

# **16 Cases of Mission Command**

**General Editor  
Donald P. Wright, Ph. D.**



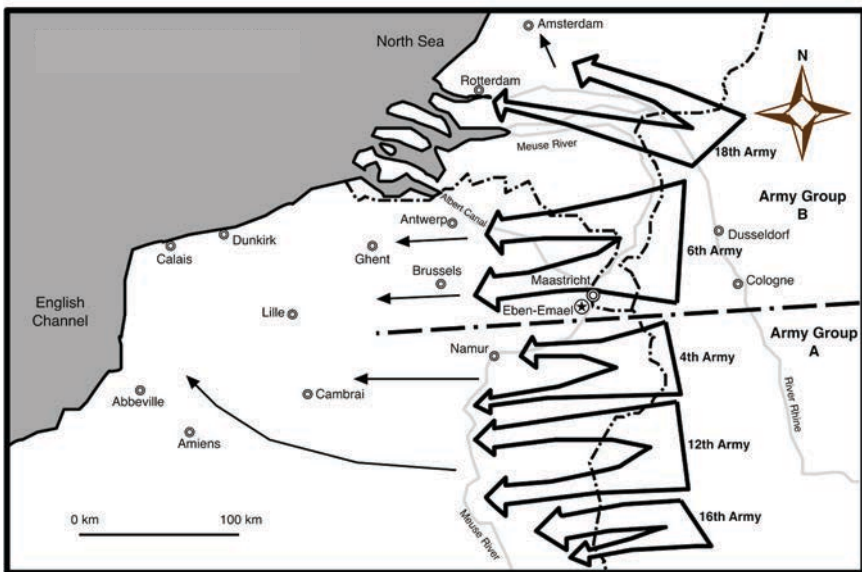
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# Capturing Eben-Emael

## The Key to the Low Countries

Nicholas A. Murray, D.Phil.

*Fall Gelb*, the German plan for the invasion of France and the Low Countries called for Army Group B, Sixth Army in particular, to quickly drive through Holland and Belgium in order to help fix the Allied forces in place. This was in order to facilitate the German main effort to the south, the *Sichelschnitt*, which had as its aim the cutting off of the core of Allied armies in order to destroy them in a large pocket. The Belgian fortress of Eben-Emael lay on the axis of attack of Sixth Army (Map 1). The fortress covered several key bridges across the Meuse-Albert Canal just to the west of Maastricht. The capture of the bridges was crucial to the success of the German invasion. Eben-Emael was considered by many to be the most powerful fortress in the world and it needed to be taken quickly if the German plan was to work. In the first ever glider assault, elements of the 7th *Fliieger* Division rapidly captured the fort opening the way to the west for Sixth Army. The success of the mission came about as a direct result of the flexibility, personal initiative, cohesion, and innovation of the Soldiers and their commanders.



Map 1. The German plan to invade France and the Low Countries.

In October 1939 Hitler added an order to *Fall Gelb* for the capture, by paratroopers, of Eben Emael to assist in maintaining the high operational tempo demanded by the plan. GEN Karl Student, commander of 7th *Flieger* Division, was tasked with the mission. He allocated CPT Walter Koch as overall commander for the capture of the bridges and LT Rudolf Witzig to the specific task of capturing Eben-Emael itself. Witzig was chosen because he was an excellent officer as well as the fact that he was the commander of the only paratrooper assault engineer unit, known as *Sturmgruppe Granit*, a unit whose skills were essential for an attack upon a fortress. Tasked with his mission, Witzig began to train his men.

Initially, it was thought that there would only be a week or so to train the soldiers chosen for the mission. Despite this, Witzig was confident in the skills of his men and trusted them to do well. As *Fall Gelb* was delayed until the spring of 1940, Witzig was able to more thoroughly drill his men over the six months gap. He oversaw all the aspects of training with CPT Koch occasionally showing up to check that all was well. Koch left Witzig to train the men as he saw fit. Koch trusted Witzig and knew that he was the expert in this type of assault. Thus Koch largely limited his role to support, providing additional troops for the mission when it became clear that Witzig's platoon was not large enough, and facilitating the platoon's training without overly interfering. The long period of training reinforced the already high cohesion of the unit and it allowed for the soldiers to practice for a variety of scenarios. This provided them with great flexibility for their mission.

Witzig was also largely responsible for design of the tactical plan of attack and he worked closely with his senior NCOs to accomplish this. He was helped by clear mission orders:

Capture by surprise the surface of Eben-Emael. To guarantee the transit of the Army over the Meuse-Albert Canal, neutralize the artillery and anti-aircraft casemates and turrets. Break any enemy resistance and hold until relieved.

