

BB ORIGINAL

46233

A BALLANTINE



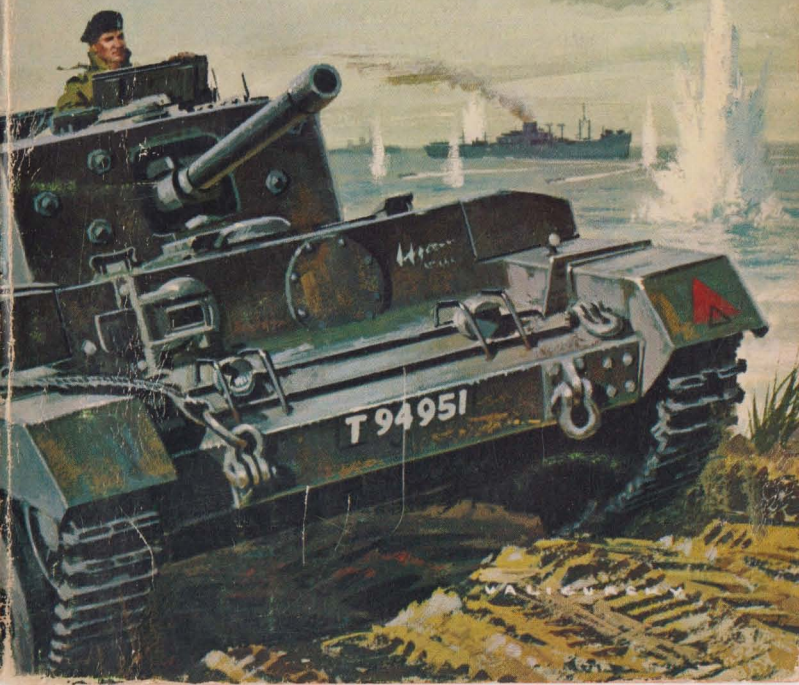
WAR BOOK

75¢

THE 85 DAYS

**THE CANADIAN FIRST ARMY IN THE SAVAGE
BATTLE FOR VICTORY IN EUROPE IN 1944**

R. W. THOMPSON



Foreword

In the final paragraph of his preface to the first edition of *The Second World War*, Major General J. F. C. Fuller wrote:

“Although there must be quite a number of errors in this book, as there will be in all books written on the recent war, my hope is that, as its subject is mainly strategical and tactical, there may be fewer than would be the case were it a purely heroic history, depicting for the most part events which never happened.”

I hold the reverse view. I believe my book could be described as an attempt at an heroic history of a very long and important battle, which is truly a series of battles. All the events “depicted” in it happened, and if I have erred it has been on the side of understatement, for heroism often is beyond the ordinary use of prose, and if one feels unable to express it beyond a doubt it is better to let it speak for itself in the deed. But it is not in this field of painstaking research, in the careful study of war diaries and records written on the spot in terse “unheroic” military terms, that errors are likely to occur. It is rather in the strategical and tactical field that a writer, whatever his qualifications, may err.

Inasmuch as my book deals with strategical and tactical matters—as it must—I may well have erred in my presentation of the facts. For the rest of my book is a true record. I was there. I saw a great deal of it.

All my war experiences have culminated in a desire to try to express the fortitude and endurance and the courage of the infantryman, and especially of the British foot soldier. He is us—the common man. That is what makes him so remarkable to me. I have sought in myself the why and wherefore on many battlefields, and I think the following passage from John Mulgan’s posthumous book *Report*

on Experience expresses very clearly a truth about the infantry, and about that body of men known as a battalion.

He writes of the "organization" of courage, and of its overwhelming importance, and goes on to say:

"Bravery is for most of us an acquired virtue. Many men can contemplate the idea of death with some philosophy. What is not so easy to contemplate is the physical effect of being torn in half by a shell. Modern war is deadly and impersonal and there is lacking very often the release of physical violence. Men have to walk forward under fire, quietly and in order, from one position to another, and no ordinary man enjoys this kind of thing.

The organization of courage comes from being part of a body of men who rely on each other and move together. This is what is called morale and has nothing to do with beliefs or speeches by politicians. Units of war who have this are unmistakable. It can be lost and regained. It needs at all times efficiency and a tightness of organization if it is to be held. You need to know when you go forward that others on your left and right are playing their part in a well-ordered plan. Their reliance on you, of which you are always conscious, gives you courage and strength and decision.

When old gentlemen talk about teamwork they are talking about morale in the same way but debasing it to a childish currency. The issues of war involve death, and death is rather more than an incident to the individual. This I remember being pointed out to a Brigadier who offered bottles of beer for prisoners brought back on a raid; the men who were going on the raid swore quietly among themselves, feeling that the raid and their lives were something more than a game of darts. Only afterwards, coming back from the raid, they might talk about it as a game, and then only among themselves. Their actions in war were not thrown open to outsiders for comment.

There is a deep satisfaction for most men in this experience. In the complexity of life men live as indi-

viduals. If they are swept up together, it is in some mob emotion that leaves behind it a bitter taste. In war, when you are working well together, you find the sober pleasure of working in concert with friends and companions and at the same time feeling pride in yourself for the part which you can play as an individual. This takes place in war against a background of issues which are large enough to be impressed in your mind as life and death, and victory and defeat."

Battles are won by men feeling these things—in spite of the Generals. That is how the Canadians and the British won the Battle of the Scheldt. There are bad Generals and bad Privates. It is no great matter. There is no place for bad Lieutenant Colonels. They are the cornerstones of an army.

I believe this passage of Mulgan's also expresses very well why so many of us, knowing the "crime" of it, and the ghastly unforgivable horror, look back on it, none the less, with nostalgia.

R. W. T.

Belchamp Walter.

Contents

Foreword	13
----------	----

Part One

THE ARGUMENT

1 The Argument	19
2 The Command Crisis	37

Part Two

SEPTEMBER

3 Fruits of Victory	46
4 The Fifteenth Army	55
5 The Wrong Battle	61
6 No Thunder on the Left	72

Part Three

OCTOBER

7 The Battlefield	77
8 The Ninth of October	92
9 Operation <i>Switchback</i>	103
10 Plans and Preliminaries	118
11 <i>Vitality</i>	123
12 Walcheren Eve	135

Part Four

v

NOVEMBER

13	<i>The Infatuates</i>	142
14	Assault Flushing	149
15	Assault Westkapelle	166
16	Operation No Name	190
17	The Bitter End on Walcheren	203
18	The Port is Opened	217

Acknowledgments

I am once more greatly indebted to the War Office for their valuable assistance, and to the Archivists of the Cabinet Office and Combined Operations Headquarters for their personal help in making all the records available to me.

I am especially grateful to the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, Washington, D.C., for permission to quote freely from Forrest Pogue's *The Supreme Command*, an invaluable document of the period.

The extract from John Mulgan's *Report on Experience* in the Foreword is used by courtesy of the Oxford University Press, and the extracts from *Triumph and Tragedy* are used by kind permission of the Rt. Hon. Sir Winston S. Churchill, K.G., O.M., C.H., Messrs. Cassell & Co. Ltd., and the Proprietor of the *Daily Telegraph*.

I am also indebted to Major John North for his kind interest, and for permission to quote from his *North-West Europe, 1944-45*, and to Her Majesty's Stationery Office for confirming Major North's permission to quote from their publication of his work, and for making available their file copies of out-of-print documents.

Finally I wish to express my most grateful thanks to Major General E. Hakewill Smith, C.B., C.B.E., M.C., for most carefully reading the proofs, checking the facts, and saving me from many small errors. For the rest, I have not sought, nor have I been given, anyone else's opinion on these operations, and above all I am grateful to Major General Hakewill Smith and others for not attempting at any time to influence me in the smallest degree. These are my views, and for all I know, mine alone.

“Do *you* know what it’s like? Of course you don’t. You have never slept in a hole in the ground which you have dug while someone tried to kill you. It is an open grave—and yet graves don’t fill up with water. They don’t harbor wasps or mosquitoes, and you don’t feel the cold, clammy wet that goes into your marrow. At night the infantryman gets some boards, or tin, or an old door, and puts it over one end of his slit trench; then he shovels on top of it as much dirt as he can scrape up near by. He sleeps with his head under this, not to keep out the rain, but to protect his head and chest from airbursts. In the daytime he chain-smokes, curses, or prays—all of this lying on his belly with his hands under his chest to lessen the pain from the blast. If it is at night, smoking is taboo. If there are two in a trench they sit at each end with their heads between their knees and make inane remarks . . . such as, ‘Guess that one landed in 12 Platoon.’”

*A Canadian Infantry Officer broadcasting,
November 1944*

I dedicate this book in admiration and humility to

The Infantrymen, the men of the Battalions, the Private Soldiers, the N.C.O.s, the W.O.s, the Platoon Commanders, the Company Commanders, and the Battalion Commanders, the Lieutenant-Colonels, to whom all these are "precious lives."

On the chests of the Generals the Honours these "bodies" have won are set out like cups on sideboards.

©, 1957, by R. W. Thompson

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 57-13098

First American Printing:

October, 1957

First Canadian Printing:

June, 1967

Printed in Canada.

BALLANTINE BOOKS, INC.
101 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10003

R. W. THOMPSON

The Eighty-Five Days

The Story of the Battle of the Scheldt

Ballantine Books • New York

ALSO BY R. W. THOMPSON

Dieppe at Dawn

Cry Korea

Men Under Fire

Land of To-morrow

Voice from the Wilderness

Devil at My Heels

Argentine Interlude

Down Under—An Australian Odyssey

Glory Hole

An Englishman Looks at Wales

Home in Ham

9 A.B.

Black Caribbean

Wild Animal Man

To-morrow We Live

Portrait of a Patriot

The Pink House in Angel Street

This is an original publication—not a reprint—published by
Ballantine Books, Inc.

On September 4th, 1944, the great port of Antwerp fell intact to the British 11th Armored Division—but not until November 28th, almost three months later, did the first Allied ships arrive at Antwerp with the supplies needed for final victory. The story of what happened in those 85 days is one of the most terrible and most controversial of the Second World War. John North, the British military historian, describes the battle as “one of the grimmest pictures in the whole invasion panorama.” He comments, “There can be little doubt that Field-Marshal Montgomery avoided the task until the last possible moment.”

The argument over the battle persists to this day. The first draft of the official United States military history covering this campaign was so bitter that it was suppressed by the personal intervention of General Eisenhower, and a less outspoken version was finally published.

It may be difficult to come at the final truth of this affair, but one thing is certain: Antwerp was the only port in Europe equipped to sustain a fighting force of two million men, and it had to be cleared. For 85 days men fought in the sodden death-trap of the Dutch Polder lands, exposed not only to the weather but to the direct fire of the enemy. It was a battle, as a soldier said of it, “for men with wet feet and waterproof skins,” and it culminated in the combined operation that “sank” the fortress island of Walcheren, and launched the 4th Commando Brigade to a frontal assault under the most concentrated defense batteries in the world.

And but for a remarkable chance, the frontal assault would have failed.

THE EIGHTY-FIVE DAYS

PART ONE

The Argument

1

The Argument

ON September 4th, 1944, the great Port of Antwerp fell intact to the 11th Armored Division. Eighty-five days later, on November 28th, 1944, the first convoy of Allied ships sailed up the Scheldt estuary to dock with the supplies that were the vital prerequisite of final victory.

The story of what happened in those eighty-five days is one of the most controversial of the campaign in North-west Europe. The British military historian John North describes the opening of the Scheldt as "one of the grimmest pictures in the whole invasion panorama." He comments, "There can be little doubt that Field Marshal Montgomery avoided the task until the last possible moment."¹

The story of "The Argument" is, in its fashion, no less grim than the story of the battle itself. The first draft of the official United States military history covering this campaign was so bitter that it was suppressed by the personal intervention of General Eisenhower, and a less outspoken version was finally published. But General Omar Bradley stated the United States' view quite clearly when he wrote:

"Of all the might-have-beens in the European campaign, none was more agonizing than the failure of 'Monty' to open Antwerp."

¹ *North-West Europe, 1944-45*, John North.

It may be difficult to come at the final truth of this affair, but one thing is certain: Antwerp, the second largest port in Europe and the third largest in the world, was the only port equipped to sustain a fighting force of two million men. By the time the Rhine was reached there were four million men in the Allied armies in Northwest Europe.

Without Antwerp it was impossible, especially for the armies in the north, to advance. With Antwerp the road could be opened up through the whole North German Plain. It was the road to victory, and Antwerp was the gate.

In those hours when the 11th Armored Division entered Antwerp in triumph to find that the pro-Allied resistance forces had preserved the magnificent port facilities from "the ravages of the retreating hun"¹ the whole of the German forces were in near panic, and the only escape route for the German Fifteenth Army, trapped in the Pas de Calais, could have been closed in a matter of hours.

John North wrote:

"Between September 4th, when the British 11th Armored Division entered the city, and September 22nd, when, after severe fighting, a bridgehead was secured over the Albert canal immediately east of Antwerp—a bridgehead that might have been seized without serious opposition within a few hours of the Allied entry into the city—no serious attempt was made to cover the twenty-mile stretch between Antwerp and the base of the Beveland isthmus. Any such move would have deprived the German Fifteenth Army of its only reasonable escape route into Holland."²

The enemy was given a breathing space, and was quick to recover his nerve and his balance. General Gustav von Zangen, commanding the Fifteenth Army, was able to withdraw his forces in good order, leaving powerful garrisons to defend the Channel ports, and to establish an almost impregnable defense line on the Leopold canal to

¹ Report Army Operational Research Group, No. 299.

² *N.W. Europe, 1944-45.*

guard the approaches to the south bank of the Scheldt. He was also able to concentrate a strong force in the Woensdrecht area to defend the entry to the South Beveland isthmus, and on September 6th he ordered a general withdrawal of the bulk of his army north across the Scheldt estuary from Breskens to Flushing. In two weeks, under the protection of the immensely powerful guns of the Scheldt defenses, and in spite of constant allied air attack, he succeeded in extricating eighty thousand men, six hundred guns, and all their vehicles.

The eighty-five days from September 4th to November 28th are the eighty-five days salvaged by the Germans from disaster while the Allied commanders argued. The Germans used them well. Chester Wilmot wrote of them:

“For eighty-five days the Germans had denied the Allies the use of this great port and, by so doing, had gained for Hitler time that he was soon to turn to good account.”¹

Gustav von Zangen did much more than to escape: he exacted a heavy toll for the failure to spring the trap. The long-drawn-out battle for the Scheldt cost a total of sixty thousand casualties, nearly half of them British and Canadian. “For not more than double this casualty figure,” John North observed, “a firm Allied base had been secured in ‘Fortress Europe’ itself.”²

The battle was fought in the bitter, sodden, winter death-trap of the Dutch polder lands (land reclaimed from the sea) by men exposed not only to the weather but also to the direct fire of the enemy. It was a battle, as a soldier said of it, for men “with web feet and waterproof skins,” and it culminated in the tremendous Combined Operation that “sank” the fortress island of Walcheren guarding the mouth of the Scheldt, and launched the 4th Commando Brigade to a frontal assault under the muzzles of the most powerful and concentrated coastal defense batteries in the world. And but for a remarkable chance the frontal assault must have failed.

Immediately after taking over the Supreme Command

¹ *The Struggle for Europe*, by Chester Wilmot.

² *N.W. Europe, 1944-45*.

in the field from General Montgomery on September 1st, General Eisenhower stressed "our imperative need for the large port of Antwerp, absolutely essential to us logistically before any deep penetration in strength could be made into Germany." Finally the Supreme Commander reported, "It was not until Antwerp had been captured and the Scheldt made safe for our shipping that the beach installations and the Mulberry became superfluous."¹

The appalling gales which had broken on the Normandy beaches on June 19th, and continued at full force for four days, had underlined the urgency to gain Antwerp. These gales, unprecedented in June, had wrecked the Mulberry and the beach installations, and only a sustained miracle of labor and ingenuity had maintained supplies to the Allied armies. But then the armies had been within easy reach. In early September, as the supply lines lengthened and called for incredible feats of organization and motoring skill, the possibility of further gales became a nightmare, and soon a reality.

Yet it was not until October 18th, six weeks after the port of Antwerp had been captured, that Twenty-First Army Group issued an announcement that the priority task was to turn west, to clear the Scheldt estuary and to open Antwerp. By that time the announcement had become little more than a form of words, for the bulk of the British Second Army was committed and facing east, and the Canadian First Army had almost set the stage for the final phase.

ii

To understand the story of Antwerp it is necessary to go back to the period from mid-August to mid-September, and to follow the sequence of events from the time when the almost complete disintegration of the German armies in Normandy blurred the minds of Commanders in the field to the harsh realities of logistics, and gave them visions of lightning thrusts into the heart of Germany. This has been called the period of "The Great Opportunity." It was a time when Army Group and Army Commanders needed to have their feet firmly on the ground as never

¹ Report by Supreme Commander to Combined Chiefs of Staff.

before. Instead, in the words of Field Marshal Montgomery:

“We had both feet off the ground, relying on opening up the Channel ports, particularly Dieppe, before our accumulated stocks became exhausted. But administrative risks have to be taken in war as well as tactical ones; the point to realize is that a Commander requires a nice judgement to know when risks are justifiable and when they are definitely not so.”¹

If this means that Montgomery was ready to take a gamble on the opening of Antwerp and leave it to the Canadians while the British Second Army thrust north and east, he did not say so at the time, nor has he said so since. In any case, the judgement was far from “nice.” Dieppe was almost useless, and there was little to justify reliance on the Channel ports in relation to the immense supplies needed in the battle for Germany.

By the middle of August it was already clear that the estimated timings of the planners, deliberately optimistic though they were, were no longer valid. The often-quoted outside dates from D-day to the end have become misleading. On D-day, June 6th, the Allies landed on the Normandy beaches. Three hundred and sixty days later, on June 1st, 1945, they planned for the end. In fact the cease-fire came on May 6th, 1945, three weeks ahead of time. On the face of it this looks like a miracle of planning in view of the giant task to be done, and it is necessary to look inside these dates.

In the “Overlord” estimates D-plus-90 days (September 4th) was set for reaching the Seine. It was, in fact, the very day on which Antwerp fell, and one day after Brussels had been liberated by the Guards Armored Division. D-plus-200 days (December 23rd) was the day on which the Allies expected to reach the Belgian frontier, and on D-plus-330 days (May 22nd, 1945) it was hoped to reach the German frontier north of Aachen.

In fact, the U.S. Third Army reached the Seine on D-plus-75 days (August 20th), and on D-plus-97 days

¹ Supplement to *London Gazette*, September 3rd, 1946. Despatch to Secretary of State for War by Field Marshal Montgomery.

(September 11th) Allied units penetrated into Germany seven months ahead of time.

Neither the planners nor the generals in the field could have been expected to foresee the obstinacy of Hitler that encompassed the suicide of von Kluge and brought about the destruction of his armies in Normandy. The fighting advance up through all France and Belgium against an organized enemy was not to be. Instead, in mid-August the Allied commanders were confronted with a situation which appeared astounding in its possibilities, and was agonizing in its realities. It was a situation for which they were militarily unprepared and logistically unequipped.

Nevertheless, General Montgomery reacted with a boldness and eagerness unlooked for in a man notable for his caution and restraint. On August 18th, he sent a telegram to the War Office outlining a plan that the U.S. Twelfth and British Twenty-First Army Groups should keep together as a solid mass of some forty divisions, "so strong as to fear nothing," and advance swiftly to Berlin. He thought that would end the German war.

Montgomery had mentioned this idea to General Bradley, commanding the U.S. Twelfth Army Group, on the 17th, and Bradley had been non-committal. On the 19th Montgomery urged it upon Eisenhower, in whose reckoning it was "fantastic." It was a mirage. None the less Montgomery clung to it, neither questioning its strategical rightness nor its logistical possibility.

But events were moving very fast. By August 20th the destruction of the enemy in the Mortain-Falaise pocket was complete. Patton's Third Army was already into its astonishing stride, a stride that could not be halted, and this alone made Montgomery's vision impossible. Even as late as August 23rd, the British Twenty-First Army Group did not expect to reach the Seine before September 1st, and to be on the Somme by the 15th. And every hour made nonsense of these estimates. The race was on, and the problem of supplies for four advancing armies needing one million gallons of gasoline a day as a single item had become acute. In these circumstances the fall of Paris loomed as a disaster to be avoided if humanly possible. The need to feed Paris would cost the Allies the grounding of an Army, yet, by August 25th, it was ap-

parent that there was no escape from this vast commitment. The resistance movement inside the city had set off a chain of events that could not be denied.

Then followed swiftly the fall of Brussels and Antwerp to the British Second Army, and it must have been clear that Dempsey's Second Army and Patton's Third Army were developing a natural rivalry, and getting deliberately involved up to their necks with the connivance of their Army Group Commanders, Montgomery and Bradley.

The fight was for supplies. There could not be enough for all. Each day as the armies forged ahead, the supply lines lengthened intolerably over the battered roads up from the beaches. Maintenance, already stretched to the limit in the last days of August, was stretched beyond the limit in the first days of September. Back in Normandy three divisions were stripped of their transport to support the forward surge. Army Corps were virtually immobilized for lack of gasoline. The Red Ball convoys of the United States Army were hurtling nose to tail over the pot-holes and the broken shoulders of the battered roads, regardless of road discipline, regardless of possible air attack, regardless of all else but to bring up supplies over 350 miles from the beaches.

To Montgomery, Bradley, and Patton it seemed that this tide, if taken on the flood, must lead on to victory. Napoleon's dictum that an army marches on its stomach was not forgotten, but adapted by each commander to the stomach of his own army. Each one saw a vision of a lightning drive into Germany. Each one knew that such a drive in sufficient strength to stand even an outside chance of success could be made only at the expense of the others. Montgomery said this again and again in so many words, and General Patton, commanding the U.S. Third Army, heard him even before he spoke. Unless Montgomery could have Patton's army "grounded," his own hopes were in vain.

Whether one such drive if mounted could have succeeded may be debated from now to the end of time. Much has been written, and Field Marshal Montgomery has powerful supporters. They all recognize the "limiting factor" of Antwerp, and even its "necessity," but in spite

of that they support Montgomery. Maj. Gen. Fuller,¹ while stressing the importance of Antwerp, also brings out the important factor of the Allied Unconditional Surrender terms, and refers to the Morgenthau Plan "which demanded that Germany should be partitioned, devastated, pillaged, and pastoralized." Nevertheless he supports the bold thrust to the heart, and believes that a bold Supreme Commander at that moment would have supported such a thrust and finished the war.

"The sole limiting factor," wrote Maj. Gen. Fuller, "was that Antwerp was still blocked, yet, in spite of this, Montgomery vigorously urged an all-out advance northwards, and we think that the dictum of history will be that he was right."

Maj. Gen. Fuller quotes Ralph Ingersoll in support of his argument:

"All the situation called for was a co-ordinated push behind *one* army, giving it all the nourishment, all the rich blood of supplies that the arterial Red Ball highways could carry, and then, after it had gone through into Germany, while the weather was still good in the early fall, it could be fed from the air. . . ."²

Even six months later, and with Antwerp open and yielding 40,000 tons of supplies a day, it was a major task to bring up the bridging for the crossings of the Rhine and Maas, and to maintain the armies into Germany. But the argument is purely academic. The drive could not have been mounted. The way to victory in the year 1944 would have been to open the port of Antwerp, and if Montgomery had had his eye clearly on the left flank of his Twenty-First Army Group in the first days of September, it is likely that Antwerp would have been ours within the month. The winter battles of attrition might not have been fought.

¹ *The Second World War, 1939-1945*, by Maj. Gen. J. F. C. Fuller, C.B., C.B.E., D.S.O.

² *Top Secret*, by Ralph Ingersoll.

“In suggesting that he could drive on to the German capital, Montgomery may have been over-bidding his hand. Yet, even if such a bold advance had been considered militarily (i.e. logistically) practicable, would it have been politically acceptable to the Americans?”¹

The answer is that General Patton, Commanding the U.S. Third Army, was “running with the ball.”

iii

The crisis—for it was a crisis—was complicated by the assumption of the Supreme Command in the field by General Eisenhower on September 1st. On that day General Montgomery, who had thus far directed the whole of the land battle, was raised to the rank of Field Marshal, making him superior in rank, but not in authority, to Bradley and Devers.² But the truth is that Montgomery, as a “foreigner,” and the representative in the field of Great Britain, was allowed more rope than the American Army Group commanders, and this confused the issue.

Only Eisenhower in those days of unparalleled excitement seems to have realized with absolute clarity that Antwerp was essential in the light of the supply problem before any drive could be mounted to defeat the enemy. But his Headquarters in Europe was not yet organized, and it has been stated critically that he was too far from the vortex of events to exercise the judgement demanded at that moment. “There was no strong hand at the helm, no man in command. There was only a conference, presided over by a chairman—a shrewd, intelligent, tactful, careful chairman.”³

I believe that a “chairman” was needed, and that the Allies were supremely fortunate in that the need produced the man. Eisenhower’s position enabled him to take in the whole vast battlefield that opened before him in the first days of September, and to exercise a judgement, difficult or impossible for those more closely involved. In

¹ *The Struggle for Europe.*

² Lt. Gen. Jacob L. Devers, commanding U.S. 6th Army Group.

³ *Top Secret.*

addition the Supreme Commander had to be a statesman as well as a general.

At once Eisenhower was faced with the urgent demands of his generals, and on September 4th, that vital day on which Antwerp had fallen, Montgomery was urging upon him again: "We have now reached a stage where a really powerful and full-bloodied thrust towards Berlin is likely to get there and thus end the German war."¹

On the same day Eisenhower sent a memorandum to his Commanders stating the reverse: "It is obvious from an over-all viewpoint that we must now as never before keep the enemy stretched everywhere."²

It meant, of course, that no thrust was possible, and all possible must be done to keep up the pressure.

It seems probable that the astounding failure of the Germans to destroy the Antwerp port installations caught the Allied commanders off balance, and fostered in them the delusion that Antwerp had been gained, that this plum had fallen into the Allied lap, that the deep-water port was ours—or would be as soon as the mines were cleared from the estuary and the one thousand acres of the docks. If this is true, it is difficult to understand how the illusion could have persisted for more than forty-eight hours. I find it difficult to avoid the conclusion that if Montgomery had had his mind on his Army Group instead of on his "bold" vision, the port of Antwerp would have been ours.

But it is difficult, especially for an Englishman, not to sympathize with Montgomery in those early days. He had fought a fine battle in Normandy, using the whole of the Allied land power with great skill, albeit over a constricted front. He had gained a great victory, and it is not surprising if he thought he saw the fruits of that victory slipping from his grasp. In those last days of August and the first days of September the British Second Army had proved that it could match its paces with Patton's Third Army in the speed of its advance, and it had become clear to most observers that these two armies had become natural rivals at that moment. It is significant, too, that Pat-

¹ Message in Eisenhower personal file.

² *Ibid.*

ton and Montgomery, rather than Patton and Dempsey,¹ saw themselves as rivals in the battle for supplies. Montgomery had virtually reduced himself to an Army Commander.

Patton was not slow to react to Montgomery's plans as a potent threat to his own schemes for a thrust into the heart of enemy territory, and to his determination to keep going at all costs.

The demands of the generals were further complicated by their methods of approach, by the differences in the British and American characters, and by the special position of Montgomery as the representative of Great Britain. Eisenhower and Bradley "spoke the same language," knowing precisely where argument or discussion ended. Also they understood the ways of General Patton. Unfortunately Montgomery not only spoke a different language, but he spoke it also at second hand, holding himself aloof from many important conferences, and sending his Chief of Staff, de Guingand, in his stead.

There were important conferences on September 9th, 10th and 11th, coinciding with the Quebec Conference, and at the conference of September 10th Montgomery put in one of his rare appearances to urge his plan that all the resources of the Allied armies should be put behind the "full-blooded" thrust in the north, and that all remaining Allied armies should be grounded to support this drive for victory.

The Supreme Commander again refused to consider what he termed "a pencil-like thrust" into the heart of Germany. It has been noted that "a pencil-like thrust" was not a fair description of Montgomery's plan, and was more applicable to the demands of Patton. Certainly there was nothing "pencil-like" about Montgomery's first vision, but later it began to dwindle to a "knife-like" drive. The point is that Eisenhower would have none of it, by whatever name. It had become clear by September 10th beyond a shadow of doubt that the prize of Antwerp was of no value until the enemy had been cleared from the Scheldt estuary. Eisenhower was convinced in his view that Antwerp must be opened without delay, and haunted

¹ It is too often forgotten that Dempsey commanded the British Second Army.

by the undoubted fact that a week or ten days of bad weather in the Channel "could paralyze the movements of the Armies. He now ordered Twenty-First Army Group to secure promptly the approaches to Antwerp and Rotterdam in addition to the Channel ports."¹

That should have been the end of the matter, but it is doubtful if Montgomery permitted his gaze to turn away from the north and east even for an instant. He had given the task of opening up Antwerp and the Channel ports to the Canadian First Army. The British 1st Corps was under command. That was enough. Antwerp was never more than a nuisance, and a subsidiary task.

"On 26th August, General Montgomery issued orders for the advance north of the Seine, and on 1st September, promoted Field Marshal, he handed the command of the land forces over to General Eisenhower, retaining direct command of the British and Canadian armies. Thenceforth his mission became the isolation of the Ruhr."²

I believe it reveals an iron inflexibility in the mind of the Field Marshal.

In the Churchill Memoirs covering this period the Prime Minister's awareness of the urgent need for Antwerp is very evident, but the very grave disagreement between Montgomery and Eisenhower is not reflected. "Without the vast harbor of this city (Antwerp) no advance across the lower Rhine and into the plains of northern Germany was possible."³

That sounds very definite, and yet in the next paragraph Mr. Churchill wrote:

"Montgomery made two counter-proposals, one in late August that his Army Group and the Twelfth U.S. Army Group should strike north together with a solid mass of nearly forty divisions, and the second on September 4th, that only one thrust should be made, either

¹ *The Supreme Command*, by Forrest C. Pogue, Office of Chief of Military History, Washington.

² *The Second World War, 1939-1945*.

³ Churchill War Memoirs, Vol. VI, *Triumph and Tragedy*.

towards the Ruhr or the Saar. Whichever was chosen the forces should be given all the resources and maintenance they needed. He urged that the rest of the front should be restrained for the benefit of the one major thrust, which should be placed under one commander, himself or Bradley as the case may be. He believed it would probably reach Berlin, and considered that the Ruhr was better than the Saar."¹

I think this reveals a mental overlap in command, for Montgomery is going beyond his brief as an Army Group commander.

Churchill makes two final comments, the second of which must be open to doubt:

"Strategists may long debate these issues."

"Their discussion caused no check in the pursuit."

In a despatch dated September 8th, Prime Minister to General Ismay, the following words occur in the first paragraph, "At the present time we are at a virtual standstill and progress will be very slow."

In paragraph three of the same despatch Mr. Churchill wrote:

"It is difficult to see how Twenty-First Army Group can advance in force to the German frontier until it has cleared up the stubborn resistance at the Channel ports and dealt with the Germans at Walcheren and north of Antwerp."

Mr. Churchill drafted his despatch on his way to the Quebec Conference of September 10th, where the urgent need for Antwerp to be opened was underlined by the Combined Chiefs of Staff. This, I believe, is the truth, unpalatable as it may be, of the issue ignored by all those who have debated the merits of what they call Eisenhower's "Broad Front" policy against Montgomery's "Narrow Front" policy. Before there could be any policy Antwerp had to be opened. That was the issue, and the only issue. It had become clear in the first week of September.

¹ *Ibid.*

Meanwhile Patton, unhindered by the higher responsibility of the Army Group Commanders, was acting in the manner to be expected of him. Montgomery feared and believed that Patton "would use any opportunity he had to bring on other engagements so that he would have to have additional support."¹ Patton did precisely that, and has been perfectly frank about it. Fearing that his troops might be halted by Montgomery's demands he resolved that this should not be so. "In order to avoid such an eventuality," he wrote, "it was evident that the Third Army should get deeply involved at once." He pursued what he called his "rock soup method." "In other words, in order to attack, we had first to pretend to reconnoiter, then reinforce the reconnaissance, and finally put on an attack—all depending on what gasoline and ammunition we could secure."²

Bradley, for his part, was not disposed to close any loopholes the dashing Patton might find for his Third Army, and even Eisenhower was anxious to keep Patton going.

But these tactics of Patton's also meant that the U.S. First Army on his left flank would be unable to cover Montgomery's right to the extent that Patton might diverge.

Meanwhile Montgomery had managed to sell his own particular brand of "rock soup" to the Supreme Commander in gaining Eisenhower's agreement to his bold plan to bounce a bridgehead over the Neder Rhine at Arnhem.³ The strong desire to use the First Allied Airborne Army was a powerful factor in Eisenhower's decision. There had been eighteen plans for an airborne attack in forty days, and each one had been frustrated by the rapid advances of the ground forces. After an air operation to seize Boulogne had been cancelled, Operation *Linnet I* was planned for an air drop on Tournai. There followed immediately *Linnet II* for a drop in the

¹ *The Supreme Command.*

² *War as I Knew It*, by General George S. Patton.

³ Bradley opposed the plan strongly.

Aachen-Maastricht area. When this was cancelled, Montgomery planned a drop to seize the river crossings in the Arnhem-Nijmegen area on September 7th. This was known as Operation *Comet*, and was first postponed from day to day, and finally enlarged to Operation *Market*, which, with Operation *Garden*, was the great dash of the Guards Armored Division from the Meuse Escaut canal through Eindhoven, and over the Maas and Waal in the attempt to reach Arnhem.

“The attractive possibility of quickly turning the German north flank,” Eisenhower wrote, “led me to approve the temporary delay in freeing the vital port of Antwerp . . . with the completion of the *Market-Garden* operation the Northern Group of Armies was instructed to undertake the opening of Antwerp as a matter of first priority.”¹

In this passage Ingersoll’s term “chairman” in relation to Eisenhower becomes valid as a criticism. Perhaps, had Eisenhower not agreed, a command crisis would have been precipitated which might have had grave repercussions on Allied relations. It was wrong to agree. It was the end, I believe, of any possible priority for Antwerp, for whether or not Montgomery’s bold venture was successful, the truly “pencil-like” nature of the thrust was bound to demand the bulk of the Second Army to strengthen the flanks, and to hold whatever might be gained.

Yet even Mr. Churchill supports the fiction, as I see it, of the subsequent priority for Antwerp. “Clearing the Scheldt estuary and opening the port of Antwerp had been delayed for the sake of the Arnhem thrust. Thereafter it was given first priority.”²

As a matter of history it was not.

The agreement to the Arnhem operation did not mean a lessening of Eisenhower’s verbal insistence on Antwerp. Again and again he reiterated, “the early winning of deep-water ports and improved maintenance facilities

¹ *The Supreme Command.*

² *War Memoirs, Triumph and Tragedy.*

in our rear are prerequisites to a final all-out assault on Germany proper.”

But the chance of victory in 1944 was already lost by the time the *Market-Garden* operation went ahead on September 17th. Three United States divisions were stripped of their transport to help bring up supplies over the 306-mile road haul from Bayeux to Brussels, yet Montgomery was still voicing his fears about Patton, fearing that the latter's demands would endanger his supplies.

It was apparent even on the first day that *Market-Garden* had struck enough trouble to throw out the timetable. The Germans were not weak or demoralized, as we had thought, and the strength of the 11th S.S. Panzer Corps was “a nasty surprise for the Allies.” To make things worse the weather deteriorated steadily for five days from September 18th, and the planned air landing of the 52nd Mountain Division in support of the British 1st Airborne Division had to be cancelled. This was due also to the lack of an air landing strip.¹

None of these things deterred Montgomery or shifted his vision. On September 18th, with *Market-Garden* already losing impetus, he again urged upon the Supreme Commander to strip all troops, except for those in Twenty-First Army Group and the First U.S. Army under Hodges,² of all transport and “everything else” to support one single “knife-like” drive towards Berlin.

This seemed to Eisenhower nothing more than a repetition of Montgomery's demands of September 4th, which he had already firmly rejected. Again Eisenhower declared himself against this “Narrow Front” policy.

“What I do believe,” he wrote to Montgomery, “is that we must marshal our strength up along the western borders of Germany, to the Rhine if possible, insure adequate maintenance by getting Antwerp working at full blast at the earliest possible moment and then carry out the drive you suggest.”³

¹ Three thousand six hundred Dakota loads were planned. All was ready.

² General Courtney H. Hodges.

³ Eisenhower personal file.

The Supreme Commander's letter continued, perhaps with a touch of asperity, by reminding Montgomery that his armies had been given priority of supplies throughout the campaign while the American forces had been fighting "with a halter round their necks."

"You may not know that for four days straight Patton has been receiving serious counterattacks and during the last seven days, without attempting any real advance himself, has captured about 9,000 prisoners and knocked out 720 tanks."

It is significant that on this day, September 18th, the British 11th Armored Division handed over in Antwerp to the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division, and then turned east to help to fill the wide-open right flank of 30th Corps.

In a further memorandum to the Field Marshal dated September 22nd, Eisenhower wrote:

"It is because I am anxious to organize that final drive quickly upon the capture of the Ruhr that I insist upon the importance of Antwerp. As I have told you I am prepared to give you everything for the capture of the approaches to Antwerp, including all the air forces and anything else you can support."

It would seem impossible to miss the force of this appeal, but it was without effect. In Montgomery's own writings, and in his reports, there does not seem to be a hint of these arguments and urgencies.

"The Supreme Commander directed that our immediate aim should be the establishment of bridges over the Rhine throughout its entire length, and that we should not go beyond this until Antwerp or Rotterdam could be opened. In view of the time factor it was agreed that Twenty-First Army Group should launch its thrust to the Rhine (Arnhem) before completing the clearance of the Scheldt estuary."¹

And again, commenting on the Arnhem thrust:

¹ *Normandy to the Baltic*, by Field Marshal Montgomery.

"The enemy has achieved a measure of recovery. This was clear not only in the Arnhem operation, but also in his reaction to American thrusts in the Seigfried line. It was necessary to prepare for a hard killing match before it was possible to secure the Ruhr and advance into Germany. There was also the task to open the approaches to Antwerp before winter set in."

On September 24th the Supreme Commander held a conference with his Chief Commanders to discuss the whole position. Montgomery was not there. His Chief of Staff, de Guingand, attended in his place.

There is a hint of personal hurt in Eisenhower's letter to Montgomery written at the end of that day:

"... I regard it as a great pity that all of us cannot keep in closer touch with each other because, I find, without exception, when all of us can get together and look the various features of our problems squarely in the face, the answers usually become obvious."¹

Field Marshal Montgomery was unimpressed. His Chief of Staff had disagreed with him on the Narrow Front issue, but it did not influence Montgomery.² And John North confirms that after the failure of Arnhem in the last days of September, "Field Marshal Montgomery was still examining the possibility of launching the battle of the Rhineland 'about October 10.'"³

As October opened, the 2nd Canadian Division was about to mount its attack north from Antwerp to open the isthmus to South Beveland. There was a "hard killing match" building up in all that area in the west. It was the dark shadow on the left that Montgomery refused to see until it blotted out the sun of his dreams; and by then it was too late.

Through all September progress had been slow. The

¹ Eisenhower personal file.

² *Operation Victory*, by Maj.-Gen. Sir Francis de Guingand. "It is only fair to say that throughout the war, this was the only major issue over which I did not agree with my Chief. I have always held the contrary view, and in the event, I am more than ever convinced that I was right."

³ *N.W. Europe, 1944-45*.

Channel ports had proved difficult. A trickle of supplies had begun to flow from Dieppe, but the whole railway system was in chaos, and lateral movement was slow. Havre had finally surrendered after an "appalling bombardment" on September 12th, Boulogne had been equally stubborn, and had held out until September 22nd, and October opened with the liberation of Calais. Throughout the whole area the Germans had been ordered to fight to the last man and the last round, and their orders made it clear that they understood well the supreme importance of denying the port of Antwerp to the Allies. The prospect was bleak.

2

The Command Crisis

WHEN the month of October opened, a graph of the British Second Army positions bore a strong resemblance to a fever chart, with 30th Corps rising steeply to a peak in the Nijmegen bridgehead, and with 12th Corps and 8th Corps slowly thickening up the flanks; 1st Corps was on the extreme left covering the right flank of the 2nd Canadian Corps.

The early dangers of the position, which had been accentuated by the activities of one of the divisions von Zangen had extricated from the Antwerp trap, had been beaten off, but the salient was still thin, especially in the Grave area. By this time Montgomery's plan to trap the whole of the German forces in Holland by rapidly advancing beyond Arnhem, perhaps even to Zwolle, had dwindled to the task of strengthening the Nijmegen bridgehead, and preparing for his Rhineland battle. That was still the first priority in the Field Marshal's mind. The task strained the Second Army resources beyond the limits.

On October 2nd, the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division began its advance north of Antwerp with the British 49th Infantry Division of 1st Corps on its right flank. The going

was slow and deadly, and the whole tract of the difficult country, not only north of Antwerp, but also to the west and south down to the Leopold canal, was still in enemy hands.

“By the end of the first week in October,” wrote Field Marshal Montgomery, “I realized that I should not be able to carry out my plans as speedily as I had hoped.

Apart from the major considerations of getting up to the Rhine and crossing it, there were three commitments facing Twenty-First Army Group. We had to provide for the early opening of the Scheldt . . . it was increasingly evident that the enemy would be able to provide considerable forces to cover the Scheldt estuary, and that we were going to have difficulty in clearing him out of the very difficult country astride that waterway. Meanwhile the American armies in particular were greatly hampered in their operations by lack of resources, and the solution of their difficulties lay in the opening of the port of Antwerp.”¹

This is a remarkable statement, not only in the light of the long argument, but in the light of the grave supply problems of Twenty-First Army Group, even with the support of U.S. transport, and the grounding of U.S. divisions.

Through these first days of October General Eisenhower worried deeply about Antwerp, and continued to hope that Twenty-First Army Group would clear the Scheldt. He had already, he believed, expressed his orders with the utmost clarity. It was a difficult position.

“As the days of the month passed without Antwerp’s being opened to Allied shipping,” wrote Forrest Pogue, “he (Eisenhower) stressed increasingly the necessity of placing that objective first.”²

A report of the British Navy on October 9th brought matters to a head. The Royal Navy warned that the Canadian First Army would be unable to move until November 1st unless supplied promptly with adequate

¹ *Normandy to the Baltic.*

² *The Supreme Command.*

ammunition. At once the Supreme Commander warned Montgomery that unless Antwerp was opened by the middle of November all Allied operations would come to a standstill.

“Of all the operations on our entire front from Switzerland to the Channel, I consider Antwerp of first importance, and I believe that the operations designed to clear up the entrance require your personal attention.”¹

Montgomery at once took umbrage and denied the “wild statements” of the Navy. The crisis of command was reaching a climax.

On October 1st General Eisenhower had his Headquarters in Europe fully organized, and he had at last gathered the Allied forces into his control. He was therefore greatly strengthened in his ability to direct operations, and it was at this point that the change-over in the Supreme Command became complete. In the difficult period from the end of August it is clear that while Montgomery’s vision had narrowed, Eisenhower’s had inevitably broadened. Montgomery had never taken his thoughts away from his thrust through north of the Ruhr. Nothing else existed for him, a perfectly understandable position for an Army Commander behaving like an Army Commander. The Supreme Commander had to consider an immense battlefield including the link-up with Operation *Anvil* advancing from the south to make contact with Patton’s army.

The activities over this whole front in September and until mid-October were based on the belief that the Germans were disintegrating, but by mid-October it had become apparent that the enemy had achieved astonishing feats of reorganization and regrouping. There would be a hard fight, and there was no room for further misunderstandings.

