enemy occupied territory and George wondered how it would all end, as time went by and relief by the Second Army became impossible.

Major Lonsdale and his men stood firm at the little Oosterbeek-Laag church and General Urquhart still found a way with 4th Parachute Brigade to keep the Germans out of the perimeter, nevertheless at some places some intruders were spotted.

There was no water at all. Food and ammunition was very scarce. C Company, commanded by Major Dinwiddie, had suffered great losses. George could hear the German halftracks driving through the streets and around the perimeter. The enemy fired through the house, trying to set the British positions on fire. They succeeded.

Intensive mortar attacks were nerve wrecking. Despite all this the British morale kept very high and – as impossible as it seems – they kept on making jokes!

Between exploding grenades and gun fire, George heard his men sing: "There's a little grey home in the west". Blackie joined George and both of them crawled to a hole in a hedge. George peeked through, and immediately fell backwards. "There are at least twenty Germans in the next garden", he hissed to his friend. "Try to get the men here, with all they have got and everything that can shoot", he said to Blackie.

After Blackie and the men arrived they managed to kill a number of Germans, and then left as quickly as possible. They joined the remainders of the Reconnaissance Battalion *[Note: Squadron]* and a few Glider Pilots, that had dug in.

The Colonel regrouped the various units, in total some 90 men, and placed them in defensive positions. The men could see the German prisoners of war, locked up in the 'Hartenstein' tennis grounds, guarded by Military Police. Right of the tennis grounds laid the men of 4th Parachute Brigade that had very hard times.

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In the meantime it rained very hard and the trenches changed into giant pools of mud, in which the men were not very comfortable. It turned out that George and his unit now included two lost souls from other units. They told how Major Lonsdale had climbed the church pulpit to speak to the injured men that were under his command. The Major had written his speech with charcoal on the back of a church door, and used this as a cheat sheet to remember the words he wanted to say to his men. After the gathering, in the heavily damaged little church at the Rhine, Lonsdale Force took positions north of the road by the church.

The two men told George they also heard Major Finch of 3rd Parachute Brigade and Major Wilson of 156 Parachute Battalion both had been killed *[Note: There was nobody called Major Wilson in 156 Para Batt. It is probable that Nattrass is referring to Major Wilson of 21st Independent Coy, but he was not killed during the battle and escaped on Operation Berlin]*. George looked at his watch and saw it had turned 00.15am. Apart from a single shot it was very quiet that night, so the Paras had a chance to get some rest. Nevertheless the Airbornes were on their guard, and they kept an eye open for intruders that persistently tried to slip between their positions.

Corporal Watts arrived at George's position and he was soaked wet by the rain. He had an old water kettle filled with water from a drain. The water was very filthy, but nobody noticed and the men quenched their thirst. The Paras were spinning on their feet in their trenches due to the lack of sleep and they were concerned about what would happen the next day. Between the steel helmets of the dead Germans, the red berets of the English casualties swirled, like poppies. The grimey faces of the Airborne soldiers looked old and tired, while most of them were barely twenty-five years of age. Their smocks were covered with dirt and blood.

At 07.00am the Germans began to systematically shoot the houses near the British positions, debris and burning materials were falling into the British lines, again causing men to get killed or wounded. In the lull of the shooting, Colonel Reid crawled to the positions to see how the men were doing. He did not beat around the bush when the men asked what the situation was. The Colonel answered their position would get even worse and relief would no longer be possible.

Blackie said to George: "Shall I try to find some ammunition?", to which George answered: "Alright pal, do what you can and good luck!"

That was the last George saw of Blackie, as he did not return. George took his men to one of the houses to find some cover from the snipers that were all over the place.

Watts brought a kettle of water and some wood and on the stone kitchen floor they made a fire. One of the men came in, his arms full of nettle leaves, and when the water was boiling, they cooked some of the nettles.

As soon as the nettles were partially cooked, they took their knives and each man fished some strings from the kettle and ate it. It tasted awful. Finally they drunk the cooled water, which tasted very bitter, but now the men thought they'd had a few vitamins!

The rest of the morning the sky above Arnhem remained dark from the continuous fires. The enemy now also used the horrific flame-throwers and George heard the screaming of soldiers being hit by the burning fluids.

The Germans apparently found the place George and his men were hiding in, as they were heavily shot at. While George together with Watts sneaked into the house next door, a silhouette suddenly appeared in the doorway, and George almost fired his Sten gun. A split second later he recognized the French Lieutenant Pellisier, who he had not seen since the landing.

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The Lieutenant fearlessly said: "That was close, wasn't it?"

