CHAPTER TEN

NOT A BRIDGE TOO FAR: THE BATTLE FOR THE MOERDIJK BRIDGES, DORDRECHT AND ROTTERDAM

The German plans

As has been mentioned on several occasions, the advance through Noord-Brabant constituted the main effort of the German attack on the Netherlands. One of the missions of the German army elements that carried out this attack was to penetrate Fortress Holland from the south by using the bridges at Moerdijk to cross the Hollands Diep and those at Dordrecht to cross the Oude Maas. To make this possible, those bridges had to be captured undamaged by the Germans, but it was clear that this would certainly be no easy task. The Dutch were not to be given any opportunity to blow up the bridges, and the German army leadership eventually decided that the only way to prevent this was to launch a large-scale attack by paratroops.1

In January 1940, the commander of the 7th Air Division, Generalmajor Kurt Student was advised of this decision. He was promoted to Generalleutnant and was given command of a newly formed Airborne Corps, comprising his own division and the 22nd Air Transportable Division. This Luftwaffe corps was given the task of both carrying out the surprise attack on the airfields around The Hague and “keeping the bridges at Moerdijk (point of main effort) and Rotterdam open for the subsequent arrival of the mobile troops coming in via Tilburg–Breda”.2 The 22nd Air Transportable Division was then designated for the attack on The Hague, for which it was reinforced with a battalion and a company from the 7th Air Division. In exchange for this, it had had to give up the 16th Infantry Regiment and several support units to the air division. In the meantime, Student

was formulating his plans for the airborne landings. He split the 7th Air Division into five groups for the attack on the bridges. Gruppe Süd was to land at Moerdijk and Dordrecht and consisted mainly of the I and II battalions of the 1st Parachute Regiment. The main objective of this group, which was operating under the command of the fanatic National Socialist Oberst B.O. Bräuer, was to capture the Moerdijk bridges; for the bridges over the Oude Maas at Dordrecht, only one company had been reserved, namely the 3rd of the I battalion.

A second group, consisting of the III battalion of the 1st Parachute Regiment, was to take possession of Waalhaven airfield at Rotterdam and keep control of it so that it could be used to fly in reinforcements. Generalleutnant Student and his staff were also to land here. One company from this battalion, after landing near the Feyenoord soccer stadium, was also to occupy the bridges over the Nieuwe Maas. Student was, however, not at all optimistic about the chances of success of this last action: the company “barely seemed strong enough to prevent the destruction of both bridges nor—if that were to succeed—to secure the bridges until the arrival of the IIIrd battalion of the 16th Infantry Regiment.”3 It was the commander-in-

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3 Hermann Götzel, ed., Generaloberst Kurt Student und seine Fallschirmjäger. Die Erinnerungen des Generaloberst Kurt Student (Friedburg, 1980) III.