In messages of October 10th, and October 13th, the Supreme Commander “spelled out” to Montgomery the priority task of the Antwerp operation.

¹ Eisenhower personal file.

"Let me assure you that nothing I may ever say or write with regard to future plans in our advance eastward is meant to indicate any lessening of our need for Antwerp, which I have always held vital, and which has grown more pressing as we enter the bad weather period."¹

Montgomery found himself between two stools. He wanted the U.S. First Army under his own command to enable him to move eastward and to fill up the line of the Maas. The British Second Army was virtually unable to move. The Canadian First Army was moving very slowly in the preliminaries to the battle of the Scheldt. The stage was not yet set.

At this point Montgomery pressed his views on the question of command.

"He (Montgomery) argued that modern war moves so swiftly that land operations must be closely and continuously controlled by a single commander who can give his complete and undivided attention to the battle, day by day, hour by hour."²

Specifically Montgomery wanted greater flexibility and he stated that the situation between his Army Group and the U.S. First Army was "unsatisfactory."

Earlier in regard to Normandy, General Eisenhower had held the view and carried it out that that was a "battle requiring the supervision of a single battleline commander . . ."³ The position had changed profoundly, as had been foreseen, and for that reason Army Groups had been organized. The Army Group Commanders were "single battleline commanders," and even they could not be expected to give their undivided attention "to the battle, day by day, hour by hour," over their fronts.

I think that Montgomery was totally misguided in his conception, and that no one should have been more aware of the difficulties. Hitler, at that time, was attempting to

¹ Eisenhower personal file.

² *The Struggle for Europe*.

³ *Ibid.*

be a single commander, and he was making a terrible mess of it, not because he was "mad" or a deluded visionary listening to "soothsayers," but because such a task, directing a battle which was not a battle, but many battles "day by day, hour by hour," was beyond the compass of any man, even of a Napoleon in modern warfare. Eisenhower, in the very nature of the Allied Command, could not have been a "Napoleon" and Montgomery could not have been his "Marshal Ney."

The Supreme Commander replied to Field Marshal Montgomery in what has been described as "one of his most explicit letters of the war."¹ In this letter Eisenhower stated that it was not a question of command but of taking Antwerp. He reminded the Field Marshal that he was rich in supplies compared with the United States and French forces right down to the Swiss border. He stated that his views about Antwerp were shared by Field Marshal Brooke and General Marshall. He again stressed that he would give additional troops and supplies to make the opening of Antwerp possible.

A declaration of policy followed. The Supreme Commander explained his command arrangements fully, and wrote that if the Field Marshal regarded them as "unsatisfactory" the issue would have to be settled.

"I am quite well aware of the powers and limitations of an Allied Command, and if you, as the senior Commander in this Theater of one of the great Allies, feel that my conceptions and directives are such as to endanger the success of operations, it is our duty to refer the matter to higher authority for any action they may choose to take, however drastic."²

The Supreme Commander's letter ended with the following sentence:

"It is the job of soldiers, as I see it, to meet their military problems sanely, sensibly and logically, and while not shutting our eyes to the fact that we are two

¹ The full text of this letter is not available, but the full context of these events may be studied in *The Supreme Command*.

² Eisenhower personal file.

different nations, produce solutions that permit effective co-operation, mutual support and effective results. Good will and mutual confidence are, of course, mandatory."

Field Marshal Montgomery replied at once, assuring the Supreme Commander that "you will hear no more on the subject of command from me." His letter ended:

"I have given you my views and you have given your answer. I and all of us will weigh in one hundred per cent to do what you want and we will pull it through without a doubt. I have given Antwerp top priority in all operations in Twenty-First Army Group and all energies and efforts will now be devoted towards opening up the place.

Your very devoted and loyal subordinate."

ii

Chester Wilmot has written with great sympathy and insight on the subject of Field Marshal Montgomery, and his dealings with Americans. "His (Montgomery's) manner and methods aroused their traditional distrust of those who hold positions of great power." These manners and methods, Wilmot observed,

"would have been equally distasteful in an American. General Douglas MacArthur, who also exercised his authority with an autocratic hand, as though it were his by more than mortal dispensation, was heartily detested by many Americans."¹

In a later passage Wilmot wrote:

"Moreover he was not as other men. He revealed no trace of ordinary human frailties and foibles. He shunned the company of women; he did not smoke or drink or play poker with 'the boys.' He could 'never be slapped on the back.' Because he lived in a small Tactical H.Q. with a few aides and liaison officers, he

¹ *The Struggle for Europe.*

was looked upon as setting himself apart from (and therefore above) his fellows. The impression seemed to be confirmed by his practice, resented as much by other British services as it was by the Americans, of sending his Chief of Staff, de Guingand, to represent him at conferences.”¹

In fact, a good deal of Montgomery's outward show of arrogance was a shell to protect an over-sensitive nature. That he did not attend conferences was not only due to arrogance, but also from his realization that his manner might not serve his cause well.

Eisenhower might well have “beseeched him,” in Cromwell's words, “in the bowels of Christ” to consider the possibility that he might be wrong. In all the circumstances the final United States summing up of this long argument is restrained:

“In both the U.S. and British armies it was understood that proposed plans might be debated and various viewpoints developed. General Eisenhower encouraged this type of discussion and often invited criticism of his plans. It is possible, however, that he added to his own command problems by failing to make clear to Field Marshal Montgomery when the ‘discussion’ stage had ended and the ‘execution’ stage had begun. Associates of the British Commander have emphasized that he never failed to obey a direct order, but that he would continue to press his viewpoints as long as he was permitted to do so. Perhaps the Supreme Commander, accustomed to more ready compliance from his U.S. Army Group Commanders, delayed too long in issuing positive directions to Montgomery. Perhaps, anxious to give a full voice to the British Allies, he was more tolerant of strong dissent from the Field Marshal than he should have been. Whatever the reason, some SHAEF advisers thought him overslow in issuing final orders stopping further discussion on Antwerp and closing debate on the question of command. It is difficult to sustain the charge that Montgomery wilfully disobeyed orders. It is plausible to say that he felt he

¹ *Ibid.*

was representing firmly the best interests of his country and attempting to set forth what he and his superiors in the United Kingdom considered to be the best strategy for the Allies to pursue in Europe. When his statements on these matters were accompanied by what appeared to be a touch of patronage or cocky self-assurance, some members of the SHAEF staff viewed them as approaching insubordination. There is no evidence that General Eisenhower shared these views."¹

On October 16th Field Marshal Montgomery as a routine formality issued his orders to open the port of Antwerp, and on October 18th the Field Marshal conferred with General Eisenhower and General Bradley in Brussels. The discussion concerned the "modest" possibilities to be pursued during November and December. Nothing more was possible. The fever of mid-August seemed to have abated. All depended on how soon Antwerp could be opened, and this truth, so long evident, was at last accepted by all.

With this, the emphasis shifted to the United States armies for the first time since late August. For the time all attacks north of the Ruhr were shelved, and the United States armies from Holland to Switzerland closed in towards the Rhine.

Commenting on Montgomery's final agreement, John North wrote:

"Two days after Field Marshal Montgomery gave orders—with, it may be presumed, an infinite reluctance—that his armies should turn their gaze west, he and General Bradley conferred with the Supreme Commander in Brussels. That was the conference of October 18th, following which Montgomery issued his statement to open Antwerp."²

Two days later, on October 20th, the Combined Chiefs of Staff began their final discussion in Washington on the possibilities of winning the war by the end of the year, but the possibilities had disappeared. All depended on Ant-

¹ *The Supreme Command.*

² *N.W. Europe, 1944-45.*

werp, and it was clear that one month might be needed to clear the Scheldt after the battle was won, and before Allied shipping could sail up the estuary into the part. The iron was no longer even lukewarm.

“The northern rim of the Ruhr, be it his (Montgomery’s) personal mirage or not, fades across the eastern horizon. A whole succession of plodding desolate battles north and south of the seventy-mile estuary—and again south and west of the Maas—was to be the price of the failure to free the Scheldt at a time when the German troops were ‘so unnerved by the tales of what had happened in France’—that they disappeared without ‘bothering to blow up’ this most valuable prize of the campaign—Antwerp, third largest port in the world, and, with its twenty-six miles of dock frontage, one of the main gateways leading into the heart of Europe.”¹

Antwerp was part of the account rendered for the “heroic legend” of Arnhem. The weather was rapidly becoming evil, breaking all records for nearly fifty years. Conditions for assault by land, sea and in the air were at their worst.

The story now belongs to the bodies, the stacks of chips with which this great gamble, the most terrible and fascinating addiction of mankind, is played. Inevitably the “generals” must, here and there, intrude, but it is not their story.

¹ *Ibid.*

PART TWO

September

3

Fruits of Victory

ON August 29th and 30th the British and Canadian armor burst out of the bridgeheads gained over the Seine at Vernon, Louviers, Elbeuf and west of Rouen by the 43rd, 15th (Scottish), 49th and 51st (Highland) Infantry Divisions, and surged in an irresistible torrent over the roads of France and Belgium almost to the Dutch frontier. The compression of the German armies, which had sought to hem them in to the Normandy bridgehead, and had at last embarked upon the fatal course of attempting to drive a way through to the sea, had suddenly given way. Gathering momentum with every mile, the armor roared through to gather the fruits of victory.

For six days and nights five armored divisions and five armored brigades tore in a furious crescendo through towns and villages that had known only the tread of the Nazi invader for four years. Men, women and children, aroused suddenly from sleep, or surprised in the dull routine of the day, came running to their doors, windows and gates, into the roads, onto the narrow verges, sensing the rhythm of victory. Half-starving lands became all at once cornucopias of fruits, bread and wines, as simple folk greeted their liberators with all that they had saved against the day, and released the pent-up emotions of the years in tears and laughter, in wild shouts, frantic embraces and frantic giving.

Young men in black berrets, riding the turrets of their

tanks like centaurs, their torsos erect, their faces glowing with pride and exultation, remembered that they were Hussars and Lancers, Bays and Greys, Blues and Tins and Skins, the inheritors of the traditions of a hundred battlefields. In that hour there was the feel and the knowledge of all the chariots, and all the cavalry that had ever charged through to victory. It was the hour for which men live and are prepared to die, and in that first surge of liberation the horror of war gave way for a short while to glory.

On the night of September 3rd, 1944, the 11th Armored Division with the 8th Armored Brigade under command, having driven 250 miles from the Seine in five days, concentrated in harbor round the small town of Alost, fifteen miles to the northwest of Brussels, and within ten miles of Antwerp. The men slept where they sat or stood or lay, drained of emotion, and in utter exhaustion. Time and memory were congealed. They were the spearhead.

Behind the 11th Armored Division, the 50th Infantry Division was mopping up isolated pockets of bewildered enemy. On their left the 7th Armored Division was thrusting towards Ghent. On their right the Guards Armored Division, brought up to the Seine on transports, had thundered in their tracks to drive straight through to Brussels. And westward, Canadian and Polish armor was already thrusting deep into Flanders, where their fathers had fought in mud and blood for four long years, and on through the Menin Gate, where the graves of thousands of British dead line the roadsides, converging on Bruges.

Barely ten days earlier all this armor had been locked in a death struggle which they had thought to win foot by foot and yard by yard. Instead the enemy had been utterly crushed and destroyed where he stood, and the armor had swept through the very entrails of his elaborate communications and mechanism of supply. Such life as remained to the enemy was no more than the flapping of the wings of a dying fowl. Streams of enemy transport had come charging towards the armored spearheads, and rushing out of side roads almost to be impaled upon its flanks. Everywhere along the roads enemy drivers at-

tempted to wheel in horror and dismay from the tracks of the juggernaut. Even enemy generals had been caught up in the fast-moving armored columns and borne forward in their staff cars as helplessly as corks in a turbulent sea, able only to await the moment of pause and capture.

In Lessines, as the Guards armor thundered through to wheel over the river Dendre, an enemy ammunition train of horse-drawn wagons galloped out of a side turning and charged down the main street. Before the driver of the leading wagon could take in the situation and rein in his horses, bursts of fire from the Bezas [type of machine gun] of the tanks piled up horses, men and wagons in a terrible confusion of death and exploding ammunition boxes. The column of armor roared on without pause. Within five minutes an ice-cream vendor with a barrow was doing a good trade with small boys and girls standing at the roadside, and a dozen men of the local "Resistance" rounded up nearly three hundred prisoners from the exploding wreckage.

It had not been a pursuit. Simply the British armor had broken loose to range at will to the limits of its power and its gasoline. It had seemed to the 11th Armored Division, leading this great rush across France and Belgium, that their own accumulated impetus, after nearly ninety days of battle within a tight perimeter, had borne them on, to ride themselves out, as far as they could go. And on that night of September 3rd, at Alost they knew only that they were at the threshold of Antwerp, and that it must be the end. None had been immune from the fever of liberation that had lit their passage, and that encompassed them on all sides. Many believed that it was the end.

ii

It is interesting to consider briefly the difference in the experience of the 11th Armored and the Guards Armored Divisions on this break-through from the Seine. The 11th Armored had been ordered to advance with all possible speed to the Arras, Amiens, St. Pol triangle, and thence to drive forward through Belgium, by-passing any

resistance they might meet. On the evening of August 30th, Lt. Gen. Horrocks, commanding 30th Corps, had urged them to drive on all night "by moonlight" and to "bounce" a bridge over the Somme at Amiens. In response to that command the 11th had driven 55 miles through a night of pitch darkness and torrential rain, their tank tracks slewing wildly over the sodden and crumbling road. Without the "moonlight," and thanks to the initiative of the French Resistance, they had "bounced" the Somme, passing within a mile of the German Seventh Army Headquarters as General Dietrich was in the act of handing over the Somme Command to General Eberbach. Half an hour later Eberbach found himself in the midst of the British column while Dietrich just managed to slip through in a Volkswagen.

That drive through to Amiens had been a magnificent performance in itself. The 11th, despite its speed, had left a clean trail, and beyond Amiens, deep in the enemy rear, and racing north on the enemy's own lines of communication, there was little to fear. The roads were clear of mines and booby traps, and at every road junction, bridge and culvert, the men of the Belgian "White Brigade" were often in command. On all sides the Germans knew themselves surrounded by enemies, and their attempts at road blocks were broken up before they could be properly formed. In the main the Germans were demoralized and incapable of action, but here and there small groups of infantry and tanks made hopeless attempts to impede or check the advancing column. These small groups were brushed aside by men riding the crest of a wave, and who were rushing on almost in a dream.

At Alost the dream was over, and weariness took possession.

But on that night of September 3rd, the Guards Armored Division with the Belgian Brigade under command had lived a different story, and was reaching the peak of exultation in Brussels. They had left their transports on the Seine and had roared through a gauntlet of welcome that bore men on its tide. For at their coming the people were fully aroused, and through the fields and the villages the men of the Resistance were rampant, rounding up pockets of bewildered enemy and marching them by the

roadsides. Here and there sections of infantry swung out of the column in response to excited pleas for help from men with bunches of grenades hanging from their belts. A girl, running to the roadside and waving urgently, cried out that some of the turnips in the field were "sales Boches," and a dozen "turnips" rose up and surrendered to the challenge of a corporal. Elsewhere a corporal followed some excited villagers to round up a total of fifty-seven enemy near a windmill half a mile off the road. The Germans, fully armed, recognized defeat. In such a mood the British armor might have gone through to the ends of the earth—had it the physical means to do so.

In the wake of the British armor prisoners in their thousands were falling into the hands of the infantry, and especially into the net of the U.S. First Army on the right flank.

In the last few miles of the approaches to Brussels small groups of enemy were overtaken, fleeing like rabbits and floundering helplessly, terrified to get off the road and equally terrified to attempt to run before the flying column. Often they were ignored, but here and there S.S. in their black leather uniforms, making desperate efforts to escape on motorcycles and sidecars, died as they dashed wildly from side streets. The Bezas of the racing tanks sprayed bullets in short bursts and these men of the S.S. were swatted out of life as though they had been flies.

Such was the manner of the Guards coming in triumph to Brussels to be deluged with flowers in the *Place Brouckère*, in the *Grande Place*, and as they climbed the steep streets round the Cathedral to the fine avenues beyond the Royal Palace. A pillar of smoke rose from the burning dome of the *Palace de Justice* as the last of the Germans attempted to destroy the last of the documents of their long occupation. Tank gunners fired almost casually as they fixed their buttonholes or drank glasses of wine. For nearly a week the enemy had been on the run out of the city. This was victory, and the people of Brussels had no doubts about it.

By morning the Guards had leapt onward to Louvain.

The possibilities were immense in those few hours when the enemy was floundering. Consider a reversal of the role of the spearhead. Had it been directed upon Brussels

instead of upon Antwerp it would almost certainly have harbored outside Brussels on the night of September 3rd, while the division racing in its tracks and swinging on to Antwerp might well have bounced the Albert canal and established its spearheads in Bergen op Zoom. Such an advance is strictly comparable with the performance of the Guards in reaching Louvain.

But had the emphasis of command, and the vision of command, lain on Antwerp, or even had there been a commander following the battle "hour by hour, day by day," and with the flexibility of mind to see the prospect, then the "might-have-beens" become truly agonizing. The First Allied Airborne Army was ready for instant action. The 52nd (Mountain) Division, after years of training for a role it would never fulfill, was alert to be flown in to anywhere. Not only was the road to Bergen open, but through to the whole of North Holland. Utrecht, Amsterdam and Rotterdam could have been freed in the first ten days of September, and the Maas and the Rhine would have been crossed. The German Fifteenth Army would have been lost, and the positions of all the garrisons from le Havre to Walcheren would have been hopeless. Not only the port of Antwerp would have been ours, but all North Holland. The road through to the North German Plain would have been clear.

That, I believe, was the great chance for the Northern Group of armies under Field Marshal Montgomery, but the route had been determined in advance in the Field Marshal's mind, and his vision never wavered from the east.

iii

In the early hours of September 4th, the 3rd Royal Tank Regiment advanced through Malines and cleared the defenses of the main bridge into the city of Antwerp. It was the last "bounce" of the 11th Armored Division for many weeks. By two o'clock in the afternoon the Division's tanks were moving through enthusiastic crowds thronging the main boulevards, while the infantry and machine gunners made all speed to occupy the vast and

complex areas of the docks. At that hour not even the most optimistic imagined that the docks would be intact, or that, even if they had not done so already, the Germans would fail to blow the main sluices.

There was the feel, even in the main streets, that Antwerp was still at war. There had not been a stream of enemy withdrawing by this route, and even in their enthusiasm the people, by their deportment, revealed their awareness of the vital importance of their great port.

It was soon clear that the Belgian Resistance Organization had won a major victory. Acting with great speed and courage immediately on the news of Allied victory in Normandy, they had seized key points and devised a system of "islands" in all the dock area by manipulation of dock gates and swing bridges. By this means they had contrived to defend vital points from a wavering and uncertain enemy, and to make themselves safe from counter-attacks by night.

But even with the aid of the eager men of the Belgian "White Brigade" the taking over and complete clearance of the dock area was a difficult and baffling task. Following their guides, the Manchesters reached and secured the main sluices while the Rifle Brigade strove to find their bearings in the mazes of cobbled ways, the deep dark channels, towering cranes, warehouses and swing bridges. Company and platoon commanders pored over their large-scale maps by torchlight, striving to define on the ground the areas that were their responsibility, and men of the Resistance loomed up constantly out of the shadows, eager to lead troops to points they judged to be important.

On that night in Antwerp docks, with enemy snipers still active, the simple command of a general officer "to occupy the docks" revealed itself in all its difficulties as it was translated down through brigade to battalion, to company, platoon and section "on the ground." Perhaps, given the *élan*, the sublime assurance of forty-eight hours earlier, such a complex obstacle might have been taken in its stride, but the chase was over. On the morning of the 5th, the Rifle Brigade and the Manchesters discovered to their infinite relief that the docks were intact, and that somehow, crawling about through the nightmare of the

night, they had managed to occupy all the key points.

Meanwhile in the city Maj. Gen. Graf von Stolberg, commanding the Antwerp garrison, was a prisoner, explaining his failure to destroy the port by the inadequate statement that the Belgian Resistance "prevented my defensive plan from taking form." In truth the Germans had been overwhelmed by the news from Normandy, and had failed to react to the danger until it was too late.

Thus it seemed in those first hours that this magnificent "plum" had fallen into the Allied lap, but it was evident, too, that the enemy were still in some strength on the north bank of the Albert canal and in the northern suburbs. From concrete strong-points on the north of the canal enemy sniping and machine gun fire began to take on a purposeful and harassing pattern, and the shells from 105-mm. guns were falling in the center of the city. It should have been a warning to instant action, for even then, through all that day of September 5th, the enemy resistance was tentative, and must have crumbled before violent assault at a number of points. But the 11th Armored, understandably enough, had reached its limits, and was also orientated on 30th Corps with its axis veering ever eastward. On September 5th, the 11th was ordered to secure bridgeheads over the Albert canal and to be ready to move on the line of z'Hertogenbosch. The battle for the port of Antwerp was not only not over, it had not even begun.

In the streets of the city collaborators were being rounded up in droves to be herded into the empty animal cages of the Zoo. By evening on the 5th the cages were filled with frightened men and women huddled behind the bars. On that evening, while the 7th Armored Division was entering Ghent, and the whole of the German Fifteenth Army believed itself to be trapped without hope in the Pas de Calais, the 11th Armored began to probe for soft spots to the north and east. The plans of the British Second Army excluded Antwerp.

The enormous gains of that remarkable week had taxed the resources of Twenty-First Army Group beyond the limits. On the Seine the British 8th Corps had been grounded and stripped of the whole of its second-line transport and half of its first-line transport, to help to sustain the advancing columns. One thousand four hundred British Army three-ton trucks had been found defective and useless. Seven thousand five hundred tons of bridging, as a minor item, had been brought forward for bridging the Seine, a foretaste of the immense tonnages which were needed for innumerable lesser waterways at increasing distances from Normandy, and which would soon be needed for the crossings of the Maas and Rhine. It was almost inconceivable that such supplies could come through any other channel but Antwerp.

Whatever the dreams of the Army commanders, the A and Q [Administrative and Quartermaster] staffs undertook tasks of organization and improvisation of a magnitude which confronted them with the inescapable proposition that war is the art of the possible. The hopes of any significant contribution from the Channel Ports were dashed even before September 5th, for the Allied air bombardment in devastating railheads and the lateral communications of the enemy now faced the engineers with immense problems before some order might be produced out of chaos. Again, more supplies would be needed apart from the hourly essentials of gasoline, oil and ammunition.

Very slowly, as it seemed, the triumph of Antwerp dissolved as the reality of the defenses of the long Scheldt estuary were realized. In addition it began to appear unlikely that le Havre, Boulogne, Calais and Dunkirk, would fall like ripe plums into the lap of the Canadian army. All these were fortresses, difficult of approach, and held by garrisons sworn to fight to the last.

All these tasks, including the opening of the Scheldt estuary, which had already become the most urgent task facing the Allied armies in Northwest Europe, were to fall to the lot of the First Canadian Army. Upon them

and their success the whole of the operations of the winter must depend. They were short of supplies; they were without priorities; many of their meager troops were "grounded." They were, in fact, the "Cinderella" army, at times almost forgotten, and they alone in the first days of September were confronted by an organized enemy, in retreat it is true, but none the less capable and resolved to contest every crossing and every key point from the Seine, and to stand and fight on the defensive line of the Leopold canal.

This was the grim prospect on the left, while on the right the roads from Antwerp, Brussels and Ghent were filled night and day with heavy trucks wedged nose to tail back to the Seine and to Bayeux. R.A.S.C. [Royal Army Service Corps] drivers, in those days, were at their wheels for sixteen hours, and at times for twenty hours, out of each twenty-four, on the long four-hundred-mile haul to the forward troops. Their work demanded constant vigilance, great patience and strong nerves. The neat houses by the roadsides in the French and Belgian villages, that had been spotless on the first day, lay under shrouds of dust, or were plastered thick with mud from the churning wheels as through every hour of every day and night the vital need to open Antwerp was emphasized and underlined.

4

The Fifteenth Army

THE skilful building up and maintenance of a major threat against the Pas de Calais had deluded the enemy for more than two months, and had achieved its object of keeping the German Fifteenth Army out of the Normandy Battle. It had also preserved it intact in defense of the area. The tremendous defeat suffered by the Germans in Normandy had had severe repercussions, and there might have been a moment—had it been possible to take advantage of it—when the enemy might have

taken to his heels. By the end of August the moment had passed, and under a new commander, General von Zangen, the Fifteenth Army had regained cohesion and something of its balance. This was the enemy, estimated at 150,000 strong, facing the Canadian First Army as it debouched from its bridgeheads in the loops of the Seine east and west of Rouen on September 1st.

The Canadians concentrated their main weight and their armor with Canadian 2nd Corps on the right and the British 1st Corps on the left. The intention was to cut a wide swathe towards Bruges to reach the coast at Zeebrugge, while British 1st Corps attacked le Havre, and the infantry of 2nd Corps cleared the Channel Ports.

In his order of August 26th, General Montgomery had asked Lt. Gen. Crerar to give the honor of capturing St. Valery en Caux to the 51st (Highland) Division, and that, of course, the Canadian 2nd Division should have the satisfaction of taking Dieppe. In 1940 the bulk of the Highland Division had perished at St. Valery, and in August 1942 two brigades of the Canadian 2nd Division had suffered appalling casualties in the disaster of the Dieppe Raid.

While, therefore, the Canadian and Polish armor pursued the enemy rearguards on the right, the 2nd Division swung lefthanded out of the bridgehead and tore down the slopes into Dieppe almost without firing a shot. At the same time the British 1st Corps on the left gained bridgeheads after severe fighting, and found every key point and road junction covered by well-sited anti-tank guns, and held by an enemy who still had to be pushed before he would withdraw.

There was little taste in the taking of Dieppe, for the enemy had abandoned the port after carrying out hurried demolitions, and the town was desolate and almost deserted. Without a fight and without a warm welcome there was nothing to release emotion, and the Canadians patrolled the wide boulevards between the boardinghouses and the sea in grim humor. There were, in fact, very few present who had looked upon that façade and fought hopelessly on the stony beaches, and even to these few there was no connecting link between the first experience and the last. Perhaps there were too many ghosts shrouded

on the barbed wire of the empty beaches to evoke any feelings of triumph or happiness. Nevertheless Dieppe had considerable importance, and many interests. The Germans had failed to wreck the port, and within a week it was hoped to bring in some small cargoes to lessen, however slightly, the great demands on the beaches.

Beyond that a lesson many times learned could have been learned again. Not for the first time since the Dieppe Raid it was noted how easily formidable coastal batteries and defenses could be taken in the rear. The terrible east headland, honeycombed like a miniature rock of Gibraltar and virtually impregnable from the sea, held few terrors on its landward side. On the "Blue" beach at Puits, where the Royal Regiment of Canada had died almost to a man, the skilfully designed concrete emplacements were cunningly merged into the structure and line of the cliffs, and were almost invisible from the sea and air.

No doubt, the Canadians thought, the sacrifice of the Raid had served a high purpose, as Lt. Gen. Crerar had assured them after D-day, but there were some who wondered whether "the facts of life," as an officer put it, "could not be got into the heads of the Staff at less cost."

The important point was whether the "facts of life" had been got into the heads of the Staff even now.

Nevertheless there was a message of hope out of Dieppe for the people of England, and especially of London, on that 1st of September. Deep in a belt of woodland a mile or two behind the town the first of the flying-bomb sites was found like the mouth of a great cave running down into a belt of trees. At least one of these bombs, according to the people of Dieppe, had fallen on the town, and there was evidence in the massive scars that some must have crashed within a few hundred yards of take-off.

The fortunes of the Highland Division had been far more satisfying. They had broken out over the Seine on September 1st against a determined enemy, and had rushed upon St. Valery with startling speed, brushing resistance out of their path. A week earlier, the Division, pursuing the enemy through Lisieux and up and over the hills beyond, had suddenly got into its stride after weeks

of bitter fighting in the Caen hinge. They reached St. Valery on the crest of this wave and pausing only to impress themselves indelibly on the town, the Highlanders turned back to come in on the right of the 49th Division investing the fortress of le Havre. They had had their brief hour of triumph, and the dull wastes of war stretched ahead of them for many weeks.

Le Havre, with its landward approaches protected by the estuary of the Seine to the west and by a flooded valley to the east, was one of the most powerful fortresses of the Atlantic wall. Elaborate minefields and anti-tank ditches covered by concrete gun emplacements made any assault a formidable proposition. Unmistakably, too, the enemy still regarded le Havre as a vital point, and a garrison in division strength made very clear its intention to defend the fortress to the last.

On September 2nd the British 1st Corps, supported by an armored brigade and an army tank brigade, began the unpleasant task of probing the approaches while the Navy and Air Force delivered a bombardment from 350 guns and 4,000 tons of bombs. None of this softened the landward defenses, nor, it seemed, the determination of the defenders.

But there was no time to lose, and by September 7th the 1st Corps was conscious of having been left behind by the armies racing to the north. In six days le Havre had sustained a tremendous battering from the sea and air, and finally in the wake of a deluge of 5,000 tons of bombs dropped on the fortress in ninety minutes, the 49th and 51st went in "regardless." Le Havre surrendered on September 12th, yielding 12,000 prisoners. But there was no room for satisfaction.

The 4th Canadian Armored Division had entered Bruges on the 9th, and its patrols had reached the coast in the area of Zeebrugge. Ostend had fallen on the pattern of Dieppe, and on the 5th the Canadian 3rd Division had closed up on Boulogne and Calais.

On the right of the Canadian advance the Polish Armored Division relieved the 7th Armored Division in Ghent, and bashed its way across the strongly held Ghent—Terneuzen canal. By this action the Germans were isolated in the narrow strip of land held between the

Leopold canal, the Ghent—Terneuzen canal, the Scheldt estuary and the sea. The pattern for the battle for Antwerp was now clear, but a sense of urgency was nowhere discernible. Indeed, on the left flank the reverse seemed to be true, encouraged no doubt by the shortage of troops and supplies, and the lack of priorities. The news was also a factor in the feeling on the left that all the interest was on the right. Soldiers had inevitably come to consider themselves almost in the role of actors, and watched the Press carefully. Through all September 30th Corps had stolen all the thunder, and it was to continue to do so.

From Twenty-First Army Group Headquarters, from Second Army and 30th Corps there had been signs of impatience from September 4th onwards. General Dempsey had prepared a plan for the army to strike towards the Rhine at Wesel. Montgomery was determined to bound ahead and seize bridgeheads over the Maas and Rhine. The First Allied Airborne Army was ready and waiting. With the relief of the 7th Armored Division the British 12th Corps was able to gather its forces to fill the left flank of the Second Army.

The British 1st Corps, fighting for le Havre, was looked upon almost like a laggard schoolboy dawdling at the tail of the column, and urged constantly to hurry, and to move up swiftly to the Canadian right. There could not be the slightest doubt that the whole left flank was considered of secondary importance, and even a nuisance.

At last, as it seemed, by September 9th, the fruits of the Normandy victory were gathered in and consolidated, and it had escaped the attention of everyone except the Germans and General Eisenhower that the port of Antwerp, the juiciest fruit of all, was not in the basket. The Germans had regained their balance swiftly all along the line. As early as September 6th General von Zangen had established a strong defensive line on the Leopold canal, covered by the powerful coastal batteries of the Scheldt defenses at Cadzand and Breskens. He had also begun the withdrawal of the main body of his forces across the estuary. The loss of the line of the Ghent—Terneuzen canal was a serious menace to his open flank, but he had still time to move, and used it well. While Field Marshal Montgomery was waiting impatiently for 12th Corps to

fill the gap between 30th Corps and the Canadians, and for the 11th Armored to get clear of Antwerp and to strengthen 30th Corps far away in the east, von Zangen was rapidly covering the approaches to the South Beveland isthmus with the best of his troops. These troops were in strong defensive positions behind railway embankments, and with immense fields of fire over open country. Probably their positions were virtually impregnable from frontal assault. Their right flank and rear was secure, and it might be at least a month before they could be threatened from their left. Nearly seventy miles of coast line on both sides of the Scheldt estuary stretched from Antwerp to the sea. A high proportion of the land was below sea level, and all of it was interlaced with canals, dikes, causeways and minefields. All this territory was defended by troops sworn to fight to the last, and who seemed likely to do so. In fact, their escape route would cease to exist before the end.

The estuary itself was sown with minefields, and these could not be tackled until the land was won. In Antwerp itself Naval divers were working night and day in the dark, bitter-cold sludge of the docks, pulling themselves along on guide tapes, feeling with bare hands for mines and booby traps that might go off at a touch.

Yet it is true that scarcely a thought was given in the first three weeks of September to the urgent, complex and costly battle that must be planned and fought to gain this whole area, essential, beyond a shadow of doubt, to final victory.

On the Channel coast the Canadians were investing Boulogne and Calais as though there was all the time in the world, and without a trace of imagination. The pattern was the D-day pattern of naval bombardment, bombs, bombardment and more bombs. The Czech Armored Brigade was about to take over the role of sitting down outside Dunkirk "for the duration." It performed this role with unwillingness and a natural impatience. The main body of the Canadian 2nd Corps moved up on the line of the Leopold canal and prepared to take over Antwerp from the Second Army.

The German Command issued the following order:

“The defense of the approaches to Antwerp represents a task which is decisive for the future conduct of the war. After overrunning the Scheldt fortifications the British would finally be in a position to land great masses of material in a large and completely protected harbor. With the material they might deliver a death blow at the North German Plateau and at Berlin. . . . For this reason we must hold the Scheldt fortifications to the end. The German people are watching us. In this hour the fortifications along the Scheldt occupy a role which is decisive for the future of our people.”

All the available resources of the British Second Army were being built up with the utmost speed for a vastly different task, and one which, in the judgement of Field Marshal Montgomery, might bring swift victory.

5

The Wrong Battle

FROM the moment of the liberation of Brussels the sense of urgency and enthusiasm had been held at the peak on all that line of advance. The smell of victory seemed to be in the very air, and in the wake of the Guards Armored Division the three-tonners rumbled over the broken and sprouting cobbles of roads that had endured the traffic of a century without hurt. Through all the glades of Tervuren in the greenish-auburn shadow of the beeches the piles of ammunition boxes and the oil dumps were swiftly building. In every spinney, and along all the roads through Louvain to Hasselt, and from Gheel to Beeringen the dumps grew by the wayside.

The 50th Infantry Division, which had arisen again and again from the ashes of its dead since 1940, and at last lacked even a nucleus upon which to build anew, battered at the strong German defenses over the Meuse—Escaut canal at Gheel. The Guards, probing on with tremendous zest, gained bridgeheads over the Albert ca-

nal at Beeringen, and turned north to the Meuse—Escaut to fight for crossings from de Groote to Neerpelt, and to gain a foothold on the Dutch frontier. There were no illusions up forward of the stiffening enemy resistance. Along the whole intricate canal line from Antwerp to the extreme eastern flank the evidence was clear that the Germans had somehow stopped the rot. The days of “bouncing” bridges and bursting through an enemy crust and to race on to the limits of supplies, were over. General Dempsey commanding the Second Army had no doubts about the position. Reports were coming in of German troop movements and reinforcements all along the line, and especially was this true of the Arnhem area. But if there were some qualms at Second Army Headquarters they could make no impression on the commander of Twenty-First Army Group. The plan was ready. The vision had set, and the paragraphs in the appreciation relating to the enemy were not to be rewritten. None of these considerations affected the troops or sapped the sense of enthusiasm and tension which in those days pervaded the Headquarters of 30th Corps and spread downwards to infect all battalions. The troops, knowing little or nothing of what might lie ahead, were keyed up with a strange expectancy, feeling that even the end might be in sight. Swiftly the Germans were driven out of all the pockets south of the main canal line, and while the Belgian Brigade fought for their old barracks and training grounds round Bourg-Leopold, 30th Corps moved up into the fields beyond Hechtel. By the time the Canadians were entering Bruges, the Second Army was ready to answer the call of Montgomery, and to make a bid for victory.

Behind all this great and sustained effort was a new driving force in the person of Lt. Gen. Horrocks, commanding 30th Corps. Severely wounded in the desert, and at an age when such wounds normally put an end to active command, Lt. Gen. Horrocks had disregarded the somber reports and exhortations of the doctors, and had regained his strength aided mainly by his own invincible spirit. At the call of Montgomery in August he had risen from a hospital bed, and had almost at once given *esprit de corps* an exact meaning. At his coming all the troops

under his command became inspired, and the impossible of yesterday became the target of today. In Brussels on September 3rd, Horrocks had made it clear that the capital city of Belgium was neither a terminus nor a stopping-place, and with his driving force behind them 30th Corps went on without pause.

Horrocks was a remarkable figure, tall and scholarly in appearance, gentle, yet generating enthusiasm and confidence. He was also a "front-line" general, and men in their weapon slits often looked up to see his austere figure standing above them at times when they would not have thought it wise to stand themselves. He had many of the qualities men expect in their battalion commanders, and with them he wore also the unmistakable mantle of a general.

"Supplies, supplies, supplies!" was his invariable song. "Everything depends on supplies."

It should have made Antwerp unforgettable, but that was not the affair of Lt. Gen. Horrocks. It was his affair to forge such a weapon out of the material of 30th Corps that would enable it to rise above its difficulties and cut through to the heart of the enemy. Even in early September, when it might have been presumed that his name would have been unknown and of little interest to those outside his Headquarters, and the headquarters of the divisions under his command, his presence and his inspiration reached back from the forward positions north of Hechtel to the supply dumps south of the Seine. Lorry drivers, bringing up the sinews of war, became aware of themselves as vital parts of this machine, and those who wore the sign of 30th Corps on their sleeves developed a "Regimental" pride in it. The Wild Boar of 30th Corps swiftly became famous. Follow this sign, men said, and you are on the right road. It blazed the trail that would lead on to victory.

It was not merely by chance that Horrocks and Patton attracted all available supplies to their efforts and commanded the spearheads of attack. No two men could have been more different in aspect and in the outward manifestations of personality, yet both generated a sense of excitement, the one representing all that is best in the old

English character, and the other all that is best in the flamboyant character of new America.

The personality of Lt. Gen. Horrocks is of the greatest importance in considering this whole period, and it may be true to say that the presence of Patton and Horrocks changed the shape of the war in Northwest Europe. Without such a man to serve him Montgomery might well have found his vision a sheer impossibility, and would then have been forced to turn his whole attention to Antwerp. As it was, the mighty leap of his spearheads along a single narrow corridor to the north to bestride the great rivers Maas and Waal and Neder Rhine, and a score of lesser streams and canals, almost came true.

It was surprising in those days how few seemed to understand the undoubted plain truth that the price of the Arnhem gamble, win, lose or draw, must be Antwerp. It meant, too, that the price of Arnhem, short of total victory, and the isolation of the whole of Western Holland, must be to make victory impossible in 1944. Yet it was undertaken for the reverse reasons. It is true that de Guingand, Montgomery's Chief of Staff, understood this clearly, but de Guingand was ill, and away from the front at the important times, and free from the "infection" that seemed to possess all those present.

But the decision had been made. Incredibly the man of caution, the master of the set-piece battle, threw caution to the winds and embraced the ideas of a Patton. It is the more remarkable that Montgomery had achieved this state of mind even before Patton had shown his paces. The brain child was his own. And in the second and third weeks of September, while the left flank of the battle was forgotten, it remained only for all concerned to strive for success. Through all the second week of September the tension grew, and each man slept with the sense that the dawn might bring an experience that would be the peak of a lifetime. Day after day those at the top knew of the postponements of the great air drop, and masked all their doubts and fears from the troops under them. The U.S. First Army, turning due east, was opening up a dangerous gap on the right flank of the British, and the 11th Armored Division was still involved on the canal

crossings east of Antwerp. By September 13th the 15th Scottish of 12th Corps had taken over in the Gheel bridgehead from 50th Division, and had established a small bridgehead at Rethy. The going was very hard indeed, and the enemy pressure was as tight as a vise. That open country of canals, and the death-traps of straight roads like causeways, was a foretaste of Holland, and the very thought of water began to make men shudder.

By mid-September 12th Corps had moved into position on the left flank of 30th Corps, and the British 1st Corps was coming up as fast as possible to take over on the Canadian right. It seemed unbearably slow to those who waited tensed and ready in the fields north of Hechtel and held the bridgeheads almost on the Dutch frontier. In all truth the whole performance had been magnificent, and the Canadians received far less than their due. At last, as the 11th Armored Division moved east through Herenthals to the dim region of Bree, three divisions of the First Allied Airborne Army were committed to the most daring operation of the campaign in Europe, and the Guards burst out of their bridgehead to cross the Dutch frontier within twenty miles on a straight road of the industrial town of Eindhoven, and with nearly eighty miles to go. It was the morning of September 17th.

There would be no time for normal military precautions. There was time only to race over a single narrow road regardless of the existence of an enemy, through Eindhoven, Son, Veghel, Grave, Nijmegen, and on to Arnhem. There would be more than twenty rivers and canals to cross, including the giant bridges at Grave, Nijmegen and Arnhem. The flanks would be wide open; the supply line would be a vulnerable thread. On the left flank 12th Corps would make all possible speed, but whatever speed it might make it could not be fast enough. No hold-ups were possible, and at the outset hold-ups there were. It was, in fact, a plan that presumed the absence of an enemy even capable of blowing a bridge.

September 17th was the first possible moment for 30th Corps to move, and it was at least a week too late. By September 17th the German formations re-organizing in the area Arnhem-Apeldoorn were perfectly placed for

counterattack, and with a strong force of Tiger tanks available.¹

Nevertheless there was no room for even a doubt of success in the mind of any man on the ground. Nearly every man knew that the British 1st Airborne Division was dropping at Arnhem, and that the U.S. 82nd and 101st Divisions were seizing the bridges at Nijmegen and Grave and opening up the route through from Eindhoven. The link-up must be made all along the line.

In the last forty-eight hours no sign of a qualm clouded the face of Lt. Gen. Horrocks, and on the night of Saturday the 16th the tension in the fields north of Hechtel and in the bridgehead was so strong that it was like a tangible force in the darkness, a kind of dynamism generated by thousands of men poised for battle.

At the outset, enemy self-propelled guns supporting troops well dug in on the flanks harried the advance of the Guards driving up the ribbon of the concrete road through a flat landscape of heather and pine, and with no room to manoeuvre or deploy off the road. The first bound carried them to the village of Valkenswaard, a bare six miles from their take-off. Ahead of them, they now knew, the airborne troops were fighting on the road from Eindhoven to Grave. Beyond that they knew very little.

The next day, the 18th, was September at its best. While the Irish Guards, carrying infantry on their tanks, pressed on to the relief of the 101st Airborne in Eindhoven, the armored column was too often at rest by the roadside behind them. The young Guardsmen, climbing from their tanks, had time to shave, taking advantage of the hold-up to preserve the appearance for which they were famous. But these were ominous signs. The flat lands of Holland from Eindhoven to Arnhem billowed with discarded parachutes, and still the gliders were flying in, and the troop-carriers were dropping their burdens of men and supplies to drift gently down to earth. On that afternoon of the 18th the Guards were in Eindhoven to relieve the paratroops and the tanks were wedged nose to tail through all the narrow ways, hemmed in the midst of the cheering crowds. For more than twenty-four hours

¹ These activities were known to British Intelligence. See *N.W. Europe, 1944-45*.

they had listened to the dangerous sounds of war closing round them. They had watched the last of the Germans, sullen and menacing and "draped with grenades," leaving in their trucks, and for some hours there had been a vacuum.