Additionally, Witzig pointed out that the process of working with his subordinates was reinforced by the unit's "trust and loyalty from bottom to top and from top to bottom." This cohesion was to pay great dividends during the attack itself.

The attack force was arranged in 11 squads of seven or eight men each for a total of 83 men and two officers. The small size of the squads was largely a product of the technical specifications of the *DFS 230* assault gliders in which the unit was going to land on the roof of the fort. Gliders

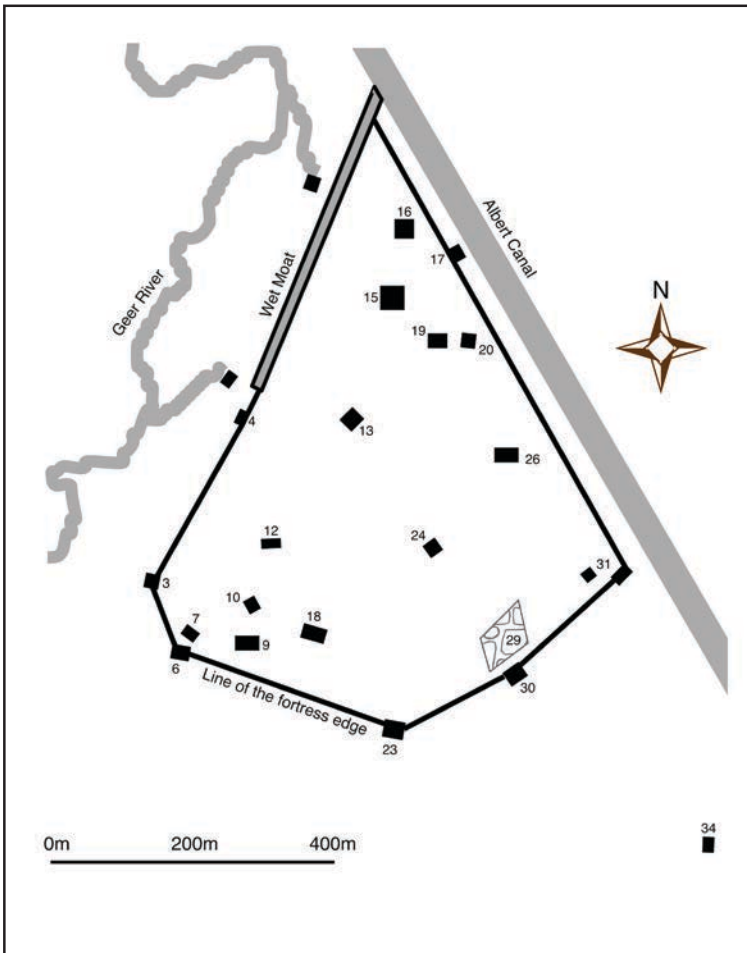
were chosen because their lack of engines (less noise) meant that surprise was more likely. They had the added advantage of being able to land on a precision target, something that parachuting onto the target could not guarantee. There was thought to be too great a risk of a loss of surprise if parachutists took time to concentrate before assaulting their targets. To try and guarantee that the assault force had at least one officer available, LT Egon Delica was to land with the First Glider and Witzig with the Eleventh (Reserve) Glider. The 83 other ranks contained 28 NCOs, who were to prove crucial to the success of the mission.

Each squad was allocated one main target with the idea that once it was neutralized they should then start engaging subsidiary positions. As such, this meant that each glider would land separately from the others and the men would thus have to act largely on their own initiative, at least at first. Once the main positions had been dealt with, the Germans were to establish contact with the other elements of Koch's force (attacking the bridges themselves), and coordinate with the lead elements of Sixth Army to facilitate the river crossing.

The attack was scheduled to be one of the first operations for the German invasion of the west on 10 May 1940. Despite six months of training and practice, however, things went wrong shortly after the troops were airborne. Two of the gliders, which were being towed by transport aircraft, lost their tows and had to make emergency landings short of the target: second squad under the command of SGT Max Maier and eleventh squad (Witzig's). Thus, the operation lost its commanding officer and a senior NCO before it arrived.

