

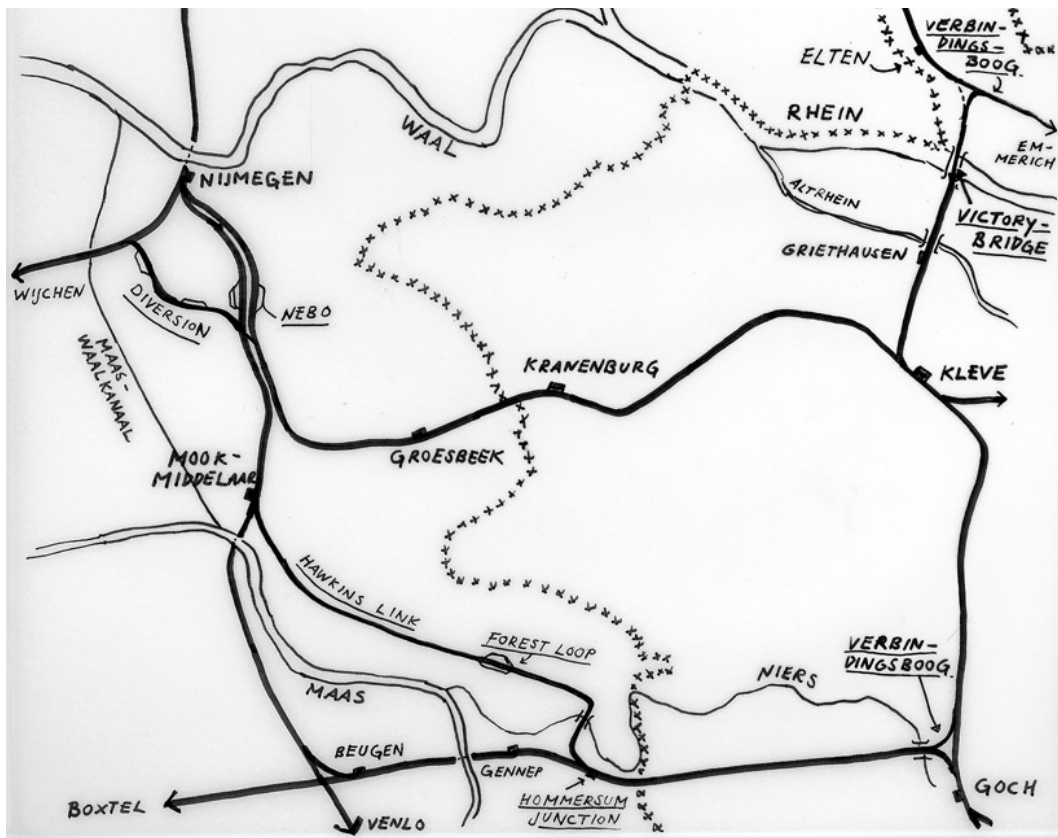
## Military Railway Lines around Nijmegen (the Netherlands), 1945-1946

In Winter 1944-45 the British military 182 R.O.C. (Railway Operating Company) Royal Engineers built some railway lines in the Netherlands between Wijchen near Nijmegen and Hommersum in Germany with the aim of avoiding Nijmegen. The reason was that the overloaded station of Nijmegen was still under reach of German fire, which would hamper allied military transports which were dearly needed to support the invasion of Germany. The existing railway lines to Venlo and Gennep could not be used because the railway bridges spanning the river Maas near Mook and Gennep had been demolished, therefore an alternative railway connection had to be built. This military railway line was cut through the Heumensoord forest near Nijmegen and was laid along the Rijksweg (the metalled State road) between Mook and Gennep. This rather simple diversion line used parts of existing railway lines for a more-or-less safe connection towards the Allied front line which was on the move towards the river Rhine. These military railway lines south and south-east of Nijmegen disappeared after the end of WW2 just as swiftly as they were laid and so existed for not more than one year.