On that night of the 18th, while the Germans counter-attacked the 101st Airborne on the road through Son, St. Oadenrode and Veghel, young and old walked in their parks, marvelling at the bearing of the young soldiers bivouaced there. Those young men, whose role it was to ride the tanks, and to leap off to attack the enemy threatening the road, behaved with an extraordinary gentleness towards the quiet people of this Dutch town. Their like was seldom seen again. They will never be forgotten.

It was not until the 20th that all those along the road from Nijmegen back through Eindhoven to the Dutch border faced the fact of failure. Miracles had happened. On the 19th the Guards had bridged the Wilhelmina canal, and raced through over the great bridge of the Maas at Grave. This was the first of the major obstacles captured intact by the dash and courage of a handful of men of the 82nd U.S. Airborne Division. Five men had rushed the Germans in their dug-outs firing their tommy-guns, and finally hurling grenades into the enemy dug-out. Almost at once a solitary German with the demolition charges had ridden his bicycle into the arms of the Americans. The bridge was ours. On the 19th, thanks to that, the Guards covered twenty-five miles in three hours, and on the afternoon of that day the British 8th Armored Brigade was fighting furiously side by side with the U.S. paratroops for the approaches to the bridge across the Waal at Nijmegen.

By that time there was severe fighting all the way back along the road to Son, and a terror air attack on Eindhoven sobered the inhabitants and brought the first real sense of possible failure to all the men of 30th Corps striving to catch up with the armored columns. But the links of the slender chain were constantly broken, patched and broken again, and the tail of the Corps, even with all the drive of Horrocks, could not wind up on this narrow spool.

By the 19th the minds of all had narrowed to the single

thought of Arnhem. The weather had deteriorated steadily. Fogs blanketed the English airfields from which supplies and reinforcements must take off. Landing areas from south of Nijmegen to north of Arnhem were under heavy fire, and at times in enemy possession. On the right flank of the U.S. 82nd Airborne Division heavy counterattacks were coming in from the area of the Reichswald forest, and the Division, urgently awaiting its own reinforcements, was forced to fight furiously to rescue its incoming gliders from landing in the arms of the enemy, and under concentrated fire.

On the night of the 19th it was difficult to restrain a sense of impending disaster, for it seemed impossible that even the Nijmegen bridge could be taken and crossed. Concrete pillboxes and self-propelled guns manned by a powerful enemy force in high morale defended the approaches to both the railway and road bridges across the Waal, and S.S. troops were fighting with determination in the town itself. The foothold of the armor and the paratroops, insecure in the rear, seemed tenuous. Hourly through the night of the 19th and through most of the next day all those fighting in Nijmegen thought to see the great bridges curl their girders into the sky in clouds of dust and in the din of detonation.

On the night of the 19th a plan of desperate daring was evolved, for this was one of those rare occasions in war when the normal does not apply, and when more must be accomplished than may reasonably be asked of men, or hoped for. With irresistible fury the Guards had succeeded in clearing the town of Nijmegen and opening up the approaches to the river about a mile west of the bridge, and in the early afternoon of the 20th, the U.S. 504th Parachute Regiment embarked in broad daylight, in full view of the enemy, in British assault boats they had never used before. With dauntless courage and an astounding sang-froid these men assaulted under concentrated enemy fire across the 400-yard wide river Waal. In that first wave many died, and many swam. Miraculously they gained footholds on the opposite bank, and turned towards the bridge. All this time there were Germans clinging like limpets to the girders of the towering framework of the bridge, firing Bazookas, rifles, automatic

weapons, and fighting like men possessed. So desperate was the situation that even the presence of these men did not give an assurance that the bridge would not be blown, and the defenders with it.

By early evening, against all the odds of war and chance, the U.S. 504th Regiment hoisted the Stars and Stripes on the northern end of the bridge, and at that heroic signal the armor of the leading squadron of the Guards went in. There was only one way, and a narrow way, but there was no holding back on that evening to cross the bridge across the Waal. Bazookas fired from the bridge itself knocked out the first tank, and the one that followed on, but the third got through. Great gashes had been torn in the roadway of the bridge itself, and the 600-yard gauntlet of the girders was wreathed in smoke and flame, as a corporal of the Grenadier Guards drove his tank onto and over that perilous structure. But the bridge was won.

It was the last great hurdle, but if there was renewed hope on that evening of the 20th it was short lived. Ten miles ahead lay Arnhem. The road was no more than a causeway between the dike-meshed fields and the partially inundated lands beyond the village of Elst. It was impossible for armor to deploy, and Elst was the end of the road. At that point enemy tanks in strength met the challenge and held it, and the very presence of the enemy at this point was an ominous indication of the condition of the British airborne troops known to be holding out behind them.

Lt. Gen. Horrocks was right forward on that day, starting into the haze towards Elst, standing in the midst of his troops on the road, not with his brigadiers, but with his ordinary men, accessible, yet infinitely remote. There was even then no suggestion in his bearing, in his whole mien, in the gravity and extraordinary gentleness of his aquiline face, that could give a hint to any man of the dismal knowledge in his mind. His troops should have been on the Zuider Zee, but the Zuider Zee with all that hopeless plan had never seemed within reach. Looking back, even the gaining of the nine-span bridge across the Maas at Grave seemed a remarkable achievement. All that lay ahead now was rescue, but even that could

not be hoped for along the narrow road through Elst.

It remained also to consolidate, and to attempt to hold the ground won, against an enemy constantly reinforced, and fighting like an army far from defeat. In the rear, Lt. Gen. Horrocks knew as well as any man that the dangers were not diminishing, and there was the hourly possibility that all his forward troops might be cut off, their supply line completely severed. Indeed, it had already happened and would happen again. He had stood at the head of his supporting columns on the edge of a strip of woodland, disdainingly cover, and looking along a mile of open road towards Son. He had watched truck after truck striving to run the gauntlet of fire, the lazy crisscross of the soaring red tracer, the bursts of the "88s," and he had seen the trucks burst into flames until the narrow road was punctuated with the billowing black smoke and the wreckage of burning vehicles. On that day the enemy self-propelled guns could be plainly seen, dark against the dark verges of the woodland, and a squadron of Guards armor had to turn back before that short stretch of road could be re-opened. On the left flank 12th Corps made slow progress, impeded by one of the divisions von Zangen had saved from the Pas de Calais. On the right flank the enemy strength was growing. Their homeland was at their backs.

All these things were crystal-clear in Horrocks' mind as he surveyed the road to Elst on the morning of the 21st, while German frogmen were making desperate sorties, swimming by night and day down-river, in attempts to blow the bridge. His main thoughts concentrated on the rescue of the British still fighting, hopelessly at that hour, beyond the Neder Rhine.

Scout cars, moving fast in the morning mists, had reached the river banks at points on the left flank opposite the area of Oosterbeek, but it was the task of the 43rd Division to fight through the fenlands to the river and open up an escape route for all those who might have survived.

On the evening of the 22nd, a squadron of tanks of the 4/7th Dragoon Guards led a battalion of the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry through to the southern bank of the Neder Rhine. It was at a point almost opposite

Oosterbeek. To do this they had thrown caution to the winds, and simply crashed through regardless of mines or enemy. Enemy tanks attempting to close in on their rear were attacked with such fury that they were brewed up before they could be effective, but through all the intricacy of dikes and by-roads the enemy fought with desperate tenacity. Nevertheless, a battalion of the Dorsets got through to join them on the morning of the 23rd, and to write the last paragraphs of the battle. It was an hour and a half after midnight when 250 men of the Dorsets took to the water in a scratch collection of craft they had humped down to the water's edge. It was their task to extend and to hold a bridgehead which had already lost definition. They came at once under mortar fire, losing two craft at the outset. The remainder struggled with the swift current, exposed to the fire of the enemy, for a blazing building on the north bank burnished the water with the reflection of its flames. Those who reached the opposite bank, armed only with their rifles or tommy-guns and grenades, somehow scrambled up the steep bank in the face of point-blank fire from an enemy concealed on the fringe of the woods. Their task was hopeless, yet because they accepted it and did what they could, fighting in small groups in the woods, harassing the enemy who would otherwise have dominated this crossing point, small groups of survivors of the Airborne managed to reach safety.

From that day onwards British paratroops found their various ways into 30th Corps lines, all of them wet, all of them curiously cheerful and valiant. Many had been helped and fed by the Dutch.

Meanwhile Horrocks was resolved to hold and to consolidate all that had been won. His Headquarters was swiftly established almost on top of the enemy in the woods southeast of Nijmegen, with air-bursts crashing and crackling dangerously in the trees overhead. Yet it was good. It held morale strong, and it was impossible to be out of the front line, for it was virtually "front line" all the way back to the outskirts of Eindhoven.

In the end the advance had gained so much that many have tried to argue failure into victory. It is, I am sure, a wrong view. Arnhem had to succeed, and it failed. For

many days the British Second Army was dangerously extended, and the enemy was able to concentrate re-organized forces in all the area from Nijmegen to Venlo, and to flood a large proportion of the land between the rivers. It made a festering sore in the right flank of the British salient, and it was a painful operation to cut it out. Six months later 30th Corps, gathering almost the entire resources of the Second Army under command, would be involved in the bitter fight for the Reichswald forest. Nearly seven months after Arnhem, in mid-April 1945, the Canadians would capture the bridge, as unsung then as they were in this unhappy September of 1944, and patiently fulfilling the role that was their inescapable lot.

Slowly, unwillingly, attention began to turn towards the left flank. The British Second Army had shot its bolt, and no further adventures could be expected from it.

6

No Thunder on the Left

THE most striking feature on the left flank was the emptiness of the roads, and the remarkable sense of peace over all Flanders. The organized enemy withdrawal had left the countryside free from fear. The lack of priorities and supplies had left the roads clear. Over much of that land the war of 1914-18 seemed more real than this war of September, 1944. The fields and roadsides, redolent of the unquiet grave, held in their stillness a nostalgia. It was as though here in Flanders not only the bodies, but also the hopes, of a generation of men lay buried.

War in 1944 had not treated Flanders unkindly. The long, leaning poles of the hop vines relieved the green of turnips and the dark reddish sheen of beet in the peaceful cultivated fields. There were red poppies glowing in the kale, in the rich clover, and in the harvested bundles of flax. There was no feel of excitement, or of urgency.

From the sudden hill of Cassel under the statue of Foch overlooking all the seaboard plain of Dunkirk and Calais the pattern of present war could be seen. The hill

of Cassel itself was seamed with defensive works, and as far as the eye could see tall wired poles, erected by the enemy, stood in the fields to guard against air landings. On the distant outskirts of this scene the late September sun made pale mirrors of the inundated fields surrounding Dunkirk, and on the roads to the coast every village had been a strong-point defended by massive pillboxes and well camouflaged farms and barns. Barbed wire curled in the dikes and ditches, and slit trenches covered every field of fire, for it was here that the Germans had prepared to resist the Allied landings, only, in the end, to abandon all their works, except the ports. Every port along that coastal belt was a fortress, and every fortress had woven an intricate network of minefields and wire round its landward perimeter. So urgently and well had the Germans worked on building up the defenses that they were loth to abandon all, even when the threat inspiring their labors had patently disappeared. At best they could hope only to deny the harbors for a matter of days, yet in the end, by holding on, they succeeded in buying precious time for the defense of Antwerp.

In the last twenty days of September the mills of war on the left had ground exceeding slow, as well as exceeding small. On September 17th, while the Guards leapt forward out of their bridgehead at de Groot, two brigades of the Canadian 3rd Division with the support of 340 guns went in to the final attack against the elaborate system of concrete forts defending Boulogne. The enemy batteries at Gris Nez answered the Canadian concentration of artillery, and finally, after a set-piece battle, the fall of Boulogne yielded 10,000 prisoners.

Doggedly the Canadians set about repeating the tedious pattern at Calais, and again at Dunkirk, and it is permissible to wonder whether it was not all a waste of time, men, ammunition, and vital supplies, so urgently needed elsewhere. The garrisons within the gates of all the Channel Ports were already prisoners in their fortresses, and could have been left to wither away like dead twigs on a tree that has lost its trunk. There was no future for them. They could not break out, and their nuisance value must have been negligible. The value of the ports they held paled to insignificance against the

enormous quantities of supplies demanded daily. As it was, some weeks were to elapse before the engineers could restore the port installations, clear the harbors, and open the docks to shipping.

In late September, in contrast to the warfare on the right, the slow "one by one" reduction of Boulogne, Calais, Dunkirk, Gris Nez, seemed alarmingly unreal, and divorced entirely in feeling and purpose from all that was going on elsewhere. The opening of Antwerp had not yet entered the reckoning, and Lt. Gen. Crerar's plans were of the most methodical kind. At Calais and Dunkirk, as soon as the inhabitants, as well as the defenders, realized that attack was imminent, there was first the demand for a truce. Then followed the negotiations, the evacuation of civilians, the bombing, the bombardment, the negotiation of the minefields and blasting of strong-points. At last siege or surrender. On October 1st, with little stomach for the last fight, Calais surrendered.

At Dunkirk the whole tedious process seemed endless. Two young Frenchmen rode out from the town on bicycles bringing a request from the President of the French Red Cross for a truce. There was a lull of forty-eight hours while the request was passed up to Army Command and back again. The two young Frenchmen then rode back into Dunkirk, promising to return. It was Sunday. Someone remarked that "tomorrow would be washing-day." All through Monday the Canadians waited for the return of the bicyclists, and finally at first light on Tuesday they rode back, explaining that it would have been a dangerous journey by night. Two junior staff officers then drove in a jeep to a rendezvous with the Germans, and were led blindfold to the Garrison Commander. The conference included the Mayor. An agreement was reached.

The truce itself was to be preceded by a twelve-hour period to clear the exit roads for civilians, and followed by a twelve-hour period to put all mines and defenses back again. Everyone then sat down for sixty hours while 8,000 men, women and children were evacuated, fed and conveyed to safety.

The German Commander added a finishing touch to these proceedings with the following statement: "The

preservation of German lives is more important at this moment than the Port of Dunkirk. We shall fight hard, but not to the end."

This statement seemed a good reason to kill them all. In fighting there is little room for compromise, and if you do not mean to die it is wiser not to take a chance. Nevertheless, without fighting or dying very much the Germans had succeeded in denying the Channel Ports to the Allies for far too long.

Another week had passed, and troops could no longer be spared for the job. The Czech Armored Brigade was hastily called upon to hold a watching brief over Dunkirk and to relieve the Canadians. Thus Dunkirk languished under guard to the war's end. The whole slow process of the taking of the Channel Ports had cost a total of 1,500 British and Canadian casualties against a bag of nearly 30,000 Germans captured. It had also cost more than thirty days, and was not as good a balance sheet as it looked. For more than three weeks General von Zangen had deployed his men and strengthened his defenses. The Leopold canal had become almost impregnable to frontal assault, and a whole network of canals lay between it and the Scheldt estuary. The neck of the South Beveland isthmus was very strongly held, and was the first of several death-traps on that flank. The toll of Allied lives would be paid on a different account, but it would be paid.

In the light of the facts it is curious that so great an administrative authority as Maj. Gen. Sir Miles Graham should have supported Field Marshal Montgomery's drive to the north with the statement: "Based as we were on the Channel Ports . . ."

We were not so based until the end of October, although Dieppe and Ostend were providing a trickle of supplies much earlier. The whole contribution when it came could not be described as more than useful.

In all that month of September only two events of any significance took place in regard to the opening of the Port of Antwerp, and these were mainly "signs." On September 18th, the Canadian 2nd Division had taken over in the city, and with the aid of Dutch Resistance had cleared the small pocket west of Antwerp to the Terneuzen canal. By this the enemy were confined to the Breskens pocket,

held between the Leopold, the Terneuzen canal, the estuary, and the sea.

The second event was the arrival of the nucleus of a Naval Staff to set up its headquarters at Bruges on September 21st, and to sit in on the planning for the Scheldt battle. This was called "T" Force. Its arrival brought the first sense of urgency, and even of impatience. Slowly, infinitely slowly, and with a sense of inevitability, the plans were taking shape, and the stage for the battle was set.

Yet no one moving with the troops, now on the right, now on the left, in those first weeks of September, could fail to be struck by an essential difference, difficult to define, but of vital importance. Neither the Canadians, nor the British divisions of 1st Corps under their command, had experienced the high peaks of "liberation fever." They had not been called upon to make swift and sudden psychological adjustments. They had fought hard and grimly in Normandy. They had advanced with commendable speed to Bruges. But they had faced an enemy from start to finish. Inevitably they had eased up, but had remained dour, given to dry and sometimes bitter humor. They had never lost their fighting mood nor had they spurted at a sudden vision of victory. It was, perhaps, in this, that the Second Army had failed in its fatal thrust to the north. Through all Holland the mood and mantle of liberators had remained upon them, and it was not the best way to meet a determined enemy, still very far from defeat. Before the end of September the Second Army had found its fighting feet again, withstanding constant heavy counterattacks in the Nijmegen bridgehead and from powerful enemy forces launched from the Reichswald forest. Soon, as the enemy flooded all the land between the branches of the Rhine, it was to become a miniature Zuider Zee. The Second Army, extended to the limits, could do little more than hold its own during the weeks when the terrible sequel to Arnhem was being fought out over the hideous waterlogged banks of the Scheldt. From north to south the Allied armies were grimly short of supplies and reinforcements, and winter was upon us. No one doubted then that it would be a hard winter, but none knew just how hard it would be. Perhaps that was fortunate.

PART THREE

October

7

The Battlefield

IN the absence of Lt. Gen. Crerar, on sick leave, the task of planning and fighting the Battle of the Scheldt fell to Lt. Gen. G. G. Simonds, commanding Canadian 2nd Corps. The most experienced commander in the Canadian Army, Lt. Gen. Simonds was then forty-one years of age, and reputedly ambitious and ruthless. His responsibility was very great.

By the end of September the plans were well advanced, and the resources and forces which would be available were quickly coming together. The immediate task was to complete the preliminaries with all speed, and to isolate the final battlefield.

These preliminary tasks to clear the way for the battle were in themselves formidable. As soon as the task of sealing off the South Beveland isthmus could be completed the Canadian 2nd Division would mount its attack due west through the Bevelands to launch its final assault over the causeway into Walcheren. But before this could take place the difficult water-logged area of the "Breskens pocket" had to be cleared of enemy. This task fell to the Canadian 3rd Division and was given the code name *Operation Switchback*.

As October opened the battlefield lay clear ahead. In the intricate pattern of its canals and dikes and major waterways, its inundated fields and floods, its exposed causeways, and its entire absence of cover for attacking

troops, it presented perhaps the grimmest piece of "ground" over which men have ever been called upon to fight.

The artillery available to the Canadian 2nd Corps were 327 guns, including 144 25-pounders, 128 mediums and 55 heavies and super-heavies. In support of the Corps the Naval "T" force was busy assembling ships and men at Southampton for the seaborne attack, and at Ostend men of the 4th Special Service Brigade were in training on the beaches with assault troops and the curious collection of vehicles of the 79th Armored Division. On October 1st the 6th Battalion of the Highland Light Infantry heralded the coming of the 52nd (Lowland) Mountain Division, no longer to be denied the opportunity to get into battle. The many and difficult tasks which would be called for from the air would be performed by 84th Group of the R.A.F.

On the enemy side the greatest ally of all was water and weather. From east to west the Germans had called the waters to their aid to make vast inland lakes and floods, but at no point from the confluence of the Neder Rhine and the Waal to the sea was the water a more potent and more deadly ally than in the whole region of the Scheldt estuary. It would force men to accept the alternatives of advancing on narrow dike banks and causeways exposed to devastating fire or to take to the flooded polders [land reclaimed from the sea by dikes] up to their armpits. Such artillery observation as might be attempted on the ground would inevitably be undertaken from church towers, and the lives of forward observation officers would depend on remarkable agility once they were suspect or discovered.

For artillery support, apart from the weapons he had been able to withdraw, von Zangen had the support of the powerful batteries covering the Leopold canal line from Breskens and Cadzand, and the batteries of Flushing to cover the whole of the coastal line of the Breskens pocket from the Savojaardplaat. The seaborne attack against the west of Walcheren island, believed to be impossible, would be met by the guns of the most powerful coastal defenses in the world, and it was estimated that a force of 790 Lancaster bombers would be needed to drop

full bomb-loads on each casemated battery to stand a good chance of success. The only other challenge such batteries would take seriously would be from guns of at least equal caliber to their own.

In addition, the Germans were well equipped with the mortars of which they were the masters.

With their backs on Breskens the German 64th Infantry Division had the role of defending the pocket. They were pledged to fight to the last and were committed to death or surrender. The German 70th Infantry Division would defend the Bevelands and reinforce the garrisons of Walcheren, estimated at between 7,000 and 10,000 men. In the neck of the South Beveland isthmus six battalions of German paratroops were dug in on the railway embankment, and on the banks of the dikes, and with immense fields of fire.

The only possible landward approach to the citadel of Walcheren island which dominated the entrance to the Scheldt was through the neck of the isthmus and across the narrow causeway connecting the Bevelands with Walcheren across the Slooe Channel. It was feared that the Germans might flood the Bevelands to close this route.

Such was the task confronting Lt. Gen. Simonds and the Canadian 2nd Corps in October 1944, and to which the Supreme Commander implored Field Marshal Montgomery to give his personal attention. Its importance was paramount.

In brief outline Lt. Gen. Simonds' plan was:

- i. To seal off the isthmus leading to South Beveland and to clear Breskens "island."
- ii. To clear South Beveland by an advance along the isthmus in conjunction with an assault across the estuary mounted from the south bank in the Terneuzen area.
- iii. To clear Walcheren by concentric assaults from east, south and west.

This would involve an assault crossing of the estuary to be mounted from Breskens against Flushing, and the seaborne attack of "T" force from Ostend.

It was decided to neutralize the fixed and heavy defenses of Walcheren itself by bombing the sea dikes and flooding the island, and at once the Dutch Government in exile in London made representations to the British Government to spare the civilian population of Flushing from air bombardment. To this the British Government gave a non-committal reply, stating that it must be at the discretion of the Military Commander.

At once the R.A.F. set about its main tremendous task of breaching the huge sea dikes of Westkappelle, and thus flooding Walcheren island. As the North Sea poured in to these lands so hardly won from the sea by the stoic Dutch, it was hoped that some of the heavy batteries covering this coast would be neutralized. The sea dikes at the chosen and essential point were 330 feet thick at the base of concrete, and rising to a height of 30 feet above the high dunes. A gap of at least 300 yards was asked for as a minimum, and against this gap, and into this gap, the seaborne attack of "T" Force would assault, supported by heavy naval gunfire and by the bombers, fighter-bombers and Typhoons [fighter aircraft] of the R.A.F.

At that same hour an assault crossing would be mounted over the nine-kilometer wide channel against Flushing, while the infantry of the Canadian 2nd Division would, it was hoped, be forcing the passage of the causeway over the Slooe Channel.

But all that was a long way off, and far beyond the knowledge of those taking part. The days when such an assault from the sea would be possible were strictly limited, especially in the winter months. November 12th was fixed tentatively for the final assault, and all the time between might well be less than enough for the work ahead. But for the "terrible urgency" it is possible that the Navy would not have agreed to the plan. In its entirety it called not only for a miracle, but for sustained endurance and courage on the part of the troops that would inevitably at times be suicidal.

The month of October 1944 opened appropriately with a fierce gale which hit the Normandy coast and again revealed the tenuous nature of the whole supply line. It also whipped all the exposed lands of coastal Holland

with its vicious fringe. The rain drove down out of skies indistinguishable from the grey water-logged landscape, and in these conditions the infantry of the 2nd and 3rd Canadian Divisions began their preliminary assaults.

ii

The Canadian 2nd and 3rd Infantry Divisions received their orders to advance on October 4th. While the Canadian 3rd Division assaulted across the Leopold canal to clear the Breskens pocket, the Canadian 2nd Division would advance to seal off the South Beveland isthmus. It was expected that these operations would be completed in "3 to 4 days." At the same time Bomber Command would make its preliminary sorties against the Walcheren dikes.

On the left, the 7th Infantry Brigade of 3rd Division in the lead had already closed in to the line of the canal, and found all the bridges blown. On the right the Calgary Highlanders of the 8th Reconnaissance Regiment had probed the light defensive screen of the enemy on the flanks of the main road north out of Merxem. The orders "2 div will advance on the Merxem—Bergen op Zoom axis" came as a relief to men anxious to move forward, and perhaps to meet the end of a war that was becoming increasingly uncomfortable. The Division had come under severe fire from "88s" and had been harassed by accurate mortaring on the outskirts of the drab and depressing suburb of Merxem. The tall shuttered houses lined the narrow streets, unwelcoming, hiding the fearful inhabitants. Merxem and the villages beyond on the road to Putte had become places of suspended animation, waiting, and seeming sour with fear. Swiftly, with two brigades forward astride the main road, the Division began to move, clearing Eekeren on the left on the fringe of the pitiless polder lands, and filling the right flank to Brasschaert up the right fork of the main road. The enemy was elusive, evading contact, yet skilfully using every farm and barn and culvert as sniping points. Mortars withdrew before they could be attacked, and were set up again five or six hundred yards back. There were

few mines, but it was dangerous to take a yard of ground for granted. It was the "small change" of war with payment made in single lives and wounds from day to day.

Beyond the built-up areas belts of thinly planted woodland came down to the verges on the right of the road, and the left was open—as open and bare and cheerless as the pale sky. In the clear light of the first days under a sky like the inside of an oyster shell the land lay like a map to the sand banks and the sea, colorless and featureless, save for the everlasting dikes, the low shapes of barns, and of small farmsteads in which the silent dour folk sheltered with their livestock against the bitter winds. Such crops as there were had been harvested, and much was hidden from enemy and friend. The lives of the peasants were cast in a grim mould, and their innocence was profound. They were strong, slow moving, and wedded to peace as surely as the Eskimos and for like reasons. War was alien to them, a monstrous inexplicable evil that had afflicted them for four years, surrounding them with its trappings, taking a toll of their labors and all that they wrested from the soil. When they ventured into their polders, avoiding the dike banks, their heads and their eyes were down, and there were some among the Canadians able to understand in their bones the struggle of these people, knowing the northern wilderness of their own vast land.

Beyond the last of the built-up areas and the warmth of walls the pitiless landscape faced the troops with a pitiless battle. They could sense it. The leading battalions of the two forward brigades splayed out left and right like the fingers of two hands, resolving themselves at the tips into individuals who must walk and eat, rest and sleep with death. To them war was a series of barns, road junctions, slit trenches, strong-points, and mines, the objectives of day after day. Their horizon was limited by their field of vision. Cooks brought them hot food and tea in containers, and the Post Corporal brought them letters to read in the ditch, or with luck in a barn or under the shelter of a wall. To these men a division was as remote as the next world, and even a brigade was a back area. They knew themselves as a part of a battalion led by a lieutenant colonel who, so far as they were concerned,

was God. They knew that there were higher ranks, but they knew that there were not "higher" people. For whenever they were growing too afraid, and things seemed too bad, too dangerous, the colonel would be there, nonchalant, upstanding, chatting amiably, and saying those words that were usually very simple, words like "good chaps" and "well done" that you might laugh at and jeer at when the danger had passed, but which never failed to fortify in battle.

Assault troops of the Engineers led the single files of men, sensitive, probing like antennae, and the columns of sections moved swiftly, spread out, cursing the lack of cover. The sudden stutter of a Spandau and the menacing crackle of exploding mortar bombs brought them instantly to their knees and bellies to crawl in the sodden dikes, while platoon commanders, those 2nd lieutenants who had survived the testing ordeal of battle and gained the respect and confidence of their men, kept their eyes ahead, seeking the enemy, striving to pin-point a target for attack. Men might think their platoon commander a bloody fool. They might joke about his youth and wonder whether he had ever had a woman. But they would die at his command by the time the Canadian 2nd Infantry Division had its orders to advance up the road to Bergen op Zoom. The 2nd Division and all the divisions had stripped themselves down to their essentials in the surgical operation of war in Normandy. The 2nd lieutenant who could not lead platoons into the face of the enemy had put up more "pips" and gone back to Division or Corps, or Army, without blame or envy. Cream would not be cream if all milk were cream. All the way through the ones whose strength was not of the simple order of those who must fight and face death by adventure, and not by misadventure, had been weeded out, promoted, and found jobs at which they could at times excel, often dangerous jobs and skilful jobs, but not remotely resembling this job of advancing day after day and night after night upon an enemy, and with nothing but courage.

Jeeps with the thin spindles of their aerials bending to the wind careered up and down the roads. Signals jeeps unrolled black cable at the roadsides to link battalions with their brigades, and brigades with division. The whole

vast paraphernalia that enables a division to be a self-supporting entity began to move in the wake of its feeler scout cars and infantry out of Merxem. Lieutenant colonels talked to company commanders in the shelter of shallow banks. The scout cars rolled lazily on their heavy ribbed tires ready to whistle up tanks to break road-blocks. But it was not tank country, and a tank was simply a self-propelled gun with its supporting Bezas or M.G.'s.

Through St. Mariaburg and on to Kapellen on the main axis casualties were slight. Lieutenant colonels halted their jeeps to talk to their forward troops, and nerves quietened at their coming. It was nervy in the beginning, and colonels were never afraid, or, if they were, it was something infinitely secret between themselves and their Maker. If they failed the battalion was no good, for the battalion was a part of its commander, his instrument, and the company and platoon commanders were his disciples, gaining their strength from him. This was the strength upon which brigades and divisions were built, and if the battalions were faulty all the rest counted for nothing.

Because of these things, and many more less tangible, ordinary men advanced in silence up the narrow exposed roads in the face of the enemy, glad of the occasional noises of their aircraft swooping forward, glad of the shuffle of sound that told them their shells were on their ways. When men crumpled suddenly by the roadsides R.C.A.M.C. [Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps] jeeps came swiftly forward, and wounded were lifted carefully out of dikes by men who seemed unaware of enemy mortaring and bursting shells. In this phase of uncomplicated advance into battle, wounded were received in Regimental Aid Posts within a few minutes, patched up, eased, sent back to hospitals, or to the grave.

Further back, seeking whatever shelter they could find, the elaborate Brigade Trucks listened to the battle, collecting and collating threads of information as they filtered in, sifting and sending reports back to division. A disaster to a section was absorbed by company and battalion, and might remain unknown to brigade. The 1-to-25,000 maps of the forward troops became 1-to-100,000 maps at division, and with that the detail of barn and dike, as

well as the detail of life and death, was lacking. At division all was optimism, for the broad picture seemed good. The enemy rearguard screen was withdrawing, but it was imposing its presence upon the Canadian 2nd Division, cutting it down to a measured careful pace. The pace was too slow for brigadiers urged by a major general, urged himself by a corps commander, urged by Army, by Army Group, by Supreme Command, who gave orders—"Open the Scheldt."

On the second day out of Merxem, brigadiers drove forward in their jeeps, urging, exhorting. On the left flank the Fusiliers Mont Royal, part of a special force, were making some headway through the polders, trying to edge westward towards the south side of the neck of the isthmus. But the neck of the isthmus was barely a mile wide at its narrowest point, and the enemy could cover it with a barrier of lead and steel. The speed of the Fusiliers Mont Royal must depend on the speed of the brigade on its right flank.

At Sandvliet the special force was bombarded with pamphlets in French and English to remind these Canadians of the Dieppe disaster. Those who read seemed unmoved beyond a curse, unable to understand what the Germans hoped to gain.

"Hello Boys of 2nd Canadian Division!

Here you are again, after those nasty hours at Dieppe where out of 5,000 brave lads of the Royal Regt., the Essex Scottish, the Mont Royal Fusiliers, the Camerons, the South Sasks, the Black Watch and the tank gunners of the Calgary Regt., only 1,500 escaped death or capture.

Now your division is in it for the second time.

First your pals—and now you.

It was a lousy trick they played on you that time, wasn't it?

Why exactly were you forced to do it?

Every child knows now that the whole Dieppe affair was nothing but a big bluff.

First the Bolshies had to have their Second Front for which they so urgently clamored.

Secondly the Brass Hats needed 'Invasion-Experi-

ence' and quite naturally they wouldn't think of sacrificing any Limeys in a job like that.

Surely you understand. . . .

Now joking aside—this thing is much too serious. We haven't the slightest intention of poking our noses in your affairs. *But we Germans honestly despise the idea of having to fight against decent fellows like you, inasmuch as we know you're not fighting for yours truly or for Canada.*

You know that only a few old scraps of paper bind you to England, an England that in its entire history has never done a damn thing for Canada that would help its future. Canada's sole purpose has always been to fight and bleed for England.

In the next few days this God damn slaughter will start again. *WE* can't help it, since we are, after all is said and done, fighting for our very existence.

But WE WARN YOU Hitler didn't give up France for the fun of it.

Remember—always remind yourself of September 21st.

Let those who gain fight their own blood battles."

By this pamphlet the enemy showed that they were aware that there would be a fight, and they had not forgotten the Canadians or the order of battle of the 2nd Division. The Royal Regiment of Canada and the Essex Scottish were beginning to move westward towards the neck. The tank gunners of the Calgary Highlanders were again facing an enemy in prepared positions, and the advance slowed to the imminence of battle. On October 6th, the 2nd Division reached Putte, and moved on throughout the next day to reach Hoogerheide. At this point the forward troops were over halfway across the tip of the peninsula, but the optimism had gone from the Division. Enemy counterattacks came in throughout the nights against the whole of the left flank, and especially against the Fusiliers Mont Royal. The 8th Reconnaissance Regiment, probing forward from Hoogerheide, struck the hard rock of the enemy forward defenses, and were forced back by anti-tank guns covering every channel of advance. The Royal

Regiment on the left began to feel naked on the right flank.

On October 9th the Division had not advanced beyond Hoogerheide. It had made a junction with the British 49th Division forward of St. Leonard. That was the line, and it would need a major effort to go on from there. Five days from October 4th had gone already. Away on the extreme left flank the enemy was fighting for every inch of ground in a narrow Canadian bridgehead across the Leopold canal. Canadian 2nd Corps had grossly underestimated enemy strength all along the line.

iii

The task of the Canadian 7th Infantry Brigade concentrated in the area of Maldegem was expressed in simple terms:

“7 Cdn inf bde will destroy or capture enemy in area Moershoofd—Ardenburg—Oostburg—Schoondijke. Assault and seize crossing of Leopold canal. Enlarge bridgehead. Mop up to west.”

The success of this operation would bring the Brigade to the threshold of Breskens and cut the pocket in halves. On October 5th rum was issued to all troops of the 7th and 8th Infantry Brigades. The weather was deteriorating, and the prospect ahead was bleak enough to justify all possible means to fortify the human spirit. Rum was promised daily. It was sorely needed.

At half past five o'clock on the morning of October 6th, the Brigade launched its assault following a scorching barrage of flame from twenty-seven Wasps [flame thrower on a Bren-gun carrier] of the 79th Armored Division. The attack went in at a point immediately east of the junction of the Leopold with the canal de Derivation de Lys. Here the Derivation de Lys diverges southeast from the main channel of the Leopold. Less than a mile ahead lay the Dutch frontier, marked by the tiny homesteads on the southern outskirts of the village of Eede. They could be seen easily enough through the tall

trees lining the dikes and the banks of the canal, and picked out by the landmark of the church tower. Only the poor visibility and the curvature of the earth prevented a clear vision to the North Pole. There was nothing in the way.

A sustained bombardment through the night had failed to dislodge the enemy from well-dug-in positions on the reverse slopes of the canal banks and dikes, and the Wasp flame-throwers had been brought up under cover of darkness to go into action with the dawn. It is doubtful whether any troops in the world can keep their heads up under the searing tongues of flame, and under this cover the Canadians hauled their assault craft up and over the southern bank and paddled across the canal as the barrage of flame lifted.

On the right, "B" Company of the Canadian Scottish Rifles crossed under desultory fire, and managed to get a footbridge across the canal before they were hemmed in close to the dikes by heavy machine-gun fire seeming to come from all directions except their immediate rear.

On the left the Lead Company of the Regina Rifles crossed well before the enemy had his head up, but once over the canal bank, the bombs from heavy mortars and machine guns weaving in a cross-fire from Ardenburg and Middleburg made progress impossible. The enemy defenses were as tight as a drum, and it was suicide to attempt to advance over the open coverless ground. Men strove to inch forward through the water of the dikes only to find that every narrow channel was covered by rifle, Spandau or machine gun. There seemed no hope of getting a bridge of any kind across on the left, and the companies of the Regina Rifles ferried across as best they could to hold on with the battalion in a tight perimeter in which every yard counted.

All that day and all through the night the men were in mud and water, often up to their armpits.

On October 7th, the Reserve Battalion, the Royal Winnipeg, crossed on the Canadian Scottish footbridge, and a terrific battle developed in the appalling maze of dikes halfway between Eede and Moorhoofde at Oosthoek. And here the Brigade fought with a bitter determination in its efforts to link up the crossings and establish a solid

bridgehead. The road joining the two villages was barely three hundred yards ahead, and every dike bank held an enemy resolved not to give an inch. Mortar fire and heavy machine-gun fire enfiladed the Brigade with nothing short of an incessant torrent of fire, and held it virtually to the northern bank of the canal. In a desperate attempt to break out, "C" Company of the Canadian Scottish was immediately cut off and captured.

On the left the Regina Rifles, probing for any sign of weakness, were able to expand two hundred yards to the westward by crawling in the dikes often with only the heads of men showing above water. But there was still no depth to the north, and artillery support appeared to have little effect.

Again and again by night and day strong fighter patrols crawled forward over the sodden polders, squelching in mud and water, meeting the enemy literally hand to hand to smash and strangle and kill in the sodden dug-outs, to gain perhaps a score of yards as the prize of those who prevailed, crawling over that quagmire of misery.

Thirty minutes after midnight on October 12th, after fighting without shelter for six days and nights, eating and drinking crouched and huddled on hands and knees, grateful only for the warming, strengthening fire of the rum that had become as vital as ammunition, "A" Company of the Canadian Scottish attacked with savage ferocity towards the Graaf Jansdijk. The Company was organized as a fighting patrol and it gained the banks of the fearsome channel marking the Dutch frontier, barely five hundred yards inland from the Leopold canal.

That day was a day of reckoning, a day of desperate sorties, and in the early afternoon the lead Company of the Royal Winnipeg was cut off, but would not give in. The men lay down in a wide square, grateful even for six inches of cover, and they fought where they lay, as dangerous as a tiger at bay in a patch of scrub.

The efforts of the day made a slight impression as the rescuing companies of the Royal Winnipeg fought their way through savagely to save the Battalion. But not all the courage of men could prevail against an enemy defending this maze of dikes and half-flooded polders, and supported by heavy artillery, hosts of invisible mortars,

heavy machine guns, and all the personal weapons of the infantry.

Yet the tenacity of 7th Infantry Brigade, clinging to its narrow bridgehead and fully engaging the enemy over a slowly widening front, had at last enabled the Engineers to bridge the canal on the fourth day. In a final desperate effort on October 13th, the Canadian Scottish Rifles forced their way into the village of Eede and at last had their feet astride the hard road, and the road junction to Ardenburg. It was the first real gain since the initial crossing, and only one thousand yards inland from the canal bank. Here for the first time men rose to their feet and saw themselves rimed with grey mud.

"The whole — country is just one dike after another. It's not a country at all," said a company commander. A great deal more was said that is unprintable. The Dutch themselves say of their polder country, "God did not have a hand in it." And that was true. They had made it themselves, and for more than one hundred years they had consoled themselves with the knowledge that no army could ever fight over it.

For a week the rain, driven by winds blowing half a gale, had seemed to join the dark evil sky to the dark evil land, so that the small space that had been won resembled the inside of a tureen squelching with mud and water like some foul stew. Even the dikes had lost their lines, crushed and churned into the grey muck heap of the featureless wilderness. There were no fires. There was no rest. For a full week men had lived and died and slept always wet and caked with ooze. The first respect for the enemy had given way to a bitter hatred, growing to an absolute loathing, for the Germans had mined and booby-trapped the bodies of their dead. The bloated bodies in the mud of the polders, and lolloping face down like filthy grey bags in the dark waters of the dikes, had proved as dangerous dead as alive. Bodies exploded at a touch to destroy men in their rare moments of compassion.

In the old-fashioned phrase, "there was no quarter." Enemy bodies rotted and stank where they had fallen, of less account than the swollen carcasses of oxen with the legs sprouting stiffly upwards, symbols of the misery of that terrible land reclaimed from the sea.

When Eede was at last won the land ahead was strewn thickly with mines. Hidden wires touched off explosions of mud shot through with fragments of steel. Men lost their feet as they crawled along under the dike banks and sat staring at the shattered stumps.

On October 16th, the Regina Rifles were still battering themselves against an impregnable defensive line running from Middelburgdijk to Doopersdijk. There was no give at all. A pill-box won with blood was retaken by the enemy before the small band of riflemen could make good their gain. At least one hundred men of the German 64th Infantry Division had dug themselves in deep to hold the road to St. Kruis.

The waterways were of an extraordinary intricacy, for not only were there the dikes draining the polders, but there were also many cuttings almost as wide and as deep as the Leopold canal, running north, south, east and west. The Molenkreek was a formidable barrier covering Middelburg, and no hamlet seemed to lack its kreek or vliet, its water, its everlasting mud, and the grey, ice-cold rain.

The 7th Infantry Brigade knew that it had won too little, but the commander of the German 64th Infantry Division knew that they had won too much in gaining even one thousand yards, for this area, the direct route to Breskens, was the core of his defenses, and every yard was vital. On October 14th, General Eberding, commanding the 64th, issued a warning to his troops in uncompromising terms. Any man who might surrender, no matter what the circumstances, would be regarded as a deserter. The Division must stand and die. "In cases where the names of deserters are ascertained these will be made known to the civilian population at home and their next of kin will be looked upon as enemies of the German people."¹

Such an order was a sign of weakness, and of acute anxiety. It lent men fear rather than courage, and General Eberding had good cause for alarm on that day. Under the pressure of the failure of the first unimaginative frontal attacks of the Canadian 2nd and 3rd Divi-

¹ Quoted in *The Struggle for Europe*, from an order issued by General Eberding October 14th, 1944. Noted also in Canadian 7th Infantry Brigade War Diary.

sions, new movements had begun to develop ominous threats to the enemy. Hitler commanded that the Scheldt estuary must be held at all costs. The Allied Supreme Command demanded that it must be taken at all costs. On October 13th, the first of the V2's came silently into the heart of the city of Antwerp, sending a vast column of rubble, masonry, iron, steel and the remains of people a tremendous height above the city. This V2 was the harbinger of a cavalcade that would test the spirit of the people at least until the Scheldt battle was won.

8

The Ninth of October

THE end of the beginning of the preliminary battles for the Scheldt is clearly marked on the 9th October. The slow progress and the powerful enemy reaction over the whole battlefield had made nonsense of the first appreciation, and called for a reassessment. Fortunately the plans at this stage were flexible.

The changes in command made necessary by the absence of Lt. Gen. Crerar had settled down. Lt. Gen. G. G. Simonds had a free hand, and was able to develop his ideas to the full, as G.O.C. in C. Canadian First Army. Maj. Gen. Foulkes had moved up from 2nd Division to the temporary command of Canadian 2nd Corps, and Brigadier R. H. Keebler had taken over 2nd Division. Lt. Gen. Simonds had reacted swiftly to the slow progress, and would have translated his reactions to deeds on the ground even more swiftly than he did if the supply situation had been favourable, if, in short, the imperative urgency of the Scheldt battle could be made to claim the undivided attention of Field Marshal Montgomery.