It is worth looking at both Maier's and Witzig's reaction to this setback. Once the tow rope was lost, thinking quickly, Witzig ordered the glider pilot to look for a field where they could not only land but from where they could be re-lifted. This done, as soon as they were on the ground, Witzig ordered his men to clear a temporary runway and himself set off to find the nearest German transport airbase. There, he commandeered a transport plane and flew to collect his glider before heading off to land several hours late at Eben-Emael. SGT Maier was equally intrepid. He hitched a ride on a motorbike, with his squad's CPL P. Meier, to the nearest town. There he commandeered two small cars to transport his squad to Eben-Emael. Unable to take the cars further than the Meuse River, he elected to continue on foot. Maier persuaded some German engineers to put his men in one of the first boats to cross the river and from there they made their way (via another commandeered vehicle) to the bridge nearest to Eben-Emael. This had been demolished by the Belgians. Undaunted

Maier attempted to cross the Albert Canal alone to reconnoiter a way forward but was killed in the process. CPL Meier now took charge and after waiting a few minutes, he crossed the canal. From there he stole a bicycle and rode to the fortress. However, he was unable physically to get to the rest of *Sturmgruppe Granit* (by this time on top of Eben-Emael itself) and instead scouted along the moat on the northwestern side of the fortress before making contact with SGT Haug of fifth squad. Imparting his story by shouting, he let Haug know that he would attempt to get his men to the fort as quickly as he could. Heading back to rejoin his men, and still unable to reach *Sturmgruppe Granit*, Meier instead linked up with relieving German troops from Sixth Army and aided them in crossing the Albert canal. Whilst that was going on, nine other gliders had landed on the fort and the Soldiers had set about their mission.



Map 2. Fortress Eben-Emael casemates with armored cupolas indicated by number designation.

The first nine squads each had targets designated for when they landed, with the tenth and eleventh squads acting as the reserve. Given the failure of second and eleventh squads to show up, the situation was a little more complicated. Ideally LT Delica, who was senior on the ground, should have taken charge. His glider, however, had landed a fair way to the south and his squad was busy dealing with its target position, a 75mm-gun casemate (18, Map 2). Unable to contact Witzig or Delica, SGT Helmut Wenzel of fourth squad took command and established headquarters for *Sturmgruppe Granit* inside the machine-gun casemate (19, Map 2), which his men had captured minutes earlier. SGT Wenzel (described by LT Witzig as “a first rate man, an old engineer with vast experience, a vigorous troop leader”) was fully familiar with the mission and continued with the plan. He had his radioman establish contact with Koch in order to inform the overall commander when his men had taken their main objectives, as well as to gain situational awareness as to the whereabouts of the relieving troops. Meanwhile the other squads had landed in proximity to their targets and set about dealing with them. As Witzig described it, “they didn’t need to ask questions. They had their orders, and they did them.”

Squad eight, under SGT Unger, had been the first to land and they immediately set about dealing with their target, a 75mm-gun position in an armored cupola (31, Map 2). Being the first to land, they came under a hail of small-arms fire and they took their first casualty almost immediately. They close-assaulted a Belgian position which threatened their advance on the main objective. They did so with the help of fifth squad which had already successfully disposed of their own targets: the anti-aircraft guns (29, Map 2) and the armored observation cupola (30, Map 2). SGT Haug, of fifth squad, had used his initiative to support eighth squad’s attack. This was a crucial and timely intervention as the Belgian Soldiers inside the cupola had just loaded two 75mm rounds when the German engineers detonated their shaped charge knocking out the position. The Germans then blew in the armored access doors of the gun position effectively forcing the Belgians to abandon it.

Separately, squad three, under SGT Arendt, had an unanticipated difficulty in their attack on another of the 75mm-gun casemates (12, Map 2). Their plan anticipated an access door to the casemate, or possibly an armored observation cupola, through which they might neutralize the casemate’s garrison. However, there was no obvious door and no observation cupola. SGT Arendt decided to improvise. He detailed his men to blow in one of the gun mounts. This was a difficult task as the charges were not designed for this and neither had his men trained to do it. They managed, however, to place a charge in one of the gun embrasures

before detonating it, destroying one of the 75mm guns. This also put out of action the casemate, into which they could now enter. Rather than stop with the neutralization of the casemate, SGT Arendt entered and dropped explosives down a connecting stairwell. This had the effect of deterring any Belgian defenders from seeking to re-occupy this casemate.

The targets on the fortress were dealt with in a fashion similar to the above, with the exception of the 120mm-gun cupola (24, Map 2), and a 75mm-gun casemate (26, Map 2). These had been the targets of squad two, which had not arrived. This presented a problem. The 120mm-gun cupola contained the most dangerous weapons on the fortress and it was essential that they were dealt with. Glider pilot Heiner Lange of fifth squad realized the danger and took it upon himself to knock out the cupola. Although he was not an actual engineer, he had trained with his compatriots and was familiar with how the explosives worked. Despite being wounded, he succeeded in detonating his charge. This, however, did not completely succeed in knocking out the position. It only partially damaged the guns and the Belgian crew re-occupied the position until fifth squad again attacked it and eventually put it permanently out of action. These actions show great initiative, as this was not a part of the plan for fifth squad. This left one of second squad's positions to deal with. SGT Wenzel, in command in the absence of Witzig, ordered tenth squad, under SGT Hübel, to attack the position and it was put out of action relatively promptly.