### Diversion

The first leg of these military railway lines measured five kilometres and was dubbed the Avoiding Link or Diversion line. The Diversion line branched off from the existing 's-Hertogenbosch-Nijmegen railway line at milepost km.62.8 near railway cabin no.60, approximately 800 metres east of the railway bridge crossing the Maas-Waal connection canal near Wijchen, which railway bridge was repaired by the British Sappers. This location is now the commercial centre Winkelsteeg. The Diversion paralleled the forest road "Weg door het Jonkersbos" on the west side; where the road zig-zags the railway line crossed over, then also crossed the Hatertseweg and turned slightly to the right towards the level crossing with the Rijksweg, just south of the Grootstalselaan. The Diversion line passed the forest north of Heumensoord over a path parallel to the Scheidingsweg. For this purpose the forest path was widened to 25 metres. Before the path ended, the line made a sharp right-hand turn. Nowadays one can still distinguish there some interrupted lines of old beech trees. The Diversion line now connected with a series of turnouts onto the parallel single-track railway lines Nijmegen-Venlo and Nijmegen-Kleve at about milepost km.21.9 which is about 100 metres north of railway cabin no.14. Just before the joining point at the Venlo line one can still distinguish a low embankment. Supposedly this is one of the scarce remains of the navvies' jobs to enable the junction for the Diversion. The existing railway line towards Kleve over Groesbeek could not be used due to heavy damage and because it was still under German artillery fire on the north bank of the Rhine.

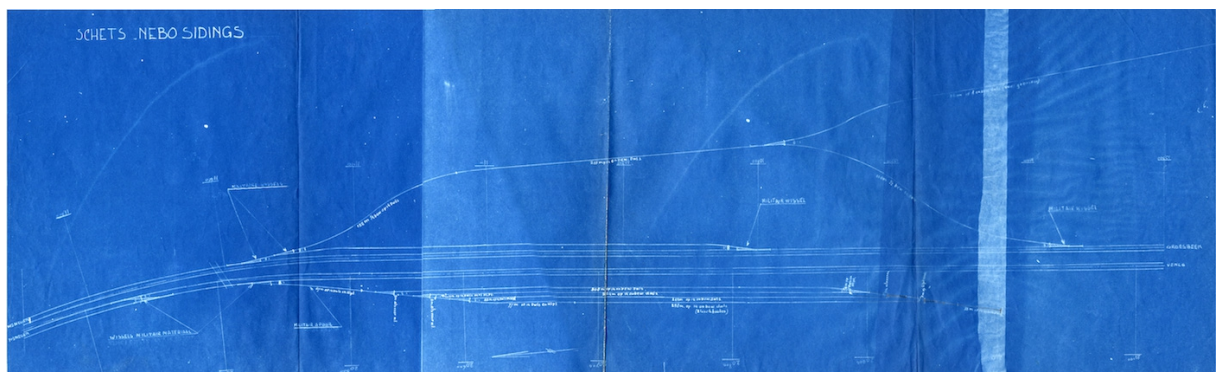
This Diversion Line was built within four weeks and operations started on February 23, 1945. For safeguarding the railway and level crossings a number of crossing huts (the superstructures of former closed freight vans) were placed as stationary shelters for sentries assigned to these duties. These men announced trains on to the next guarding point and were a sort of blockmen. Crossing huts were placed on both ends of passing loops, next to the Weg door het Jonkersbos, at the level crossings with the Hatertseweg and Grootstalselaan, at the tramway line crossing the Rijksweg (west of this location there was a short spur) and at the level crossing with the Beukenlaan (just before the Diversion joined the line towards Nijmegen).



*Map of the railway lines south-east of Nijmegen in 1945-1946, drawn by V.M. Lansink*

## Nebo sidings

Where there is now a sporting area at the D'Almarasweg in Nijmegen, on both sides of the railway lines to Mook and Venlo (between mileposts km.20.4 and 21.1) and to Groesbeek and Kleve (between mileposts km.10.5 and 11.2) some spurs were laid for shunting and loading of the military trains: these were dubbed the Nebo sidings. West of the railway a four-track shunting yard was built and on the east side a passing loop was built with a spur leading to the rear side of the Nebo monastery at the Sionsweg. This monastery was being used as a military hospital. [W.L.R.: Mount Nebo in the Bible is where Moses died. Probably the monastery took its name from this.]



*The Nebo-sidings on a blueprint from 1946, archive of the NS (Dutch Railways), Dienst van Weg en Werken (the Utrecht Archive).*

### Hawkins Link and Hommersum Junction

The next leg of the military railway towards Germany was dubbed the Hawkins Link. This connection measured 15 kilometres and was finished on February 26, 1945 after just two weeks' work. This line branched off at the Mook-Middelaar station in a westerly direction, then turned to the east and again to the west of the Bovensteweg in Mook (at the level crossing with the Groesbeekseweg there was a crossing hut). From there the line was where nowadays we find the Pastoor Fabritiusstraat and then it paralleled the Rijksweg through the villages of Plasmolen and Milsbeek. The railway line here was on the eastern side of the road, which was peculiar as there was another railway line on the opposite side of the Rijksweg: the Maas-Buurtspoorweg (MBS) local tramway line. In Milsbeek the military railway line turned away from the road and went straight through the village to the south side of the Onderkant. Where nowadays there is the CNC compost factory at the Driekronenstraat, then there was a two-track passing loop dubbed Forest Loop, probably after the Reichswald which is at some distance. Forest Loop was guarded by British sentries who stayed without intermission in the covered goods van (a former air raid warning vehicle) which was placed alongside the railway.