On October 9th, the Naval command of "T" Force at Bruges, frustrated at the delays and irritated by planning liaison difficulties, made the "wild statement" which provoked Montgomery to anger. In the opinion of the Royal Navy the Canadian 1st Army would run out of ammuni-

tion by the end of October unless urgent priorities were given without delay. The "wild statement" appears to be justified, and this piece of "ammunition" provided by the Navy was loaded into an urgent message to Montgomery from the Supreme Commander. Finally the last of the eastern visions faded. By October 16th, considerable re-grouping of forces, already planned, were accelerated by the Field Marshal's unequivocal order to open Antwerp.¹

With that General Dempsey's 2nd Army put its main effort on the left to clear southwest Holland to the Maas line, thereby relieving the British 1st Corps, under command of Canadian Army, from responsibilities eastward. The whole western battlefield at once took on a solid shape.

The 4th Canadian Armored Division, less its 10th Infantry Brigade, was switched from the Leopold canal to come in between British 49th Division and the Canadian 2nd Division; 1st Corps was further strengthened by the arrival of the U.S. 104th Infantry Division. Overwhelming pressure could be exerted on the enemy over all southwest Holland, and the cork was almost in the bottle to seal off the Scheldt. The right flank of Canadian 2nd Corps was now absolutely solid, and Canadian 2nd Division could turn its back to the east without fear.

These important moves, however, were two weeks in the making, and would not bear upon the battle for the Breskens pocket. But in this Lt. Gen. Simonds had allowed himself great flexibility, and was able to strike at the enemy from the flank with power and speed.

The 9th Infantry Brigade of the 3rd Division had been in Ghent from October 1st, and in training with elements of the 30th Armored Brigade of the 79th Armored Division and their specialized armored vehicles. An attack had been carefully planned to go in on the eastern flank of the Breskens pocket across the channel of the Savojaardplaat and on October 7th the 9th Brigade sailed up the

¹ "By 9th October . . . my immediate objective had been reduced to completing the clearance of the Scheldt estuary and the undertaking of operations against the enemy bridgehead west of the Meuse. It was very soon necessary further to reduce the scope of our plans. The Allied need for Antwerp had become imperative . . ." (*Normandy to the Baltic.*)

Terneuzen canal in "Buffaloes" with the 5th Assault Regiment R.E. [Royal Engineers] The passage up the canal was not plain sailing; the Buffaloes were difficult to navigate, and there was some trouble with the locks, but the force was in Terneuzen on October 8th and ready for action.

It would have been impossible at this time to commit even so much as a support company into the cramped bridgehead so bravely won and held by the 7th Brigade round Eede, and Lt. Gen. Simonds was able to move 8th Infantry Brigade east through Ecloo to cross the Terneuzen canal, and to come in behind the 9th. A brigade of the British 52nd (Lowland) Division was already concentrated south of the Leopold and available to support or to relieve the 7th.

On the early morning of October 9th, the 9th Brigade assaulted across the Savorjaardplaat, and it was the rapid development of this threat that had served to loosen the enemy grip on the 7th Brigade perimeter. It had also alarmed General Eberding, fearing for his pivotal position based on Oostburg and had led to his savage threat to his troops.

With these moves the whole prospect on the left began to brighten in the tents of the Generals and Operation *Switchback* began to look more like its name.

Synchronized with the assault of the 9th Brigade, the Algonquin Regiment of the 10th Infantry Brigade of the 4th Canadian Armored Division, forced a way through the land gap at the southeastern corner of the Breskens pocket between the end of the Leopold canal and the gullet of the Braakman. This was the weak point in the enemy defense, and the 64th Infantry Division was at once under pressure, fighting savagely to close the land gap through which supplies could flow much more readily than over the Savorjaardplaat. It was at this time that the Engineers working tirelessly behind the 7th Brigade managed to establish a Bailey bridge across the Leopold canal.

Thus October 9th marked not only the end of the beginning, but the opening of a new and healthier phase in the battle for the Breskens pocket.

One piece of very good news had served to encourage

Lt. Gen. Simonds in those first bleak days of the October battle. On October 3rd the R.A.F. had staged a test attack with 243 Lancaster bombers against the west Walcheren dikes, and the great sea dike covering Westkapelle had been breached. It remained by ceaseless attack to widen the gap, and to strive to make some more. The North Sea was pouring into and over Walcheren island.

ii

WOENSDRECHT—SEALING OFF THE BEVELANDS

October 9th was to become a day of memory for the men of the Canadian 2nd Division probing further forward from Hoogerheide towards Woensdrecht on the last lap to close the neck of the peninsula. October 9th was the last day of remembered time, a "Port" one had found infinitely boring, even hateful, yet to which men would look back with wonder after many days, simply as the beginning of a nightmare.

Through the night of the 9th, the rain began to beat down in a steady rhythm that became a pitiless deluge continuing through four days and nights. The dawn of the 10th was full of evil. On the right of the main road, the Essex Scottish and the Regiment de Maisonneuve were crawling and stumbling through the sodden woodland, cautious of trip-wires and cunningly concealed mines. Their objective was to clear the enemy from strong defensive positions round the Groote Meer lake. There were several lakes linked together through the woodlands, but land and water had begun to lose definition. The whole earth squelched. The din of shellfire was an accustomed background, but it seemed to the men, groping through the saturated woods in the rain and the mud, that the only sounds were the high-pitched power whines of rifle bullets and the roar of mines detonating. Visibility dwindled to a score of yards. Men crumpled without a cry to choke out a last breath with their blood into the soaking earth, while the enemy fought a measured withdrawal to the military training grounds a mile or two to the north, knowing every inch of the ground.

While these two battalions strove to clear the right

flank, the 5th Infantry Brigade astride the main road met the full force of the enemy-entrenched power before Woensdrecht. Again and again anti-tank guns halted the tanks of the 8th Reconnaissance Regiment, forcing them to retire. It was an impossible task for tanks, but for men without armor it seemed even more impossible. The infantry lay in the shallow drains and the dikes peering out over the slushy ooze of the polders towards Woensdrecht. For them there was no way round this gateway to Beveland. They were without illusions. The concentrated fire pattern, the "88s," anti-tank guns, Spandaus and rifles wove in thick strands without pity, without excitement.

Woensdrecht rose on a shallow mound on the fringe of the polders, guarding the northwest corner of the isthmus. One thousand yards beyond, invisible on that day of driving relentless rain, the embankment causeway carries the railway line out of Walcheren, across the Beveland causeway, and through Bergen op Zoom. Immediately behind the railway embankment as it curves out of the isthmus lies the *Verdronken lan van Zuid Beveland*—the "Drowned land." Once it was all drowned land, and on October 10th it seemed to be all drowned again, and with Woensdrecht rising like some ominous hulk out of the brown water.

The *Verdronken land* of South Beveland is normally the sand flats and the salt-water shallows and deeps of the inlet of the Ooster Scheldt, and beyond it lies the inhospitable island of Tholen.

The defenses of Woensdrecht extended for more than one thousand yards in depth to the final barrier of the railway embankment. The position was held by four battalions of paratroops deeply entrenched and well armed, and with two more battalions screening the left flank, holding up the clearance of the woods, and falling back slowly on the main positions.

From the south the area was impregnable, and the only possible approach was from the east, from the road running through Hoogerheide to Korteven; but even this way was only possible, if possible is given an impossible meaning. To assault and take these enemy defenses was the role of the 5th Infantry Brigade. If there was a way round it was not for them, but for the Generals. They had

to attack, and the iron and steel of struggle seems to have entered the souls of these men, impelling them forward. Again and again, crawling, crouching, stumbling a few yards in stooped positions, always silent, always saturated with mud and water, the leading companies strove to gain a foothold at Woensdrecht, while the enemy held as firm as rock, directing his fire with merciless efficiency, immune on those fearful days of downpour from air attacks.

John North wrote of it, and of the days to come: "The steel of a man's mind was to count more than the manufactured article."¹

Colonel C. P. Stacey, the Canadian military historian, states: "No written record can do justice to the situation."²

So be it. In the end there is nothing to record beyond the bare facts of the muddied shapeless land and water, the dikes and drains, the narrow causeways, the embankment from which there came an unfaltering intensive controlled fire discovering men even on their bellies on those open polders, picking them off like bogged snipe. The enemy, buttressed against all the fire power the Canadians could bring to bear, thankful for the filthy murk of the sky that saved them from air attack, were men of the highest calibre Germany could still muster, and dedicated to death.

As for those in the assault, no ordinary motive power drove them on, throwing up mud hummocks, burrowing like moles. They had no words—not even curses. They did not know that they had become bearded, hungry, sleepless, muddied forms, for they were without thought. There remained to them only the knowledge that they were a part of something, a section, platoon, company, regiment, and that it all held together.

Fighting patrols of the Royal Regiment of Canada had explored the hard enemy line on the right of the attack, crawling over the sodden ground by night, penetrating the enemy outposts from Zandvoort to Woensdrecht itself, and bringing back small pieces of information which

¹ *N.W. Europe, 1944-45.*

² *The Canadian Army*, by Col. Stacey. Department of National Defense. Ottawa.

served only to confirm the hard rock of the defense. For six days and nights the men of the leading battalions pitted themselves against that defense, paying for every yard with anonymous blood, until those who survived were only aware that they were not yet dead.

At the end of the first three days not a yard of ground had been gained. The battalion diaries, the brigade diaries, the division diary, reveal little of this encounter. There was a sense of "nothing to report." There are entries which state simply, "mud, mud, mud—relentless rain, water everywhere."

October 13th was a day of reckoning standing out from the muddied calendar of those days. Leading their men over the polders against the dikes of Woensdrecht on that day every rifle company commander of the Black Watch of Canada was killed. It was of no avail, yet these men set upon their bitter purpose could not relent, and their spirit began to bring a sense of awe and doom to the enemy. The fire of the divisional artillery came down continuously on the enemy positions, and sheltered as he was from the worst of the weather, able to eat and sleep, the strain of isolation began to tell.

On the morning of the 16th, having withstood fierce counterattacks through the night, the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry at last won a foothold in Woensdrecht, and by dusk they held it firm against savage counterattacks coming in with a fury that was almost berserk. But the R.H.L.I. had sustained far more terrible assaults. At last in Woensdrecht they had something to hold to, something firmer than mud and sand and water, something that seemed almost like a "hill" in the underwater wilderness. Ahead of them was the last redoubt of the enemy, deeply entrenched behind the railway embankment, and holding the last narrow thread of the neck of the isthmus. But so narrow and flat is all that land from coast to coast that a first-class shot could pick off an enemy from one side to the other on a clear day.

The fighting through the next three days was bitter and terrible, but it did not lack shape. It was no longer a nightmare. Feeling began to come back into stunned minds and bodies, and men began again to curse.

From October 16th onwards the Canadian 2nd Divi-

sion thought that the worst was over, and the enemy knew that the worst was still to come. Montgomery's order of the 16th¹ had released the Canadian 4th Armored Division for its new role, and it was already on the move, coming up fast on the western flank of the British 49th, and to sweep on into Bergen op Zoom. On the morning of the 22nd, the armor crossed the Dutch frontier at Es-schen, eight miles to the northeast of Woensdrécht beyond Spillebeek. The next day the enemy positions were completely outflanked, and threatened from the rear.

At last the road through from Antwerp to Bergen op Zoom was won, and the main enemy escape route was severed beyond hope. Withdrawing slowly under the cover of darkness the Germans prepared to fight through the neck, and beyond the neck, on the canal, the dikes, and in scores of defensive positions as good as the one they had yielded.

On October 24th the Canadian 2nd Division turned east into the neck of the South Beveland isthmus to face their last heavy commitment in the freeing of the Scheldt. The battle for the Bevelands had begun.

iii

SOUTH BANK—ASSAULT ACROSS SAVOJAARDPLAAT

The men moved steadily forward in the darkness towards the broad estuary, halting in small groups like beads threaded on a string. The shapes of the Buffaloes loomed out of the night, strangely unlike anything which might be expected to float. The voices of the officers and N.C.O.s guiding the men to their craft were low pitched, muffled in the darkness. The sky was heavy with cloud, banking up against the horizons. An hour was still wanting to midnight, and the moon was not yet up. There was no light showing, not even the glow of a cigarette.

Every few minutes flashes of gun-fire revealed a harsh pattern of land, water, men and vehicles in black relief, and the wide estuary became supple and luminous, molten black and wet between low masses of land. The men looked foreshortened, squat under their tin hats, bulging

¹ Announced officially from Brussels, October 18th.

with equipment and weapons, yet in a curious way they looked intensely human in their bizarre trappings.

Between the flashes of gun-fire the intense vision faded into recognizable clumps of shadow, suddenly to be distorted, again to be extinguished. There was little menace in the gun-fire which came from across the water, from South Beveland or Walcheren.

The men came forward, unwinding on long spools out of the clumps of darkness behind them, to climb the ramps into the cavernous bodies of the Buffaloes. Once on board they burrowed down, wedging their backs into the steel walls, easing their equipment. Some sat on ammunition boxes or stores piled against the forward bulkheads. When they were settled, they looked up at the sky, or slumped, completely absorbed, looking at nothing at all. They had said all that they had to say, the funny things and the unfunny things, about this attack—what little they knew of it—about the collection of amphibians with which they had lived and worked for a week, training, practising getting in and out, cursing and sweating, wondering what they'd bloody well dream up next. They had trained with 58th Squadron of 5th Assault Regiment, R.E., and they knew that they couldn't get very far in this war without them. The assault R.E.s provided the crews and the gunners of the Buffaloes and for a growing host of ingenious vehicles and devices nicknamed "Funnies" and referred to as "The Zoo." The 79th Armored Division had cleared the way into Normandy, and they would clear the way to wherever it was they were going now—if it could be cleared.

But the men didn't much like the Buffaloes. Coming up the canal from Ghent they had wallowed along, and had had to be manhandled out of the water at Terneuzen, clawing at the steep banks, unable to grip with their tracks. The attack had been delayed for twenty-four hours because of that. It had been a day of bitter cold, overcast, a day of waiting. The Assault R.E.s had assembled their vehicles, Buffaloes, Terrapins, Wasps, and an assortment of A.V.R.E.s. [Armored Vehicles Royal Engineers].

The men of the infantry watched with cold eyes, unrevealing, and their thoughts seemed to be summed up in the one word—Jesus! It did not sound like blasphemy, but

like a prayer. They were thinking of the night, when it would come. It had come now.

The Buffaloes were lightly armored and lightly armed troop carriers. They looked like small tanks without turrets, especially in the darkness. Each carried a Bren or a Lewis gun mounted forward on each side and fired by a gunner from the body of the craft. The driver sat forward of the bulkhead. Their tracks carried the Buffaloes easily overland, less easily over mud and silt, and effectively through water, even choppy water.

The voices of Naval officers at the launching points sounded quiet yet resonant above the heavy shuffle of boots, the clump and creak of equipment and weapons, rifles, Brens, mortars. The noises of the water became an undertone to those who waited, at first unheard until, like the ticking of a clock in the night, the ripple and clop of water against the wharves became the inescapable sound.

The vast canvas of Northwest Europe lay before the eyes of the Supreme Command, but this small piece of it was invisible. "The Canadian First Army will open the Scheldt estuary: the Canadian 2nd Corps will clear the Scheldt estuary: the Canadian 3rd Division will clear the Breskens pocket."

When the orders came down to Brigade the vast mass of detail, of movement and supply, the "A" "Q" and "G" staffs had simplified, involving men who began to emerge as individuals. "The Canadian 9th Infantry Brigade will assault across the Savojaardplaat, seize bridgeheads, expand, exploit . . . Left: Biervliet, Ilzendijk, Oostburg . . . Right: Hoofdplaat, Nummer Een, Breskens. . . . In support 58th Squadron Assault, R.E.s . . . R.N. . . . Canadian 8th Infantry Brigade will pass through . . ."

The Brigadier brief his battalion commanders, and the battalion commanders took away their small pieces of the puzzle, and faced the realities of personal life and death, of honor and courage, dishonor and cowardice, success and failure, and knew the innermost meanings of these things, having put them to the test on the ground, under fire. To the lieutenant colonels their battalions were an extension of themselves, their personal instruments. The honor—or dishonor—the success or failure, was theirs, not to be avoided. Day after day and night after night

the battalion commanders considered a feature, a hill or hollow, a village, a group of farmsteads, strong-points, battery sites, one thousand yards of land. The company commanders divided it up, and gave it to the platoon commanders, and the platoon commanders held their tiny "O" groups with their platoon sergeants and corporals, studying one hundred yards of mud or sand, dike and culvert, on 1/25,000 maps, pitting themselves and thirty men with rifles, grenades, three Brens and a 2-in mortar, against it. . . .

The vast canvas of the campaign in Northwest Europe broke down into these tiny fragments, and built up again from them, day after day, night after night, a kind of unending turbulence of death and renewal, platoons, companies, battalions, brigades, divisions, revolving in and out of battle, a wheel of death, two up, one back, in support, in reserve.

The "O" [Operations] groups were over. The platoon commanders stood by their Buffaloes, and the broad estuary made the night seem boundless. The officers were more silent even than the men, withdrawn into themselves, assembling the knowledge of what they had to do, and what they had to do it with. It was the first period of the dry mouth, when men knew themselves—if they were brave—to be no better than other men, yet called upon to lead, to show the way, to decide what to do under fire, consorting with death imminent . . . a fair hope of surprise . . . up and over that . . . canal . . . wire, mines . . . and thirty men each one of whom they knew by name.

The men loaded into the Buffaloes were seasoned troops of the North Nova Scotia Highlanders of Canada and the H.L.I. [Hamilton Light Infantry] of Canada. They were going into battle, to assault over beaches backed by a canal. In the backs of their minds as they sat or sprawled in the Buffaloes they knew that it might not happen—not tonight. It had not happened last night. They might sit waiting, hour after hour, and then be ordered to get out, impatiently, as though they had kept the whole thing waiting. The ramps would go down and they would stand and wait, or sit and wait, or sleep and wait.

The battalions had assembled to march to the loading points soon after dark. The cooks had brought up hot

food in containers. A batch of letters had come forward to battalion, and were held there. No good delivering letters now. Wait.

The letters are full of thoughts without words, and you can take a percentage of the bundle, like a Gallup Poll, and send them back again undelivered, never to be delivered. You know how many, but you don't know which ones, not until the morning.

At midnight the Buffaloes warmed up and moved into the estuary, taking stations in two flotillas behind a Royal Navy motor boat. Fifty-one Buffaloes took the station to starboard, and forty-six to port. It was the night of October 9th. Two battalions of 9th Infantry Brigade would assault across the Savojaardplaat against the Breskens pocket. It always came down to that in the end, to the simplicity of men on their feet. Not all the "Funnies" and tanks, and Typhoons and "Secret Weapons" could alter that. The only way to get there is on your feet. The men in the Buffaloes knew that without words. It gave them a certain pride. It made them put away the knowledge that some of them would be dead by morning, and others maimed. But they did not call it a "killing match."

9

Operation *Switchback*

THE ground over which Operation *Switchback* must be fought was absolutely flat. H-hour for the assault mounted from Terneuzen in Buffaloes was at 0200 hours. Capt. R. T. Forde R.N., led the flotillas in a motor boat. He had a compass, but was able to manage well enough without it. The course lay close inshore to hide the strange collection of floating "vehicles" against the dark loom of the land. The moon was bright, and the night clear, and the convoy sailed almost under the South Beveland guns. Sand banks were no great hazard, for the Buffaloes drew little water, and could walk over a firm sand bank even more easily than they could swim.

The course followed the south shore until the flotillas were well clear of the mouth of the Savojaardplaat. They then turned almost due south to come in to the assault on two beaches, North beach coded "Green," South beach "Amber." This line of approach might gain surprise, for the enemy would be more likely to look out direct across the *plaat*.

Steadily the flotillas wallowed along making nearly three knots, and unmolested by enemy gunfire. The distance to be covered was five and a half miles. It was like Normandy over again. Naval and Royal Marine frogmen and divers were working all along the shores of the estuary, clearing the small havens and jetties as soon as they were won. There were all the mines and underwater devices to which they were accustomed, including element C, and often there was something new; always the possibility of something new. It was brave work, and it was worse than Normandy. It was no longer June, no longer the sand of the beaches, but the treacherous mud and silt of the Scheldt. And this was only the beginning. It would go on and on, beach after beach, and for the divers, yard after yard for fifty miles along each shore. You didn't have to be in the "big picture" to know that, whether you were a diver or waterman or a troop. They were all watermen from this point forward; water, water all the way through Holland, all the way to the banks of the Rhine at Calcar and Wesel.

The war, for all the growing power and fiendish purpose of its mass-destruction weapons, grew more individual, a war of engineers and infantry.

The directional tracer of the Bofors [anti-aircraft gun] strung arches of hurrying crimson lights across the sky to the beaches. The run-in was easy. Despite the activity of the Bofors and the marker shells of the 25-pounders the silence seemed profound to the men in the Buffaloes. At eleven minutes past two the assault companies of the North Nova Scotia Highlanders went up and over the north beach, up and over the first dike, gaining a foothold on firm ground. They had won complete surprise, and it was some minutes before mortar shells began to explode on the beach, menacing the Buffaloes and the second wave. A few minutes later the H.L.I. of Canada

were ashore on the south beach, harassed by mortaring and shell-fire, but making good. They had been keyed up for much worse, and knew that they would get it, all in good time. They ran crouching and stumbling over the sand to the first shelter of the dike. Here and there men grunted and fell as hot metal from the bursting mortars took them in knee or thigh, belly or lungs.

The assault engineers and beach parties in the first waves got down to work, establishing communications, finding sheltered spots for wounded, stores, ammunition, good beaching points. They worked as though there was nothing worse than mosquitoes. If you don't do that mortars will get your nerves and "pin" you to the ground. Within minutes small guiding lamps were lit to lead in succeeding waves of troops. From the *plaat* [tidal flat] they looked like fireflies, and made the landing points seem less dangerous. But that was false. The danger on the beaches grew with every minute as the enemy was alerted, getting the range with artillery and mortars, knowing the range too accurately.

Grateful for the darkness and the luck of the landing, the leading companies dug themselves in to hold fast and wait for dawn. The night hid the dark forbidding polders, scoured by narrow death-traps of dikes and ditches and the embankments of the roads. The whole land was a death-trap, and the 9th Brigade was going to see it for the first time in the morning.

The Buffaloes and Terrapins unloaded their troops and stores on the beaches, and turned round for more. There was no need to urge the men to hurry. They worked calmly, but they wanted to get away, to keep moving. This was the beginning of a ferry service of men, ammunition and supplies that would go on day and night into the unforeseeable future.

The remains of the night grew ominous. The mortar fire increased steadily in weight and quality, seeking out the nooks and crannies. The Canadians got their 2-in. and 3-in. mortars going but they were no match for the Germans with mortars, and they knew it. The enemy was fully alert, watching, not having budged a yard from his strongly prepared positions. The factors of weather and ground were entirely in his favor, and the land

was impossible for tanks to fight over. The Flushing, Beveland, Cadzand and Breskens batteries ranged over every yard of the pocket, and soon after dawn the heavy guns of Flushing joined in a devastating artillery chorus. The battle for the Scheldt was joined with that overture.

The Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry [S.D. and G.] Highlanders of the second wave of the assault climbed into the Buffaloes at Terneuzen and sailed under fire at precisely seven minutes to eight. They were under direct fire from across the water, and huddled down, blind in the Buffaloes, cursing, and glad of the smoke the R.C.E.s were laying right across the entrance to the *plaat*. There was too much wind for it, but the R.C.E.s [Royal Canadian Engineers] went on laying it.

On shore the lead battalions met furious enemy assaults with controlled small-arms fire. They could see the enemy running about like rabbits in the crisscross of the dikes, and they took it steady. A Field Regiment of the R.C.A. [Royal Canadian Artillery] came in with good shooting, and forced the enemy to keep down in his burrows. But the dawn was noisy.

At half past ten o'clock the S.D. and G. Highlanders landed under heavy mortar fire on "Green" beach, and were enfiladed by the enemy deeply dug into the steep canal banks. Even at that hour there was the feel that this would be a fight to the death, even if you didn't know the score. Wedged into that last slice of polderland south of the Scheldt was a whole German division, made up of men who had known and survived some of the worst of Russia. They were "leave" troops, hastily assembled, but they were mature soldiers, resolute in defense and attack, and knowing that "leave" had ceased to have a meaning for them. They would not budge. There could not be a withdrawal, for there was no room for withdrawal. Men in strong-points would stay there while the battle flowed over them and round them, and would go on shooting until they were smoked out, scorched out, killed.

If any of the generals still believed that the Germans had lost their morale it was a pity they couldn't spare the time to put in an hour or two in the Breskens pocket, or at Woensdrecht.

On that morning the Germans did not realize the full

extent of the threat developing against them on three sides. They had not realized fully that the Leopold barrier was by-passed, and that they must face east and southeast as well as south. On that morning the Algonquin Regiment were forcing the land channel while the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, also of the 10th Infantry Brigade, were probing the Leopold for a crossing on the flank of the Algonquin's. The irresistible compression had not yet made itself felt.

Away on the right flank, on the south shore of the estuary, was the enemy weak spot against attack coming in from the west and on that far corner, covered by the North Nova Scotias, the S.D. and G. Highlanders went through to gain the road to Hoofdplaat. The sea dike was dangerous but the enemy was half out-flanked. For the first time the Germans saw an army between them and their Fatherland, and knew, as they had not known before, that their backs were to an alien land and an alien sea. The knowledge seeped into the minds of the men in the dikes, in the strong-points, the disguised farms and barns, in the haycocks, which were not haycocks at all, but more strong-points. The knowledge drove the enemy to savage suicidal counterattacks, and left him numb and listless, not so ready to die. The Canadians, already up to their armpits in the dikes, met an enemy flapping up out of dikes like grotesque grey birds, officers in great-coats, driving men on, berserk. It steadied the Canadians, and they held on wherever they were, meeting all attacks with steady controlled fire, killing men in their sights. And in the aftermath the platoon commanders got up and ran for it, gaining yards, dike to dike, stalking men down sodden corridors of mud and water.

The assault R.E.s had brought up Wasps to scorch the enemy out of the canal banks, burning him out like vermin from a warren. It was going to be a dangerous piece of war, and very wet. It had the feel of that even to infantrymen whose horizons were bounded by the dark and lifeless polders, the sodden dismal earth like grey metal under the grey sky. The discomfort of their soaked clothing had gone beyond discomfort into natural acceptance.

The S.D. and G. Highlanders advancing cautiously along the coast road knew that the enemy was not with-

drawing, that he was fading along the dikes, knowing every yard of the ground, waiting. It was an eerie business.

On October 10th the last of the Autumn weather broke, and it was winter. A cold drizzle joined the dark sky to the dark land and water. Only the tall grey steeples of the churches in the villages pierced that landscape, like spikes growing up out of the floor of some immense cave.

Behind the 9th Brigade, the Savojaardplaat seethed with Buffaloes and Terrapins, making the direct crossing by day and night on the high tides, keeping food and ammunition up to the battalions, slowly expanding their bridgehead.

The drizzle thickened imperceptibly to heavy rain, and on October 11th visibility was down to nil. Platoon commanders, urged by company commanders, urged by battalion commanders, urged by the Brigadier, floundered forward through the mud and water, meeting the enemy hand to hand, avoiding the grey corpses floating in the dikes, hummocked over the polders like offal, obscene, featureless shaven heads that no longer resembled the heads of men. In this last extremity the enemy resorted to every diabolical trick in his evil armory, leaving his dead as lures, death to compassion.

For the first forty-eight hours it was difficult to discover any shape in the battle, but by noon on the 11th enemy motor gun boats engaged the S.D. and G. Highlanders from the Hoofdplaat channel until Spitfires dived upon them and left them blazing from end to end. Late that afternoon the H.L.I. of Canada, having prised the enemy from the road junctions, put in their first attack on Biervliet to make good their grip. The Canadians gained ground, but there were no signs of "give" in the enemy, and Biervliet was the first of the vital points on that axis. Small groups of enemy lay concealed, ready to emerge in the night, to harry, to kill silently, to make sleep uneasy, if sleep there could be. Harmless-looking clumps of roots blazed suddenly with 20-mm. fire. Haycocks erupted. Even a bale of straw might prove lethal.

But the bridgehead had to expand. The North Shore Regiment of the 8th Infantry Brigade landed behind the North Nova Scotias, and came under command of the 9th

Brigade. The Queen's Own Rifles of Canada were going in behind the H.L.I., and the whole of the Canadian 3rd Division was squeezing in, forcing itself into that last desolate slice of land and water to meet the Germans literally face to face. And in the midst of it all were the people of Holland, the men, women and children whose fathers and grandfathers had fought the sea, and drained the polders to grow crops, graze cattle and fatten pigs. They lay in their barns, on the floors of their simple farmhouses, in their scattered churches, and their animals were with them. The battle discovered them, enveloped them and their lands, and prised them out to walk in steady silent streams, dour, the faces of the middle-aged red and blue with tiny veins, the arms of the women as massive as hams. In silence, revealing nothing, bearing small bundles, they went back to the beaches and the waiting Buffaloes, to "safety." Their faces and bodies seemed to have been graven in the struggle to live, and smiles would have seemed grotesque. They gave no sign.

On October 12th the wind began to rise, whipping the rain and rousing the waters of the Savojaardplaat and all the Braakman to the turbulence of a mill stream. For two days and nights the Buffaloes and Terrapins could not get across. The 13th was a Friday, that Friday of "relentless downpour" with the Company Commanders of the Black Watch dying before Woensdrecht, leading their desperate assaults. In the Breskens pocket it was no better. The H.L.I. with their left on Biervliet, and their right trying to force a way through the center, were caught in the open polder by our own aircraft, and blasted to death in anger and frustration. It was St. Pieter's polder, and the truth is that they were not expected so far to the west at that time. They had floundered through polders whose names were known only to Platoon and Company Commanders poring over their maps, locating Elisabeth polder, Clara, Maria, Helena, all as alike as beans. It was country over which men felt they ought to navigate by the stars. They spluttered coarse jokes about frogmen, and expected to grow webbed feet. It was more likely to have your feet blown off by one of the flat pancake mines that made each stride in the dikes a nightmare.

When the H.L.I. of Canada knew that they had been

shot up in St. Pieter's polder, and had time to think about it, they thought it was apt.

The Brigadier was forward on that day, under fire in his scout car, imperturbable, talking to men, giving them something indefinable, as though they made brief contact with purpose, with something they were in danger of losing. They learned that a large batch of German prisoners had spent two nights on the open beaches waiting for the Buffaloes and Terrapins to take them back to the cage. They had been soaked to their skins, but that had become meaningless. R.C.A.M.C. [Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps] men got fires going when they could, and perhaps one man in ten might be lucky enough to get dried out,

The 13th was black Friday all along the line, and after that things began to ease, but slowly. The enemy would surrender, but only as a choice with death, only when there was nothing else to choose. The weather began to clear, and the ferry service made up for lost time, piling up stores in the bridgehead. On the left of the pocket the Queen's Own Rifles, supporting the H.L.I. at Biervliet, made progress south of west to link up with the 7th Reconnaissance Regiment of the 10th Brigade. The enemy counterattacks began to grow feeble, to peter out.

But the enemy still held, denying every yard, fighting while there was a chance, but no longer beyond a chance. The ground he lost, slowly, hour by hour, day by day, was lost forever. The veterans from the Russian front had their backs to the last wall, and the knowledge was no longer a source of strength. It had begun to corrode, and the harsh decree of their Divisional General, Eberding, when it came, worked the acid in deep.

There was no break-through, and no real hope of a break-through. From the south shore of the estuary to the north bank of the Leopold the enemy was a tight wedge, and with the wound made by the 7th Brigade at Eede gnawing into his side. It would go on yard by yard through fire and muck and water, the incessant downpour, the mines, the crossings of the wide dikes, the lesser canals, until at last all that remained of men and territory would be used up. Into these last yards of territory the Germans crammed everything they knew, so that every

unknown thing, however commonplace, was lethal to the touch, or might be. They lay in the dikes and went on shooting until they were overrun and killed or taken prisoner. Every road was pitted with craters, impassable until the bulldozers could fill them. The thin trees had been felled to add to the obstacles, and those trees still standing and splintered by gunfire might explode if a man should lean against them.

By October 14th three complete brigades were inside the Breskens pocket with the enemy. A Canadian sergeant embarked in a dinghy, trying to find a hard road to bring up his trucks. The landward route was open—if you could call any of it land—and through the gap the Fascines, Bobbins, Flails, Ploughs, [tank with bulldozer blade] Petards and S.B.G.s, a whole lumbering ark of armored monsters of the 30th Armored Brigade, were moving steadily. All of these armored vehicles could fight and shoot as well as perform their numerous roles. They were all tanks, Shermans or Churchills, adapted for this special kind of warfare. The Fascines carried huge bundles of faggots to tip forward into anti-tank ditches or dikes or to lessen the gradient of an embankment, to lay down mattresses to give armor a grip. The S.B.G.s dropped their own bridges down in front of them. The Petards were huge mortars to blast concrete strong points at point-blank range, lumbering up until the enemy, starting up the vast spouts of those weapons, tried to scream his way out of his concrete trap like an animal. In their way the Petards were as hideous as the flame-throwing Crocodiles to the men facing death through the weapon slits on their strong-points.

Resistance on the coast road was patchy, but the road was under constant fire from the heavy guns of Flushing in spite of the Typhoons going in again and again with their rockets. And whatever happened the enemy mortaring never faltered, deadly and accurate.

The enemy was no longer fighting to hold Breskens, or any other key-point, he was fighting simply at the very core of his defenses. The Régiment de la Chaudière had come into the pocket across the *plaat* on the axis Kapitaladem on the 14th, to press on south through Pyramide while the Queen's Own Rifles plugged ahead

for Ijzendijke. With their left flank on the Dutch-Belgian border, the Régiment de la Chaudière found themselves involved in a deadly obstacle race, and were hard put to it to extricate themselves. The countryside was a diabolical ruin of felled trees, craters, wire, mines, with enemy dug in along every dike bank, and their putrefying dead like bait by the verges. It was no fantasy of inferno: it was real.

On the 17th, mazed down in that obscene wilderness, the de la Chaudières lost contact with the Queen's Own Rifles. Lt. Col. Lewis,¹ Acting Brigadier and commanding 8th Brigade, went off with his driver in a jeep to try to get through. The Queen's Own Rifles found the Colonel's body the next day lying beside his wounded driver.

It was difficult even for brigade commanders to consider time. Too much of it was passing, and there was no short cut. For the men of the battalions time had become quite meaningless, even day and night had become indefinite boundaries. Food, sleep and being dry were things of a dim past, of a time when rum didn't taste like water. Men went on impelled by a will to go on and to survive, putting one foot before the other as men do who fight their way through blizzards. Only those involved in this bitter struggle know the strength of it. Not generals. To generals it seemed simply that Operation *Switchback* had bogged down. The 7th Brigade had jumped off over the Leopold on October 6th, and the whole job had been scheduled to take three or four days. Now, on October 18th, twelve days later, and with the whole Division plus in the battle, barely one half of the Breskens pocket had been won. Nobody who knew anything about it could doubt that it might take an equal number of days to clear the other half. Antwerp might not be opened to shipping before Christmas. Hitler was buying time, and making a profit. That was the position on the day that Field Marshal Montgomery announced his intention to turn west after the Brussels conference.

War in the pocket and war on the road to Woensdrecht

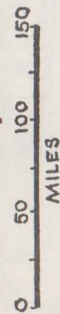
¹ The Brigadier was commanding 2nd Division. Four Lieutenant Colonels in succession commanded 8th Brigade in October. Lewis was the second of these.