"You do not seem to be nervous at all, sir", George answered shocked. The Lieutenant asked how many men George had left and George replied there were only five left.

"Follow me", the Lieutenant said and explained he wanted to check out the crossroad, where one of the roads was leading to "Hartenstein".

"Why do you want to go to that bloody crossroad?" George asked the Lieutenant. "It is crawling with Germans over there, it would be like committing suicide", he carried on.

"Listen up!", the Lieutenant said. "Perhaps you are right, Sergeant, but what do you suggest then?"

George said it would be more appropriate to take the old positions near the Battalion Headquarters,

so the Colonel at least would be able to know where to find us.

The Lieutenant agreed to the proposal and they returned, finding Tilley furiously gesticulating, and trying to make them understand the Division was going to be evacuated.

"The news is not confirmed officially, but it is clear something is going to happen tonight!" In the end no one knew what to do anymore, just because there were no commanding officers to lead the men. Ammunition was practically finished, and it seemed soon they would have nothing to fight with anymore. It was almost impossible to move around the perimeter. The perimeter was continuously getting smaller and smaller by the heavy gun fire and German snipers.

There were shells everywhere and everywhere the British looked, you could always see a hated steel helmet of a German soldier hiding. Roads and paths were covered and blocked by debris, corpses, fallen trees and broken vehicles, of both parties, burned out. The few jeeps the English had left were used to move the wounded to the Regimental Aid Posts. Major Boy Wilson and his small group of men defended themselves and fought like lions, strafing the Germans as hard as they could. The gasworks in the southwest corner of the perimeter burned like a torch and the reflections of the fire could be seen in the river Rhine.

Colonel Warrack, senior medical officer, had been on his feet for days now, but he kept on going. Brigadier Hicks found the remainders of his 1st Airlanding Brigade confronted by the Germans and they had taken the houses along the road to "Hartenstein" so the enemy now was situated around his Headquarters. The Glider Pilots fought fearlessly, but the Germans were not beaten, but instead brought mechanized guns and a Tiger tank into battle. The Paras disabled the Tiger tank and killed a few Germans.

George, together with Patterson and Watts, decided to try to clear out the Germans from some of the houses, and at George's signal they ran to the adjacent house.

Immediately they were shot at by a German sniper, but they were not hit.

They sneaked from one house to the next, without knowing what they were actually doing, they were that exhausted.

Suddenly there was a gunshot from close by and George fell backwards. Directly another shot was

fired, hitting him for the second time. It turned out a bullet had gone through his left leg and another wounded his arm.

He tried to get up, but fell backwards due to the infernal pain in his right arm. His leg was completely numb and he could not move it at all. Patterson came running for George, he grabbed him, put him on his shoulder and carried him to a house. Father Morrison was around, he examined and dressed the wounds as well as he could.

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He suffered a deep flesh wound in his arm, but George's leg was also very badly hurt. Sergeant Pierce, also with serious wounds to his leg, was also lying on the floor of the room George was in.

Also Swanston was there, he was hit in a knee cap, and Private Hannah, who died in the meanwhile. George took Hannah's army watch and put it into the bandages that were on his leg.

Now it turned 7.00pm. George could see the thick smoke, passing by the beautiful clear sky, through the damaged roof. Suddenly he heard footsteps and he thought for a moment they were German footsteps. It was Colonel Reid, who came to tell them the remainders of the 1st Airborne Division were to be evacuated that night, leaving behind all wounded. These men should, as far as capable, fire their weapons so the Germans would believe the battle was continuing.....

The Colonel said he was very sorry that he had to leave them behind, but he promised to notify the families back in England. Despite the terrible pains George fell asleep, a sleep he had not had for the last nine days.

When George woke up it was silent everywhere and there was nothing to indicate that a war was going on. The Reverend made his usual rounds. This priest was doing the best he could in the situation, even more than that.

Again George heard footsteps at the door, footsteps of iron fitted boots.... There were shouted German orders and a moment later a few German soldiers stormed into the room. In the front an officer, waving a large pistol, so the British thought they had had it.

The Germans did not harm their prisoners, but offered them Capstan cigarettes and said: "You, good soldiers!"

The officer checked to see for himself that the British in the room actually were all wounded.

After this, he turned to the Reverend and promised to bring sufficient bandages and medical supplies. Two German guards stayed behind.

Hours went by, but finally the Germans arrived with stretchers, to bring the wounded men to the trucks standing by.

