

## Fighting Basques – English Translation MD Power 27<sup>th</sup> April 2020

**José María Irala, a war child in Operation Market Garden.** As you well know if you follow this blog, the purposes of this historical recreation are many: experimental archaeology; dissemination of history; advice on projects for film or television; and also, as in this case, memory. With this scenography, the Sancho de Beurko Association pays tribute to José María Irala Vara, a Basque war child who fought in Operation Market Garden.

29<sup>th</sup> March, 2020- Guillermo Tabernilla - Asociación Sancho de Beurko.

### Photo

The publication in 2018 of the book 'Combatientes Vascos en la Segunda Guerra Mundial' (Basque Combatants in the Second World War) by the publishing house Desperta Ferro, left us some unfinished scenes that had been planned but were not done due to lack of time and means, or if they were done were not in the end published. For those people who are not aware of it, the Fighting Basques Project is a memory project of the Sancho de Beurko Association that combines historical recreation and photography with the aim of creating scenes from the past in order to present them to society at large in a convincing way. We see this recreation as a part of culture and not as an end in itself, that is to say, a means to complete, through these images, research works based fundamentally on family history and to make visible a generation, the one that was born in the period between the wars, a time in which the old Europe became the battlefield of all ideologies. This is a question that would enter fully into the field of memory. We believe that it is more important for this representations to be true historical facts, which would distance us from a certain reductionism that has become established in the academic world, which sees historical recreation only as a kind of cultural performance with "tourist, leisure and educational"<sup>(1)</sup> aims. Beyond such one-sided simplifications, the phenomenon is much more complex and we believe that there is room to move forwards with a serious and rigorous proposal that could even go from memory to experimental archaeology, a discipline that until now seemed to be restricted to ancient times - but let's not anticipate events.

At first, this project that began in 2015 was limited to the period 1939-1945 and to the allied side, but as our recreation is pioneering the representation of the Spanish Civil War in the Basque Country, it has been decided to begin the history from 1936. Within this group, Germans, Italians and Japanese have also been recreated but only as a support for the sets and mostly from a private source since as an association we do not take part in public representations or recreations for the sake of preserving our creative freedom, never because of a discriminatory issue. In this way, we try to generate a discreet ambiance around our friends and collaborators to be able to work with calm as we refer to the group of people that work in an advanced way with the concept of private living history, such as the 6<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Durham Light Infantry, Northwest Paratroopers and British Corps, among others with whom we have been collaborating. The result is the photo sessions that we have been publishing for the last two years in various media. Since we have always counted on the help of our friends from Desperta Ferro in our projects, we have committed ourselves to writing a series of articles with all this graphic material to support the laudable editorial effort they are making to publish information that allows people to take in culture in their homes for which we are very grateful, and to temper the effects of this coronavirus pandemic.

**Photo** José María Irala's section in England in July 1944. Source: <https://paradata.uk/media/9286>

The set design in homage to José María Irala Vara, one of the two war children who fought with the British in 1944 - the other was Lucio Sauquillo Echevarría - was finally made on April 23<sup>rd</sup> 2018, when the book had already been given to Desperta Ferro, even though his biography, totally unknown until then, was one of those dealt with in the text, but it did not arrive in time to be published. Born

in Bilbao in 1923 and living in the Biscayan town of Getxo, he was evacuated with his brother Rafael to England in 1937, and later was not claimed by his parents, who had gone into exile in Bayonne and wanted to spare their children the drama of the civil war. By the time they had returned to Spain, the war in Europe had already begun, so the lads stayed there. José María lived for a time at Mrs. Woodbine's house at 24 Meadow Road in Dudley, near Birmingham, where he joined the British Army on April 6<sup>th</sup> 1943. His military record describes him as a young man of 1.65 m in height and weighed 57 kg. who after a brief stint with one of the regiments of the Royal Armoured Corps (RAC), was transferred to Commander C.F.H. "Freddy" Gough's 1<sup>st</sup> Airborne Reconnaissance Squadron based at Ruskington (Lincolnshire) on February 3<sup>rd</sup> 1944 (2). In the words of Cornelius Ryan(3) it was a unique squad of its kind in the entire British Army that would employ him on jeeps and motorcycles attached to the 1<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division in Operation Market Garden.