MAP I

PRELUDE

Aug. 18 - Sept. 3, 1944

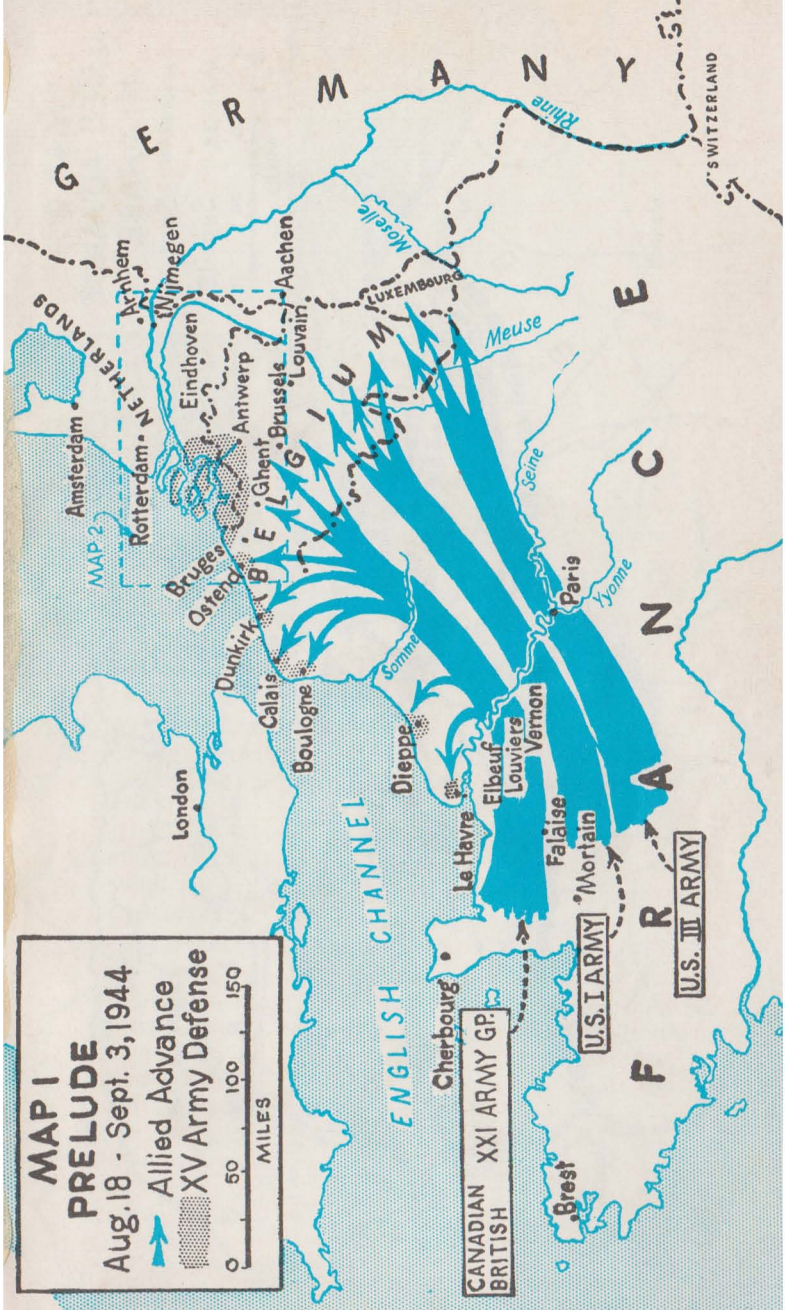
- ➔ Allied Advance
- ▨ XV Army Defense



CANADIAN XXI ARMY GP.
BRITISH

U.S. I ARMY

U.S. III ARMY

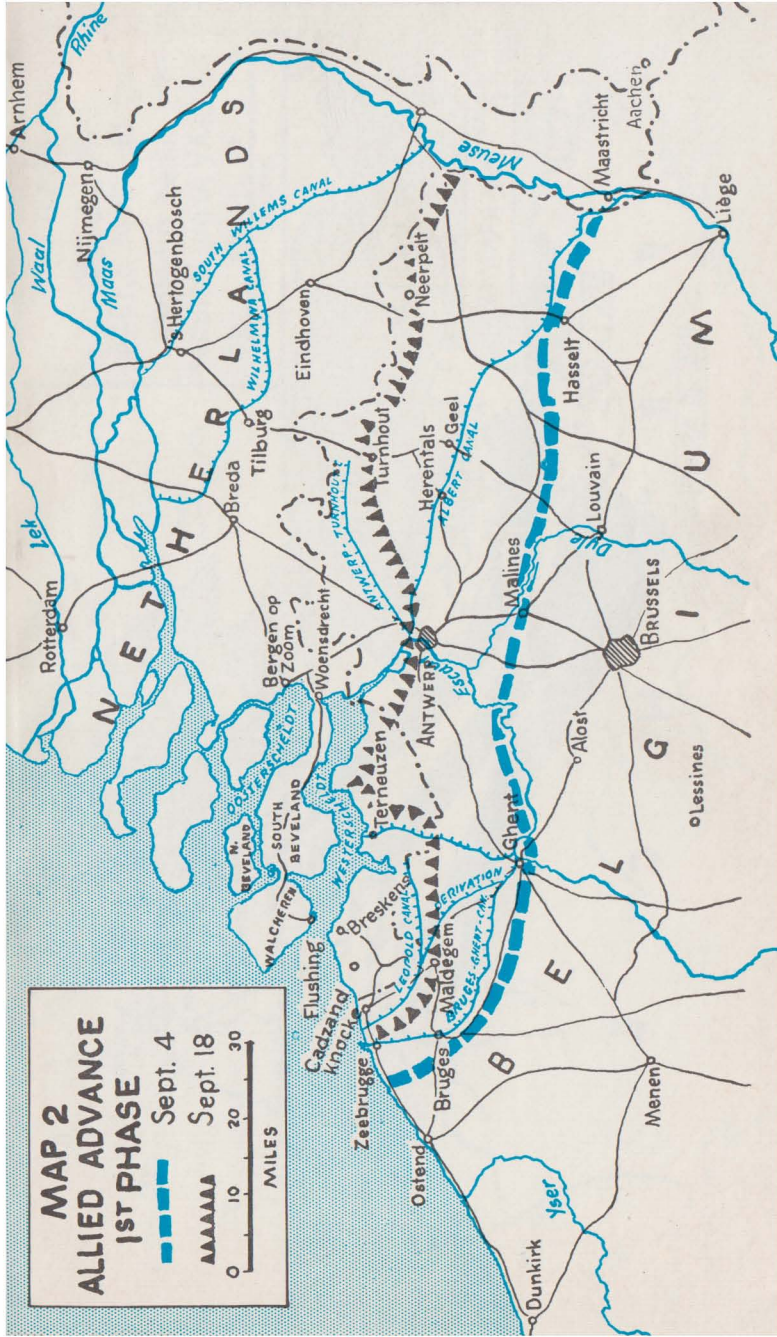


MAP 2 ALLIED ADVANCE 1ST PHASE

— Sept. 4

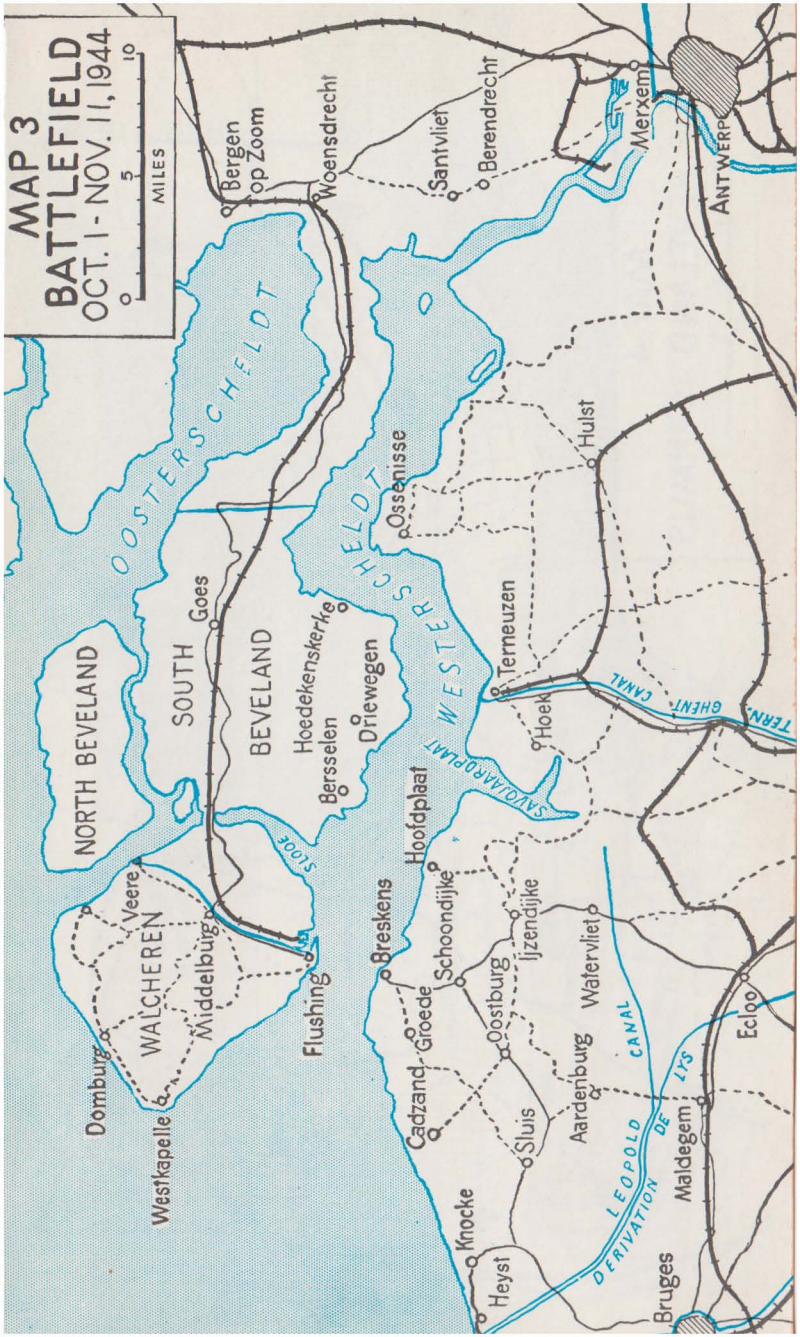
▲▲▲▲▲ Sept. 18

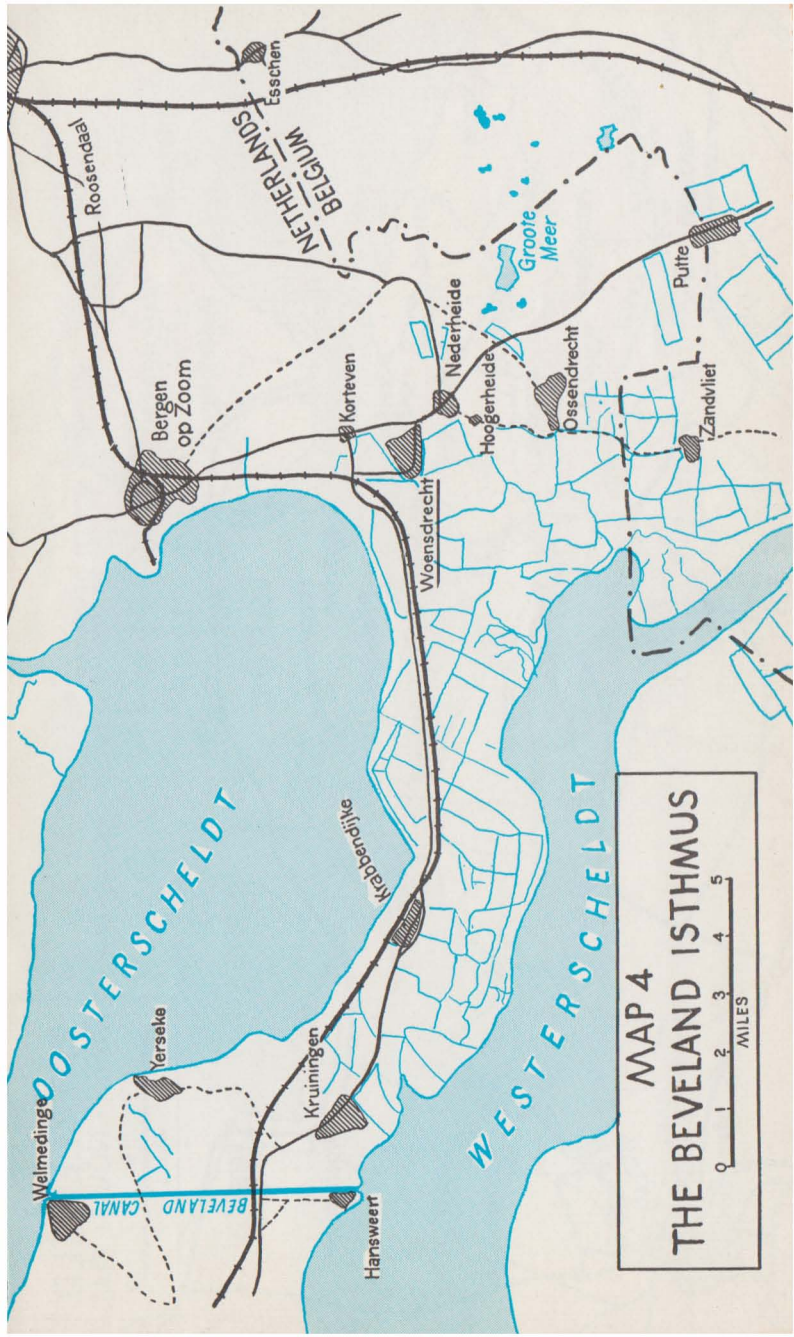
0 10 20 30
MILES



MAP 3

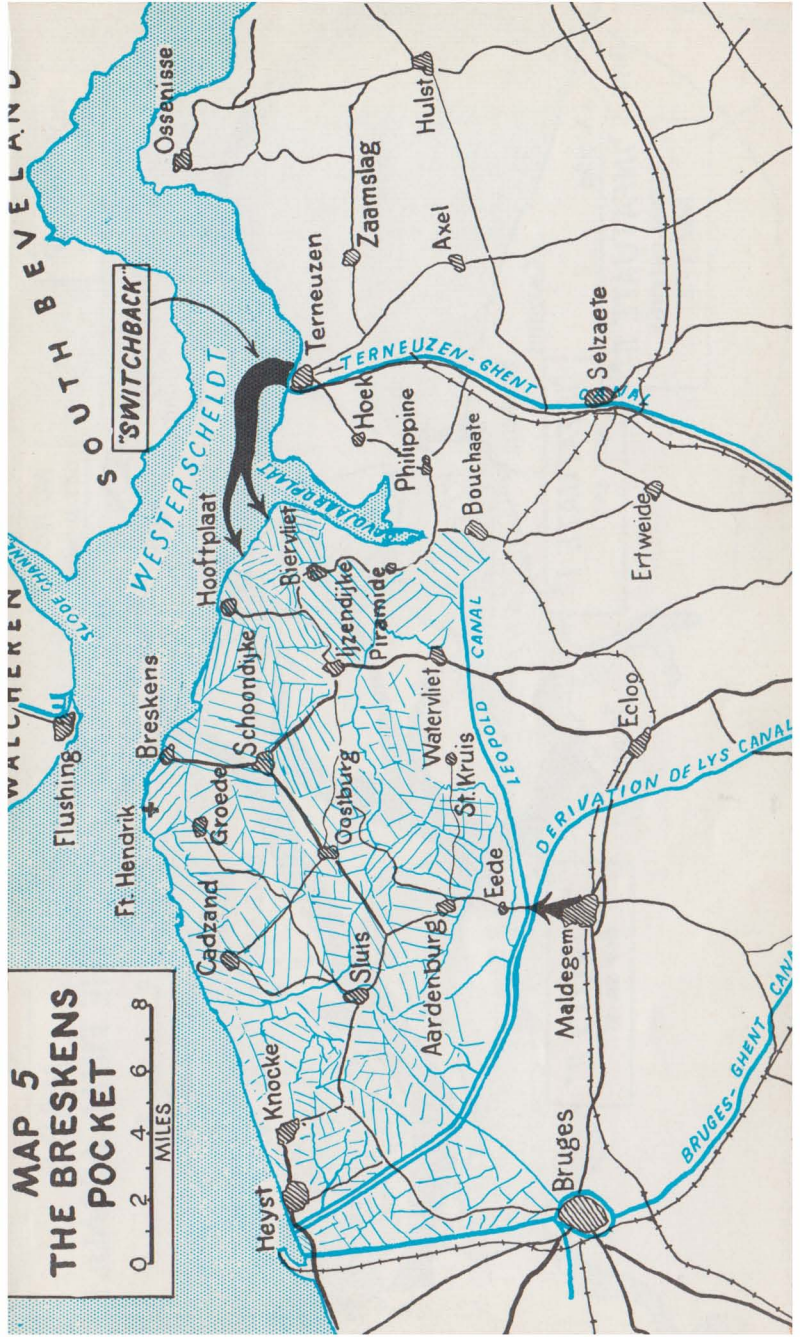
BATTLEFIELD OCT. 1 - NOV. 11, 1944





MAP 4
 THE BEVELAND ISTHMUS

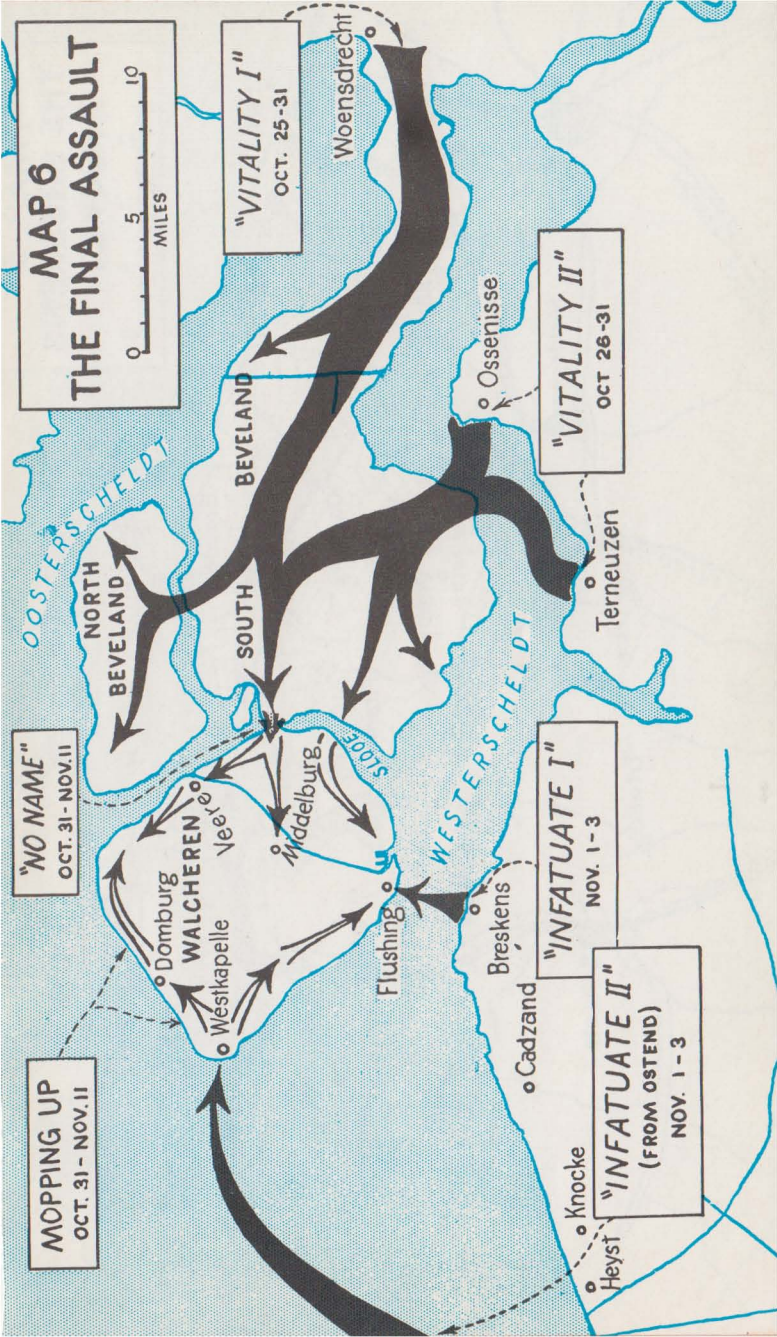
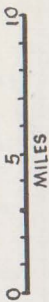
0 1 2 3 4 5
 MILES



MOPPING UP
OCT. 31 - NOV. 11

"NO NAME"
OCT. 31 - NOV. 11

MAP 6
THE FINAL ASSAULT



"NO NAME"
OCT. 31 - NOV. 11

"VITALITY I"
OCT. 25-31

"VITALITY II"
OCT. 26-31

"INFATUATE I"
NOV. 1-3

"INFATUATE II"
(FROM OSTEND)
NOV. 1-3

NORTH BEVELAND

SOUTH BEVELAND

WALCHEREN

WESTERSCHELDT

OOSTERSCHELDT

Woensdrecht

Ossenisse

Terneuzen

Flushing

Breskens

Cadzand

Knocke

Heyst

Westkapelle

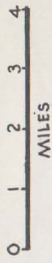
Domburg

Veere

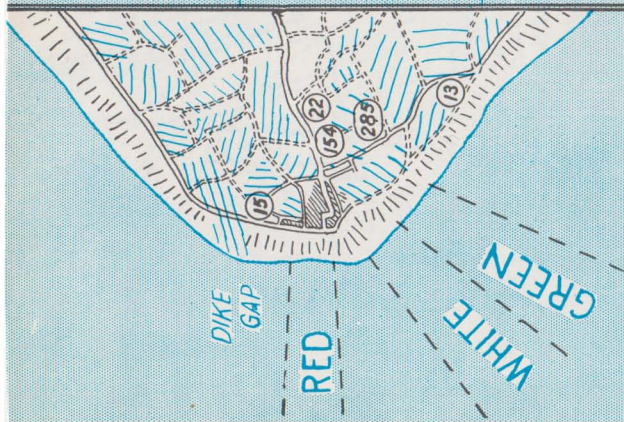
Middelburg

SLOE

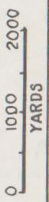
MAP 7 WALCHEREN

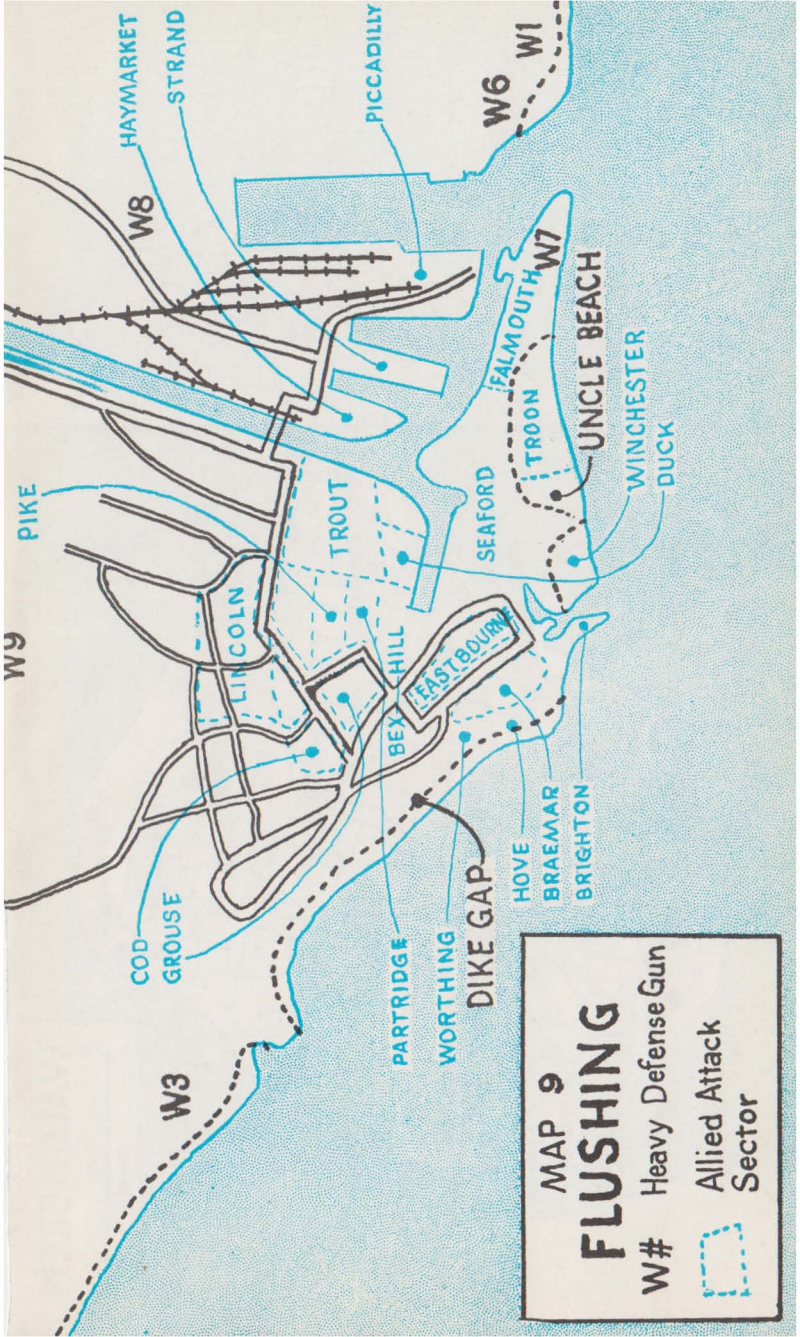


○ = Heavy Defense Gun



MAP 8 WESTKAPELLE







Belgium's great modern port of Antwerp, third largest in the world.
(British official photo)

Troops drive forward over flooded roads towards Willemstadt.
(British official photo)





North of Antwerp a Churchill tank crosses the Antwerp-Turnhout Canal. (*British official photo*)

S. P. Bridges (Churchill bridge layers—"Jumbo") advancing over the canal. (*British official photo*)





Special tank "Petard" with fascines (loaded at front) moves up to battle. (*British official photo*)

November 1, 1944, the first assault against Flushing, made under heavy fire. (*British official photo*)





Troops advance along the waterfront in the assault against Flushing.
(British official photo)

Colonel Reinhardt, German garrison commander, after capture in his headquarters at the Hotel Britannia, Flushing. *(British official photo)*

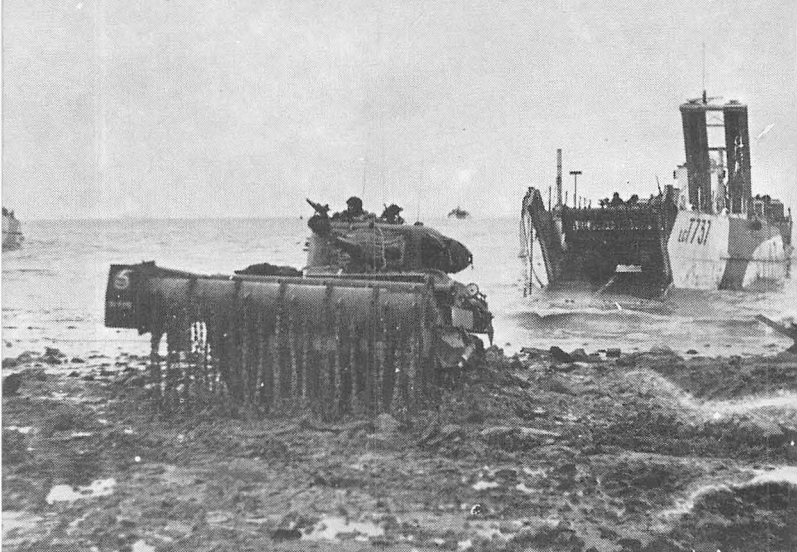




Tank landing craft approaches the shore at Westkapelle on Walcheren Island. (*British official photo*)

An armored bulldozer and two buffaloes coming ashore from landing craft at Westkapelle. (*British official photo*)





Two flails (tanks designed to explode landing mines) debark from a LCT. (*British official photo*)

Wounded British soldiers are evacuated from Walcheren in buffaloes. (*Wide World photo*)

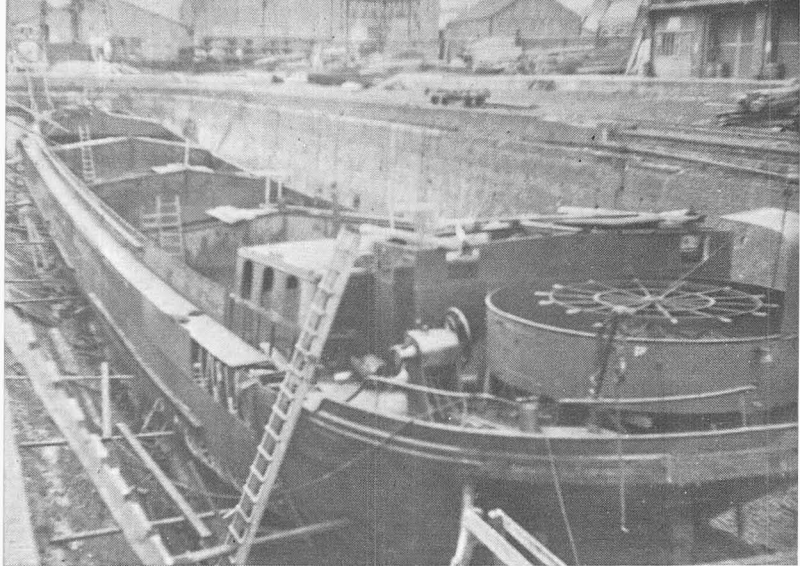




The battered countryside beyond the town of Westkapelle. (*British official photo*)

Inside view of a knocked-out German gun emplacement on Walcheren. (*British official photo*)





One of Hitler's invasion barges discovered in Antwerp. Begun in 1941 for Hitler's invasion of England, they were never completed. *(British official photo)*

The first coaster entering the Antwerp docks, (November 26) after the Scheldt had been cleared of mines. *(British official photo)*



had come down to its basic truth, men on their feet confronting men on their feet, and all the rest not counting for very much. The "Funnies" of the 30th Armored Brigade might cancel out much of the enemy defenses, but the ground and weather cancelled out the air and the use of armor, and the heavy batteries guarding the estuary entrance countered two A.G.R.A.s [Army Group Royal Artillery]. It came down to men struggling through mud and water, over dikes and streams and through villages as desolate as the polders, over roads that were cratered and mined horrors. Only so many men could face an equal number compressed into the narrowing confines of the last slice of land, and most of it under water.

Yet on October 18th the end was in sight. No power of man could hasten it, but equally no power given to the enemy could resist the pressure. On the 18th, the 6th Battalion of the H.L.I. moved up to St. Laurent and Middeldorp on the Leopold, and a new "general post" of forces had begun. The whole of the British 52nd (Lowland) Mountain Division was coming into the line at long last after intensive and exhausting training for mountain warfare, their many false alarms, their tedious months of waiting. That it would be a below sea-level battle was in keeping with their "Lowland—Mountain" name, a quirk of war. The 6th Battalion H.L.I. of 157th Infantry Brigade relieved the Canadian 7th Infantry Brigade in their Leopold canal bridgehead and the 7th moved at full speed to come in over the Savojaardplaat behind the 9th. By that time the 7th Reconnaissance Regiment was on the outskirts of Aardenburg, and the 157th Brigade was spared a too-terrifying experience.¹ The Queen's Own Rifles were pressing on Oostburg, and on the coast Breskens was almost within reach. Breskens itself was the very fringe of necessity, and all the rest could wait, if the worst should come to the worst. Breskens opened the way for direct assault across the water on Flushing, and until its small port was opened and cleared, and the batteries silenced, no assault could be mounted. It was

¹ 157th Bde. H.Q., 6th H.L.I., 52nd Div. Recce. Regt. and 79th Fd. Regt. R.A. had seen action in the "island" and in the corridor as the main body of the seaborne echelon for the Arnhem role of 52nd Div.

hard going along that coast road under the Flushing guns.

In all the war diaries of the battle, the muddied, cryptic entries of battalion and brigade intelligence officers reveal very little. By that time few would write a line that could be avoided, and there is little to be read between the lines. In the main it is a monotone of mud, fire, water and mines. The phrase "relentless rain" occurs in half-a-dozen diaries, as though rain itself had reached a pitch when only this word "relentless," among quotable words, might describe it.

In the diary of the H.L.I. on October 18th there is still a refreshing naivety, evoking a nostalgia, comparable with first days at school, when all is new, exciting, hopeful. An entry concerns a Dutch patriot with the rather remarkable name Jeannes Francisins J. Causwells; "commonly known as Tarzan," reports the diary. One has a picture of the Battalion Intelligence Officer, a couple of sergeants and a corporal, listening spellbound to the exploits of J. F. J. Causwells behind the enemy lines. "He returns with valuable information. He has killed and outwitted many Germans," the diary records. One feels that at long last J. F. J. Causwells had found his audience. Did he call on other battalions? If he did, his visits are not recorded. Perhaps they were too busy trying to outwit and to kill Germans themselves, and very soon the H.L.I. were to be in the thick of it. "Tarzan" had chosen his moment well.

ii

October 18th was not a turning point in the battle for the slice. There was no turning point. The enemy fought for the territory yard by yard to the bitter end, and with a resolution that would have commanded admiration and respect for a foe less steeped in evil, less prone to self-pity, and open to shame.

The week from October 18th to the 25th was, I think, the worst week of Operation *Switchback*, but it was not the last. The three or four days were to become a full four weeks.

The extreme urgency was to clear Breskens, and to

open the port. To do this the Canadian 9th Infantry Brigade had to lever the enemy out of his strong positions at Schoondijke, a small country township on an important road junction some three miles due south. The enemy position at Schoondijke had already become precarious with the progress of the Canadians towards Oostburg, but Eberding was holding on with a tenacity that showed no tendency to diminish.

The plan of the 9th Brigade was to mount a powerful diversionary attack on Schoondijke while mounting a direct assault against Breskens from the west, supported by A.V.R.E.s, heavy artillery and a full-scale air bombardment by medium bombers of the R.A.F.

Bad luck dogged the Canadians all along the line. The S.D. and G. Highlanders preparing their assault in circumstances of extreme danger and difficulty, exposed to point-blank fire from the Flushing and Breskens guns, suffered a severe loss and fearsome shock on the eve of their planned attack. Either from shellfire, or for some reason unknown, a vehicle carrying flame throwing liquid exploded with devastating results, deluging a wide area with fire. Ten armored vehicles of the 1st Assault Brigade, R.E., were reduced to useless and irreparable ruin, and eighty-four men, many dead, others suffering terrible burns and wounds, were dragged out of the flaming wreckage. At one blow all the bridging and Fascine tanks for the Breskens assault were put out of action, and the support troops seriously reduced. Nothing could be done. At 0900 hours the next morning, the morning of October 21st, the S.D. and G. Highlanders went in to the attack while squadrons of Typhoons dived on the defenses of Breskens and strove to neutralize the fire from Flushing. A preliminary bombardment by heavies and super-heavies added to the confusion of the battered defenders. Thanks, partly, to the Navy's "wild statement," there was ample ammunition available to the Canadians, and large stocks were building up for the final battle.

Immediately following the attack of the medium bombers the Canadians entered the smoking rubble that had been a small thriving town and port. There were barely two stones to be found one upon the other, a sight still able to shock in the late Autumn of 1944, in spite

of—or because of—Caen. A few dazed enemy tottered up out of cellars like rats; the rest had gone.

The attack of the H.L.I. of Canada against Schoondijke provoked a sustained outburst of 20-mm. fire, and it was clear that Eberding was resolved to dispute every yard as he fell back, screened by powerful rearguards, upon his immensely strong prepared positions behind the Derivation canal. With his left on Retranchment and his right on Sluis he might keep the batteries of Knocke in the battle for a further ten days, even though he might lose Cadzand. Beyond the line of the Derivation all that remained of Belgium in German hands was virtually a lake, quartered by the causeways of the main roads, until Heyst and Knocke stood on the shores of the sea.

The very end of the affair promised to be the worst of all. Under pressure the enemy began to fall back slowly upon Groede covered by the guns of Fort Hendrik and Flushing, which made the roads almost impassable. It was a battle of heavy artillery, for our 25-pounders were not good value for money in the open polders.

While Typhoons went in again and again in attempts to silence the Flushing guns, the North Nova Scotia Highlanders went through the S.D. and G. Highlanders to attack Fort Hendrik, a mile along the coast road, and to the northwest of Breskens. It was the morning of the 22nd, and for four days the enemy stiffened, refusing to give a yard of his line running from Fort Hendrik, through Schoondijke and swinging back in a diagonal to the Leopold. Schoondijke was the last hinge on which the German right flank was swinging back, contracting upon Sluis. All that remained of the veteran German 64th Division was being inexorably packed into the last pocket.

On the 23rd the Royal Winnipeg Rifles and the Canadian Scottish, striving to make progress on the Groede road, came under the intense fire of the Fort Hendrik guns, and were forced to a standstill to fight a battle of bitter attrition. Breskens was useless until these battles were won.

On the Canadian left center, the Régiment de la Chaudière, striking trouble from the outset, was heavily counterattacked on the 19th, and their forward positions completely overrun. The battalion was out of contact and

fighting in a kind of personal wilderness, unable to reach the Queen's Own Rifles on their right or the 7th Reconnaissance Regiment on their left. Nowhere were the personnel mines worse, or exacting a more terrible toll.

The climax for the Régiment de la Chaudière came on the 24th, when "B" Company was surrounded and cut off. Fifteen men fought their way out to the 7th Reconnaissance Regiment while 73 men under the Company Sergeant Major dug themselves in and prepared to fight to the last. It was a time when the senior N.C.O.s and warrant officers of the Canadians were picking up the batons of leadership as they dropped from the dead and dying hands of the platoon and company commanders. These few of the Régiment de la Chaudière were finally relieved by Flails and Crocodiles [flame-throwing tanks] on the 28th. They had done well, and that perhaps is a fair measure of the losing battle the Germans fought for four weeks in the Breskens pocket, and which they continued until the very end.

The defenders of Fort Hendrik were no exceptions, and through four days, from the 22nd to the 25th, they met and defied all the assaults and bombardments the Canadians were able to fling against them. The Fort, an ancient fortress rising from the sand, and defended to landward by a system of deep and wide moats, had been reinforced in concrete by the Germans, and was a magnificent defensive position. Medium bombers of the R.A.F. deluged the fort with high explosive while the set-piece attacks went in, only to be beaten back by heavy machine gun fire and anti-tank guns firing from casemated strong-points, invulnerable to all but the most powerful direct hits from heavy bombs or heavy-caliber shells.

But for the ferocious Petards it is hard to understand how flesh and blood could have prevailed against the water and wire defenses of the outer perimeter. It was a period of bold leadership by night, with platoon commanders, sergeants and corporals, crawling over No-Man's Land, as their fathers had done in the shell-pocked mud of Flanders, cutting wire, marauding in small groups, swimming, picking men out of their dug-outs, killing silently, and steadily undermining the morale of the sleepless and exhausted defenders. There was flesh

and blood within as well as without, and the sustained pressure and bombardment was exacting hour by hour its toll of flesh.

A few prisoners taken on the evening of October 24th stated that there were only twenty-three men still alive in the Fort. "Go back and tell them to surrender," said the North Nova Scotias. The prisoners went back, and soon after first light, at 0630 hours on the morning of the 25th, twenty-three men marched out with the messengers to surrender. Fifteen more exhausted men were winkled out of hiding places, and by 1130 the Fort was cleared. With that the vital phase, the essential minimum, of the battle for the Breskens pocket was over. The guns of the Cadzand batteries still joined with those of Flushing to harry the Canadians, and to defend the mouth of the Scheldt, but it could be only a matter of days before Eberding must face his last battle behind the Derivation canal in the last of Belgium.

There was not a moment to lose. The role of the Canadians was almost done. The troops for the final assaults were on their marks.

10

Plans and Preliminaries

THE operations of the 2nd and 3rd Canadian Divisions to close the neck of the South Beveland isthmus and to open the port of Breskens were the essential preliminaries before the plan to clear the enemy from the stronghold of Walcheren, and the whole north shore of the Scheldt, could be put into operation. By October 25th these two essentials had been fulfilled, and the first phases of the final plan began without further delay.

In their entirety the whole series of battles to clear the Scheldt and to drive the enemy north of the Maas, roughly from the Channel coast to Moerdijk, were planned and fought by the Canadian First Army. The British 1st

Corps, forming the right flank of the Canadian Army, had received the strong reinforcements already noted in order to speed up the advance to Bergen op Zoom and secure the flank of the Canadian 2nd Division. Now, for the battle of the Scheldt in its final phases, the Canadian 2nd Corps was powerfully strengthened. In the absence of Lt. Gen. Crerar, the planning of the complete series of battles was the responsibility of Lt. Gen. G. G. Simonds.

In late October the Canadian 2nd Corps had under command: the 2nd and 3rd Canadian Infantry Divisions; the British 52nd (Lowland) Mountain Division; British 30th Armored Brigade (79th Armored Division); 1st Assault Regiment.

With, in support: "T" Force of the Royal Navy with 4th S.S. Royal Marine Commando Brigade; two A.G.R.A.s, 84th Group, R.A.F.

By the end of October the enemy occupying the Bevelands and Walcheren on the north of the Scheldt estuary was invested on three sides. On October 27th, the Canadian 4th Armored Division liberated Bergen op Zoom. On the 29th, the Polish Armored Division took Breda. The only supply and escape route remaining to the enemy was by sea through the small port of Veere on the Veere-gat channel on the northeast coast of Walcheren. This slender hole would be available only while the Germans could hold North Beveland.

From October 25th the entire area over which the Canadian 2nd Corps would have to dispose its forces and fight was virtually under water, sea, estuary, canal, kreek or flood. The dry land was confined almost exclusively to the roads, the railway line, the banks of the main canals and dikes. Walcheren and South Beveland were below sea level. South Beveland had been partially flooded by the enemy, and was in a state of saturation early in October. Walcheren was flooded by the bursting of the sea dikes by the R.A.F.

The sea dikes had been breached in four places early in October, and the main breach at Westkapelle had been widened steadily by repeated attacks. The R.A.F. effort had been consistently on a massive scale, for in addition to the precision bombing of the dikes nearly one thousand sorties had been flown by Bomber Command be-

tween October 11th and 21st to drop approximately 5,000 tons of bombs on the west coast battery positions. And these things do not represent more than half of the R.A.F. total effort in the battle.

On October 21st, air reconnaissance revealed that the towns of Middelburg and Flushing had become islands, and that the only dry land on Walcheren island was a small patch to the east. The fortress of Walcheren had become a series of isolated islands of defense, but the main defenses, designed to prevent sea-borne attack from the west and to close the mouth of the Scheldt, remained the most formidable of their kind in the world.

The planning had begun early in September, and the expectation that the Germans would flood the neck of the Bevelands isthmus had led Lt. Gen. Simonds to plan a sea-borne attack. The terrain was considered entirely unsuitable for the use of airborne troops, and the first idea that these troops might be used was not pursued. On September 25th the Royal Navy began the formation of "T" Force, and by October 21st a total of 217 heterogeneous vessels had been assembled at Southampton, and made ready for action. The craft, in the main, needed to be manned by highly trained specialists yet gifted with versatility and, above all, with resolution in face of the enemy.

"T" Force sailed for Ostend on October 26th, and arrived safely the next day. The 4th S.S. [Special Service] Commando Brigade were already in hard training with elements of 30th Armored Brigade and R.E. Assault Groups. It was fortunate that the Ostend dunes resembled the dunes of Westkapelle, for no "rehearsal" would be possible, and the training was thorough. The drivers of all vehicles or "craft" knew each one of their passengers individually, and each passenger learned to drive. No man was indispensable. Drivers could fight, Commandos could drive, all could man Beezas, Brownings, Lewis's or Bofors.

The battle was planned to develop in four main phases. The first phase, Operation *Vitality I*, the advance of Canadian 2nd Division through the neck of the isthmus, was planned to clear North and South Beveland, and to secure

a bridgehead over the rail and road causeway into Walcheren.

The second phase, Operation *Vitality II*, would tie in with *Vitality I*. British 52nd (Lowland) Division, supported by Royal Navy small craft, and amphibians and D.D. Tanks of 79th Armored Division, would attack across the Wester Scheldt from Terneuzen and the Osse-nisse peninsula into South Beveland. They would link up with Canadian 2nd Division, and go through across the Causeway into Walcheren.

At the moment of the climax of these operations the third and fourth phases would begin: Operation *Infatuate I*, the direct assault across the Scheldt estuary on Flushing by British 52nd (Lowland) Division with 4th S.S. Commando Battalion under command, supported by Royal Naval small craft, and amphibians of 79th Armored Division.

On the same day, and near to the same hour, Operation *Infatuate II* would begin. "T" Force with 4th S.S. Royal Marine Commando Brigade (less 4th Bn.), Royal Naval ships and craft, tanks, A.V.R.E.s and amphibians of 79th Armored Division carried in Royal Naval craft, would attack from Ostend and effect a sea-borne landing at Westkapelle to destroy the coastal batteries, and to swing north and south. Force under command of British 52nd Division on landing.

ii

The British 52nd Division, commanded by Maj. Gen. E. Hakewell Smith, had come into detailed planning on October 1st under orders of Canadian 2nd Corps. The Division expected to complete concentration by October 26th. A Field Regiment of the Division and elements of 157th Infantry Brigade had arrived in September and the 6th Battalion of the H.L.I. of 157th Infantry Brigade had been "blooded" in the Arnhem corridor when it took up its position on the Leopold on October 1st.

On October 18th the Brigade had relieved the Canadian 7th in the Eede bridgehead, and was holding a line east to west some 3½ miles north of Aardenburg on

October 23rd. By that time the enemy was falling back fast behind Sluis, and the presence of the Brigade in the bridgehead was not strictly necessary. In fact, it was withdrawn, still cheated of its "first night in the front line," and moved with all speed to the new concentration area in the Ossensisse peninsula.

The 156th Infantry Brigade had concentrated south of Deinze on October 13th, and on the 21st the Brigade received a warning order for an assault landing on South Beveland. The assault was to be planned for the night of the 24/25th, and there was "feverish" excitement in Brigade Headquarters. No one in 156th Brigade, the War Diary asserts, had even seen an assault craft or knew anything about them.¹ The whole Division had trained for mountain warfare, and it had seemed likely that they would become airborne at Arnhem. This had been rather a joke, for aircraft, like mountains, are high up in the air. Now the Mountaineers would go into battle for the first time on the water to attack an island below sea-level. It pleased them mightily "between the lines." "Feverish planning" began at once, and while Brigadier Barclay, the Brigade Major, the Intelligence Officer or one of the staff captains (the competition was keen) liaised with Canadian 2nd Corps and Headquarters 1st Assault Brigade, the Brigade, minus most of its transport, concentrated hurriedly in the Axel area on October 21st.

The third Brigade of the division, the 155th, was earmarked for the job of the assault on Flushing, and on October 22nd Brigade Headquarters received a warning order for *Infatuate I*, and began to plan. Its orders were simple:

"155th Infantry Brigade Group will capture Flushing."

On October 28th a holding party of the 4th Battalion of the King's Own Scottish Borderers reached Breskens while the rest of the Brigade had an awkward journey through the ruinous flooded polders on the left of center of the Canadian 3rd Division. There was not much time in hand.

The whole of 52nd Division at that time felt rushed

¹ In fact, the whole of 52nd Div. had intensive assault landing craft training at Inverary, but they had not seen 79th Arm. Div.'s Buffaloes and Terrapins before.

off its feet, and in a state of high excitement. 156th Brigade states categorically that Headquarters 52nd Division had not arrived from England even by October 25th,¹ and the Brigade was still short of half of its battalion transport on that date. A note of invincible optimism runs through the War Diary of 156th Brigade, and it is not the work of one man. Confidence was immense.

While these urgent movements and plans were going forward with all possible speed the Royal Navy was showing signs of impatience. It knew that "time and tide" quite literally wait for no man, and the days on which the planned sea-borne attack might be possible were diminishing with the declining year. Naval reconnaissance groups moved into slices of coast on the heels of the assaulting infantry and engineers. On October 25th a Naval party reached Breskens and on the 26th a bomb disposal squad removed one and a half tons of explosive from the piers and dumped them inland, while divers cleared the harbor and approaches under constant fire from Flushing.

By that time Operation *Vitality* had begun.

II

Vitality

THE South Beveland at its narrowest point is barely a mile wide. Here the railway embankment rides on the dike shores of the Ooster Scheldt, and there is nothing else but a road, deeply cratered and heavily mined, and water. The secondary roads make geometrical patterns round the flooded polders, leading to nowhere. Tanks were useless. Clinging to the banks of the dikes the Canadian infantry of the 4th Brigade waded, crawled, even swam, in bitter sardonic humor, beyond cursing. Even the more volatile French Canadians possessed them-

¹ Owing to congestion at Ostend 52nd Div. H.Q. was brought over in bits and pieces. Maj. Gen. Hakewill Smith and a G2 were over early in October. By October 15th Div. H.Q. was functioning effectively, and was "reasonably" complete by October 26th.

selves mainly in silence. It was difficult then to enter into the mind of any man or to discover a horizon beyond a yard of mud and water. Brigades, divisions, corps had become impelled by a basic urge, a basic faith, deep in the consciousness, accepting this need to go forward, not questioning.

I am driven at this point to explore my mind, spurred by the spirit of the Canadians after Woensdrecht. The mood of troops in war, enduring long periods under fire, seems to me profoundly interesting. How they put up with it—or don't put up with it. Why they put up with it. How they digest the horrors, assimilate sights and experiences to which all their upbringing, all the life they have known previously, has given them no experience.

Frankly one would have thought that these Canadians would have had enough; too much. They had been waist deep in water—many of them (I do not exaggerate)—for two weeks. Impossible to overstate their discomfort. And death had become personal, a daily and nightly lottery in which each man of the forward battalions held a ticket. Every day in every platoon someone "bought it," as they said.

You crawl into a man's slit or slot or shallow hole, and are accepted. "There's two or three of them behind that dike. You can hear 'em." The soldier is silent, intent. "About three minutes past twelve," he says. "You get a movement." He might be showing you his garden—"I've got my beans in there alongside the lettuces."

With the British, the Canadians, the point of acceptance is long, long ago, and once taken it is not again questioned. It becomes a part of the unconscious. It must be so. The Canadians were not really unhappy, or if they were they had a curious pleasure in it, like men stubbing sore toes. And they had a grouse. A peculiar sense of isolation had been growing in them up from the Seine. It had been noticeable in Ghent and Bruges in late September. They had felt that the main stream of war had turned away, and that they were increasingly forgotten. They heard the triumphant echoes of the armored thrusts; the tears, laughter, flowers and champagne of the liberations, of Brussels, Paris—even Antwerp. Their own experiences had been in a lower key. They began to take a

pride in that, a provincial pride, the pride of the unsung, the unappreciated, and with an underlying bitterness, a derision. After all, they were fighting a war, not making headlines like politicians or actors. And they came to believe that they were fighting it alone, fighting it in this god-forsaken corner, this flat and flooded patch.

It had made of them uneasy companions. They would accept the few Americans, the few Englishmen, coming their way, with awkward tolerance, as men with much to do and no time for idle chat. "Call in again later, when it's all over. We'll have the house in order. Coffee ready."

It was better not to remark that the Americans and the English were still fighting. It was better to say nothing; to take it as it was meant. It was happening all along the line from Nijmegen to Basle, but to a smaller degree. The horizon of an infantryman is bounded by his battalion. He may fight for weeks within a mile or two of troops of whom he is unaware.

After Woensdrecht the Canadians had become welded together, kindred, a tight community. The truth is that they wanted to feel alone, alone with the sustained and terrible experience which they began to clasp to themselves as something personal, and upon which no one had a right to intrude.