Stills from the movie *The Battle of the Reichswald*, during construction works on the Hawkins Link, 1945.

The railway line continued parallel to the Aaldonksestraat, but at approximately 100 metres distance, and just after the Maria Roepaan monastery near Ottersum it turned sharply to the south, then crossed the River Niers over a temporary railway bridge where a former goods van body was placed. From there the line passed the Oord farm and the Oordseweg and finally joined the Boxtel-Goch railway line at milepost km.50.1 which is 1.5 kilometres east of the Gennep station, near the present-day military area of the Looier Heide (Looier Moors). This junction was named Hommersum Junction, after a village some kilometres away across the border line. Adjacent to this junction a former goods van was placed which functioned as a signal cabin and was staffed continuously by British soldiers. On February 27 the first train to use this railway line transported fuel. As the Hawkins Link (*which was named after engineer Laurence Edward Hawkins, 1902-1992*) was built in a record time of 14 days, it is obvious that the construction was rather provisional. Rails and sleepers were simply laid in the sand instead of on the more usual gravel trackbed which drains better. Later on it seems some gravel was dumped on the sandy trackbed. Although the maximum permitted speed on the line was 30 km/h, several derailments happened. In the spring of 1946 part of the trackbed near Ottersum is rumoured to have been washed away by the swollen river Niers. From Hommersum Junction the military transports could travel on the Boxteler Bahn (Boxtel railway) over Hommersum and Hassum, which again crosses the River Niers just before Goch.



Little is known about how many trains used these military railway lines and what kind of goods these transports contained. In the beginning the supply of goods to the front line will have prevailed and later on also troops, wounded, prisoners of war and repatriates. In springtime 1945 train traffic near Gennep will have been rather dense. Fortunately, after provisional reparations of the Gennep bridge in March 1945, the Gennep-Boxtel railway line could also be used. However, the train operations cannot have been an immaculate and streamlined operation as nearly all turnouts and signals at Gennep station had been put out of use. The British 182 R.O.C. were responsible for operating the military railway lines. To safeguard the train traffic on the Mook-Hommersum leg, the trains were worked with the staff system. For each block, the train driver had to receive the copper staff from the Blockman residing in the crossing hut and at the end of the block had to give it to the Blockman over there in the next hut. At Forest Loop and Hommersum Junction and at Gennep station the so called Military Railway Signalling was installed: rotably sign boards to allow a train to proceed into the loop or to halt it. In the last weeks of the war when the front line had moved deeper into Germany the railway line was mainly used by troop trains transporting soldiers on leave and repatriates. On June 11 traffic control over the military railway line was transferred to the Nederlandsche Spoorwegen (NS). Forest Loop then was renamed Milsbeek station and Hommersum Junction became Gennep Aansluiting (Gennep Junction).



*The Niers-bridge near Ottersum (photo provided by Frans Meeuws)*



*The signal-worker at Hommersum Junction during his work inbetween the trains (photo's provided by Frans Meeuws)*



*Hawkins Link at Plasmolen, next to Buitenlust Tea Garden. Photo from the book *De MaasBuurtspoorweg*, by P.J.M.Rutten, p.79*



*Rijksweg near Plasmolen, about 1945; at the right the tramway track of the MBS and in the background next to the ruined houses, the Hawkins Link is visible. Photo from collection Gemeentearchief Nijmegen, nr. GN10369.*

### **Victory Bridge**

Something more can be said with regard to these interesting military railway lines: just before Goch a curved connection track was built in a northerly direction towards the Kleve line. From Kleve the military trains could then follow their way over the former Trajektlinie of the REG (Rheinische Eisenbahn Gesellschaft, the railway line Kleve-Elten from 1865, which had included a railway ferry



(Trajekt) over the river Rhine that was discontinued in 1926). Between Spyck (near the southern jetty of the former ferry on the left-hand river bank) and Welle (the northern jetty on the right-hand river bank) a 713 metre-long railway bridge was improvised within 33 days: Victory Bridge. This was inaugurated on May 9, 1945.