**Operation Market Garden.** With the ambitious plan of Marshal Montgomery, it was expected to take a series of bridges in Holland over the Meuse, Waal and Rhine rivers with American, British and Polish airborne forces and wait for the arrival of their own armoured columns. Then, an offensive would be launched in which the German Fifteenth Army would be seriously compromised, causing a quick end to the war at the end of 1944 when it would cross the Ruhr basin and finally arrive in Berlin. It would be up to the British paratroopers to take and secure the Arnhem Bridge on the Rhine, the furthest away of all of them. This was the biggest airborne operation of the whole of the Second World War. All the members of the squadron, including José María Irala, were trained as paratroopers at Ringway Air Base.

**Photo** – Portrait of José María Irala Source: <https://www.paradata.org.uk/media/9286>

Between 12.40 and 2.30 p.m. on 17<sup>th</sup> September 1944, Gough's men parachuted into the drop zone and then got into their jeeps, although they had to make do with just under three-quarters of their vehicles, sped towards neighbouring Oosterbeek trusting their fortunes to the firepower of their Vickers K machine guns and towed 20 mm Polsten guns with the aim of reaching the Arnhem Bridge before the infantry. But the lack of armour of those light vehicles- a circumstance they tried to alleviate by placing the spare wheels in front of the radiators to offer some protection- soon became evident, as the vanguard jeeps fell in an ambush woven by German armoured vehicles. Allied intelligence had made the serious mistake of not detecting the presence of two SS Panzer divisions, even though they were quite far from the launching areas (4). In the end, Gough's men were unable to advance to Arnhem in the vanguard, as did Lieutenant Colonel Frost's 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion paratroopers, who were the first to reach the bridge that would give its name to Richard Attenborough's extraordinary film 'A Bridge Too Far'.

From then on the squadron vehicles increased their efforts to maintain communication between Arnhem and Oosterbeek, where General Urquhart, head of the 1<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, would set up his command post, but these sorties became more and more desperate and on September 19<sup>th</sup> Frost proposed to break the siege with two jeeps and a Bren machine gun to open a corridor to allow through the arrival of the Polish paratroopers that were still in England due to the bad weather. But all was in vain and all attempts to rescue the men trapped in Arnhem failed due to the pressure they were under from the German troops, and a house-to- house battle ensued that lasted until the following day. On September 20<sup>th</sup> the SS armoured vehicles finally made their way to the Arnhem Bridge, sealing the fate of Frost and his men. It seems that this was the day José María Irala died. His section was waiting for orders from the command at the Hartenstein Hotel in Oosterbeek when a German self-propelled howitzer hit the British target and as the men jumped into their jeeps the young Basque fell mortally wounded by machine gun fire. It is told by his comrade John Marshall:

"At the signal we simultaneously jumped onto the vehicles and the squadron moved at full speed. Violent machine gun fire from the armoured vehicle riddled the last jeep. The jeep had already started moving but the paratrooper Joe Irala, who was jumping in at the time, was hit. John Marshall

remembers how he was pulled out as he complained of being hit in the leg, but it was obvious that the injuries were much more serious. “When I saw what had happened to him”, said Marshall, “I made straight to the first aid station in Hartenstein. They shot at us all the way but I took no notice. When we arrived Joe was already unconscious.”

In fact, Irala, the boy who had come from Spain to fight for the British, had been hit by a machine gun shell in the stomach and died 30 minutes later. For Marshall it was a particularly tragic episode because there was a great friendship between the two men that transcended differences of rank. I continue to remember him even today,” said Marshall, “as a wonderful soldier, very intelligent, immensely brave, and with a quality that the average Englishman does not have; that of great personal loyalty.” (5)

**Photo** The gravestone of José María Irala in the Arnhem/Oosterbeek Commonwealth War Cemetery. © The War Graves Photographic Project

Market Garden failed and Oosterbeek’s siege held firm until the night of 26<sup>th</sup> of September, when only 2,163 of the 10,000 men who made up the 1<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division managed to cross the Rhine River to the other bank, where Sosabowski’s Polish paratroopers were waiting for them. The rest were taken prisoner or lay dead. Irala’s body was found in the gardens of St. Elizabeth’s hospital in Arnhem and is buried in the Commonwealth War Cemetery in Arnhem/Oosterbeek (the Netherlands). In 2017 we contacted Steve and Sandra Rogers, coordinators of The War Grave Photographic Project, to ask them for a photograph of his gravestone we could include in our memory project and to find out where he was so that we could pay tribute to his memory as soon as possible.