I marvelled then, and I marvel now, at the spirit of the Canadian 4th Infantry Brigade of the 2nd Division as they turned west to force their way through the narrow neck of the isthmus. Some of the craters on the main road were gigantic, huge cavities defeating the bulldozers. One was seventy feet across, measured by an engineer, and it had its equals. Tall poles threaded with wires spaced the flooded polders. The thin trees had been felled to add to the obstacles. Schumines, Teller mines, mines with names known only to engineers, mines in scores were sown carefully over all that way.

Absurd to attempt to recount in detail that waterlogged progress. In individual minds it lives merely as discomfort, a blurred memory, of men's feet blown off in a grey futuristic landscape, something of Dali's. Waves of 20-mm. fire held men tight against dike banks and made others thankful even of the water. Air bursts from "88s" worked in with the hideous barrage of the mortars with

a sound like green seas on iron decks, a drenching sound, horribly threatening. R.C.A.M.C. men, privates, corporals, stretcher-bearers, picked men out of mud and silt and water, and bore them back to Regimental Aid Posts, to regain feeling, to know pain.

The 4th Brigade went on. It made nearly three miles on the first day, and by the evening of the 26th forward patrols were reconnoitering the eastern banks of the Beveland canal. In normal warfare such an obstacle would have loomed as immense, perhaps impassable. To the Canadians it seemed merely routine.

The 6th Brigade was ready to pass through, and their Brigadier, putting himself "in the picture," was blown up in his jeep and badly wounded. Small groups of infantry and engineers had fanned out through the flanking polders, threading ways along the secondary roads.

The Beveland canal joins the Ooster Scheldt to the Wester Scheldt running north to south across the entrance to South Beveland proper. It is like a broad collar right under the "chin," and about six miles long. The width of the canal varies between 190 feet to 290 feet. It is non-tidal, and its normal level is one foot above sea-level. The minimum level of the bottom is 20½ feet below sea-level, and the banks rise four to five feet above the water level. Drainage ditches up to twenty feet wide flank the canal, and add to the difficulties of an assault crossing. The road and railway causeway crosses the canal about one and a half miles from the southern end, and there are lock systems and roads at each end, at Wemeldinge in the north and at Hansweert in the extreme south. The road from Yerseke to Goes crosses on a bridge about one and a half miles from the northern end, and there are one or two foot bridges.

All the crossing points were covered by enemy batteries, and all bridges and swing bridges were heavily mined. It was a job for assault boats, and on the night of the 27th, the 6th Brigade went across to establish two bridgeheads. At a third point heavy enemy shelling drove them back, but it was a flash in the pan, for in the early hours of October 26th "*Vitality II*" had sailed on the assault crossing from Terneuzen over the Wester Scheldt. With that the enemy was outflanked, and began at once

to withdraw. Operation *Vitality* repeated the formula of *Switchback*, which had relaxed the enemy grip on the 7th Brigade bridgehead across the Leopold, and forced the abandonment of the Beveland canal positions.

On October 28th the Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders of Canada captured the North locks while the Fusiliers Mont Royal and South Saskatchewan Regiment advanced swiftly in the center. Resistance was crumbling. On the night of the 27th the enemy evacuated an estimated five hundred troops into North Beveland across the Zandkreek, while three thousand withdrew into the Walcheren fortress. There were very few enemy on the ground, but the going was still deadly over the mine-sown roads and dikes, and harassed by artillery fire.

By the end of October the Bevelands were cleared. The 8th Reconnaissance Regiment swooped across the wide channel of the Zandkreek in Dutch barges, and finding nothing in the way, North Beveland was occupied without a fight. The five hundred were picked up, half bewildered, with nowhere to go, defeated.

The task of the Canadian 2nd Division was almost done when the Royal Regiment attacked, surrounded and captured the concrete pill-boxes guarding the approaches to the Walcheren causeway. The 4th Infantry Brigade began to concentrate in Goes, establishing its Headquarters in the billet from which they had driven the Gestapo, and knowing the first taste of comfort.

On October 31st the Black Watch of Canada, followed by the Calgary Highlanders, attacked across the causeway.

ii

On the evening of October 23rd, with a battalion of 157th Brigade under command, and numerous specialized troops, vehicles and weapons in support, 156th Infantry Brigade of the 52nd Division concentrated at Terneuzen with a very high temperature and an all-around lack of sleep. Less than twenty-four hours earlier, and little more than thirty-six hours before it was due to assault South Beveland across the Wester Scheldt, the whole task of planning and carrying out Operation *Vitality II*

"from scratch" had been given to the Brigade. The word "feverish" occurs in the Brigade and Battalion Diaries for this period, and not without reason. Through the first twelve hours "feverish planning," in which Headquarters 1st Assault Brigade, R.E., was closely involved, "156" was on the move, and with half of its Battalion transport "not yet arrived."

On the morning of October 24th the Brigade and the men of the two Battalions chosen for the initial assault landings had their first sight of the Assault landing craft, Buffaloes, Terrapins, Alligators [amphibious Sherman tank], Weasels [small amphibious personnel carrier], and D.D. Tanks [amphibious tank and personnel carrier].

While Brigade Headquarters studied, digested and finally "appreciated" a mass of important material, the men of the assaulting Battalions accustomed themselves to the "feel" of the Buffaloes in which they were due to embark into battle in a few hours. In this they were aided and greatly cheered by the men of 5th Assault Regt. R.E., 11th Royal Tanks and a squadron of the Staffordshire Yeomanry, all of 79th Armored Division, providing the crews of the formidable array of "swimming vehicles," and weapons. The 7th Battalion Cameronians only landed at Ostend on the 24th and 25th and motored direct from their ship to the Buffaloes.

Everything, including a knowledge of South Beveland, was new to 156 Brigade. On October 24th it was still in process of learning that South Beveland was "mostly below high-water level," that it was surrounded by dikes, and with dikes inland, that the beaches on which it must land men, materials and artillery consisted of "sand six to eight inches under mud and silt, salt marsh and esparto grass." The dikes were said to be negotiable by infantry crawling between the wooden stakes, and at high tide tracked vehicles should be able to cross.

One hundred and seventy-six L.V.T.s [Landing Vessels Tank—Buffaloes and Alligators] to carry the assault troops had assembled at Terneuzen, and were organized in two flotillas with 80 L.V.T.s under command of 5th Assault Regt. R.E. and 76 L.V.T.s under command of 11th Royal Tanks. In addition 25 L.C.A.s [Landing

Craft Assault] and 27 Terrapins were ready for use in the assault and in the ensuing build-up, and with a squadron of Staffordshire Yeomanry in support.

Without laboring the point it seems proper to say again that 156th Brigade and the whole of 52nd Division had been highly trained for mountain warfare over a long period, and that nothing they had learned had been relevant to an attack "below sea-level." That they were not at any time dismayed seems greatly to their credit.

Half-way through the 24th came relief:

"*Vitality II* postponed twenty-four hours (THANK GOD!)" records the diary. It records also that no one had had a chance to sleep for the preceding forty-eight hours, nor would sleep be probable in the "unforeseeable" forty-eight hours ahead.

H-hour had been fixed for 0445 hours on the morning of the 26th to weaken the enemy at the time when the Canadians would be putting in their assaults across the canal. Landings would be made on two beaches on the southeast corner of South Beveland, the one facing south on the Baarland peninsula, and the other to the north on the eastern flank, facing east. Bridgeheads would then be developed and expanded to form a single bridgehead. Lines of advance would be generally in a northwesterly direction, and contact would be made with the Canadian left flank with all possible speed.

Even with that twenty-four hours' respite there was little enough time. All over the Ossenisse peninsula five battalions, artillery and support troops of 156th and 157th Brigades were concentrating and having their first sights of the Buffaloes and Alligators. At six o'clock on the evening of the 25th the 4/5th Battalion of the Royal Scots Fusiliers were ferried from their concentration area to their embarkation point. All went smoothly. At midnight the 6th Battalion Cameronians and the Royal Scots Fusiliers were climbing into the Buffaloes as though to the manner born, their grousing tempered with humor and a sense of pride that they, the Mountaineers, should be going into action in this unlikely fashion. They were watched dubiously by their artillery officers and N.C.O.s, who had already half-way made up their minds to make the eighty-mile journey round by road—as soon as the road was

open. For PLUTO had ended the fight for oil, and all but the insatiable Patton were satisfied.

By 0100 hours embarkation was complete. The night was very dark, but clear. The target beaches lay up to eight to nine miles ahead across the quiet water. Red marker lights were lit on the south shore to assist navigation, and it was laid on for the Bofors to direct tracer on a line to prevent the right flanking flotillas from deviating too far to the northeast.

The night had been peculiarly silent. At long intervals groups of shells, probably from Fort Rammekens on the southeast corner of Walcheren, dropped short—perhaps deliberately short, perhaps suspicious of activity off Terneuzen. Without delay the Buffaloes sailed in two flotillas, and cleared the coast without incident. Each flotilla was led by two assault craft, one assault craft to guide, and the other to act as “round-up.” The Bofors tracer laid a boundary of crimson balls curving in a gentle arc across the water. The red marker lights shone clear. All was well.

At precisely 0200 hours a Brigade Reconnaissance party, consisting of Lt. Col. Gosselin,¹ Capt. Shaw, the Brigade Intelligence Officer, Capt. Hutton, a staff captain, a lance-corporal [same as U.S. private first class] and two other ranks, embarked in a Buffalo with the command Weasel. Their purpose was to establish a small advanced Headquarters, and to co-ordinate the actions of the assault battalions at the earliest possible moment.

There was a strong tide running upstream, and owing to this and the dawn smoke screen the Reconnaissance party missed the guiding lights. When dawn broke the party reached the north bank and began casting about for the landing beach. The Buffalo then took to the water, and cruised about while the “navigating officer” searched for a green light. But this was a highly dangerous business, and just as Lt. Col. Gosselin ordered the Buffalo out into the stream they came under heavy mortar fire, and a direct hit landing in the body of the craft set it on fire. The blast shifted the command Weasel and pinned Gosselin and his two officers against the hot wall of the Buffalo. Just as they feared that they would be roasted

¹ C.O. of 4/5th R.S.F., but in command of the two assault battalions for this operation.

alive in a floating oven, the Buffalo sank, and the Weasel popped up like a cork. Hutton swam for the shore, but Gosselin supported the wounded and semi-conscious Capt. Shaw. After a short while Gosselin also lost consciousness, and the next thing he knew was that he was on the deck of a naval pinnace with a boat hook through the webbing of his equipment. A very young naval officer was saying, "Excuse me, sir, do you know where we are?" Four or five hours had elapsed. The pinnace had been carried too far upstream by the tide.¹

But the passage of the main bodies was smooth and uneventful, and at ten minutes to five o'clock, within five minutes of the planned H-hour, both battalions touched down on the mud, silt and sand of the Beveland beaches. Their arrival was unexpected, and on the "Amber" beach of Baarland a group of Buffaloes managed to carry one company of infantry not only over the beach, but nearly a mile inland. Two Buffaloes bogged down, unable to find the sand beneath the mud and silt, others had better success. Within an hour the bridgehead was established, and the forward company was within striking distance of the small township of Oudelande before the enemy was fully aroused to the danger.

On the beach the inevitable mortaring harassed the landing-parties organizing the arrival of the second waves, and a group of Buffaloes ran into heavy fire coming in to land, and floundering on the churned-up muddy slopes of the dikes. With the dawn the Cameronians counted a bag of ninety prisoners against the loss of one man killed and seven wounded. By four o'clock in the afternoon Oudelande was taken against slight resistance by a withdrawing enemy and at a cost of sixteen casualties. The prisoner bag had increased to well over one hundred.

This was not, however, a measure of the struggle ahead, and must be counted as a most fortunate beginning. On the north, "Green" beach, the Royal Scots had met with a more lively reception. A sea wall prevented

¹ Capt. Shaw was lost, and with him the Brigade War Diary. Capt. Hutton was captured on reaching shore. He rejoined at Bremen in the Spring of 1945. Lt. Col. Gosselin was back with his battalion within two weeks.

any incursion of the Buffaloes beyond the beach, and enemy mortars and anti-tank guns came into instant action. For an agonizing few minutes the men in the leading Buffaloes felt like sardines packed in tins, and some of them point-blank under anti-tank guns. The vehicles were too crowded for the ramps to go down, and it was a moment for individual action and initiative. A platoon commander climbed over the side of his Buffalo and called his men to follow him in a charge along the sea wall to silence enemy guns enfilading the beach from the west. The platoon commander lost his life and the lives of two of his men, but the gun was silenced.

From the foremost Buffalo on the opposite flank a corporal of "A" Company leapt out to attack an anti-tank gun with his sten, and to put it out of action. All over the beach the troops tumbled out of the Buffaloes, gained cohesion, and charged over the sea wall. There were moments of confusion. One company had gone slightly astray in the landing, another was thought to be cut off; but these were merely the alarms and excursions to which 156th Brigade would rapidly become accustomed. Within two hours the beach-head was secure, harassed only by the indefatigable enemy mortars operating, as always, from exceptionally well-concealed positions and at long range.

This whole occasion was of far greater importance than the day, and was a most valuable and fortunate rehearsal for the assault units and amphibians of the 79th Armored Division. In the long and arduous months of water-borne warfare ahead the 79th Armored was due to play a major role. To convey two brigades across the nine-mile wide channel of the Scheldt, and to maintain them there was a considerable feat for Buffaloes at that time. The Buffaloes were soon to become the accepted beasts of burden of the troops, and with the host of "Funnies," were to play a decisive part in the last stages of the rapidly developing battle of the Scheldt.

At daybreak on the morning of the 26th, the whole of the channel between Ossenisse and Baarland was thick with hurrying "objects" of strange design. Buffaloes, Terapins and Alligators cavorted round the more cumbersome D.D. Tanks. These last, unable to make good their

landings on the north beach at ten o'clock in the morning, were diverted to "Amber" in the south, and a few managed to cross the mud and silt.

Also at daybreak on that morning the remnants of a sad Brigade Headquarters took to the water together with the reserve Battalion of the Cameronians. By eleven o'clock all had landed, under heavier fire than had greeted the first waves. Mortars and mines took a steady toll of life and limb throughout the day, but the day was won before a thick fog blanketed the last of the light, and the forward battalions on both flanks had dug themselves in, leaving nothing to chance. Only four D.D. tanks successfully swam the Scheldt, but were unable to climb the sea dike. The battle was fought without armor. That night the Buffaloes "sloshed about" in the wide channel trying to find their way, deprived of marker lights and tracer, but enough of them navigated with sufficient success to keep some supplies flowing.

The weather worsened sharply. Two battalions of the H.L.I. spent two days on the Ossenisse peninsula in training with Alligators. The steady rain churned the embarkation points to mud and slush impassable for wheels, and next to impassable for tracks. For three and a half hours the H.L.I. manhandled their Alligators over the short distance between them and the water. "D" company embarked in a small bulldozer with enormous difficulty, and all vehicles were loaded the wrong way round owing to the steepness of the ramps in the normal position. Nevertheless in three days and nights the Buffaloes, Terrapins and Alligators carried 700 loads to the beaches. The small bulldozer performed the invaluable function of towing Alligators through mud two feet thick.

Enemy resistance was patchy and unpredictable. Small groups would often give up without a fight, while others defended themselves furiously, even putting in counterattacks by night, and finally withdrawing in good order. But mines, coupled with mud, wire and water gave 156th Brigade a bad enough introduction to a type of warfare entirely new to them. By October 27th, five battalions were in the bridgehead which had expanded to include Ellewoutsdijk on the left and Hoedekenskerke on the right.

It was, however, all very small "potatoes" in the pattern of the long battle of the Scheldt, but it was a brief period of inoculation for which the Lowland Scots, with their mountain training and their below-land role, were to be thankful.

Advancing with good speed to the north and the north-west, and supported by first-class shooting by 9th A.G.R. A. from the south of the Scheldt, the battalions were appalled at the "pitiful condition" of the Dutch in Hoedekenskerke, Driewegen, Oudelande, and the small townships falling into their hands. Many people, they noted in their diaries, had been wounded and sick and without treatment for days. In the small town of Heerenhoek at the most westerly point of their advance on October 30th, "C" Company of the Glasgow Highlanders shared the "wild greeting" of the townsfolk with the Canadian Essex Scottish.

From that moment the Germans were walking into the lines of the forward companies in "drips and drabs," and the battle of the Bevelands was almost over, largely due to the landing of 156th Brigade on the flank. At no time after the arrival of the Canadians on the Beveland canal had the defense been more than a token. The stand had been made at Woensdrecht, and there the Canadians had "wrung the neck" of the isthmus. There are hints here and there in the diaries of the last days of October that all was virtually over, that all that remained would be plain sailing.

Nevertheless this operation does not deserve to be underwritten. It was easy only against the background of *Switchback* and the opening of the neck. Each day and each hour cost lives and limbs, and tens of thousands of acres of floods would be lethal, not only for days and weeks, but even for months and years.

Walcheren Eve

ON the last day of October the way was cleared for the assault on the fortress of Walcheren. Both *Vitalities* had ended almost with a whimper, and were about to be succeeded by an operation without a name. All through October 31st the slow fuse was fizzling away to ignite the last battle with a violent explosion.

On the south shore Operation *Switchback* was holding its character through to the bitter end. To the last it was a job for infantry able to receive little aid from the host of "Funnies" on that tragic piece of earth that was neither land, nor mud, nor water, but all three in a proportion that refused passage to wheels or tracks or boats. There was no short cut to the end for the men on their feet.

Over all the Bevelands with the exception of the narrow causeway across the Slooe Channel leading to Walcheren there was an unnatural calm. Perhaps an entry in the War Diary of the 1st Battalion Glasgow Highlanders provides a clue to the omission of a name for the last battle. Under the date October 31st it is recorded that the Battalion will be ready to "walk" across the causeway into Walcheren as soon as the Canadians secure a bridgehead of 2,000 yards.

The 157th Infantry Brigade had taken over command of its battalions in the field, and 156th Brigade, relieved of its major responsibilities, took over from the Canadian 4th Infantry Brigade and began to "mop up." All that remained was for 157th Brigade to relieve the elements of the Canadian 5th Brigade on the Walcheren causeway, and the whole of the Canadian 2nd Division would be ready to pull out into rest. At the final count the month of October had cost the Division 207 officers and 3,443 other ranks. In exchange they had taken 5,200 prisoners and killed an equal number of enemy. It was a hard balance sheet for the advance from Antwerp, and part of the price paid for the long-distance visions, the

lack of foresight, and the failure to act in the first week of September when—"no serious attempt had been made to cover the twenty-mile stretch between Antwerp and the base of the Beveland isthmus."¹

It was nearly the end of that battle for the Canadians, and only the beginning for the 52nd Division. Under the date October 31st, 156th Brigade ends its month's record on a very different note: "Operation *Vitality II* planned and carried out entirely by the 156th Inf. Bde. Gp." It further records that the Brigade controlled the build-up from the south bank of the Scheldt, and that Headquarters 52nd Division had not yet arrived from England.

The last is an over-statement. An advance Divisional Headquarters was functioning from the 15th, and by the 26th it was complete. Apart from that the record stands.

On the Bevelands on that last day of October there was, it seemed, the smell of victory. All that remained would be a formality, the tying of loose ends. Certainly there did not appear to be an operation ahead to warrant a particular name, or a plan.

At six minutes past nine o'clock on that last night of the month, the 1st Battalion Glasgow Highlanders was ordered to move northwards into the Nieuwland area, and thence to the approaches of the causeway. 9th A.G. R.A. was doing a terrific shoot on the Walcheren end, but even that could not blot out the ominous din of the enemy mortars and the return fire from the German heavy batteries. On the narrow causeway that night the Canadians of the Calgary Highlanders were hanging on like grim death against counterattacks delivered with a ferocity that would not be denied. The Canadians had to give ground. Early in the afternoon the Black Watch had advanced to within seventy-five yards of the Walcheren shore. They had gone forward through craters like miniature volcanoes and thick with mines, pressing on blindly, like men in a blizzard that envelops them. And in the evening the Calgary Highlanders had relieved them, and tried to go through.

A nameless, pitiless struggle awaited the Glasgow Highlanders, and not alone the Glasgow Highlanders; but they did not know.

¹ *N.W. Europe, 1944-45.*

In the last five days of October the small port of Breskens had become the scene of activities which it was impossible to conceal from the vigilant enemy barely three miles across the water in Flushing. The town of Breskens had become a heap of rubble from which tangled masses of wire, twisted girders, splintered buttresses and chunks of broken masonry protruded horribly like the ribs and entrails of some obscene corpse. Beneath it all the slow fires smouldered and the stench of charred flesh hung in the shrouds of smoke which hovered over the ruin. In all that wilderness there was no sign of a scavenger, no sign of the inhabitants who had once given life and prosperity to this charnel mound.

In the midst of this dismal confusion the Royal Naval divers and bomb disposal squads, the advance parties of 4th Commando, the King's Own Scottish Borderers, and the assault R.E.s, went urgently about their business, burrowing like moles to make "bunkers" in the debris of the waterfront, establishing embryo headquarters, and making Naval and Military order in the midst of chaos.

If all went well, November 1st would be the day for the final assault against Walcheren. The possible days were very few. Time was short; shorter than anyone realized even then.

Within sight and sound of the toilers in Breskens the battle for the "pocket" still raged to the west and to the south. The batteries of Cadzand and Knocke still added their weight to the onslaughts of the Flushing guns firing over open sights across the water. Swarms of Typhoons and Spitfires roared down day after day out of the grey mirk to blast gun positions and strong-points. The enemy held on.

On October 27th the Canadian Scottish of the 7th Brigade were overrun west of Schoondijke, and their forward company taken prisoner almost to a man. The German 64th Division under the martinet Eberding was, in fact, "fighting to the last" within all reasonable meanings of the term and was consistently supported by accurate and heavy artillery. It was basically a slogging match be-

tween infantry; nevertheless it is probable that the Typhoons and Spitfires were the decisive factors.

The 7th, 8th and 9th Brigades of the 3rd Division went on doggedly, knowing that time was running short, knowing also that the enemy was running out of space. Helped by Typhoons, the Regina Rifles advanced in a downpour of rain to take Cadzand, and to begin a bitter struggle against a score of concrete strong-points, not one of which surrendered, and most of which rendered possession of Cadzand of small value.

The only note of relaxation in all that month of misery in a land of appalling desolation and ruin is on October 30th. On that day a small pig appeared suddenly in the vicinity of 7th Brigade Headquarters to spark off a hunt. Officers and N.C.O.s joined in a wild chase armed with knives until the cornered pig was tackled by an N.C.O., killed, cooked and eaten. There was little enough to go round.

On the 30th the 7th Reconnaissance Regiment reached the Derivation canal near Sluis and could not get across. While their patrols sought for a non-existent soft-point the 9th Brigade prepared a night crossing in the area of Retranchement, and at 0200 hours on the night of the 31st the H.L.I. of Canada and the S.D. and G. Highlanders fastened assault boats together to form a bridge to surprise the enemy. To the left the Régiment de la Chaudière and the Queen's Own Rifles established a bridgehead, and all that remained to Eberding and the survivors of the 64th was a flooded triangle, denying him all possibility of manœuvre. There was no longer a battlefield for infantry, and the "Funnies" came into their own.

In the War Diaries of October 31st the flat deadly monotony of the month drones on. There is no hint of relaxation, no expectation of rest or relief. Strong-points must still be reduced one by one. On the night of the 31st, the 7th Brigade records the fact that "filthy weather" still hampers its night patrols. It wants a live German badly. It wants some indication of what is going on in the enemy mind at this stage. The men of the patrols flounder in mud and slush in the pitch darkness. It is icy cold, and the night is full of noises. Lying out in the sodden dikes

the Canadians listen to the sounds of enemy digging, talking in subdued voices. There is the noise of two men, probably bringing up hot food in containers. The night is bizarre.

A sergeant and two men crawl forward intent upon picking one of these men out of the darkness, alive, stifling his cries.

By that time almost everyone had had enough, but the Canadians believed that the enemy had had more than enough. It was like the 19th—or even the 20th—round of a prize-fight in the early days of the century. One man is taking a terrible battering, but is still on his feet, and the other man is weary to exhaustion with dealing it out. Neither man knows exactly how the other is feeling.

But for the Germans there was no hope. It had been a hopeless battle from the start. The 9th Brigade picked up 400 prisoners in the first light of October 31st, men caught unawares, off-balance. "Brigade mission on *Switchback* completed," the Diary records.

Civilians had become a problem, a problem that didn't bear thinking about, but which had to be thought about. Throughout *Switchback* they seemed to have gone to earth, literally, but many must have been swept back in the embrace of the enemy, unable to live in the No-Man's Land between the forces. Their land had become a wasteland, a pitiful ruin, stark and desolate, impressing its grey pattern of mud and dike and water upon the minds of the Canadian troops. "All the country a smouldering ruin . . . wisps of smoke drifting over the mud and water . . ." scribbled a brigade officer in a kind of unofficial marginal note.

At the end, when the civilians were marooned, they had to be passed back along with the prisoners by Buffalo, across the Derivation canal, and beyond, the prisoners to the "Cage," the civilians to nowhere—to their "No-Man's Land."

There remained Knocke and Heyst, the German garrisons, and Eberding somewhere with a "handful" of men. The batteries were still firing as October ended, the concrete strong-points were still manned, the defensive wire was still terrible.

All the preliminaries of Operations *Infatuate I* and *Infatuate II* had been completed by midnight on October 31st. All that was known about Walcheren had been carefully collected, assessed, digested. The R.A.F had done its work at least as well as anyone had a right to expect. The ships and weapons and men were ready.

On October 30th two flotillas of L.V.T.s sailed from Terneuzen, hugging the coast into Breskens. The bad weather was on their side, and they were unobserved by the enemy. At half past eleven o'clock on the morning of the 31st, two more flotillas sailed in and drew immediate fire from the Flushing guns to greet also the arrival of the main body of the K.O.S.B.s [King's Own Scottish Borderers] in Breskens, ready for action. Smoke-screens failed to mask the arrival of further flotillas in the late afternoon, and all those whose work was in the open were grateful of the darkness. A great array of Buffaloes and assault craft lay in and about the small harbor, an easy target.

The decision had been taken that *Infatuate I* would go in to the assault before the dawn. Two hundred and eighty-four guns, mediums, heavies and super-heavies, sent the message screaming through the night. There was no question of surprise. This time there was bombardment, and no lack of fire-power. That lesson, at least, had been learned at Dieppe.

Infatuate I would go in regardless of flying conditions, and regardless of *Infatuate II*.

The only dates possible for *Infatuate II* lay between November 1st-4th and November 14th-17th. The urgency was extreme, and even the first dates were too late. The weather forecast was bad on October 31st. It was unlikely that air support would be possible, or that air observation would be able to help the gunners of the 15-in. gun battleship, H.M.S. *Warspite*, and the two 15-in. gun monitors, H.M.S. *Erebus* and H.M.S. *Roberts*. Nevertheless, the decision was taken to sail *Infatuate II*, and the final decision to assault was left to the discretion of the Naval and Military Force Commanders afloat.

By midnight on October 31st, all men and vehicles were loaded, and an impressive array of vessels awaited the command to sail.

PART FOUR

November

13

The Infatuates

THE island of Walcheren is a shallow bowl, so frequently described as a saucer that it would seem perverse and pretentious to seek a better word. The island is nine miles wide and nine miles long at its widest points, east-west, south-north, and with its western extremity somewhat resembling the bulbous snout of an exceptionally fat sea-cow. To the north the sands of Breezand, backed by the only belts of woodland on the island, resemble (vaguely) the top-knot of a primitive head with the back of the skull, sloping away, flat and knobbly, to the causeway across the Slooe Channel in the east. The town and port of Flushing marks the southern extremity of the island, the trunkless throat of the head facing Breskens some three and a half miles across the estuary.

The rim of the Walcheren saucer is formed by dunes of soft loose sand rising to heights of from 30 feet to 70 feet above the sea, impassable in the main for vehicles, and buttressed by immense sea dikes. At Westkapelle, the very end of the snout, in order to defy the full weight of the North Sea, the dikes are 330 feet thick of concrete at the base, and rising to 29½ feet above low water, and 16 feet above the high-water level.

The farms and villages and the rich polder lands lie sheltered behind the dikes and dunes, well below sea-level, and all won from the sea with infinite toil and pa-

tience by the hardy Dutch. A canal runs from Flushing in a northeasterly direction across the island to link the port with the city of Middelburg, and the small port of Veere on the northeast coast. Middelburg, some three miles to the north of Flushing, is the "commercial" heart of the island, the Capital and the main center of population.

The natural defenses of this island, developed with all the resource and skill of the Germans, were, without a doubt, the most formidable of their kind in the world. The great sea dikes were honeycombed with gun positions, many of them buried and protected by a depth of fourteen feet of concrete. Even the manholes in the streets of Flushing had been carefully contrived as strong-points, and every natural physical feature of the island had been reinforced and exploited to the full, not only to withstand attack, but also to defend the estuary of the Scheldt.

The main defenses of Walcheren, concentrated upon the "snout" of Westkapelle, consisted of some thirty coastal defense and field batteries ranging from guns of 75 mm. to 220 mm. caliber and supported by elaborate networks of concrete strong-points armed with light anti-aircraft and anti-tank weapons.

Groynes, spaced one hundred yards apart, and formed of rows of timber baulks, ran out at right angles into the sea from the dike. All the beaches were heavily mined, and the water approaches had been sown with every type of lethal under-water device contrived up to that time, and the constant perilous study of naval and military engineers.

These heavily mined beaches and approaches were themselves defended by many dangerous shoals and sandbanks covered by heavy swells and swift currents to render inshore navigation hazardous at the best of times. Three to four rows of beach obstacles covered the beaches. Belts of barbed wire were linked to explosives, and the stanchions holding the wire were fixed into the noses of buried shells which would detonate at a touch. Massive wooden wave-breakers were so arranged that a man would have difficulty to squeeze between them, and beyond the beaches triple runs of steel rails ran the whole

length of the dike, and were reinforced by barbed-wire apron fences, and many hidden devices.

Inland, the low-lying polders were spaced with tall poles wired together to prevent air landings, and much of the land was heavily mined to defend the batteries from flank attacks. These minefields, however, could be detected by the weeds for there were no weeds in the fields which the farmers were allowed to harvest.

These, then, were the main physical features of the below sea-level island of Walcheren, the kernel of the nut which had to be cracked before the port of Antwerp could be open to shipping.

In late September Lt. Gen. Simonds had given his mind to this formidable proposition, and had resolved to breach the sea dike at Westkapelle, and thereby to "sink" the island of Walcheren, giving it back to the sea.

ii

On October 1st, the Naval "T" Force and 84th Group R.A.F. went into direct planning with the Canadian First Army in liaison with Bomber Command. Three days later the planners knew that the idea of sinking Walcheren was possible. The test attack of Bomber Command on that day made a 75-yard wide breach, and the salt tide poured in over the polders and the farms.

The points chosen for the three concentric attacks were exactly those at which the enemy had assembled all possible means to exact a heavy toll, if not to deny a foothold. The proposed attack against Westkapelle looked at least as foolhardy as the attack against Dieppe of August 1942, and there were few illusions in the minds of the Naval and Military Staff Officers whose task it was to produce the detailed plans.

Surprise would be out of the question, and governing all things, possible success, dates and timings, air and artillery support, was the weather. On calm days in November it was normally foggy and overcast. On rough days there were even worse problems at sea on a treacherous coast.

Headquarters "T" Force and Headquarters British

52nd Division went ahead with the job, resolved to make the best of it. Throughout October anonymous men of unsurpassable courage explored the water and beach defenses of the enemy while the Air Force bombed and photographed, and the chosen forces assembled and trained for the task.

iii

The success of the R.A.F. bombing was prodigious. The Canadian Army Commander had asked for a three-hundred-yard wide breach in the main sea dike at Westkapelle. The R.A.F. gave him a breach of three hundred and eighty yards at high tide. Day after day the heavy bombers pounded away at the dikes and the strong-points, opening up and widening four main gaps to let in the sea. The second of these gaps was one mile northwest of Flushing, the third three miles to the east of Flushing, and a fourth one mile northwest of Veere. Nevertheless the main battery target at Westkapelle remained intact. Had the gap been 200 yards to the west the battery would have toppled into the sea. By the middle of October the whole island had become a dirty, swirling flood with the town of Middelburg, grey and desolate, like a graveyard in its midst. From the air the inhabitants of the half-submerged farmhouses and villages could be seen rowing or drifting over that dun-colored wilderness of water, the burial ground of all that they possessed and hoped for.

There were only four small areas of comparatively dry land, one in the Flushing area, a second on a strip of dune to the southwest of the town, the third in the northwest with its high dunes and woodland belt, and the fourth in the northeast, north of the main road and east of the Middelburg—Veere canal. Some major roads and dike banks were passable, but enemy communications were severely hampered, and constantly improvised. The defense had become a series of isolated strong-points committed to stand and fight without hope of reinforcement or retreat. Most important of all, the air photographs revealed that at least nine and possibly fourteen of the battery positions in the west were flooded, and almost cer-

tainly neutralized. It was not forgotten that those remaining were sufficiently formidable.

The enemy defense picture built up like a jig-saw day by day. Flame-throwing units covered the exits from the dunes, and there were also "Dragon's Teeth," seemingly redundant behind elaborate mazes of obstacles. A double anti-tank ditch was a part of the Flushing perimeter defense, and there was an unpleasant drop, difficult to estimate, behind the dune embankment at Westkapelle. It would be touch and go whether tanks and A.V.R.E.s would be able to land, and, having landed, would be able to manoeuvre beyond the beach.

On the last four days of October Spitfires and Typhoons flew 804 sorties against gun positions, dual-purpose anti-aircraft guns and radar installations. 84th Group and Bomber Command had contributed a maximum effort up to the day.

While these air activities were in progress, Naval "Tarbrush" parties had sailed out by night to inspect the beaches under the enemy guns. They found the enemy constantly alert, and with four searchlights covering the main breach at Westkapelle. On October 24th a very bold attempt at close reconnaissance failed. The searchlights on both shoulders of the Westkapelle gap blazed suddenly upon the M.T.B. [Motor Torpedo Boat] of the "Tarbrush" party as they quietly attempted to drift in. Instantly the M.T.B. came under heavy fire, and was lucky to make an escape at full speed. Two nights later the "Tarbrush" party transferred from the M.T.B. to a dory some distance offshore, and went in almost soundlessly with the tide, but not soundlessly enough. They were about to land when the enemy opened up with flares, searchlights and small-arms fire. Again they managed to get away, and again on the following night they went in. This time the men in the dory floated inshore until they could see the lighted ends of the cigarettes of the men in the strong-points and hear the subdued voices. That night, before they were discovered and escaped for a third time under fire, they were able to observe many of the elaborate under-water obstacles guarding the main and flanking beaches, not with great precision, but enough to add to the valuable collection of in-

formation steadily building up. Even the abortive attempts at reconnaissance provided confirmation of the tidal conditions prevailing, and especially in the gap. At full tide a strong current was running at about eight knots in the gap, and would be a considerable problem for craft skippers attempting to sail through—for it was hoped by this means that it might be possible to take the enemy in the rear.

It would be necessary to land before half tide in order to force the beach obstacles, and the assault craft would not be able to cross the sand-banks until one and a half hours after low water. It was finally estimated at "T" Force Headquarters that at least five hours of daylight would be needed for the assaulting force to achieve the minimum D-day objectives.

These things had imposed further severe limitations on the development of the final plan. The planners were not very happy. The number of military authorities involved added complications to a task difficult enough in itself, and a sense of frustration emerges from the record. Liaison was not good. There were too many cooks.

The problems of *Infatuate I*, the assault on Flushing, were more simple, boiling down to a proposition of hit-or-miss.

It had been decided that if Flushing did not prove "soft" to the spearhead attack, the main body of the force would transfer at all speed to Ostend, ready to go in behind *Infatuate II*. In any case, neither assault would be dependent upon the other.

Accurate information about Flushing and its estuary defenses had been difficult to obtain. Many of the streets of the town resembled canals with unpredictable depths of water, probably at least three or four feet. Known enemy strong-points, including the enemy headquarters, had become islands, and would be the more easily defended. But the main problem had been to select a possible landing place. To the east of Flushing the beaches were flooded and impassable, and eventually a small beach was chosen to the southeast of the town, giving immediate access at a point just west of the main harbor. This beach had been used as a rubbish dump, and was given the code name of "UNCLE," possibly on account

of its "unredeemed" refuse and junk. It was an awkward beach, half enclosed by a stone mole running out into the estuary on the west. The beach itself was deeply grooved by a runnel and had a gradient of 1 in 6. Groynes were spaced 110 yards apart, and between the groynes five rows of stakes could be seen running out into the water, and most skilfully arranged to make approach difficult for small craft. It was, of course, unnecessary to look beneath the surface to know that all the lethal devices already encountered on the Normandy beaches would be met with, and that there might be others since devised. Finally the whole of "UNCLE" was covered by strong-points with light and heavy machine-guns backed by mortars, while over all loomed the great cranes and gantries of the Flushing docks.

Every possible feature of "UNCLE" was carefully studied from air photographs by the men of the first flight of the assault. The whole success or failure of the attack must, they knew, depend upon them, and it was not the first time that they had been called upon to carry such a burden. They must get a foothold while the enemy was still dazed from the bombardment that would precede their landing. There must be dash and certainty. To fumble, to flounder even for a minute, would be suicide, and the end of *Infatuate I*.

iv

The main enemy force on Walcheren was provided by the German 70th Division, variously known as the "Dyspeptic," the "White Bread," or the "Stomach" (ulcer) Division. To write off such a division as a bunch of crocks would have been a grave error, and the probable state of the enemy ulcers did not lead the attackers into any false assumptions. As garrison troops they would normally enjoy regular meals, and the necessary diet, at least until The Day. Nor was their mature age—many of them in their forties—considered a handicap, for they were men well able to understand the paramount importance of their role and might be endowed with great resolution. Without a shadow of doubt they knew that they

manned the last barrier between the Allies and final victory. Above all, they were experienced troops.

In addition to the 70th Division there was a fortress battalion, Coast Defense artillery, A/A artillery, and Luftwaffe personnel manning the radar installations, an estimated total of 8,000-10,000 men.

At sea the enemy could muster fifteen "E" boats, ten "R" boats, and some sixty miscellaneous craft, and in certain conditions these might be a nuisance.

On the night of October 31st, 1944, our own troops were ready, embarked upon the ships of the "T" Force Armada at Ostend, waiting in the bunkers of Breskens, and on the Beveland-Walcheren causeway in the east. A tremendous artillery barrage made the night hideous, and revealed the façade of Flushing in dark silhouette, its great gantries standing out like the stricken trees of a petrified forest.

14

Assault Flushing

THE 552nd Flotilla sailed safely into Breskens at two o'clock on the morning of November 1st, and with that the entire force for the assault on Flushing was complete. A Naval officer standing on the end of the broad wooden jetty controlled the craft coming in alongside, and the assault crews brought them in without a hitch. The Naval officer gave his directions in a quiet voice, unhurried, and the general calm of the ships' coming was impressive. The traffic in shells wiffled and woofed overhead in strange sibilant layers of overtones and undertones, mediums, heavies and super-heavies, 284 guns beating out an ominous rhythm through the heavy cloud banks. There was a certain amount of stuff coming back, yet it was almost lost in the terrific weight of the barrage directed upon Flushing. The incessant explosions, the wild flashes, the sudden violent welling up of tongues of flame under billowing smoke, filled the night with grotesque and lurid

shapes, superimposing themselves one upon the other like rapid exposures upon the same negative, imprinting themselves behind the eyes, pattern upon pattern of a tormented scene.

Assault craft were drawn up along both sides of the wooden jetty, and Naval officers stood at each end, ready to control embarkation, and to call the craft away to a rigid time-table. The small harbor was full of craft, forty L.C.A.s [assault craft], twenty L.V.T.s [Buffaloes], and twenty-six Weasels, a kind of amphibious "Bren carrier."

The opening assault would be made by 4th Commando plus one section of Dutch troops from 10th [I.-A.] Commando and one "Tarbrush" party. They would sail in twenty L.C.A.s to seize a bridgehead at "UNCLE" beach and clear Flushing to a depth of half a mile. The immediate follow-up would be by 4th K.O.S.B. to pass through and clear to the north.

H-hour was fixed for 0545 hours, ninety minutes before dawn.

The preliminary bombing of Flushing would cease at 0530 hours. But there wasn't going to be any bombing. The sky was ominous above the flashing of the guns. It was a bad night; too bad for the Lancasters of Bomber Command.

The artillery bombardment would concentrate on the Flushing waterfront from 0530 hours and lift at 0540 hours. The Commandos would go in before the echo died away. They must do that. That was the chance. They must seize it. Ten minutes late might be too late.

The order of sailing and assault was simple:

"Tarbrush" and 1 L.C.A. of 4th Commando

land on "UNCLE"	0545 hours
5 L.C.A.s carrying 4th Commando	0550-0555 hours
4th Commando complete	0635 hours
4th K.O.S.B. landing complete	0725 hours
Platoon 241st Field Company, R.E. and 2 Bulldozers, Platoon "A" Company, 7th Manchesters, 452nd Mortar battery, R.A.	0805 hours

It must go on like that steadily throughout the day, and the next day.

Serials 1 and 2 began embarking the "Tarbrush" and Commando reconnaissance parties at three o'clock in the morning. The men went quietly to their places in their craft, stowing their specialized equipment with care, ready at hand. They were quiet. If there was nervous tension, it was not apparent. They were specialist craftsmen in the arts of war, tried and tested in many battles from the destruction of the Varengeville battery at Dieppe, and on through many seas, islands, and lands, until now. They bore the whole prospect of success or failure, and they knew that. It was invariably so. This time the complications were greater than usual, for it had been impossible to fix a landing place on "UNCLE," and they must find one, land on it, clear it, forge a way up and over the dike and through the wire. The "Tarbrush" party would pilot the main body in to land, and "UNCLE" beach was too narrow to permit the approach of more than two assault craft at a time. All these things must be done in darkness and at great speed, with not a minute to lose.

At 0415 hours the Naval officer standing on the end of the Breskens jetty called Serials 1 and 2 away, and with flanking assault craft nosing for mines—or anything, even frogmen—Serials 1 and 2 moved out into the broad estuary. By half past five o'clock, calling the serials away in a steady rhythm, the whole of 4th Commando, 550 men, were on the water, closing on Flushing.

ii

Serials 1 and 2 had got away early to give themselves time in hand to identify the beach. They had almost an hour to spare, but did not need it. Flushing was burning. The flames of many fires reflected a wild scene upon the water, and threw the shape of a windmill in black relief against the burning buildings. That windmill marked the landward end of the mole—Orange mole, the mole sheltering "UNCLE" beach from the west, and leading up into Orange Street. This was a godsend, and Serials 1

and 2 knew that they would keep their appointment on time. For an hour they cruised in the choppy water while their escorting craft moved away east, flashing lights, drawing enemy fire, creating a diversion and attempting to mislead the enemy.

At half past five o'clock the barrage lowering upon the Flushing waterfront began the final overture. It was scarcely possible that the approach of the assault craft would be observed. The moment the barrage lifted the curtain went up, and the Naval party went in unseen under the mole while the leading assault craft held course for the middle of the beach. Thirty yards or so out she was holed on a stake, held fast and swamping. Manhandling their gear, salvaging vital sapper equipment from the sinking craft, the men swam for the beach while the second assault craft took a course between them and the mole. Within a minute the men of the second craft were ashore, going straight for the wire, cutting a gap, picking enemy out of their holes while their heads were still down and the air still shuddered from the sickening violence of the barrage. Behind them the sappers began to clear the beach.

