

Mary of Arnhem – By David Gray

After Operation Market Garden, the front in the area around Nijmegen more or less came to a standstill. The Allied soldiers in the Betuwe (a river delta in the Netherlands), had a hard time in the swampy meadows, it was a cold and wet winter and they were constantly shelled with German artillery fire. On the radio, the Americans, British and Canadians listened to the warm voice of 'Mary of Arnhem', the presenter of a German propaganda station.

From 3 October 1944, the American 101st Airborne Division took over the positions of the British, the division was responsible for the Betuwe. The weather was lousy, chilly, humid and rainy. In addition to the terrible weather and enemy artillery, the Allies were also bombarded with propaganda. The Allies occasionally sent a load of demoralizing pamphlets, by grenade volley, to the other side and the Germans mainly sought it in the spoken word, via loudspeaker installation or radio. One of their 'secret weapons' was 'Mary of Arnhem.' Her voice filled most of the airtime of 'Radio Arnhem', a military station that was frequently listened to during the cold, monotonous winter evenings, with which the Germans tried to sow doubt among the Allies about the meaning of their mission. The broadcasts were mainly aimed at arousing feelings of homesickness and defeatism. Especially the Canadians, so far from home and everything they loved. They turned out to be vulnerable to the warm, sensitive tone in which 'Mary' expressed her sympathy for the soldiers in their cold, damp shelters.

As Mary of Arnhem, **Helene Sensburg** made German propaganda broadcasts in fluent English for the Allied troops in the Netherlands. The combination of the sentimental pictures and her sweet voice made the men long for home. "How homesick our beloved Tommys will be," she sobbed gracefully into the microphone. Sometimes she stoked defeatism by naming units. "Hello guys from the thirteenth squadron. Are you wondering if we're getting there? Calm down, that's going to happen," Briton, Bill Ellis once heard to his horror. "Our morale took a hit."



Mary also tried to sow discord between the Americans and British by hijacking the BBC's frequency. When the British bulletin was over, Mary came right after it in equally good English, but with undermining messages. In December, for example, she argued that the brave British should have come to the aid of the bungling Americans during the Battle of the Bulge. In doing so, she stoked the fire between the ambitious generals Montgomery and Bradley.

"Von Rundstedt found the Americans confused, reserves were extremely small and the supply had been cut off repeatedly," she summed up.

Fantasies are woven around the figure of 'Mary of Arnhem' and when the men entered Arnhem, many cherished the silent hope of meeting her. A female mannequin, thrown out of a destroyed fashion warehouse onto the street (*above*), is daubed with her name by the military and chosen as the subject of a group photo. But 'Mary' is not in Arnhem at all; she has never even been there!



The role of *'Mary of Arnhem'* was played by Helene Sensburg, (pictured on the right in the photo), a 31-year-old brunette and wife of a cavalry officer. She was born in Germany and returned there in 1939 after a 10-year stay in England, living at Coulsdon, Surrey, and employed as a secretary with a well-known oil company where she mastered the English language almost perfectly. In Germany, she found a job at the Deutsche Rundfunk. In October 1944, she was transferred to a propaganda section of the Wehrmacht, which provided a programme in Hilversum under the name *'Radio Arnhem'*. It

was *Mary's* job to seduce the Allies at the Nijmegen bridgehead to defect. For more than four months she remained on the air with sometimes exact data about places and names of the British. With her talk and proposals, she was extremely detrimental to the morale of the troops.

A 21-year-old blonde, Gerda Markov (on the left above), who was married to a radio technician, replaced *'Mary'* when she sometimes had to stay in bed due to a chronic kidney disease. Gerda lived in New York for some time before the war and also spoke English fluently. After the liberation, both women were tracked down and imprisoned in The Hague.

English-speaking reporters eagerly dropped by to finally discover who was behind that seductive voice. "She has black hair, grey-blue eyes and a vibrant, oval face. She is just tall enough not to be called "petite", was the description of BBC journalist: Robert Dunnet.

He also reported that Sensburg was married to a Wehrmacht officer, from whom she has not heard anything since he marched against the Russians at Potsdam a few weeks earlier.

For her broadcasts, Sensburg appears to have extracted detailed troop information from prisoners of war, whom she visited in hospital. Intercepted mail also sometimes revealed useful details. And, ironically, the BBC and English-language news agencies provided fast and accurate news that could be distorted.

For example, the offending report about the Battle of the Bulge was taken from a British news agency. "All I had to do was read the Reuters text," Sensburg laughed.

She was still combative long after the war ended. She kept repeating that she did not understand the choice of the US and Great Britain. "The war between the German and British people is pointless. We should have formed a united front against the Bolshevik danger," she still reasoned. "Provided the conditions are right for Germany."

The following story was published in a newspaper called 'The Argus' on 15th May, 1945:

'Mary of Arnhem is Imprisoned in the Hague.'

The Nazis' glamour radio announcer "Mary of Arnhem" worked in the London office of the Asiatic Petroleum Company – the international representatives of Shell – from 1935 until a month before the

war stated in 1939. She travelled to the city daily from lodgings at Coulsdon, a London suburb, near Croydon airfield. She revealed this on Sunday when a Daily Express representative, Paul Holt, interviewed her in the front parlour of a suburban villa at The Hague in Holland, where she is guarded by five young Dutch Partisans armed with Sten guns.

Her real name is Helene Sandsburg [sic]. In private life she is the wife of a Captain of German cavalry, whom she married recently, and who is now a prisoner of the Red Army. Over Radio Hilversum she used to put over a special programme to the Allied troops called "Arnhem Calling." Her pay-off line at the end of sessions was "Goodnight boys, take care of yourselves," which she always got off with a sinister sex-appeal, which sent cold chills up and down the Tommies' spines.

She adored Hitler and told Holt: "I would like to think he died in battle." She described 'Lord Haw-Haw' Joyce also as "The kind of man who would like to die in battle." She refused to believe it when told that he ran away from his office in Hamburg, leaving his secretary behind, and tried to escape to Denmark.

She has a big bundle of clippings from British newspapers referring to her broadcasts, which she enjoys reading. Holt describes her: Age 31, height 5ft 5in. Hair dark brown. "She is" he adds "of the wide-eyed, witty, intrusive, understanding type - good girl at a party because she would behave."