The historical recreation is the story. As far as the scenery is concerned, it took us the whole of the year 2017 and part of 2018 to gather the necessary materials to move virtually to the Netherlands in September 1944 during Operation Market Garden. With the idea of working in a controlled environment and simulate the environment of one of the two towns of Arnhem and Oosterbeek, we opted for the latter as there were some amateur recordings from there that showed the arrival of the Irala squad jeeps being welcomed by the local population which was warm and effusive. One of these recordings is that of the dentist Clous, which shows jeeps, motorcycles, paratroopers advancing in small groups, members of the resistance, children waving little Dutch flags etc.

## Video

We thought of a house that resembled those in the Netherlands and we came up with Villa Urrutia, which has been the town hall of Güeñes (Vizcaya) since 1974. We asked their City Council for permission which without any problem they gave us the go ahead and it became our first of two stages in action. A beautiful and colourful Spanish-American house with marked modernist touches with spectacular steps that lead to the street, away from the main road, a suitable ambiance for three civilians standing there; a man and two women welcoming the paratroopers that were coming through Oosterbeek among cheers on the afternoon of September 17<sup>th</sup> 1944, when there was still hope of victory. The pavement allowed for the placement of a powerful period piece for the proposed scene: a road sign with the indication that Arnhem was 4 km away. In addition, some reproductions of Dutch posters from the time of the end of the occupation of Nazi Germany were hung on the wall. These materials, elaborated after a process of documentation research, gave the scene credibility with hardly any modification whilst achieving the appropriate setting. In this sense, as well as Clous’ home video, the scene in ‘A Bridge Too Far’ in which Dr. Jan Spaander (played by Laurence Olivier) arrives at the home of Mrs. Kate Ter Horst (Liv Ullmann) accompanied by a British medical officer (Richard Kane) served as inspiration for some of the photographs that illustrate this article.

**Photo** Scenery of Operation Market Garden for the Fighting Basques Project. © José Pablo Pérez Gutiérrez, Alma & You

The second scene was to represent the final siege of Oosterbeek, when the paratroopers entrenched themselves waiting for reinforcements that never arrived, and we made the most of the exterior of the Santiago chapel (Galdames, Biscay), near Güeñes and this allowed all the production team and the recreators to be moved within reasonable time thus lowering costs. Except for placing a parachute in the ruins around the chapel and a wooden fence, nothing had to be modified to achieve a good setting.

The question of the jeep deserves a special mention. The Jeeps of the British paratroopers had a very peculiar camouflage design called Mickey Mouse - not that all the vehicles that took part in Market Garden were painted in this way, far from it, but this choice required adding colour to the drab olive green on which were factory painted large black circles that resembled Mickey Mouse's ears, hence the name. For the set we had a jeep Willys MB Hotchkiss kindly loaned by our partner and recreator Eder Artal which had three different colours of paint as in the French camouflage design: green, black and brown. It was therefore necessary to remove the brown blotches by covering the vehicle with nets and leaving the green and black colours visible. To complete the setting, the vehicle was fitted with a wooden model of the Vickers K machine gun in the co-driver's seat, a spare wheel in front of the radiator and various other props such as number plates and airborne emblems on the front bumper and wheel, command rucksacks, ammunition boxes, pickaxe, shovel, ropes, etc. In addition to this the Beurko Sancho Association made extra effort to get an original British WS 19 radio complete with power supply, variometer, junction box, microphone, headset, cables and connectors that was installed in the back of the jeep. It was moved by our friend José Félix Vilariño who did all the transfers diligently thanks to the help given by Txema Sagastizabal, a Basque mechanic who is well known for his love of these models and who let us have a trailer, a tractor and an original spare wheel.