The trip through Oosterbeek was unforgettable for the wounded. They were literally thrown around in the truck, as the vehicle could not avoid the holes in the road. It seemed to last forever before the truck stopped and the doors were opened. George saw they were standing before a large building, men and women in white uniforms running up and down. They were told they arrived at Almelo hospital, but George had no clue where that was. The doctors and nurses had a quick inspection of the wounds and wrote some things on large white cards.

After an hour George was carried inside and he was put on a table. The filthy bandages were removed from his leg and arm. His filthy uniform and camouflage jacket were taken and thrown on the floor at the foot of the table. He was carefully washed and shaved and felt reborn afterwards. His arm was treated quickly, but they had a lot of work on his left leg. After this treatment he was dressed in a nightgown, only two sizes too big. Then he was put in a bed with snow-white sheets, smelling deliciously. Amazed, he saw that Drum Major Tate [Note: Sgt Tate] in the bed next to him, he was looking around himself for a bit. They welcomed each other and kept on talking about their recent experiences. Tate [Note: Sgt Tate] was hit in his shoulder by a shell and brought to Hotel Tafelberg. The Germans had taken him from there.

They dozed off, but they could not sleep due to the loud moaning of the seriously wounded. British and German soldiers were lying next to each other and many had nightmares from the horrific events of the last couple of days.

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The interior of the "White House" after the battle.
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The grape greenhouse, mentioned at page 452.
2867 - Collectie L.P.J. Vroemen / 2867 - 179

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The "White House" grounds. The pond, at the front, afterwards, contained a lot of material.
2867 - Collectie L.P.J. Vroemen 2867 - 177



Houses at the Graaf van Rechterenweg, opposite the "White House" (refer to page 451).
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The nuns were tireless and if someone called – German or British – they stood by the men with their loving care.

Early in the morning of September 28th, German soldiers, a totally different kind than those who had brought George and his comrades to the hospital, ran into the hospital ward. They shouted that the British should prepare themselves to be moved out at once.

They all helped each other, but George had to be brought outside by two German medical orderlies and he was put in an ambulance.

They drove for many hours, and finally they arrived at a small railway station.

A number of cattle-wagons were waiting there at the rail tracks. “Now we are off to a POW camp in Germany”, George thought.

The Paras were counted and one by one they were put in the wagons, sometimes very carelessly.

The doors were shut and locked. It was very dark in the wagons. A whistle blew and the train took off,

rattling. They were now on their way to an unknown destination.

They concluded there would be much more deprivation and hard times to come. As the train sped along, George could only think of his comrades who had lost their lives and of the Dutch, as he knew what they had gone through!



*This is what the “White House” looks now. (photograph L.P.J. Vroemen)
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The page numbers refer to page numbers used in the original Dutch article. In this translation these page numbers are shown as [...].

Additional information

The following details are taken from the back cover of the 1984 booklet "Door de Hel van Oosterbeek 1944" published van der Peyl - Kruiningen. This booklet contains the Dutch translation by N.J. van der Meer of the war-dairy as kept by Sergeant George Natrass.

George Natrass was born on July 14, in Beamish, County Durham, England. After school he was employed as bookkeeper in a coal-mine but he preferred the hotel business instead. He was employed by a large hotel in London, where he kept working until he was called up for military service. He was enlisted as private with 7th Kings Own Scottish Borderers and soon promoted to Sergeant in 1940. The battle of Arnhem during the turbulent days of September 1944, have made an indelible impression. His war diary contains his simply told but impressive personal account. After returning to England from captivity, George had to be in a York hospital until the end of November 1945 to recover from his wounds. He had to recuperate until well after spring 1946, after which he left the Service permanently. He came to work in a hotel again and in 1954 he became manager until he retired in 1979. George was a passionate gardener. George and his wife Pat regularly returned to Arnhem and joined the annual pilgrimage, to remember and commemorate his fallen comrades.

Additional pictures from Gelders Archief



Interior Hotel Dreyeroord, The "White House", after the battle.
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Exterior Hotel Dreyeroord, The "White House", after the battle.
2867 - Collectie L.P.J. Vroemen / 2867 - 172



Hotel- Pension Dreyeroord, 1978
Collection Gelders Archief / 1513 - 1843

Additional pictures from the Bundesarchiv



The White House after the battle (Bundesarchiv Bild 1011-495-3450A-10, Bankhart)

The following people are mentioned in the Nattrass account:

Major-General Roy Urquhart (Commander 1 st Airborne Division) Brigadier John Hackett (4 th Parachute Brigade) Brigadier Philip Hicks (1 st Airlanding Brigade) Brigadier Gerald Lathbury (1 st Parachute Brigade)	
Lieutenant-Colonel John Frost (2 nd Parachute Battalion) Lieutenant-Colonel John Finch (3 rd Parachute Battalion) Lieutenant-Colonel Robert Payton-Reid (7 th KOSB) Colonel Greame Warrack (Assistant Director of Medical Services)	Roll Call Nijmegen – 26 september
Major John S.A.D. Coke (HQ Coy) Major Alexander V Cochrane (HQ Company) Major Gordon M. Dinwiddie (OC C Company) Major Henry R. Hill (OC Support Company) Major Richard Thomas Henry Lonsdale (HQ 11 th Parachute Batt.) Major C.G. Sherriff (OC D Company) Major “Boy” Wilson (OC 21 st Independent Parachute Company)	18-11: garden Mr. Schriek Sr, Ede 21-9: FB garden Dreyeroord Hotel POW 20-9: FB in front Tafelberg Hotel POW
Captain David Clayhills (Bn HQ) Captain Brian Devlin (Royal Army Medical Corps) Rev. Captain James G. Morrison (Chaplain)	POW POW
Lieutenant A. Hannah (No.1 Anti-Tank Platoon) Lieutenant Joseph M. Hunter (D Coy) Lieutenant Albert “Al” E. Kipping (15 Platoon) Lieutenant C.M. Pellisier (No.1 Mortar Platoon)	POW 21-9: FB garden Dreyeroord Hotel 18-9: FB Ginkel Heath Roll Call Nijmegen – 26 september
Sergeant Robert Ferguson (C Coy) Sergeant Andrew Graham (HQ) Sergeant D.W. Keyes (S Coy) L / Sergeant David McLellan (D Coy) Sergeant George Nattrass (D Coy) Sergeant R. Pearce (Mortar Platoon, S Coy) Sergeant Tait (HQ Coy) Sergeant Thomas B. Rae (C Coy) Sergeant Major Jimmie Swanston (D Coy) Sergeant Fred Tilley (Glider Pilot Regiment)	22-9: killed in area near Bothaweg 21-9: FB garden Dreyeroord Hotel Roll Call Nijmegen – 26 september 21-9: FB garden Dreyeroord Hotel POW POW - 21-9: FB garden Dreyeroord Hotel POW
L / Corporal J. Blackie (D Coy – 15 Plat) L / Corporal Peter MacFarlane L / Corporal J. Husband (D Coy – 15 Plat) Corporal R.H. McClure (D Coy – 15 Plat) L / Corporal J. McKnight (S Coy – driver) Corporal Ord L / Corporal Watts (D Coy -15 Plat)	POW 18-9: KIA POW POW POW - Returned to Nijmegen *
Private Anderson ² Private Bryant Private Samuel Cassidy (S Coy) Private J. Cummings Private G. W.J. Crews (D Coy - 15 Plat) Private William Gibson (HQ Signals) Private Alexander Murray (C-Coy) Private T. Patterson Private Rogers Private James Ure (D Coy – 15 Plat) Private Ward (D Coy – 15 Plat) Private A.J. Weir (D Coy – 15 Plat)	- - 21-9: FB garden Dreyeroord Hotel - - 21-9: FB junction Oranjeweg / Bothaweg 23-9: FB junction Oranjeweg / Bothaweg POW - 20-9: FB garden Dreyeroord Hotel Returned to Nijmegen * Roll Call Nijmegen – 26 september
Unknown rank Watson	

(*) Not on Roll Call Nijmegen -26 September; appendix 11 as included in Off at Last

² There were 7 men with the surname Anderson that served with 7 KOSB at Arnhem but it is most likely that the man that Nattrass refers to is L.Cpl A. Anderson, 1096001, 15 Plat., D Coy.

Other men killed and buried (or likely to have been buried in a field grave) in the gardens of Dreyeroord Hotel / The "White House":

Private John Fisher	20-9-1944	D Coy
Corporal William McDade	20-9-1944	C Coy
L / Corporal Sydney P. Cross	21-9-1944	C Coy
Private Abraham Fenton	21-9-1944	S Coy
Private Robert Hart	21-9-1944	S Coy
Private James McLauchlan	21-9-1944	D Coy
Private William F. Middleweek	21-9-1944	S Coy
Private David Murdoch	21-9-1944	B Coy
L / Corporal John Pringle	21-9-1944	HQ Signals
Private Eric K. Stevenson	21-9-1944	S Coy
Private John O. Woodcock	22-9-1944	S Coy
L / Corporal Michael Torley	23-9-1944	S Coy

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