Not until the Naval party came round the end of the mole was a shot fired against them. Storming ahead, the leading troop overran a 75-mm. gun position and pill-box, pouncing upon the dazed enemy, turning the gun at once to cover the length of Orange Street. With that the direct exit from the beach was taken and would be held, five minutes from touchdown.

The sappers, soaked to their skins, had taped the gap and cleared a safe track from the landing point. Nearby, at the end of the mole, a Naval officer stood in an assault craft of the "Tarbrush" party signalling in the second flight, guiding them carefully between the stakes, two by two, in to the beach.

Twenty-mm. cannon fire opened up, but the enemy was still dazed and uncertain from the hammering of the night. One troop of the second flight moved up through the gap and turned west to seize first the Arsenal and barracks, and then to press on along the coast. The second troop spread out over the waterfront, and began to move fast into the town. Twenty-five men, a 50-mm.

gun position and the German area commander were seized before they could fire a shot, and the gun went into action in support of the troops moving west. The commandos cleared between four and five hundred yards of the waterfront with such speed and certainty that within half an hour the outer crust of the defense at this point had ceased to exist. Without that success it is unlikely that any further landing would have been possible in daylight. As it was, while the commandos fought furiously for a pill-box near the de Ruyter statue, the enemy was fully aroused to receive the third flight with heavy machine-gun, 20-mm.-cannon and mortar fire, plastering the beaches and the sea approaches from scores of unlikely angles, and rendering that confined space a veritable inferno.

But the awakening was too late, for the first and second flights were inside and under the guard, unsettling the enemy, silencing guns before the gunners were aware of danger threatening. At 0635 hours the third and final wave of 4th Commando came in to this savage greeting, hugging the mole, two at a time. Twenty yards out the assault craft with the mortars and wireless was hit and holed, sinking fast. Almost alongside, a second craft was held on the stakes. But these were emergencies for which the crews were highly trained. Men worked swiftly up to their necks in water, manhandling the mortars and wireless gear to the shore. An hour later they had the mortars cleaned and in action.

With the dawn the first fierce exultation of the assault was spent, the storming was over. Five hundred men, each armed with a small explosive charge, were in the midst of the enemy like bacilli in the blood-stream, taking a toll, avoiding the open, moving through the houses, the walls, over the roof-tops, killing snipers, locating strong-points, overwhelming nests of isolated men.

But with the dawn the enemy found his bearings, manning his multitude of guns, resolute in scores of almost unapproachable and undetectable strong-points. Even perched in the great gantries above the docks there were machine-gunners and snipers like crows in winter trees.

All that the defenders of Flushing could bring to bear upon the narrow beach and approaches to "UNCLE" met

the first flight of the 4th Battalion of the K.O.S.B. as they came in to land at half past seven o'clock in the pale grey light of that wild November morning. "Tarbrush" had made safe the channel; sappers had cleared the beach. One troop of 4th Commando had taken the barracks to the west, and the remainder had fanned out some six hundred yards deep into the town.

None of these things was visible to the K.O.S.B. as they came steadily in to land through the swirling smoke and spray, and the plumes of water rising from the crashing shells. They went in, jumping for it as the ramps went down, heads down behind their officers and N.C.O.s, running for the gap.

Before eight o'clock two companies had made good, and a terrific battle had begun to rage 800 yards deep into Flushing. The battle held from the outset rare qualities of extraordinary violence, unique in Walcheren. On a huge scale it resembled a fight in a Wild West saloon. It was elemental. Its boundaries were rigid. There could be no retreat, not even a yard for the men in their strong-points. It was the last "ditch" and surrounded by water; even the German Headquarters was surrounded by water.

iii

For convenience and clarity Flushing had been divided up into areas and objectives with code names, not only easily pronounceable, but also nostalgic for English and Scottish troops. Immediately behind "UNCLE" lay "Seaford" and "Troon," and the harbor south of the sea locks was "Falmouth." The three main docks to the east of the town and behind "Falmouth" were "Haymarket," "Strand" and "Piccadilly," and the coastal objectives to the west, the special targets of elements of 4th Commando, had been given the names of English south coast resorts, "Dover," "Worthing," "Hove" and "Brighton." Behind and between "Brighton" and "Hove" lay "Braemar," the name given to Bellamy Park, the only easily pronounceable area in Flushing. This was the heart of a very heavily defended area covering a bomb-proof barracks with a tower at "Worthing," and a former naval

barracks at "Hove." Perhaps it is misleading to write of heavily defended areas, for the whole of the town was a nest of defense, and it would have been impossible to select a weak point.

The names of fish and game birds had been used to denote the heart of the town, flanked in the north by "Lincoln," and in the south by "Bexhill." "Cod," "Grouse," "Pike," "Partridge," "Duck" and "Trout" filled the gap.

In the initial stages of the attack in that vital half-hour with the enemy dazed and off-balance, 4th Commando had penetrated deep into "Seaford" and the fringe of "Troon," and had pressed on to attack "Brandon," the Post Office. The arsenal and barracks, named "Winchester," had been captured in that first flush, and two troops had then fought a battle from pillbox to pillbox, forging a way westward to engage the enemy defending "Braemar" and covering "Hove" and "Brighton."

The last flight of the 4th K.O.S.B. got in almost on time soon after half past seven o'clock, and not a moment too soon, for the successes of the first flights had not been able to abate the terrific weight of enemy fire, and especially heavy mortar fire, thickening to an impassable intensity upon "UNCLE" and the sea approaches. Every pillbox off the waterfront was skilfully covered by fire from other pillboxes, and soon the heavy batteries flanking the town made of the estuary a wilderness of smoke and fire upon which it was becoming suicidal to embark.

One assault craft of the last flight suffered a direct hit and was lost with all twenty-six of crew and men, and at that time four craft were known to be lost. Nevertheless the R.E.s, the machine-gunners of the Manchesters, the Mountain battery of the Royal Artillery, pressed on to land. It was impossible then to manœuvre on the approaches, and only the most skilful and bold leadership got the craft in to bring vital support to the attackers harassed by heavy machine-gun and cannon fire which they could not locate.

It was the beginning of a critical time. Both radio telephone links with Brigade were lost on the beach, and the beach and approaches had become untenable. Close-sup-

port artillery was urgently needed to counter the fire from enemy strong-points. Enemy mortar teams changed positions with great speed and skill, snipers were everywhere. The three forward companies of the 4th K.O.S.B., striving to go through 4th Commando into the heart of the "fish and bird" districts, were out of contact with each other and with Battalion Headquarters, and company commanders were rallying their men with great shouts, and one with a hunting horn. For a time it was the only way to communicate, while the only way to advance was by "mouse-holing" from house to house.

By nine o'clock, Battalion Headquarters was established in an air-raid shelter on the edge of a small square, and sending out runners to contact the companies. It was no place for runners. A pillbox with heavy machine-guns enfiladed the approaches along a street called Goosje Busken Straat, another group fired from the Power Station. Under such conditions all those in Flushing fought alone for six hours while the Typhoons and the guns of two Army Groups of Royal Artillery tried to batter the enemy into silence.

iv

Across the grey shell-ridden wilderness of the estuary the town of Flushing stood out somber and remote, a specter shrouded in drifting smoke stabbed through with sudden bursts of flame. Plumes of spray rose from the water to reveal the near misses as the assault craft carrying the last of the 4th K.O.S.B. reached the "UNCLE" approaches. Buffaloes lurched and wallowed in the choppy seas, showing very little freeboard, and the assault craft seemed to crawl like snails over that dangerous channel. Every few minutes groups of shells whined over Breskens jetty to explode somewhere in the entrails of the ruined port.

In the Brigade Headquarters bunker, the Brigadier, the Brigade Major and a Captain, R.N., waited anxiously for news. A signals corporal listened with an absorbed expression to the silence in his headphones. There was

no news. The Lieutenant Colonel commanding the 5th Battalion of the K.O.S.B. said:

"We'll get away now."

"Send someone back," said the Brigadier. "Isn't there a liaison officer about?"

But no one could go over, no one at all. The stretch of water between Breskens and Flushing had become a death-trap. Assault craft returning reported that the curtain of mortar fire had thickened. It had come down behind them like a blanket, impenetrable. The Naval officer on the end of the Breskens jetty had been calling the serials away for what seemed an eternity, standing like a skittle at the end of an alley. His voice was grave, modulated on a quiet note, and very comforting. Assault craft crews coming back brought in scraps of news, and it sounded good, but by ten o'clock mortar fire barred the approaches to "UNCLE." "Couldn't get through with a matchbox," said a Bo'sun.

The first flight of the 5th K.O.S.B. embarked quietly, and Naval craft lay smoke screens to drift over the water while the artillery beat out a devastating tattoo. At noon the weather began to improve. There were rifts in the hurrying cloudbanks, and the first of many Typhoons swooped suddenly out of the clouds to dive on the Flushing batteries. The rockets tore down out of the wings, and the small puffs of exhaust smoke seemed to propel the Typhoons down upon their own missiles.

"Serials fourteen and fifteen ready to leave," intoned the Naval officer. "Serials sixteen and seventeen ready to embark."

The tide lapped the end of the jetty, and rocked the assault craft. The crash of the heavy guns ceased abruptly, and in a moment of silence serials fourteen and fifteen moved out into the estuary to disappear into the smoke. An hour later they nosed back into Breskens, one missing, five survivors picked up. The mortar fire was solid outside "UNCLE."

The tall gantries and cranes stood up out of the smoke like fabulous birds, towering, gaunt and forbidding, above the waterfront of Flushing docks. Again flights of Typhoons swooped down out of the cloud rifts like avenging hawks, and with streaks of sunlight burnishing their

wings. Again the lead companies of the 5th K.O.S.B. embarked patiently in their craft. "There'll be three feet of water over there when you land," a company commander warned. "Get ready for it."

Cascades of water flew suddenly all over the jetty, deluging the craft. Shells ricocheted off the water to whine inland. Plumes rose up like fountains, and the air was thick with shell splinters.

"All troops keep to their craft," intoned the Naval voice.

In the craft the men crouched down under the steel combings. Splinters of woodwork, rubble and masonry flew lazily upward like grey smoke out of the ruin of Breskens. The big guns opened up from the south.

"Everyone on shore," said the Naval officer. "Disembark quietly."

Silently the men left their places. A bearded Naval padre chatted amiably with anyone who would slacken pace to listen. It might have been a Sunday morning outside the church. Swiftly the troops regained the cover of the bunkers in the rubble.

The Typhoons flew 152 sorties that afternoon to strike down upon the enemy gunners and compel them to periods of silence, and the medium and heavy batteries thundered steadily from behind Breskens.

It was after two o'clock when the lead companies of the 5th K.O.S.B. came out of their holes to try again. The sky was clearing fast. Patches of blue showed through the breaking cloud layers, and the sun blazoned the wings of aircraft as they soared upwards out of the white puffs of their rockets.

Every man knew his place, a line along each side under the combing, a line down the middle.

"We'll make it this time," a private said in a high clear voice.

A subaltern in the bows of one of the craft chewed a large shiny carrot, and the Naval voice called the craft away. The subaltern leaned inboard, holding his carrot like an admonitory finger. "Listen, everyone. Center leave first, then right, then left. Got it?"

Serials sixteen, seventeen and eighteen, five assault craft to each serial, spread out swiftly over the water.

Nothing was visible to the men in the craft, except themselves and the sky, thirty-two men in each craft, crouching down, blind, in tiny oblongs of steel heaving to the water. They could hear the notes of the shells, their ears turned to danger, listening for the crunch of shingle.

Time had ceased to have a particular meaning: it might have been the journey across the Styx. The engines of the assault craft slowed, and the craft began to heave about in the choppy water. Cascades of spray deluged inboard, and the din became personal, concentrated upon these men in "No-Man's-Water."

"We'll not get across!" A boy with a rosy face had spoken without seeming to know. His eyes shone like lamps.

"By hook or by crook we will," the corporal answered. He spoke in broad Scots, and the words were curiously formal. "We're all teed up, lad."

The craft heaved about in the turmoil of sea and bursting shells, a haze of silver smoke and spray. The rosy-cheeked boy seemed to be sleeping. No one spoke again, and presently the engines went ahead at full speed. The subaltern suddenly straightened up from crouching forward. He took an enormous bite of carrot and threw the stump away.

"Ready!" he said. "Get away quickly!"

"Center first!" roared the corporal.

The ramp went down, and the men jumped. The three feet of water had become three inches, for the tide had not waited on the Captain's briefing. Men stumbled to their feet, and swiftly up and over the beach. A burst of Spandau came from somewhere, and the bullet of a sniper sounded with a curious smack in the wet mud and slime of "UNCLE." But the worst was over. In those hours while the 5th K.O.S.B. embarked and disembarked and waited, much had happened besides the falling of the tide. A score or more of Germans were working on the beach under guards, and "UNCLE" was as safe as anywhere in the south part of the town.

"They keep down the sniping," said a sergeant, nodding towards the Germans.

Already the first of the refugees had made their way from their shattered homes and stood clutching their small

bundles on the rubbish dump of "UNCLE," staring out hungrily over the grey Scheldt, waiting patiently for rescue.

v

It was nearly half past four when the 5th K.O.S.B. began to land, and went up swiftly into the town ready to go through their sister battalion as soon as they could get their bearings. The Commanding Officer of the 4th K.O.S.B. sat on a grass bank outside the air-raid shelter at the end of Graave Straat, where he had made his Headquarters. His head emerging from the bulky smock over his battledress gave him rather the look of a diver without his helmet. A map of Flushing was spread across his knees. One of his companies had just captured a German quartermaster and a cook with a good supply of enemy rations. The battle was shaping well. The foothold was secure. But there were no illusions. The enemy fire from the flanks was heavy, accurate and continuous, the mortaring was deadly. 4th Commando, fighting in "Braemar," were under heavy fire at close range from "Brighton" and "Hove," and "Brighton," "Hove" and "Dover" had most of "Bexhill" under their guns. The German Headquarters in the Hotel Britannia had become a fortress, an island within an island, heavily armed and with a powerful garrison.

The need for close-support artillery was chronic and urgent if the scores of concrete strong-points and pill-boxes were to be reduced. The gunners had manhandled their 3.7 Mountain guns up from the beach, and had begun to float them across the estuary on rafts, or in anything they could find to carry them. A mortar team had set up a P.I.A.T. [Projectile Infantry Anti-Tank—bazooka-type gun] on the roof of a cinema and had knocked out a four-barrelled 20-mm. gun that had caused a lot of trouble. Men of 4th Commando were not only going through the party walls of houses, but were swinging from gutters and drainpipes like acrobats. A room full of Germans was attacked by men of 4th Commando hanging by their legs upside-down.

That was the kind of fight it was, and it might go on like that for a week with bursts of mortar fire and deadly sniping catching platoons in the streets.

At five o'clock the Commanding Officer had one company fighting in the docks and shipbuilding yards, keeping contact by shouting as men do in forests. Every crane and cranny and crow's-nest held snipers. Sappers and "Tarbrush" parties were going through the docks and yards searching for demolition charges while the enemy in the main dock areas of "Haymarket," "Strand" and "Piccadilly," across the canal, plastered them with machine-gun fire.

A lieutenant came running up breathless to the Commanding Officer to report. He was a man of not more than twenty-one or -two.

"Sit down, Charles," said the C.O., "and tell me."

There was, for the moment, a lull in this small piece of Flushing, and it was in these moments that it became obvious, and with a sense of shock, almost of bewilderment, certainly of horror, that Flushing was inhabited, lived in, worked in, by people. Some thousands had got away up the canal to Middelburg. Thousands more had not. There was nowhere to go. They lived here in Flushing, eating meals, going to bed, getting up, selling things in shops.

Two men with narrow steel helmets, wearing armlets, and armed with German rifles, ran in to report enemy positions. At any moment enemy mortars would get the range of Battalion Headquarters. A middle-aged matron wheeled a barrow with a black-and-white calf through the small square and along Graave Straat. In every lull the civilians tried to make their ways to "UNCLE." Mothers with children at their skirts appeared at street corners, and trudged on, staid, dour, unhurried, knowing the absurdity of attempting to race death. It may as easily be a yard ahead, a yard back, as where you are. A line of washing flapped behind the shell of a battered house. A young girl framed in a second-story window of a private house swept the window-sill with a little hand broom.

The sky overhead was clearing to a duck-egg blue, and the Typhoons were making the most of it. Anti-aircraft batteries firing flat were enfilading neighboring streets. One of the batteries on the spit beyond the harbor had

shown a white flag, and had begun to fire again. The 5th K.O.S.B. were asking for guides.

The Commanding Officer was as calm as a lake.

"We'll sit tight for the night," he said.

On "UNCLE" the beach parties were trying to cope with the refugees. Many of the women had children in their arms or at their skirts. The Buffaloes were beginning to come in, filling up with wounded, staring up out of the bottom of the craft at the fading sky, some smoking, not really aware of the battle any more. There was room for a few refugees.

A sapper lifted a small girl over a puddle on that dismal beach. "Come along, Duckie. There you are now," he said. The child stood on the edge of the puddle where the soldier had set her down, and looked up at him with a smile of wonder. "There now," the soldier said again, and the child went off towards the water.

Swiftly the sky darkened to a deep wine color, and the Typhoons came down out of it for the last time. The foreshore of "Brighton," "Hove," "Worthing," and "Dover" heaved with great spouts of earth, and chains of running flame.

"Any more for the 'Skylark'!" a sergeant shouted.

And it was the "Skylark," a Buffalo with *Skylark* painted white, up forward.

The clouds began to bank heavily over the estuary. The last Buffalo left "UNCLE," and the last refugees went back silently into the town to wait for morning. Across the estuary, lights showed red over green to mark the Breskens jetty, a symbol of victory.

By midday on November 2nd, the 7/9th Battalion of the Royal Scots had disembarked on "UNCLE," and 155th Brigade, including its Headquarters, was complete in Flushing. The town had become so grossly overcrowded, and so hemmed in by the turbulent flood-waters of the North Sea, that the fighting took on, more than ever, that quality of enclosed violence from which there is no escape. Every open space was under fire, every street was

enfiladed or overlooked by snipers, or in range of mortars, and all movement was dangerous. A subaltern of the 4th K.O.S.B. was killed as he led the 5th K.O.S.B. through to their Start Line on the evening of their arrival, and within five minutes the leading platoon had lost fourteen men. A burst of mortar fire caught a company of the 4th K.O.S.B. momentarily on an open street and accounted for all its officers but one and a score of men. A lieutenant of the Royal Scots died from a burst of machine-gun fire a few minutes after landing on "UNCLE." That was the pattern of it. And through it all the civilians, the inhabitants of this battlefield, were moving in ever-growing streams out of the northern areas of the town, and converging upon "UNCLE" beach. St. Joseph's Hospital was reported on fire, and full of civilian wounded. Nothing—or not much—could be done about it.

The shooting was all at short range, and much of it point-blank, even for artillery, and the Mountain battery had come into its own below sea-level. The 3.7-in. Mountain gun, lighter than the 25-pounder of the Field Artillery, and designed to be taken apart swiftly and re-assembled, cracked the concrete pillboxes of Flushing one by one, and with devastating effect. Artillery of this caliber at point-blank range took the enemy by surprise. In the dockyards riddled with snipers and heavy machine-guns, the Mountain gunners had a "rook shoot," bringing down the suicide snipers from their perches high in the crows'-nests of ships and cranes, and on the bird-like heads of the gantries. In close support they were magnificent.

One gun team answered an urgent call for fire on a concrete strong-point by manhandling their dismantled gun into the second-floor room of a small house. One part of the gun weighed a quarter of a ton, but the men got it up the stairs and put it together behind drawn curtains. Inside twenty minutes the gun was in action. A trooper drew the curtains and the first shot went smack into the concrete fort at 250 yards. The ceiling began to come down at the first shot. At the second round the ceiling came right down and the gun began to go through the floor. The second shot killed a group of Germans trying to escape from the fort. "They disappeared," said the ser-

geant gunner. "We looked like millers!" At the eighth round the gun and its crew were all back on the ground floor without having the trouble of going downstairs. The fort was demolished, and so was the house.

The 4th K.O.S.B. were by that time deep into "Cod" and "Grouse" and under heavy fire from "Dover." 4th Commando were fighting savagely on through "Worthing" and "Eastbourne" and threatening "Dover," the last serious strong-point on that flank. The 5th K.O.S.B. were in the docks to the east, meeting strong pockets of hidden enemy with plenty of reserves of ammunition and food.

But the climax came on November 3rd when the Royal Scots attacked the headquarters of the Germans in the luxury Hotel Britannia. That was the heart of the matter, and no battalion of the British Army was ever called upon to launch an attack more bizarre.

In the early hours of the morning of November 3rd three companies of the Royal Scots were on the Start Line. They had life-jackets. They were in a street behind the hotel, and it was three feet deep under flood-water, most of it from the North Sea flooding through a breach in the sea dike just west of the hotel. A sniper's tower and a series of pillboxes added to the powerful defenses, which included 20-mm. guns, and inside the hotel was Colonel Reinhardt, the self-styled "King of Zeeland," the Flushing Commander.

The tide was running at five knots in the street, and Weasels were drawn up in support with small craft in case they were needed. Within a minute of the start the subaltern in the lead was up to his armpits. A new and more dangerous way of approach had to be taken, and by forming a human chain, hanging on hand to hand, the Battalion went in to attack waist deep in water. It became a wild and desperate scramble, pressed by indomitable leadership. The second in command was killed trying to locate 20-mm. cannon fire threatening a company. Individually men fought their ways through the flood-water to reach the hotel. A lieutenant was smashing at one of the doors, and calling on the mortars for action. A platoon commander manœuvred his platoon under the worst of the defending guns dominating the approaches

from the hotel roof and the sniper's tower and attempted to batter his way inside.

In the midst of a scene of indescribable confusion the Battalion Commander ran forward over an impossible piece of knee-deep slush to make contact with one of his companies. He was followed by his orderly and a signaller. It was a hopeless sortie. The signaller was shot down almost instantly, and the Colonel fell badly wounded trying to aid him. The Colonel crawled forward, raised himself on one arm and urged his men on with great shouts of "On the Royals!"

Taking up the cry the Royals went on.

The confusion then became acute. A German sniper had made his way into Battalion Headquarters, and the H.Q. had to be evacuated under cover of smoke. By then the Hotel Britannia was in flames. In response to the call for fire from the lieutenant battering at the door, a P.I.A.T. had been dragged forward to blast in the door point-blank.

There were three lieutenants in the last moments of that strange battle; all with revolvers in their hands, all with "On the Royals!" roaring out of their throats, all lit with the flames of the fight. One lieutenant killed three machine-gunners with his pistol, another rushed into the hotel through the door blasted by the P.I.A.T., the third battered a way in at the back with his platoon.

But the Hotel Britannia had been prepared to withstand a siege, and the men of the Royals in on the ground floor felt like the meat in a sandwich. Enemy in unknown strength still manned the guns on the roof, and could hold the stairs with grenades against all comers, while down in the basement in deep concrete was the Garrison Commander with the main garrison. Steel doors with weapon slits barred all the entrances and covered the approaches enfiling the narrow passageways.

Nevertheless the stalemate was of short duration. Unknown to those within, and observed unhelpfully by those without, a young red-faced officer was climbing the drainpipes, clutching window-ledges, gaining precarious foot and fingerholds, and steadily making his way to the roof. He carried few hopes but his own, for it seemed certain that his daring would be greeted by a large hand

on his face as soon as it topped the parapet. Instead, his sudden appearance so startled the defenders that they faltered, surrendered, and were swiftly shepherded towards the stairs. At that precise moment a smoke bomb flung by an unknown hand had begun to solve the problem of the basement fortress. The building was on fire. Faced with roasting in the concrete "ovens" of their dug-outs or surrender, Colonel Reinhardt with 130 officers and men abandoned their stronghold at ten minutes before noon. The fight had raged for nearly five hours.

When Reinhardt was told that the Germans were surrendering and that Flushing was ours, he didn't believe it. The attack, he said, had come in as and when he had expected it. He had done all he could about it. He believed that all the garrisons in Walcheren would fight to the last, and he was not very far wrong.

But on the evening of November 3rd Flushing was virtually cleared west of the Middelburg canal. Certainly no part of it was controlled by the enemy, and the future held only death or surrender for the isolated groups still holding out. "Dover" was silent. 4th Commando was pressing on in the hope of making contact with its own Brigade. *Infatuate I* was over.

Throughout the whole action for Flushing, Brigadier J.F.S. McLaren, of the Black Watch, had been a powerful driving force, landing in the early stages of the assault, and directing the battle with immense energy and skill.

15

Assault Westkapelle

AT one o'clock on the morning of November 1st four M.L.s led the Headquarters ship, the frigate H.M.S. *Kingsmill*, and 126 assorted craft of "T" Force out of Ostend harbor, and set a course to the north. The Battleship H.M.S. *Warspite*, and the Monitors *Erebus* and *Roberts* of the bombardment squadron dominated the armada of little ships taking stations behind the naviga-

tional M.L.s, [Motor Launches.] Forty assault craft carried the leading assault force of 41st Royal Marine Commando. They would land on their feet. Twenty-five support landing craft armed with 17-pounders, Oerlikons [anti-aircraft gun] and some equipped with rockets, carried Royal Marine gunnery officers and Naval crews. There were twelve smoke-laying craft and six infantry-landing craft with roving duties to pick up casualties. Thirty-five tank-landing craft carried the main body of 4th S.S. Brigade (less 4th Commando), 41st, 47th and 48th Royal Marine Commandos and 10th Inter-Allied Commando, together with Buffaloes, Weasels, Flails, A.V.R.E.s, bulldozers and gun tanks of the 79th Armored Division, and their crews. The Buffaloes and Weasels, manned by 11th Royal Tanks and 5th Assault Squadron, R.E., would carry the main assault force on shore. The "Funnies" and gun tanks manned by the 1st Lothians and 87th Assault Squadron, R.E. [Royal Engineers] would land in close support from four tank-landing craft. R.N. [Royal Navy] beach parties, specialist R.E. detachments, field companies, medical units and pioneers, made up the force. One tank-landing craft, equipped as a hospital ship, kept station with the bombardment squadron.

A more highly trained force never sailed upon a more desperate venture, and only a desperate urgency might justify the risk. But the die was not yet cast. All through October 31st the bad weather had depressed "T" Force, and the forecasts were pessimistic. The preliminary air bombardment would not take place. No air observation, and no close support could be expected on the day.

Yet it was now or never. On board H.M.S. *Kingsmill* it had been left to Capt. Pugsley, D.S.O., R.N., the Naval Force Commander, and to Brig. B. W. Leicester, R.M., the Military Force Commander, to make the final decision. It was a bad night, heavy with low cloud. The pre-arranged air tasks had been scheduled to begin at H-hour minus 90 minutes and to end at H-hour minus 10 minutes. From H-hour minus 10 minutes to H-hour plus 5 minutes four squadrons of Typhoons were scheduled to make a Cabrank attack on the beach defenses. The airfields of England, Belgium and Holland were un-

der mist, but the Typhoons might come in at the last moment.

On board H.M.S. *Kingsmill*, the Force Commanders waited for the dawn. On board the little ships, the Royal Marine Commandos and the Assault R.E.s, the very élite of fighting troops, slept. They would have slept even if they had known that the southern flank of the convoy was sailing through a minefield.

At seven o'clock, Reveille roused the Force. They were in the open sea turning due east, eleven miles off the beach of Westkapelle, with H.M.S. *Warspite*, *Erbus* and *Roberts* majestic on the northern flank. The dawn broke fine and clear telling all that it was D-day and that H-hour was near. The Force Commanders had made the decision.

At eight o'clock Maj. D. R. R. Pocock, commanding the assault force of Flails, Fascines, S.B.G.s, bridging tanks, bulldozers and gun tanks, recorded in his diary: "We saw the tower of Westkapelle. Everything still very peaceful."

The last moments of peace were fast running out, and it is also almost the last accurate time record on the part of those in the fight. "The clock seemed to stand still for all those engaged, 'As when the sun stood still for Joshua and the Israelites.'" ¹ Events which happened before nine-thirty in the morning were said by many to have happened in the afternoon. Events near to midday were placed at evening. Even the Operational Research Groups do not wholly agree. But at nine minutes past eight o'clock that morning, beyond a shadow of doubt, the guns of the German battery W 15, north of the Westkapelle Gap, began to range with three-gun salvos upon the marker M.L.s.

Six miles offshore the Armada turned for the final run in. The assault squadrons had deployed on sighting the lighthouse tower, which appeared from the sea to be standing on the dike. A demolished lighthouse on the dike itself, and a hump on the right shoulder of the gap showed up well. The first promise of the dawn had given way to low cloud with fitful shafts of pale sunlight. At twenty minutes past eight H.M.S. *Warspite* opened fire with her

¹ Operational Research Group Report.

15-in. armament at 24,000 yards, increased to 26,000 yards and settled at 24,900 yards, engaging the 220-mm. battery W 17 at Domburg. H.M.S. *Roberts* opened with her 15-in. guns on W 15. The turret of H.M.S. *Erebus* jammed. She did not open fire until half past nine.

The whole coastline heaved with smoke and flame, and the dune sand seemed to join the sky as the support craft began to close the shore. Behind them were the assault craft followed by the tank-landing craft of the assault squadron, two by two, 1,000 yards apart, and behind them again the rocket ships, a great concourse of brave ships narrowing to the narrow gap point-blank under the enemy guns.

H-hour was fixed for 0945 hours, one and a half hours after low water. One o'clock in the afternoon was the last possible moment for landing if the vital objectives of D-day were to be attained in daylight. But time would not wait on such niceties.

The plan was simple; the intention clear, stemming from the order of Canadian 2nd Corps:

- i. T Force will assault Island of Walcheren.
- ii. Clear area from inclusive Westkapelle to Flushing and destroy all batteries therein.
- iii. Clear area from inclusive Westkapelle to Breezand, and destroy all batteries therein.

"T" Force had divided the assault sector into three beaches designated by the codeword TARE.

Tare RED—North of Westkapelle gap extending 800 yards.

Tare WHITE—The Gap—380 yards.

Tare GREEN—South of Westkapelle about 450 yards and extending 350 yards.

"Red" and White" were the assault beaches; "Green" the maintenance beach. Armor, it was believed, could land only on "Red" beach, and no alternative point had been planned.

The first assault had been planned to go in four main phases:

1. RED—H-hour.

3 troops of 41st commando with R.N. beach signals and parties in 3 L.C.T.s¹ to land on foot and seize left shoulder of Gap. 30th Armored Brigade in 4 L.C.T.s in close support.

2. WHITE—H-hour plus five minutes.

48th Commando in 3 L.C.T.s in two waves to pass through Gap, seize footing on dunes to south and capture battery. Exploit and clear south to ZOUTENLAND, and beyond if possible. Second wave H-hour plus twenty-five minutes in 2 L.C.T.s.

3. WHITE—H-hour plus twenty-five minutes.

41st Commando with 2 troops 10th [I.-A.] Commando in 2 L.C.T.s in two waves to capture Westkapelle and gun positions. Second wave H-hour plus twenty-five minutes in 3 L.C.T.s.

4. WHITE—H-hour plus sixty minutes.

47th Commando in 4 L.C.T.s to pass through Gap and clear dunes south to ZOUTENLANDE and destroy gun positions. Tactical H.Q., 4th S.S. Brigade in 2 L.C.T.s, to land with 47th Commando.

Two Field companies, R.E., and one detachment of a Field Park Company, R.E., provided one platoon for each commando to deal with mines, gun emplacements, clearance and beach areas.

The advance to the north would wait upon the success in securing Westkapelle and the progress to the south.

Pioneers with stores and residues would begin to land on "GREEN" beach at high water plus one hour.

Such was the order of their going.

The support squadron of L.C.G.s had been timed to close the beach from one mile offshore at H-minus twenty minutes, but shortly before nine o'clock the battle was joined and "time stood still."

Throughout the preliminary bombardment by *Warspite* and *Roberts*, the main batteries of Westkapelle held their

¹ Lieut. Stephen Stroyd, R.N.V.R., who commanded the leading landing craft, states that these ships were L.C.I.'s (s), nos. 525, 526, 532. These were Fairmile built and only 40 were laid down. They each carried normally 4,000 gallons of 87 Octane fuel, but for the assault against Walcheren their wing tanks were filled with sea water.

fire, their gun crews watching the approach of the force, observing and selecting their targets, and perhaps not realizing that the mass of tank-landing craft wallowing in the swell in the middle distance held 104 Buffaloes and 80 Weasels packed with men. None knew better than the Germans that it was imperative to prevent a landing, and they had the means to do it beyond a shadow of doubt.

That first long partial silence may have given some optimists a hope that by a miracle the batteries had been neutralized, but these hopes, if they existed, were swiftly dashed. As the support craft closed the shore, opening fire with their 17-pounders at 2,000 yards, the whole coastline burst into stabs of flame, and the sea erupted with a violence that made a chaos of time and memory. Men's ears were deluged with the din while their bodies suffered the impact of shot and shell and the drenching sea.

Out of the mass of smoke and flame and spray the leading craft pressed on, and like an undercurrent of a harsh wind heralding a tornado, they heard the moaning of the rockets as the rocket ships opened up with broadsides from the rear. In those first moments it seemed that our ships must be overwhelmed, for added to the devastating accuracy of the enemy fire our own rockets were falling 2,000 yards short in the midst of the support craft and the tank-landing craft carrying the first wave of armor. A flak ship went up in a great gulp of flame from a direct hit by the enemy as 200,000 rounds of Oerlikon ammunition exploded. A second flak ship was ablaze from our own rockets. The leading L.C.G.s were badly hit, on fire and foundering. The Hospital L.C.T., turning back under orders to take a safer place, blew up on a sea mine. Men fell out of the sky to lie face downwards in their life-jackets on the sea, while others swam or clung to debris and the casualty craft roared at full speed to the rescue.

Nevertheless it was in that first half-hour at sea that by a miracle the battle of Westkapelle was lost and won. Out of the smoke and spray, weaving like the tentacles of some ferocious sea beast, the L.C.G.s of the support squadron went in at full speed with their 17-pounders and Oerlikons blazing. In the first attempt to run in on "Red"

beach behind an L.C.G. the leading and the second landing craft were hit. Twice they were forced to turn away, but a third time they pressed on while L.C.G.s engaged the batteries of 3.7-in. guns point-blank with a courage that was as sublime as it was hopeless.

The support craft had been the first to come under heavy direct fire, and in the last 400 yards it had been impossible to man the bridges. The first L.C.G. was hit and sunk. A second L.C.G., a third and fourth went in to beach under the muzzles of the 3.7s. At 30 yards range one craft got off twenty rounds rapid and saw its 17-pounder shells bouncing off the concrete casemates and pill-boxes like peas off a plate. The armor of the little ships stood up well to the 6-in. gun-fire, but snipers aided by lucky ricochets off the decks penetrated the sighting slots of the guns to kill the crews.

With their quarter-decks fully exposed, three ships held their ground, for it was ground, literally looking up the muzzles of the enemy guns in those vital minutes when the covering troops of 41st Commando gained a foothold, and rushed in over the dunes to assault the village of Westkapelle. The tale of one is the tale of three. On one L.C.G. the 1st lieutenant and a rating had been killed almost at once, and the vessel was put out of action with both guns hit. Her crew then fought to get her off the beach, pumping out the forward tanks and churning astern, making water fast. Steering gear and gyro failed. Half a mile out the vessel heeled over to port and sank.

By that time only five out of twenty-five ships of the support squadron were still in action, and the rest sunk, on fire or too badly damaged for hope. Yet in that crucial half-hour they had played a giant's part, and because of them, and the enemy concentration of fire upon them, the first waves of the assault went in over "Red" and "White," beaches at twelve minutes past ten o'clock, twenty-seven minutes late, and relatively unscathed.

But there had been a more potent factor than the heroic effort of the Naval ships: the German battery W 13, having fired 200 rounds per gun with devastating effect in the first half-hour, abruptly ceased fire, and remained out of action. In another five or ten minutes it would almost certainly have accounted for the entire

force of support craft before attacking the landing ships. This was a miracle, as it seemed then, and without it, even allowing for the very grave initial error of the German gunners in attacking the support craft instead of the landing craft, it is difficult to believe that a landing would have been possible. At about the same time, the Monitor *Roberts* scored two lucky hits on the W 15 battery, and the salvoes of *Warspite* appreciably lessened the rate of fire of W 17 from Domburg.

To press home this unlooked-for advantage the Typhoons swooped suddenly through the clouds to plaster the batteries with cannon fire and rockets. Meanwhile the rocket ships had loaded up with smoke, and now attempted to lay a smoke-screen across the Gap. But the wind was adverse, and it seemed that these ships were destined for failure on that day.

On shore both 41st and 48th Commandos were making progress, but could not advance beyond the village of Westkapelle without artillery support. From south of Breskens the heavies and super-heavies were ranging short on the German batteries, and without effect. If the armor could not get in, and get in quickly, all might yet be lost, for the Germans, reacting swiftly, had brought a tremendous weight of mortar and small-arms fire to bear on the narrow beaches.

ii

It was the job of the 30th Armored Brigade assault squadrons to go in as nearly as possible on the heels of the initial landing on foot of the 41st Commando covering force. Once on shore their role was to breach the major obstacles and to get into fire positions on the dike to give support to 41st Commando in or about Westkapelle and 48th Commando moving south. The armor consisted of 10 Flail tanks, 2 Petards, 4 S.B.G.s, 2 Fascines,¹ 4 bulldozers, and 2 Sherman gun tanks.

The four tank-landing craft in which these were car-

¹ Petards, S.B.G.s and Fascines are referred to as A.V.R.E.s. I cannot be absolutely certain that my division is correct. There were 8 A.V.R.E.s.

ried with their crews were named "Cherry," "Damson," "Bramble," and "Apple," all under command of Maj. Pocock of the 1st Lothians.

At H-plus-thirty minutes—or very close to that time—"Damson" was leading "Cherry" in by about forty yards to "Red" beach. 41st Commando had gone in on their feet about three minutes earlier, too close under the guns to be a target, and had rushed up and over the dike in a matter of seconds. The tank-landing craft came in with their Oerlikons blazing and the crews of the armor letting fly with their Bezas. The fire from W 15 was terrific. A Petard tank was in the front position on one craft and a Flail tank in the other. These two would attempt at once to batter and shoot a way through the stakes and make way for the others to follow. Thanks to the remarkably clear records of Maj. Pocock and his men, it is possible to follow the sequence of events with some certainty.

Lt. Tom Sloan in "Damson" reported:

"H-plus-30 we began to run into our beach. Batteries too accurate for comfort. Our rocket craft let fly a few hundred rockets and they landed very close ahead and put the wind up us.

Our craft leading the armored assault and 600 yards offshore, the enemy gunners plastered the ship. One shell hit an A.V.R.E.'s bridge [S.B.G.] which collapsed on top of a Flail tank. Another shell fire to the Fascine, and from then on shots holed craft badly. 1 Naval rating killed. 3 commandos wounded. No casualties in tank crews.

We turned round and lay off-shore, flooding and on fire. All hands rigged fire hoses and extinguishers. The burning Fascine threatened disaster to H.E. charges. Tank crew contrived to jettison H.E. and fought flames. Crew of this tank under command L/Sgt. J. Black very brave. Craft put about to go alongside hospital ship.¹ Many craft burning, and mines all round us."

"Damson" was ordered back and finally limped in to Ostend. "Cherry" following "Damson" in was also hard

¹ Hospital ship already sunk. H.M.S. *Kingsmill* taking wounded.

hit astern, but went in alone to take two direct hits at the moment of touch-down. "Cherry" backed away and tried again and again.

Lt. S. A. Miller in "Apple" saw both "Damson" and "Bramble" in trouble, and his craft tried to help "Damson":

"My L.C.T. went alongside to help, then ordered to go in. Fire from shore very intense. Not hit going in. My tank got off all right, but second stuck with Cpl. Leishman. I went back to pull him out, but no luck. Both tanks stuck and bogged. I then walked out to L.C.T. and asked Captain if he could move the bows over. This he did, and my third tank came off and bogged down on the cobbles. The craft was moved again and the A.V.R.E. with bridge came to the ramp and dropped bridge on the cobble-stones and came over it, but as soon as it came onto the stones it bogged down. The second A.V.R.E. was by this time on the bridge and the L.C.T. pulled away to sea with 1 bulldozer which was unable to start.

While the A.V.R.E.s were coming off, Evans, Sgt. Hickson and their men were trying to pull my tank forward with a bulldozer but failed.

I reported to Squadron Leader and tried to get another bulldozer, but by the time the beach had cleared, the tide had come in and swamped the tanks. I waded into the water to assist my men ashore and then went forward to the ridge to get some news of battle."

"Red" beach with its cobbles was a dead loss, and the remaining L.C.T.s made for "White" beach, hoping for better luck. Lt. Miller, in common with many others deprived of their roles, did not give in, but persistently attempted to get into the battle and fill the places of the dead. Evans, Sgt. Hickson and their team of fitters made constant heroic efforts to save the tanks. Their astonishing zest and high spirits sustained the men on the beaches through many hours.

"Cherry" and "Bramble" were at this time closing "White" beach. "Bramble" was badly hit, but "Cherry" ran in safely under "terrific fire." "Bramble," having turned about, came in again and got all her vehicles off

except for a Flail with an A.V.R.E. bridge wrapped round it. "Cherry" also had success, and her armor was in the lead churning up the sand to reach the dike ridge. It was hard going. A second bulldozer bogged down trying to help, and the tracks began to churn up deep mines out of the sand. These had been missed by the R.E.s in the first sweep. The shelling and mortaring had now become intense on the beach and the lead troops in Westkapelle and attempting to move south were calling for fire support. The tower of Westkapelle was giving trouble. Sgt. Ferguson in the leading Flail tank picked up the call for fire and got his tank in position near the crown of the ridge. It was impossible to go further without bridging or Fascines, but Ferguson had a clear sight of the tower and put eleven rounds of 75-mm. right into it.

The L.C.T.s of the commandos were now coming into "White" beach almost in a procession, and only two craft out of the first twenty-seven were sunk. W 13 was out. W 15 was crippled, and the Cabrank of Typhoons swooped suddenly out of the clouds to deluge the strong-points with 222 rockets and 9,505 cannon shells. The crews of the Buffaloes blazed away with their Brownings and Polsens as they came in to land and floundered into action.

Already the R.E.s had blasted a way through three rows of wooden posts close to the water's edge. Each post was nine to twelve inches thick and planted very deep. Mines and shellfire took a steady toll of the Buffaloes, and a way had to be blasted through the steel rails on the dike bank.

At ten minutes to eleven all that was left of the armor was on top of the dike and facing a twelve-foot drop down the other side. Six out of ten Flails were drowned on the beach, one bulldozer was bogged beyond hope, another blew up, and a third was on its way home in "Apple." A Dozen L.V.T.s were on fire and two L.C.T.s added to the wreckage of the ships in the approaches. But two Sherman gun tanks, three Flails, two Petards and one bulldozer were getting into the fight, smashing a way through to Westkapelle. Sgt. Ferguson's gunfire had brought the garrison running out of the tower to surrender. The village of Westkapelle was ours.

It was safer on shore than at sea in the first hour. The first waves of 41st and 48th Commandos had come in under heavy fire, but thanks to the enemy concentration on the support squadron they had landed without severe losses. Once ashore they moved with the speed and certainty gained in a score of assaults, and with that common faith, one man in another, that had grown up out of them. Their wounded lay in a fold of the sand under the guns, safe from them. Ignoring pillboxes and strong-points the leading troop of 41st Commando rushed up and over the north shoulder of the dike to reach Westkapelle village six minutes after touchdown.