Although not all of the Belgian positions had been completely destroyed, the fort had been sufficiently neutralized for Wenzel to signal Koch that the mission was accomplished. All that remained was to make sure the fortress stayed relatively quiet. No small undertaking with such a small force. Witzig's glider landed on the fort at around 0800, about three to four hours after the start of the action. He liaised with Wenzel and discovered that their relief by 4th Panzer Division, originally expected at 1000 hours, was hours behind schedule. Witzig now had to deal with Belgian counter-attacks without the expected support. Witzig organized his men to set up a defense of the surface of the fort and called in the help of the Luftwaffe. This is where the German's superior combined arms really counted. Belgian troops moving towards German positions on Eben-Emael were subjected to numerous air raids which both slowed them down and reduced their combat power. Despite this, Belgian troops made several attempts to clear the roof of the fort and to re-occupy their gun positions. Ultimately these attempts failed to alter the outcome. German initiative and combined arms, along with the dogged tenacity of the German engineers, would allow Witzig's men to hold on overnight. That



being said, his position was serious. His men were short of ammunition, explosives, and most importantly drinking water. Witzig was not sure how much longer his men could hold.



The Albert Canal as seen from Fort Eben Emael.

US Army photo.

In order to facilitate the relieving troops crossing the Albert Canal, several troops from eighth squad swam across the canal to act as guides for the reinforcements. The subsequent attempts to cross the canal by relieving troops from the 51st Pioneer Battalion came to naught as a machine-gun and anti-tank gun casemate (17, Map 2) covered the canal and could not easily be attacked (it was tucked down by the edge of the canal, a fair way below the level of the fort). The steep walls of the cut, through which the canal went, prohibited easy access to it. Witzig's men improvised by lowering explosive charges down and shoveling dirt to block the casemate's observation slits. Although this did not stop the Belgian machine-gun fire, it did reduce its effect. However, the relieving pioneers in rubber boats were still unable to get across the canal in daylight.

SGT Portsteffen, of the 51st Pioneer Battalion, had made several attempts to cross the canal with his men during the late afternoon and evening. All had failed. He decided to wait until dark before again attempting a sortie. This time he and his men were successful. Regrouping on the western side of the canal, they worked their way up the dry moat on the northeast side of Eben-Emael to casemate 4 (Map 2). This casemate had unsuccessfully been attacked several times by Witzig's men, who needed to neutralize it to open a route for the relieving forces. At casemate 4, Portsteffen personally used a flamethrower to suppress the bunker



before his men neutralized it with explosives. This opened a route over the casemate and up the steep side of the fortress to the surface. Portsteffen, alone, ascended the side of the fortress eventually meeting with men from ninth squad. Witzig joined them at around 0700 on 11 May. *Sturmgruppe Granit* had held its position for almost 24 hours longer than anticipated. Now out of water and short of ammunition, the relief was just in time.



Portion of Fort Eben Emael.

US Army photo.

Relieving *Sturmgruppe Granit*, the men of 51st Pioneer Battalion, guided by Portsteffen, proceeded to reduce the remaining Belgian positions. By mid-morning they had forced most of the defenders into the interior of the fort. With more forces and combat power arriving, the Germans were now in almost complete control of the surface of the fort. Still, however, there was desultory resistance. This ended at 1215 when the Belgian garrison surrendered. They had suffered 88 casualties inside the fort and around 1,000 prisoners fell into German hands. Of the 85 men of *Sturmgruppe Granit*, 24 were killed or wounded (28% of the force). Despite this high casualty rate, the fact that the glider troops accomplished their mission demonstrated the high level of trust and cohesion among them. This operation was also an enormous propaganda coup for the Germans. They had tried something never before attempted in war and they had pulled it off. After the operation, junior officers and NCOs were prominent among those receiving awards for outstanding leadership and initiative at Eben-Emael.

The capture of Eben-Emael opened the route across the Albert Canal and through central Belgium. The German Blitzkrieg invasion of France and the Low Countries would likely not have proceeded as well without the success of this daring mission. The exercise of disciplined initiative by the junior leaders was absolutely critical to the success of the mission.

### **For Further Reading**

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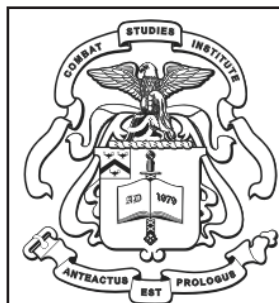
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