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Special Forces in een tuinstad: de inzet en effectiviteit van het personeel van het Bureau Bijzondere Opdrachten in de provincies Zuid-Holland en Overijssel 1944-1945

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Summary

Founded in March 1944 by the Dutch government in exile, the Bureau Bijzondere Opdrachten (BBO) sent specially selected and trained military personnel – internally also called *Special Forces* - to the occupied Netherlands to support armed resistance groups. However, the densely populated and urbanized nature of the Netherlands complicated clandestine and guerrilla-like activities. This had already become evident before the creation of the BBO. During the so called *Englandspiel*, a German counterintelligence operation, virtually all Dutch personnel sent from Britain were arrested. Not without reason, there were doubts in Allied circles as to whether the Netherlands was suitable *at all* for armed resistance activities. Consequently, the British head of the allied *SHAEF Mission to the Netherlands government*, Major-General J.K. (John) Edwards, referred to the Netherlands as ‘one large garden city’, in which, in his view, resistance groups had no room or opportunity to make an effective contribution to hindering and combatting the German occupation forces. Therefore, Edwards also indirectly questioned the usefulness of the deployment of the dozens of BBO agents in this ‘garden city’.

A significant proportion of BBO personnel operated in the Dutch provinces of *South Holland* and *Overijssel*. This dissertation examines the deployment and effectiveness of the BBO agents working in these two provinces, and focuses specifically on the extent to which they were effective. Their mission goals, expected and actual activities, final results, as well as the limitations they experienced in carrying out their assignments, constitute the focus of this research. This dissertation is both historically and conceptually relevant. Although some attention has already been paid to BBO in the Dutch and English literature, it does not, however, deal in depth with the deployment of BBO agents. There are also major gaps in this literature. Furthermore, statements on the effectiveness of their deployment are scarce, superficial, partly contradictory and based on very limited source research. As a result, the usefulness and effectiveness of the BBO agents’ deployment - including those who were active in the provinces of South Holland and Overijssel - is hardly understood to date. A historical ‘by-product’ of this study, is a broader and deeper insight into the actions and value of (parts of) the Dutch resistance.

Although the insights from the BBO experiences are not necessarily readily transferable to the 21st century, they are still relevant to the academic and military domain. On a conceptual level, this dissertation is useful because it contributes to the academic debate on Irregular Warfare (IW), particularly in the area of coordinated support and deployment of resistance groups. In Western military circles, this type of military activity is often referred to as Unconventional Warfare (UW). As a result of the resurgence of so-called Great Power Competition, there is currently an increasing focus on UW and alike activities. Presently, however, there is relatively little (unclassified) doctrine and scholarly literature on UW. Within the Western military and academic community, there is also an increasing interest in the application of UW-like activities in densely populated and urbanized areas. Because of increasing population growth and urbanization worldwide, conflicts are expected to progressively take place in and near cities. Until now, however, UW has mostly taken place in inhospitable and sparsely populated countries and areas. Therefore, knowledge and literature in the field of ‘urban’ UW is very limited. The fact that this dissertation focuses on the support of resistance groups in densely populated and urbanized areas, further adds to its conceptual relevance.

To achieve the research objectives, a historical-empirical approach was adopted. Extensive source research in national and international archives form the foundation of this dissertation. Moreover, to understand, interpret and evaluate the effectiveness of the BBO, an analytical framework based on UW doctrine and related literature was developed. This dissertation is therefore composed of three parts. Part 1 presents the analytical handle and historical framework through which the origins, actions and functioning of the BBO can be understood and interpreted. Its first chapter discusses theory in the field of UW and identifies, among

other things, the factors that influence UW effectiveness, as well as how UW effectiveness can be measured. Chapter 2 discusses the creation and mission of the BBO. This insight is important for the complete understanding of the mission goals of the agents sent to the provinces of South Holland and Overijssel. This chapter also discusses the (quality of the) recruitment, selection and training of the BBO agents. Part 2 and Part 3 of this dissertation form a case study, in which the activities of the personnel selected for this study, are reconstructed and evaluated.

Part 2 chronologically divides and describes the activities of BBO personnel deployed in the province of South Holland on the basis of various distinctive, and strategically and/or tactically different phases of the occupation and liberation of the Netherlands. The first chapter of this section deals with the activities of the agents who were active in this part of the country between the spring of 1944 and July 1944. During this early phase, the first teams infiltrated the occupied Netherlands, and initial contact with the Dutch resistance was established by the BBO. The following chapter discusses the agents' activities in the province of South Holland around the period in which operation *Market Garden* (September 1944) took place; this was the moment when conventional Allied forces reached the southern part of the Netherlands and a rapid liberation of the country was expected.

The subsequent chapter examines the work of BBO personnel during the fall and winter of 1944-1945. Due to the failure of operation *Market Garden*, and the hold-up of the Allied crossing of the river Rhine, the context and duration of the BBO missions also changed. In this phase, the (more offensive or overt) activities of the resistance were scaled back, and the work of the agents regained a more clandestine and supportive character. The last chapter of Part 2 covers the activities of the BBO personnel in the spring of 1945, the period when the liberation of the still occupied parts of the Netherlands took place, and the German occupation forces finally capitulated. In this phase, the BBO personnel had to refocus the activities of the resistance in the province of South Holland on active support of Dutch and Allied interests.

Part 3 focuses on the activities of BBO personnel deployed in Overijssel. Its first chapter begins in early September 1944, when the first agents became active there. The subsequent chapter examines their activities during the fall and winter of 1944-1945. In this period, the situation in Overijssel also remained static. The following chapter covers the work of the BBO personnel active here around the spring of 1945 (February-April). Unlike South Holland, the province of Overijssel was liberated by force. This was also the phase when the BBO personnel deployed the Overijssel resistance groups to facilitate the Allied advance.

This thesis concludes that the BBO results achieved in the provinces of South Holland and Overijssel varied widely. The BBO activities in South Holland were characterized by very high opportunity costs. Comparatively, a large number of agents were active in this province (mainly in the cities of Rotterdam and The Hague) and, in addition, a considerable amount of weapons and sabotage material flown in from Britain, were dropped here. Although the armed resistance in the province of South Holland (these groups merged into the *Binnenlandse Strijdkrachten* (BS), or 'Domestic Armed Forces' in September 1944) carried out, among other things, an impressive series of sabotage actions, the BBO's investments here, paid off only to a very limited extent. Without a final battle - contrary to expectations, Canadian and British forces did not enter this province until after the German capitulation - in the end, only a relatively small part of the South Holland BS, came into action. The results achieved in this province could very likely have been accomplished with far fewer BBO personnel and equipment as well. Bottom line, the effectiveness of the BBO personnel deployed in South Holland, was only moderate.

In contrast, the effectiveness of the BBO personnel active in Overijssel was significantly higher. Although, compared to South Holland, a relatively small group of agents was active here, they still managed to supply, train and organize large numbers of BS personnel, province-wide. Unlike the South Holland BS, the resistance groups in Overijssel engaged in a final battle - in which they made the largest and coordinated

contribution. In addition to hindering German road and rail traffic and telecommunications, the numerous local BS groups provided direct assistance to advancing Allied ground troops by providing them with intelligence, by participating in combat operations, by occupying and maintaining vital infrastructure, and by providing security services. Furthermore, the losses on the side of the BBO and BS in Overijssel were, comparatively, much lower than in South Holland. Also the number of civilian casualties, and unintended and incidental material damage resulting from BBO activities, were significantly lower here. All in all, the BBO personnel deployed in the province of Overijssel were very effective.