**Photo** - Scenery of Operation Market Garden for Fighting Basques Project. © José Pablo Pérez Gutiérrez, Alma & You

The work of the recreators – a total of eight participated in the session – was extraordinary and very stimulating for the whole team with the result that can be seen in the photographs; Raquel Rodriguez, Beatriz Gabriel and Raúl Lozano were in charge of the three civilian characters creating these by dressing them up in period costume and using many other personal effects. Emilio Pirla, from the well known hat shop 'Sombrería Gorostiaga' (Bilbao), kindly gave us some Fedora hats, a model that was widely used during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and women's berets. Igor Jubindo (lieutenant), Eder Artal (driver), Eneko Tabernilla (trooper) and Iñaki Peña (radio operator) were in charge of the characters in the jeep of Irala's reconnaissance squad. They wore reproductions of the battle dress uniform with the cloth colour of the end of the war in Europe, as well as jackets, especially the "Denison" ones manufactured by Kay Canvas that guarantees faithful reproductions, and complete British paratrooper equipment: Helmet, "bleached" leathers or dyed to the KG3 standard, gaiters, ammo boots, maroon beret with the Reconnaissance Corps insignia, etc. Javier Petuya created a German non-commissioned officer who captured a group of British wearing a combination of Feldgrau warrior and Dot 44 camouflage trousers that were very common among SS troops during the battle. To obtain this result, the collaboration of renowned British props manufacturers, experts in World War Two such as Colin Hodgson (Relics) or Warren Reynolds (Shoot and Scoot-Airsoft Customs), and the help of the professionals we usually work with, such as Ana (Trapagaran) from 'Academia de Corte y Confección' (Academy of design and fashion) and the shoe shop Ancor Zapatería (Ortuella) were very important. The list of friends who loaned us articles would be very long, like Ricardo Fernández Munilla or Igor Jubindo himself. We enlisted an assistant to

coordinate such good people and who could rely on the help of our friends Iñigo Artal and Raquel Llano who are ready to help with any need we may have.

A special mention should be made of our photographer, José Pablo Pérez Gutiérrez, from Alma & You Photography, with whom we have collaborated on several occasions and who always adapts to each set with his colourful and personal style. The choice of artists like Pablo has always been a premise since the birth of Fighting Basques, because from all the photographs taken only a few are selected, as we believe that not everything is valid in recreation. Pablo thus joins others like Jesús Valbuena, José Luis Revuelta, Carlos Luengo Jesús Quintero, Sergi Suhigarai, David Martin, Wais Sverus and Others who, in addition to contributing their own vision of the world and their experience, have allowed us to grow as a project, accompanying us on a path that will depend on our own ability to maintain over time this effort of reconstruction that after almost five years we hope will be to your liking.

**Photo** – Photo Gallery – All images ©José Pablo Pérez Gutiérrez, Alma & You

**Guillermo Tabernilla**, researcher and founder of the Sancho de Beurko Association, directed 'El Cinturón de Hierro' (The Iron Belt); catalog for the Heritage Directorate of the Basque Government and is, together with Pedro J. Oiarzabal, principal investigator of the Fighting Basques Project, a project of report on Basques in World War II in collaboration with Memoria Bizia and the North American Basque Organisations (NABO). A specialist in military and family history, his latest research examines diaspora communities for Basque veterans. As a communicator and expert in historical recreation and set design, he has participated in radio and television programs, short films, documentaries, exhibitions, etc. His books include Saibigain, the Mount of Blood (2002), The Euzkadi Disciplinary Corps (2004), A UGT militiaman (2006), The Alava Front, Part 1, from July 18 to the battle de Villarreal (2006), Cecilia G. de Guilarte, CNT reporter (2007), The Soviets in the Provisional Government of Euzkadi (2012) and The report of the Republic for the loss of the northern front (2013) and Basque fighters in World War II (2018).

## Notes

(1) Raposo, P. (2008): "Performing culture: historical recreations and heritage interpretations", in Pereiro, X.; Prado, S.; Takenaka, H. (coords.): Cultural heritages: education and interpretation. Crossing limits and producing alternatives, 12. Donostia: Ankulegi Antropologia Elkartea, p. 77.

(2) Jose Maria Irala's Army Service Record. Glasgow: Army Personnel Centre, Support Division Historical Disclosures.

(3) Ryan, C. (2005): A Bridge Too Far. Barcelona: Unpublished, p. 122.

(4) Actually, there was only one armoured unit in the immediate vicinity, the ss-panzer-aufklärungs-abteilung 9, equipped with light armour but with plenty of capacity to annihilate the squad's jeeps. The armoured forces for those two divisions came from outside the Arnhem area (Buckingham, W. F. (2019): Arnhem: The Complete Story of Operation Market Garden 17-25 September 1944, Gloucestershire: Amberley Publishing).

(5) Fairley, J. (1978): Remember Arnhem: The Story of the 1st Airborne Reconnaissance Squadron at Arnhem. Aldershot: Pegasus Journal, p. 119, quoted at

<https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:F0nwDnitbLMJ:https://paradata.org.uk/people/jose-m-irala+&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=en>.