CHAPTER ELEVEN

MYTH AND REALITY

Still coming to terms with the past?

Taken by surprise on 10 May 1940, the poorly prepared Dutch armed forces managed to sustain combat for five days and to bring disarray to German plans. Neither the deployment of elite units nor its superiority in terms of personnel numbers or materiel enabled Nazi Germany to claim a victory, leading to breaches of the law of war and other unfair combat methods being necessary to bring the Netherlands to its knees, the lowest point of which was the bombing of the undefended city of Rotterdam. Left to their own devices by their allies, the armed forces had no choice but to capitulate. In London, however, the Dutch government steadfastly continued to support the resistance.

These are, in brief, the prevailing ideas which were held by the Dutch both in and outside the occupied territory in an attempt to come to terms with the shocking, and for some even traumatic, events of 10 to 15 May 1940. Since that time, insight into the actual sequence of events has increased substantially, but specific elements from the view sketched above have proved to be difficult to eradicate from the national psyche: reason enough to test those theories once more.

The surprise element of the German invasion can be dealt with quickly. Years prior to 1940, professional Dutch military literature and the general staff already assumed that the next war would start without a formal prior declaration of war. A wide range of measures had been taken against the consequent risk of a strategic invasion, ranging from border security and the construction of bunkers at strategically important bridges to an ingenious mobilisation system. On the evening of 9 May 1940, the armed forces had already been on a war footing for over eight months and, insofar as was deemed necessary, were in a state of alert. At no time previously during the mobilisation of 1939-1940 had the commander-in-chief taken such far-reaching measures as he did that evening. That the Netherlands
expected an attack was also clear to the German troops at various locations along the border from the demolition of bridges and other objects. Furthermore, as has been discussed in earlier chapters, there is no reason to call the SS units deployed in the Netherlands elite troops; on the contrary, their military usefulness was viewed as low by the Wehrmacht commanders in 1940. It was only shortly before the campaign against Poland that Hitler had created clarity on a possible war task for the SS regiments. SS regiment ‘Der Führer’ underwent its baptism of fire at Westervoort and the Grebbeberg. Even if parachute units can be viewed as specially trained troops, this certainly did not apply to the airborne troops—they were just standard infantry with a special mode of transport. In addition, the Germans had no experience of deploying two divisions of paratroops and airborne troops, which meant that the deployment of these units involved greater risks than usual. The Airborne Corps was thus not eligible to provide support for the operations tasked to Army