

The Belgian & Netherlands Independent Brigade Groups



Brigadier Jean-Baptiste Piron (right), commander of the 1st Belgian Brigade



Colonel AC de Ruyter van Steveninck (right), commander of the Netherlands 'Prinses Irene' Brigade, presenting the Brigade with its colours

A Brief History

The Netherlands and Belgian Independent Brigades were both formed in South Wales in 1941 from a nucleus of evacuated military personnel and volunteers. Starting small, the brigades steadily grew as suitable recruits answered the call from all over the world. While training, the Brigades also fulfilled the vital role of securing the Welsh coastal defences at a time when the British Army was at its most vulnerable.

Although designated as Brigades, these units were small; they were reinforced Motor Infantry Battalions, each comprising three company-sized Motorised 'Fighting Groups', a Field Artillery Battery (the 'Belgian' Battery actually being formed by men from Luxembourg), a reconnaissance element and other combat support services. The Belgian Brigade also possessed an Engineer Company. However, despite the similar organisation, the Netherlands Brigade remained significantly weaker than the Belgian Brigade.

The intention was for these formations to be combined arms 'proto-armies' of infantry, armour, artillery, engineers, etc. They were to be very well equipped with vehicles and support weapons, thus enabling rapid expansion to full brigade strength once the recruiting areas had been liberated. Indeed, the combined arms nature of these formations demonstrated a high degree of forward thinking, as these would act as nuclei for each arm of service, enabling the rapid creation of new national armies in the liberated territories, thus maintaining stability in the post-war political environment.

The 'Netherlands 'Prinses Irene' Independent Brigade Group' and the '1st Belgian Independent Brigade Group' landed in Normandy in July 1944. The brigades were both placed under the overall command of the British 6th Airborne Division (part of British I Corps). Both brigades were attached to 6th Airlanding Brigade, commanded by Brigadier Edward Flavell, and were

responsible for the army's extreme left flank on the Channel coast, alongside the British 1st & 4th Commando Brigades, which were also under 6th Airborne Division command.

Despite their small size, the two brigades gave a good account of themselves in initial skirmishes and in their first major operation: Operation 'Paddle', the advance to the Seine in August 1944. The Belgian Armoured Car Squadron in particular won strong praise from 6th Airborne Division for its dash and élan, which included the capture of a bunkered German coastal defence stronghold without any infantry support! Both the Belgian Armoured Car Squadron and the Netherlands Reconnaissance Squadron worked very closely with the 6th Airborne Armoured Reconnaissance Regiment during this rapid campaign of manoeuvre.

With the withdrawal of 6th Airborne Division to the UK at the very end of August, the brigades were transferred to the 49th (West Riding) Division for the last few days of the Normandy Campaign and the crossing of the Seine itself. The brigades were about to join the assault on the German fortress of Le Havre when they were withdrawn from the line and transferred to the Guards Armoured Division (British XXX Corps) for the 'Great Swan' across France to Belgium.

Upon arrival in Belgium, the brigades were split up:

The 1st Belgian Brigade's Story, September 1944 to May 1945

The 1st Belgian Independent Brigade Group (commonly known as 'Brigade Piron' after its charismatic commander, Jean-Baptiste Piron) marched through Brussels to ecstatic scenes. They then spent much of September occupying and pacifying Belgium; being greeted by their overjoyed countrymen (and women!) everywhere they went. However, the Brigade was soon into action again in support of Operation 'Market Garden' (the 'First Netherlands Campaign'). The Armoured Cars and the Luxembourg Field Artillery Battery had already been in action during the operation, having been detached to support XXX Corps' drive north to Eindhoven. The Brigade remained in the Netherlands until 17th November, fighting with the British VIII Corps and US XIX Corps in the operations to expand and defend 21st Army Group's salient in the country.

Meanwhile, thousands of volunteers (mainly men of the Belgian resistance movement) had rallied to the colours and the brigade had to be withdrawn from the front to enable training and expansion to take place. During this period the brigade was also engaged in occupation, guard and supplementary police operations throughout Belgium, alongside many other Belgian units that were being formed to create the new Belgian Army.

Having finally been expanded to full brigade strength of three Infantry Battalions, plus a full Armoured Car Regiment, Engineer Company, Machine Gun Company and Field Artillery Regiment, the Belgians were re-activated in April 1945 and came under the command of 51st (Highland) Division (Canadian II Corps) for the final assault on German-held Holland. However, the 2nd Infantry Battalion and the Field Artillery Regiment were detached to the 4th Commando Brigade (sometimes being 'loaned' to 116th Royal Marines Infantry Brigade) and consequently fought their last battles in the Second Netherlands Campaign alongside their old Normandy comrades from the Royal Marines and the Netherlands Brigade.

The Netherlands 'Prinses Irene' Brigade's Story, September 1944 to May 1945

While the Belgians were training new recruits in their home country, the Dutch were still in the war and were burning to liberate their homeland. Having stayed with XXX Corps when the Belgians departed, the 'Princess Irene' Brigade accompanied the 43rd (Wessex) Division, 50th (Northumbrian) Division and 8th Armoured Brigade in Operation 'Market Garden', following in the wake of the Guards Armoured Division up 'Hell's Highway' to Eindhoven and Nijmegen. They received a rapturous welcome from their liberated countrymen, though these joyful scenes were punctuated by fierce battles as XXX Corps, supporting the American paratroopers of the 82nd and

101st Airborne Divisions, defended 'The Corridor' against strong German assaults from the east and west.

Sadly, due to the ultimate failure of Operation 'Market Garden' in September 1944, only a small portion of the Netherlands was liberated in the First Netherlands Campaign and therefore, only a small number of insurgents and volunteers were subsequently recruited to the 'Prinses Irene' Brigade. The small number of recruits did however, mean that they could be trained 'on the job' by the brigade's Training & Reserve Company and the brigade stayed in action throughout the autumn winter, while their Belgian comrades were withdrawn for reorganisation and expansion. The 'Prinses Irene' Brigade therefore managed to expand only slightly, with depleted units being brought back up to strength and a fourth motorised infantry company being added.

During the Autumn the 'Irenes' came back under the command of the British I Corps for Operation 'Pheasant' (the clearance of German forces south of the Maas) and supported the 51st (Highland) Division during its assault on Tilburg in the last weeks of October. Following the fall of Tilburg, the Brigade was then transferred to Zeeland and was in reserve, under command of 52nd (Lowland) Division (Canadian II Corps) during Operation 'Infatuate' (the assault on Walcheren). The Brigade stayed in Zeeland during the winter, being placed under the command of 4th Commando Brigade, with whom the Irenes stayed until March 1945, when they came under the command of 116th Royal Marines Infantry Brigade and were reunited with elements of the 1st Belgian Brigade for the final campaign to liberate their country.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Hanno Spoelstra and Dirk Leegwater for their help with compiling the order of battle of the Princess Irene Brigade, and Rob van Meel for providing information on the brigade's vehicle markings.

I would like to thank Mr Hans Sonneman of the Museum, Brigade & Garde Regiment Prinses Irene for his invaluable help, as well as for giving his permission to reproduce the pictures in the Dutch section below. His museum's website can be found [here](#).

I would also like to thank Jean-Louis & Georgette Marichal for granting their permission to use the photo of Brigadier Piron and the Belgian formation signs. Their superb website detailing the organisation and history of 'Brigade Piron' can be found [here](#).

Richard van de Velde's excellent site on the Prinses Irene Brigade can be found [here](#).

Finally, my thanks to Nigel Maddaford for correcting and polishing the Netherlands order of battle.