*Victory Bridge between Spyck and Welle, photographed in April 1945 from the southern Rhine bank by Sgt Harry W. Sibson (934th Port Construction & Repair Company, Royal Engineers). Collection Malcolm H. Sibson.*

Although the northern part of the Trajektlinie was torn up in 1930, the British still could make use of the old trackbed; but where the Trajektlinie had turned westward to Elten, the British had to construct a curved connection line to the east in the direction of Emmerich. We still can see the former trackbed in the landscape. Also on topographical maps we see evidence and when glanced at one can easily come to think of a "fork" connection, like near Elst, but in reality there were two separate railway connections which never existed at the same time. Near Welle, on the Rhine river bank, one can still find concrete remains between the shrubs. The author assumes that the British army did not make a neat trackbed over here, but simply constructed a concrete slab on the spot to support the track. On the other hand, later on there may have been constructed a metalled road on or alongside the trackbed. At this location some more peculiar things can be found whose meaning or origin is unclear. Possibly these items have to do with the Trajekt (the railway ferry), but the author also observed an old river dike which comprised a kind of culvert (on the map below indicated with "SI"). In short, there have been at that place all kinds of infrastructure works. Anyone going there to look for remains is advised to go to the railway bridge over the Altrhein near Griethausen (between Kleve and Spyck). This very rusty bridge dates from 1863 and has been declared "Industrie-denkmal" (industrial heritage). If you wear boots you might search between the dense shrub on the south bank of the River Wild south-east of Elten (between the railway line Arnhem-Emmerich and the connecting curve mentioned): here you can see the ruined pillars and supports of the former REG-railway bridge over the River Wild.



*Map of the area Spyck/Welle/Elten (detail of Topographical map 1:50.000). The trackbed of the Trajektlinie can easily be recognised. On the southern river bank the railway track is still indicated. This track was in use until 1982 for an oil refinery in Spyck, but has been torn up many years ago. The slight curve to the right was made to reach the refinery. Originally the railway track went straight on alongside the road to the river bank. On the right-hand upper corner of the map one can distinguish the embankment for the curved connection line built by the British.*



*The former railway bridge of the REG which crossed over an ancient branch of the river Rhine near Griethausen, on the Kleve-Spyck railway line. This bridge from 1865 was undamaged in 1945 when the Allied army got there and it formed an important part of the route to the military railway Victory Bridge over the Rhine which is some kilometres farther away. Photo by V.M. Lansink on March 23, 2003.*





*At Welle we look from the northern dike along the Rhine towards the trackbed of the former Trajektlinie. Just right of the centre, where one sees the trees, is the spot where the Victory Bridge was. Between the shrubs one can see some possibly-related substance as well as the landing spot of the railway ferry. In the background one sees the Spyck oil refinery. Photo by V.M. Lansink on march 23, 2003.*

### **Tearing up the lines**

In the summer of 1946 the Hawkins Link, the Nebo sidings and in all probability also the Diversion line were lifted by the contractors A.M. Stuij of Nijmegen. The railway lines had lost their importance and also hindered normal road traffic, since the tracks sometimes lay simply across a road. The Victory Bridge near Spyck/Welle was also dismantled at this time. The NS seems to have used the bridge first for some freight trains, while waiting for the improvised bridges near Nijmegen and Oosterbeek to be completed (in August and December 1945 respectively). At the end of the 1940's there was some discussion in the NS of relaying tracks over the alignment of the Hawkins Line to serve a paper factory at Gennep. The probably reasons behind this are that one was not yet certain about the definitive reconstruction of the Maas bridge near Gennep (or perhaps wanted to reopen this only for normal road traffic) and therefore sought to create an alternative, cheaper route. Finally in July 1950 a permanent railway bridge over the Maas near Gennep was taken into use and the plans for these sidings were dropped..



*View from the General Gavinstreet at Mook on the Rijksweg towards Gennep. Here the Hawkins Link left Mook and was laid on the left-hand side of the Rijksweg. Nowadays almost nothing reminds us of this short-lived railway line. Photo by V.M. Lansink on May 28, 2005.*



Although former railway lines usually can easily be recognised in the landscape, the military railway lines south-east of Nijmegen left hardly any remains. The rather adventurous period at the time of construction, in combination with a lack of (known) photographs and reports have made a legend of these military railway lines. The author V.M.Lansink would be grateful to receive first-hand memories of witnesses of the operations, and also corrections or additions will be welcomed.

## Sources & Literature:

Find out more about activities of Victor M. Lansink on [www.railtrash.net](http://www.railtrash.net)

This article also appeared slightly edited in "Rond de grenssteen", published by Heemkundekring De Grenssteen Mook – Middelaar – Molenhoek, summer 2005, pages 16-20.

Read more about military railway lines south of Nijmegen:

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