The first wave of 48th Commando, landing from five tank-landing craft in Buffaloes on "White" beach, dismounted at once from their vehicles and swarmed up over the dike to the south to take the radar station in their stride. Two batteries were under water and abandoned. W 358 fell to the first violent assault. It was vital to make ground in the first minutes, to carve a space and hold it until the second waves and the armor brought support. 41st and 48th Commandos did just that.

But the enemy were now fully aroused and from scores of strong-points, pillboxes, and positions hidden in the dunes, intense mortar, machine-gun and small-arms fire closed the way to the south and made an inferno of the beach.

A few minutes after half past ten o'clock the second waves came steadily in to meet intense fire on "White" beach. 41st Commando went through north of the Gap in Buffaloes, dismounted over the dike and reached Westkapelle just as Sgt. Ferguson's good shooting brought the snipers running out of the Observation Post in the tower.

10th (I.-A.) Commando closed the northern flank, but 48th Commando coming in on "White" beach to the south of the Gap had a bad time. Two craft pulled away on fire as they closed the beach, a third stuck on the iron stakes and decanted its Buffaloes into a sea that was too much for them. Scores of men struggled to the beach soaked to their skins. One craft had a direct hit and took

a shell in board astern wrecking some Weasels. Two ammunition Buffaloes brewed up and exploded on the beach. Others blew up on mines that had been buried four feet deep in sand half an hour earlier, and through all this, while sappers and mechanics, machine-gunners and mortar teams, wrestled with their varied tasks, manhandling weapons, humping ammunition forward on foot, the second wave of 48th Commando swarmed up and over the dike to meet the concentrated fire of the enemy.

It was impossible for vehicles to keep with the commandos, and for an hour the commandos fought with their personal weapons, without support. Nevertheless soon after eleven o'clock, engaging groups of enemy in running fights over the dunes, 48th Commando had made good its hold on a wide dune area to the south and prepared to mount an assault on the powerful W 13 battery position.

W 13 was at that time an enigma. As a battery it had long since ceased to fire, and no one knew what this might mean. The guns of the A.G.R.A.s, firing from the south of Breskens with the role of neutralizing the batteries and strong-points in the initial phase, were still ranging short. An R.A. officer, who had miraculously got his Weasel on shore and forward with the commandos, called urgently on H.M.S. *Roberts* for support, but was killed by a mortar bomb before he could make contact, and his signalman with him.

Even at this early hour it was becoming clear that the Weasels were a failure. They could not negotiate the difficult mixture of land and water, and the liaison officers and signallers who manned them were mostly immobilized. But the armor was lumbering on towards Westkappelle, having got off the dike with its remaining Fascines and bridging. A squadron leader had run forward trying to find a route into the village, but the road was recognizable only by the burned-out shells of the houses that had stood beside it. Working like "elephants," the armor tore up stakes and everything movable, bulldozed houses and rubble, blasted roadblocks with Petards, pushed over those houses still standing, and dragged rubble, timber and masonry to fill the craters and to lay mattresses over the floods. Slowly the armored monsters lumbered on like a herd of ungainly Leviathans.

It was about half past eleven when two tanks tried to answer 48th Commando's urgent calls for fire on W 13. They could not see the target, and were not sure of direction. Making contact with a liaison officer still struggling to get his Weasel off the beach, the tanks asked for directional fire from the 3-in. mortars, but all the mortars had been destroyed. Ten minutes later two troops of 48th Commando went in to the assault against W 13 to be met with withering fire from heavy machine guns and Oerlikons. Two troop leaders were killed and their troops severely mauled. It was impossible to press home the attack. Whatever had caused the main battery to cease fire it was not the default of the battery garrison.

To the north, 41st Commando, leaving Westkapelle to the tanks and the covering force of 10th (I.-A.) Commando, turned to attack the W 15 battery from the rear. Typhoons had now come to the aid of the party. At noon, with rockets and 20-mm.-cannon fire pouring down upon the batteries, the commandos went in, and by half past twelve o'clock W 15 was ours, and the northern flank of the landing was consolidated, ready for the advance on Domburg.

It was clear then, and it had been well appreciated, that the advance to the south would be the tough proposition, for the south alone closed the mouth of the Scheldt and barred the way to victory.

Brigade Tactical Headquarters, coming in with 47th Commando soon after midday, was almost at once in the midst of a scare. One of its L.V.T.s ran over a smoke bomb as Tactical Headquarters established itself in the deserted concrete bunkers of the radar station, and the whole place at once filled up with dense and pungent smoke. Gas-masks were on, and it was some time before anyone realized that it was a false alarm.

At this time the great Gap in the main sea dike had become a tide rip nearly four hundred yards across, and in it the craft skippers were fighting a current running at more than ten knots. Weasels, quite unable to make progress, were tossing like corks, and even the Buffaloes found the going difficult. Part of 47th Commando had got in to the south, but three L.C.T.s with their loads of Buffaloes and men had been forced to go in north of the

Gap. The Buffaloes then tried to negotiate the difficult passage of the tide rip, and it was four o'clock in the afternoon before 47th Commando finally assembled to the South. Only three Weasels then remained to them out of twenty, and they had lost three Buffaloes. It was almost the exact moment of 48th Commando's final assault on W 13. Typhoons had come to the rescue for the second time to drop 500-pound bombs right on the target, and with that 48th Commando charged in with bayonet and grenade, overwhelming the machine gunners and Oerlikons. Nevertheless it was finally half past six before the last Oerlikon and the last of the persistent defenders were silenced, and 48th Commando had captured the battery that could have and should have destroyed them at sea. W 13 had run out of ammunition after firing 200 rounds per gun in the first half hour. It had expended its resources in futile attempts to support the German 64th Division in the Breskens pocket. Its morale was high and its shooting accurate to the last, but from first to last its judgement had been bad.

It was dusk when the armor finally reached Westkapelle and two tanks took up positions to the east of the village under the tower they had shattered, and ready at last to support 47th and 48th Commandos going south, or 41st Commando going north. With them 10th [I.-A.] held Westkapelle and the approaches.

The landing was secure.

iv

It is not easy now—and it was impossible then—to see the picture whole as a single vivid canvas. In its entirety seen from the sea it was a spectacle of violence given grandeur by the setting, the movement of the ships within the framework of the sea and coast, the sustained variations on a theme of battle. Men spoke afterwards of the "colossal spectacle," of "the small ships in shore enveloped in smoke, spray and flame for minutes at a time, while further out *Warspite*, *Erebus* and *Roberts* fired colossal salvos. Guns were answering from the whole coastline."

Others told of the beach "littered with burning vehicles" and of the "terrible concentration of fire."

But none could sort out the detail of a spectacle that was in its nature blinding and devastating to the eye. It is best, I think, to let the picture grow in the mind's eye out of the facts and fit small coherent pieces into the large framework.

Capt. G. D. Scarrow, R.A.M.C., landed on the heels of the first waves of the commandos and was probably the first to establish a Regimental Aid Post on "White" beach. Very early on 10th (I.-A.) Commando established one on "Red" Beach, caring for the first wounded of 41st Commando. Capt. Scarrow records that he saw the leading L.C.T.s hit and the rocket ship "blew up and disappeared." His log begins at 1045 hours:

"We learned we were going in at 1115 hrs. and unshackled the L.V.T.s and Weasels. 1100 hrs., turned for shore and went in at full speed. Shells landing left and right and I decided to keep my head down.

"Touched down. The first three L.V.T.s away easily, but the fourth stuck on the ramp. I took my Weasel up behind and could see the first three L.V.T.s jammed on the beach. I managed to slew them round so that my Weasel could get off, and let the L.C.T. get away. All this time we were under very heavy fire.

"We took the Weasels up the beach about one hundred yards under a ruined block-house, and lay in the cover to get our bearings. The beach was littered with tanks, bulldozers and all sorts of junk. One platoon of 48th Commando lay under cover on the dike. The other side was completely covered by fire. There were wounded on the beach, and I was busy getting them into slit trenches the Navy had dug at the bottom of the dike. A Naval lieutenant asked me if I would like an L.C.T. to come in. As I had only fifteen wounded at the time I thought it would be unwise to risk a ship. Besides, I supposed ships would be under command of the A.D.M.S.¹ I told him to get the wounded into

¹ The A.D.M.S. [Assistant Director of Medical Services] was wounded.

any ship that was leaving and impressed a lot of 'odds and sods' who were hanging round to help.

"We had landed on the wrong beach. I wanted to get to the village and contact the Medical Officer of 48th Commando. I got into position to see and the village seemed to be having a pretty easy time, while the other beach was being plastered to blazes.

"Maj. Pocock and Lt. Miller were trying to get their tanks off the beach. They must have arranged with the Beachmaster to blow a gap in the iron stakes. The explosion brought down a lot of loose earth on top of the dike and buried three of my patients. We dug them out and they were none the worse except for shock.

"I decided to go to the village with an orderly. It was an easy walk. I found the Colonel and sent back for the Weasels. Everything seemed pretty peaceful. I arranged with the M.O. 48th Commando to set up an R.A.P. in a house. I saw Sgt. Ferguson shooting up the tower with his Flail. 'C' (A.Q.M.S.) Evans seemed as happy as a sandboy guiding in the tanks. He also helped me a lot with blankets. We got a fire going and made a drying room."

The next entry is on the evening of the second day:

"We were all very upset about Leyland's death far more than if he had been killed by a shell."

Nearly a thousand men had died on land and sea up to that time, but the unlucky death of Tpr. Leyland upset a great many men. It was one of those accidents which stand out from the killing of war, and seem perverse. Leyland was the driver of a Weasel in which Lt. Miller and Capt. Stevenson were trying to cross the Gap on the morning of the second day. Both officers had lost the necessary tools of their planned roles, and were trying to get into the battle. The death of Tpr. Leyland emerges from their reports and fills in some of the picture in the Gap.

Capt. Stevenson's log reads:

"Our craft came under heavy fire so we turned round and went out two miles. Eventually we touched down south of the Gap. All vehicles were out of the

craft in one minute, and made across the Gap to the north side. I followed in my Weasel and was swamped by a wave. I got a lift on a passing vehicle back, and then another lift with a Weasel in tow. The Weasel sank at once."

The Weasels were helpless in the strong current, and their propulsion in the water was so weak that the smallest piece of wire or debris would hold them up. On shore they were as good as Bren carriers, but they were of little use afloat except in calm water free of obstacles. Capt. Stevenson went on trying to cross the Gap all that day without success. Early the next day he tried again:

"I boarded a Weasel with Tpr. Leyland and Lt. Miller. It was necessary to cross some thirty yards of water at low tide. It was deep water, and a 10-knot current running. The Weasel was driven out to sea, overturned and sank. I was carried out to sea in the current. The water was too rough to swim, and I just let it take me. I saw Miller and Leyland hanging on all the time, and a Naval officer trying to reach them on the end of a rope."

Eventually Capt. Stevenson began to swim back at an angle towards the beach and made headway out of the tide race.

Lt. Miller saw more of Leyland's unfortunate death. He was trying to get supplies across the Gap to his squadron when he got a lift in the Weasel.

"The Weasel overturned in the tide, and Leyland's leg was trapped in the driving seat. I hung on, but the tide was too strong and washed me off. I followed Capt. Stevenson's example and let the tide take me. Then I swam round the race and managed to reach shore. I then went back to the L.V.T. where Commander Prior was trying in vain to save Leyland."¹

¹ Commander Prior is the same Commander Prior who did such fine service on the "Green" beach of Pourville in the Dieppe Raid. Almost all the Naval and Commando survivors of the raid were fighting on the approaches to Walcheren on that day. Lt. Miller held Leyland's head above water for a long time, until finally he was swept away.

From the record of Lt. Carter, a Liaison Officer of 30th Armored Brigade attached to 48th Commando, it is possible to feel some of the frustrations of that day. Carter's craft landed in the first wave, and suffered casualties in the midst of the "assault gun boats sinking and on fire." Carter's craft then had a direct hit, and one shell from W 13 "landed inside the L.V.T. immediately behind my Weasel." That put paid to his Weasel, and the beach area "was plastered with mortar fire, M.G.s and S.A." by the time Carter was ashore. He tried to get across the dunes and searched for three-quarters of an hour hoping to find a usable Weasel, for without radio communications he couldn't do his job. "There was nothing on the beach but burned-out vehicles, Weasels and Buffaloes, and Weasels were awash in the Gap." Finally he found a Weasel on fire but intact in a fold of the dunes near the radar station. He put out the fire with sand, and found the No. 19 set still working, but he could not make contact. "The only way," he wrote, "that I could contact the commando was to run two miles over the dunes." He was aware of the urgent need for tank support, or mortar support, and was in a fury of frustration that he was powerless. He had picked up the calls for fire, and for some hours he went back and forth over those dunes like a man in a desert. At 1545 that afternoon he noted, "Tank fire wanted in fifteen minutes." That was before the final assault of 48th Commando on W 13. Carter then noted: "Commandos assaulted without tank support. Everything seemed to have become suddenly quiet."

After that the Liaison Officer became desperate. He found the R.E.s attempting to blow a path along the beach to get some Weasels further forward. The beach was being swept every two hours for mines, but the failure of most of the maintenance craft to get in with supplies hampered the sappers. "All night trying to find a No. 68 set. A commando operator got hold of some parts and made one set work," Carter notes, and after that he tried to get some sleep. It was eight o'clock that night, "but about then an L.V.T. went up on a mine one hundred yards away and burst into flames. It was full of walking wounded, and all save two were burned to

death. Star shells were followed by H.E. all through the night."

Long before the dawn Lt. Carter was off again on his search. "I found the Commanding Officer at 0530 hours and made contact with the forward Weasel and with the tanks. Communications complete for the first time." The stress and strain drops from the Liaison Officer at that moment. He was in time to be with 48th Commando forming up for the attack to the south on Zoutenlande, and at six o'clock that morning the leading troops moved forward to a slight ridge overlooking the village. W 288 was a little way in the rear, but there was no enemy fire. 48th Commando edged forward warily, for they had lost heavily in officers and men in the fight for W 13, but there was still no fire. "Nothing came out of Zoutenlande except the white flag," Carter reported exultantly.

The Liaison Officer tried to join up with 47th Commando as they came through. "I knew that they had lost their own L.O.," he reports. But the Brigade Command ordered him back to the Lothians. He was back at the Gap in time to see an ammunition Buffalo hit by shell-fire from W 11. "It seemed to take an eternal time to burn itself out. Finally I got an L.V.T. and we pushed off without being hit."

In the middle of the afternoon, 41st Commando, leaving two troops in Westkapelle, had moved up the road and over the dunes towards Domburg. They went forward cautiously, one troop on the road and the other in the dunes. Groups of enemy began to surrender, some marching down the road, hampering the advance; other groups attacked fiercely from hidden strong-points in the dunes. Enemy communications seemed to have broken down, and there was no way of knowing what any group might do. It depended on their officers and their morale. They were all virtually isolated.

W 17 and W 18 were still firing steadily out of the Domburg area, despite having been plastered all day by the 15-in. guns of H.M.S. *Warspite*. Domburg was burning, and showed itself full of fight. After covering the three miles to the outskirts, 41st Commando left 10th (I.-A.), 200 strong, to hold on, and went back to Westkapelle to be ready to support 47th Commando moving

south. By evening on the second day 10th (I.-A.), skirmishing on the outskirts of Domburg against a full 600 enemy, were feeling lonely. The Lothians were on the move towards them, but the going was very slow. R.E.s had cleared some of the worst of the road obstacles and the A.V.R.E.s were clearing a path for the two Sherman gun tanks.

On the beaches the situation had worsened steadily, and the rough seas made it difficult for any ships to get in. Supplies were very short, and all ammunition had to be carried forward on foot. A great many sappers, deprived of the tools of their trade, were fighting as infantry.

A tremendous weight of fire was coming down on the beach from W 11 battery south of Zoutenlande, and the ambulance units and hospital dumps were "plastered with fire" in the midst of blazing gasoline and ammunition vehicles. A.Q.M.S. Evans and his team of fitters had been forced to abandon hope of rescuing any of the armor, for the salt water had got into the wiring.

Capt. Scarrow was back at his post on the beach, and he gave a brief flash of the conditions:

"L.V.T.s and ammunition still going up in flames. A great rumor of a German landing in the north, but no one paid much attention. We got a fair number of wounded away in one ship, but no sign of a Navy ferry service. We tried to get more wounded away but it was too rough for the L.C.T.s to come in. There were rumors of ships coming in, but they didn't come."

One hundred and fifty wounded had been taken off by an L.C.T. not fitted as a hospital ship, and that was the end. No ship of any kind could close the beach for three days, and the whole force ashore was virtually marooned with the enemy. The bombardment squadron left at dusk on the second day.

Under constant fire, the wounded were made as comfortable as possible, and the Medical Officer thanked God for the absence of abdominal wounds. At dusk on the evening of the second day the German prisoners on the beach began to sing *Deutschland über Alles*.

The battle of West Walcheren was fought out over the coastal sand dunes because there was nowhere else to fight. The rest was water. The few stretches of road emerging above the floods were heavily cratered, staked and mined. It was very hard going, and it was hardest of all for 47th Commando. They had come in rather late, half of their force on the wrong side of the Gap. By the time they had formed up to the south, they had lost the whole of their wireless in the wreckage of seventeen Weasels out of twenty. They had still seventeen Buffaloes, but these were of little or no use as transport over sand.

47th Commando had observed with anxiety the assault of 48th Commando on the powerful W 13 battery. It spurred them to be ready to go through, and if need be to go to the aid of 48th. Throughout that first afternoon and far into the night every item of supplies had to be humped forward on foot, and over endless acres—as it seemed—of heavy sand hummocked with the mounds of the dunes. Without their machineguns it would have been suicidal to go forward.

The whole nature of the terrain and the siting of the enemy strong-points compelled the commandos to attack on narrow fronts, through channels deadly with mortar fire. There was nothing for it but to go in over open ground, to charge with bayonet and grenade against the machinegun posts. And the enemy was unpredictable. There was no way of telling until an attack went in whether he would fight to the last with unbreakable tenacity, or whether he would give in at once. There was no compromise. The isolation of one enemy post from another made of each an island subject to its own morale, its own instincts. W 288 beyond Zoutenlande gave up. W 13 fought to the last. With W 11 no one could tell.

But whatever happened, every assault was reduced to its age-old terms of men on their feet fighting at the point of the bayonet. The enemy use of mortars—that most simple and effective piece of close-support artillery—was of the highest order, and in these conditions our

own lack of close-support fire made of each assault an acceptance of sacrifice. Without the Typhoons both 48th and 41st Commandos might have been decimated. As it was they had been severely mauled. The leading troop of 48th Commando had been killed or wounded to a man in the first assault against W 11, and it was clear that this would happen again unless artillery support could be obtained. But within minutes the R.A. Observation Officers were killed by mortar fire. A second troop was reduced to half strength by devastating mortar fire as it formed up, and it was not until the Typhoons swooped down at four o'clock in the afternoon that 48th Commando got home by the most valiant charge.

47th Commando, striving to get themselves in a position to move in swift support, knew all this very well.

41st Commando, moving north partly on the coast road and partly on the dunes on their left flank were hemmed in by the flooded polders on their right. Small groups of surrendering enemy had hindered them, but had not misled them. They had lost some of their finest troop leaders and men in the first assault on Domburg. The W 17 battery fell without much fight, its garrison half-dazed by the sustained battering of the 15-in. guns of H.M.S. *Warspite*, and a last-minute avalanche of 500-pound bombs dropped by Spitfires. But all through the blazing ruins of the small town of Domburg the enemy fought bitterly to maintain a protective screen round the small belt of woodland in which stood the heavily defended battery W 18.

The heavy enemy sniping in Domburg increased all through the second day as 10th [I.-A.] Commando held on, greatly outnumbered, and awaiting anxiously the arrival of the armor. The armor had by that time been reduced to two Sherman gun tanks and two A.V.R.E.s. Maj. Pocock's log reads: "Only half the town in our hands, and held by 10th [I.-A.] Commando with 200 men against 600 enemy. So our arrival welcome."

But the urgency of the battle lay in the south, and it was the role of 47th Commando to pass swiftly through 48th in Zoutenlande to attack the W 11 battery and force a way through to link up with 4th Commando fighting their way out from Flushing.

It was nearly one o'clock on the second day when 47th Commando passed through Zoutenlande and pressed on towards W 11. 41st Commando had then taken up positions to be ready to support the attack southwards, leaving 10th (I.-A.) Commando feeling thin on the ground to hold Domburg and the northern flank.

The capture of W 11 had become a matter of extreme urgency, for the battery had concentrated on the beaches with devastating effect, steadily eliminating the limited supplies on shore. Nothing was coming in, and the weather was deteriorating fast.

It was very heavy going over the loose sand to the south, and an anti-tank ditch 2,000 yards from W 11 and covered by mortar fire forced the commandos to consider the position. There was in all truth little to consider. The battery had been sited and the lie of the dunes used to force a ground attack into a narrow channel. However skilfully the commandos deployed it was clear that the last 100 yards must be covered by a charge. Their only hope was to call up artillery support while that vital 100 yards was covered. Reviewing the scene, the two leading troops thought they could do the 100 yards in two minutes. It is a measure of the nature of the sand, for these men, all athletes at the peak of physical condition, would be charging for dear life itself.

It was late afternoon when that brave charge went in under close-support fire, only to be caught and killed by that fire before they could cover the distance. Two minutes was not enough. Again and again 47th Commando re-formed and pressed home their assault against deadly mortar and heavy machinegun fire. There was no question that at each attempt men must die, but the hope was that in their dying some might get through. With four out of five troop leaders killed, the Adjutant led the remnants of two troops into W 11. It was ten o'clock at night, and "feeling very naked and thin on the ground," this brave band of men, forced to a partial withdrawal and with the enemy occupying at least half of the battery position, beat off counterattacks of a terrible ferocity throughout the night, refusing to surrender. By standing firm against impossible odds, the Adjutant and the remnants of two troops "saved a very dire situation," and with the dawn

the remaining troops of 47th Commando finally overwhelmed the enemy.

The Germans, tottering out of their last defenses at the call of their officers, were beyond fighting. Battered and dazed by an immense weight of bombardment over many days, they stumbled out, incapable of coherent speech or action. Such was the end of the battery W 11, and with that there was some peace for the wounded on the beach of Westkapelle.

The troubles of 47th Commando were not over. The morning of the third day was wild with wind rising to gale force and driving the sand in thick storms. But for that it might have been possible for 4th Commando to cross the Flushing Gap in Buffaloes to assault the last barrier in the rear. As it was, two troops of 47th Commando confronted the last strong-point across a wilderness of sand lashed by the gale. Here again the contours of the dunes must force the attackers into a narrow channel, but undismayed the commando attacked, completely unnerving an enemy knowing himself alone and defeated. "So great was the determination of the commandos that the enemy lost heart and gave up."¹

At ten minutes past four o'clock on that dismal afternoon of November 3rd the German resistance on southwest Walcheren was virtually at an end, and when the gale abated the final link-up with Flushing was secure.

On Westkapelle beach the prisoners had ceased their singing of *Deutschland über Alles*, and were busily digging and working accompanied by an astonishing number of dogs, their companions throughout the long siege.

16

Operation No Name

TO ALL who fought in the battle of the Beveland Causeway, and to all who observed it closely, it may seem appropriate that the operation should be nameless. Per-

¹ Research Group, C.O.H.Q.

haps also the fact that it had no name is an indication of how lightly it had been considered, and this is supported by the fact that the 1st Battalion of the Glasgow Highlanders were making ready to "walk across" on the night of October 31st.¹ Most of those, I imagine, who may have followed the developments in the freeing of the Scheldt thus far will be beyond surprise; yet this nameless operation should surprise them. Every school-boy who has read the Lays of Ancient Rome knows how Horatius held the bridge "in the brave days of old," and has heard tell of the Spartans holding the pass of Thermopylae. Perhaps the generals remembered only that the 300 Spartans were destroyed. One thing is certain: in the face of a determined enemy it would not be possible to cross the narrow causeway linking South Beveland with Walcheren Island across the muddy rutted channel of the Slooe. At best it would demand sacrificial courage. Slooe is an apt name, at least to my ears, for that miserable trough.

On October 31st the Royal Regiment of Canada had liquidated the enemy strong-points covering the eastern end of the Causeway, and the Black Watch had gone through into the attack. At once illusions were dispelled. By mid-afternoon, battling against a barrage of artillery, mortar, machinegun and small-arms fire, the Black Watch were in a death trap, unable to move forward or back. They had advanced within seventy-five yards of the Causeway's eastern end when the full deluge of fire hit them, and clamped the living, the dying and the dead to that narrow, diabolically mined and cratered strip. It was as though the enemy, in concrete pillboxes, and in nests behind the dikes, had waited to "see the whites of their eyes", before opening up with heavy machineguns point-blank, immune themselves from anything but direct hits on the loop-holes.

That night the Calgary Highlanders tried to go through and to relieve the Black Watch under cover of the darkness while the 1st Battalion of the Glasgow Highlanders moved up behind the dikes at the eastern end of the Causeway ready "to walk across."

¹ It was not lightly considered by the Commander of 52nd Division.

November 1st dawned dull and overcast and in that dawn the Calgary Highlanders struggled desperately to move forward round immense craters, crawling in narrow grooves and on the walls of the dike to the south. At noon the Brigade Major of the 5th Infantry Brigade sought the permission of his Brigadier to go forward to take command of a company that had lost its commander and others of its officers. With one company across, but not "through," the Calgary Highlanders fought bitterly, but it was beyond flesh and blood to withstand the devastating controlled fire of the enemy. At five-thirty, in the dusk, they were forced back.

A plan was then made for the Régiment de Maisonneuve to pass through and a heavy-fire plan was organized in support. Under that heavy-fire plan the Régiment Maisonneuve went in, and all that was left of the Calgary Highlanders pulled out "weary and battered."

From this point the story of the Causeway belongs to the Glasgow Highlanders. They had been dug in all day and night behind the dike knowing the nature of the struggle, knowing that this would be "no walk." Reports coming through from Flushing cheered them, inasmuch as they felt that nothing "could go on forever," and by this time the Commander of the Division had begun to take steps of his own. These, however, might not be of much help to the Glasgow Highlanders in the immediate future.

The Causeway over which these men must fight was 1,200 yards long by 40 yards wide, raised 20 feet above the water level and crossing the salt marsh, the runnelled swamp and water of the Slooe Channel. A railway embankment ran parallel to the road and 10 feet above it on the northern side, and on the south there was a paved footpath lined with trees. Beyond that the buttress of the dike. The trees were splintered stumps, the pavé an erupting, mined mass of stone. The whole length and breadth of the road was mined and cratered so elaborately that all the resources of the engineers could not clear it. Heavy, medium and light artillery, mortars and machineguns firing on fixed lines, covered every last millimeter of that godforsaken track; and powerful enemy forces in concrete strong-points, in impregnable positions

behind the dikes, reinforced this great array of concentrated fire with their personal weapons.

That was the prospect on the night of November 2nd when the British 155th Infantry Brigade ordered that the relief of the Canadians must be carried out, and George Blake, the official Historian of the 52nd Division, wrote: "No. 10 Platoon of the 1st Battalion of the Glasgow Highlanders started to lead the Battalion into hell." Those same words are quoted by Maj. John North in his official record of the campaign in Northwest Europe, in a book dealing briefly and brilliantly with a whole campaign, yet having space for this Platoon. The words are a simple statement of an appalling fact.

It was dawn on November 2nd. The Headquarters of the Canadian 5th Infantry Brigade and of the British 155th Infantry Brigade were in a state of strain that night. The Canadian 2nd Division had pulled out for a rest. The Canadian 5th Infantry Brigade was anxious to go, but the Régiment de Masionneuve was still on that narrow track of Causeway, and reported to be holding a pocket of bridgehead on the other side.

This tension was reflected in Battalion Headquarters of the Glasgow Highlanders when the Battalion Commander and his Intelligence Officer set out alone to try to make contact with the Régiment de Maisonneuve.

It is best, I believe, to set down the bald facts. The night was pitch dark. The moon had set. A terrific artillery program supplemented by four 2-in. mortars opened up soon after midnight, and it was almost impossible to set foot on the Causeway and live. The only hope was to crawl yard by yard down the sides. The barrage was both ways as the Glasgow Highlanders moved up to the line of a sea wall to the south. The time was 0350 hours. At 0426 hours the barrage lifted, and the Battalion Commander of the Glasgow Highlanders had made contact with his opposite number of the Régiment de Maisonneuve. One company of the Regiment was believed to be alive in a small bridgehead—though it was not a bridgehead, but rather a small defensive position—and refusing to pull out. In fact they could not pull out. They were marooned. The Battalion Commander of the Régi-

ment de Maissonneuve said that he had not more than forty men left alive on the Causeway.

At 0520 hours one platoon of the Glasgow Highlanders was ordered to relieve the lost men before daylight. And that was the beginning. The men of "B" Company moved up and dug into slots on the sides of the south dike while their Mortar Platoon gave support. The Company lay in their holes for nearly an hour, and then began to move slowly forward in the darkness. The night was as black as the grave. Small battered groups of the Régiment de Maissonneuve crawled back as "B" Company crawled forward. At half past six o'clock day began to break "grey and drear" with "B" Company crawling from slit to slit and hole to hole over that sloping embankment. At a quarter past seven o'clock the Company Commander was wounded, and the appalling, inescapable fire began to take a steady toll. The Company Commander refused to leave his Company, dressed his wounds, and continued to lead.

The situation in Battalion Tactical Headquarters was heartbreaking when the Brigadiers of the Canadian 5th and the British 157th Infantry Brigades confronted the Battalion Commander at nine o'clock that morning. The nerves of all three men were at full stretch, their tempers frayed by their anxieties. The Canadian Brigadier said that if his troops were not relieved he would bring back his tired troops to extricate them. He seemed to have forgotten the dreadful experiences of his battalions, and talked bitterly as if the Régiment de Maissonneuve were offering organized opposition to the enemy. He spoke as if he had a battalion holding a bridgehead, and that they were simply waiting for the desultory Glasgow Highlanders to relieve them.

The Battalion Commander had been out most of the night trying to make personal contact. His "D" Company was already trying to relieve the battered "B" Company. He was deeply aware that this was almost the "baptism by fire" of his men. His reply was to issue the order, " 'D' Company will secure a footing on Walcheren 'at all cost.' " "A" Company was in support.

Forty minutes later, with Typhoons diving upon the

enemy at the sluice gates, "D" Company advanced, making use of the reeds on the flats of the Slooe Channel. In such conditions men just go on as a part of a kind of corporate body and soul, not so much individuals as a piece of a regiment, a battalion, a projection of a man's ideal, and with a strength flowing through the whole body from man to man. Without that sense of oneness men break. 18 Platoon in the lead made contact with all that remained of the Régiment de Maisonneuve, twenty men absolutely powerless to go forward or to go back, taking refuge in a small defensive position in the shell and cellars of a farmhouse. These twenty men refused to go back, and for the next four hours the small band of Scots and French-Canadians held on together, while under continuous smoke and a terrific barrage the forward companies of the Glasgow Highlanders strove to get into position to attack the enemy behind the sluices. It was "sheer murder."

At two o'clock in the afternoon the remnant of 18 Platoon managed to pull back with the twenty French-Canadians, leaving a corporal and two men to look after one of their wounded in the cellar. The battle of the Causeway now belonged entirely to the Glasgow Highlanders.

At 1430 hours the War Diary records that the Battalion was out of touch with its Companies, and notes: "Situation grave. Water rising rapidly. Fierce and accurate enemy sniping."

An hour later three men set out alone towards the enemy, three private soldiers with rifles, the finest marksmen in the Battalion. The battle had reduced itself to the terms of a duel, these three men going out alone into that wasteland to countersnipe. They went off through the smoke.

Later that night there is a note in the War Diary, "Pte. Speed, one of our snipers, killed."

A Canadian bulldozer came up to try to fill in some of the worst of the craters under cover of the darkness, but it brought down a fierce barrage. The battle had become a nightmare, a hideous thing, a single track of death. Nothing, it seemed, could shift the enemy from the western end of the Causeway; yet he was beginning to

crack, and the first real sign was that he declared Arnhemuiden an "open town."

Arnhemuiden lies only a mile or two beyond the Causeway. It was "full of wounded, civil and military," in desperate straits. And slowly, almost imperceptibly, 17 and 18 Platoons began to get a grip. It was still "sheer murder." The stretcher bearers were pulling wounded out of the reeds and the holes and the slits, but the enemy's nerve was beginning to break. It was not because of the frontal assaults over that narrow track in that nameless battle. He could hold those as long as his ammunition lasted, but the great batteries behind him in the west and the south, so few miles away, were silent. He knew the Allies were at his back, that his right flank was threatened, and that only a narrow route remained open to Veere, and he had even begun to doubt that.

The last entry in the Battalion Diary on that long day is timed one minute before midnight, 2359 hours: "Enemy moving along main road to Causeway broken up in disorder by artillery fire."

The Cameronians had crossed the Slooe Channel to the south, and were moving up on the enemy flank. In the morning the sun was shining, and the Typhoons went in. It was almost like a spring day.

ii

On the night of November 1st two sappers felt their way in the darkness across the Slooe Channel from the small "port" of Havenhuis. Their purpose was to discover a route for a battalion to follow over that maze of creeks and salt marshes, reeds, esparto grass, sand, glutinous mud and water, and crisscrossed with channels seeming to run in all directions.

From the outset, Maj. Gen. Hakewill Smith, commanding the 52nd [Lowland] Division, and the whole three-prong final operation against Walcheren, had resolved not to commit his troops to the suicidal hazards of the Beveland Causeway if it were humanly possible to avoid it. He had inherited a situation allowing him very little latitude in its main features. His assaults against West

Walcheren and Flushing were fully planned and committed. It was in the attack from the east that he believed he must seek and find an alternative to frontal assault.

The only possibility from South Beveland must be a crossing of the Slooe Channel. In 1940 the Germans had failed to cross against a French Armored Division, and had abandoned the attempt after losing 100 men drowned. The Germans were unlikely to believe others might succeed where they had failed, and not least for this reason Maj. Gen. Hakewill Smith pursued his idea.

Through the days and nights of the end of October the General and his engineers studied enlargements of air photographs especially taken at low tide, and it seemed that in that herring-bone maze of creeks and runnels there might be a slight ridge running through the saltings. It appeared to be "a very low watershed a few feet wide," and it might prove firm enough for a column of highly trained men in single file. It was a desperate chance, but a chance, and thereupon the General ordered his sappers to attempt to find a way.

The situation was urgent in the extreme. While these hopes were in the balance the Commander of the 2nd Canadian Corps confronted Maj. Gen. Hakewill Smith with an ultimatum in his Headquarters at Breskens, and ordered him to mount an attack across the Beveland Causeway on the night of November 1st. Throughout a stormy hour the Divisional Commander argued his case with the Corps Commander. An assault across the Beveland Causeway was not "feasible." The whole causeway was an elaborate minefield. We were without armor, and hopelessly outgunned. Maj. Gen. Hakewill Smith explained fully his hopes of the Slooe Channel; that his engineers were confident, and that his mountain-trained troops would cross. But the Corps Commander was unsympathetic. At the end of the interview the Commander of the 52nd Division had gained a doubtful forty-eight hours' respite, to find a way, or . . .

It was in these circumstances that the two sappers set out from Havenhuis, knowing well the urgency of their task. The ground was firm down to the water's edge. Beyond that glutinous mud incapable of bearing the weight of a man underlay the shallows. The width of the whole

channel at that point is about 1,500 yards, of which 300-400 yards is a water channel at low tide.¹ In fact, the Slooe Channel was a hideous combination of land and water, and varying from hour to hour.

Across this miserable dike the sappers groped their way alone in the night to within 200 yards of the enemy positions on the Walcheren shore. If the way were carefully taped a crossing would be possible from one hour before until one hour after high tide. It would have to be attempted partly in assault boats and partly on foot, and the footway would be almost too narrow for two men to pass. All that could be said was that it could not be as bad as a direct attempt to assault across the Beveland Causeway. It would share with that operation the honor of being nameless. There was no time to lose.

An elaborate minefield covered the whole area of Havenhuis, for the Germans were not taking chances, and under cover of the remaining darkness of the night of the 1st, and again as soon as it was dusk on the evening of the 2nd, the sappers began to clear the way. At the same time the 6th Battalion of the Cameronians moved up from the village of Nieuwdrop, followed by the 4/5th Battalion Royal Scots Fusiliers to carry for them.

Shortly after midnight on the night of November 2nd-3rd, a group of three sappers began to lay guide tapes across the channel, and behind them, without waiting to learn whether the sappers had got across, the leading companies of the Cameronians embarked in assault boats. It was then half past three o'clock in the morning. Forty-five minutes later they reached the western shore of the Slooe, to be caught in concentrated enemy fire that burst upon them with the suddenness and shock of an explosion. Before the lead Company could move, and with their Commander killed, they had ceased to exist as a fighting unit. At the same time the enemy opened fire on Havenhuis.

All through the dregs of the night the Cameronians struggled over that evil channel. The western shore was soon a morass in which men struggled often waist deep in liquid mud. Weasels, attempting to come to the rescue,

¹ The Slooe Channel is now reclaimed. Walcheren is no longer an island.

bogged down everywhere like ungainly beetles, their noses poking into the banks of the runnels and the craft slewing, unmanageable as the tide receded.

Yet, difficult as it was to go forward it was impossible to go back. At dawn one company had gained a slender foothold on the western shore, and there they hung on throughout the dismal day, short of food and ammunition, and with little hope of relief until the night. All over that sodden ditch men and vehicles were marooned. A company of the Royal Scots Fusiliers was stuck all night on the saltings. The wind got up from the south and drove a choppy sea to fill the channel. Fog blanketed the men in bitter cold. Their War Diary is dismal reading, for theirs was the dull grind, the danger without the glory. On the night of November 1st a chance shell out of Walcheren had hit one of their trailers loaded with high explosive, and had fired an enemy ammunition dump. Five men died, and a Company Commander heroically saved the Battalion jeeps.

But however grim it was through the bitter cold of the night marooned in the Slooe Channel, it was better than the Causeway. The men knew that. They knew that this bridgehead had to be won. With a determination and courage unsurpassed in all this story the Cameronians hung on and expanded their first foothold to 1,000 yards, and by nightfall on the first day German prisoners were laying chestnut palings over the mud of the shore approaches. The prisoners knew that they had lost, even if the Cameronians did not know that they had won. There was a peculiar sense of isolation in that battle.

All through the night of the 3rd-4th, the Brigade passed men, food and ammunition across the channel, and contrived to pass prisoners and wounded back. On the morning of the 4th, the right flank of the bridgehead was on Groeneburg, and that afternoon the Forward Company of the 5th Battalion H.L.I., coming in to support, was smashing the enemy out of the dikes with grenades, within sight and sound of the Glasgow Highlanders on the Causeway. Groeneburg was the last link, and Pte. McGregor, charging with his Bren gun at the hip, overcame a machinegun post, killing six Germans and virtually making the join-up.

At last, under pressure from all sides, and wedged into the heart of a tiny island that was nine-tenths water, the Germans were caving in. Whatever real fight there might still be must lie in the north. In the south, Fort Rammekens, guarding the southeastern corner of Walcheren, fell with scarcely a token shot.

The knowledge of the Slooe crossing had begun to unnerve the enemy manning the pillboxes and the defensive positions behind the dikes of the Causeway. While the Cameronians were struggling through the mud and muck, desperate for a foothold, 17 and 18 Platoons of the Glasgow Highlanders began to win, and to know that they were winning. Both Platoons had hung on like "grim death"—there is no better phrase for it. With remarkable tenacity and with fine leadership they had steadily manoeuvred to improve their positions. Soon after dawn Lt. Renwick commanding 18 Platoon had withstood a counterattack from a force he estimated at 100 strong. By the manner of it he "smelled" victory, called for artillery support, and got it. An hour later, ramming home a counter counterattack, three Warrant Officers, eight N.C. O.s and eighty-two men surrendered to 18 Platoon. It was the beginning of a steady stream. One prisoner calling upon others to surrender brought a further 130 men out of their dug-outs to be machinegunned by others still resolved to fight to the last.

Throughout the night of the 3rd, sappers had worked over the Causeway for a final check-up, and had removed eighteen mines. Even so the jeeps and carriers blew up on that fearful track, and many men were still to die before the way was clear. It was a dangerous day, a wild day, with Lt. Renwick and his Platoon bringing in a total bag of eight officers and 364 men. The bridgehead was two miles wide and 2,000 yards deep by nightfall.

iii

On the morning of November 4th shipping in the wide mouth of the Scheldt estuary was safe from enemy fire for the first time. Three mine-sweepers, trusting more to their senses in the matter than to orders, sailed in to be-

gin without more delay one of the most difficult and hazardous mine-sweeping operations that the war had provided. It was to take many days and a great fleet of mine-sweeping ships to sweep and sweep again. It was as though, in fact, "the last division" of the enemy lay beneath the water, and not one of these would run away or surrender. On that day, November 4th, the three little ships, the spearhead of the effort, found their way through to Antwerp. The naval divers were still working in the ramifications of the docks. The V2s were still coming in.

The Canadian 2nd Corps Intelligence summary under the date November 4th records briefly that "the enemy no longer controls the approaches to the Port of Antwerp," and that "only mines remain to prevent the use of the Scheldt estuary by Allied shipping." On November 3rd the Commander of the British 52nd Division had declared Flushing cleared of enemy, and on the same day the Commander of the Canadian 3rd Division had announced the end of Operation *Switchback*.

On the south bank that wet and tortured operation on the mainland had been fought out to the bitter end, and with that the batteries of Knocke and Heyst were silent. It had been a hard battle to the last hour, and not until November 1st did the enemy begin to crack. He was then back behind his last water barrier, defending a flood patterned by the embanked cross of the major roads, and with no hard ground over which to manoeuvre.

November 1st was one of the hardest days suffered by troops who had fought on doggedly through mud and water for nearly a month. The Regina Rifles and the Canadian Scottish clung to the hope that the enemy must feel worse than they did. Their patrols had listened to the enemy digging and food-carrying throughout the watery night of October 31st, and with the grim dawn both battalions had come under cross-fire from heavy machineguns in disguised strong-points. Every yard of water seemed to be mined and wired, and the enemy mortaring caught men in the open as they strove to attack isolated pillboxes with open fields of fire. The enemy no longer had anywhere to go, and his mood was uncertain. There was little compromise; either he would surrender or he would fight like a beast at bay.

The Canadian 9th Infantry Brigade with the H.L.I. of Canada were moving up on the north coast road, worried mainly by enemy sniping, while the Canadian 8th Brigade, pressing on across the Uitwaterings canal to the south, advanced on the last key point of St. Anna Termuiden to capture General Eberding, and to release in the same coup a cageful of captured Canadians. It was the sign of the unmistakable end. Eberding sat gloomy and morose in the Brigade mess awaiting removal to Division. He may have brooded on his failure to obey his own orders to "fight to the death." Perhaps he wondered if his surrender would lead to the persecution of his family in Germany. In any case, he was silent. He had fought a long, hard, losing battle.

But there was no real let-up by the Germans even then. Isolated bodies of men in their pillboxes took a toll of lives to the last, and those who gave up stumbled "dazed and depressed" into the Canadian lines, having fought themselves to a standstill.

On November 2nd the 9th Infantry Brigade cleared Knocke, and with Typhoons in support, the North Nova Scotia Highlanders entered Heyst. The 7th Reconnaissance Regiment (17th Duke of York's Royal Canadian Hussars) thereupon began mopping-up operations in the difficult area between Zeebrugge and the Leopold, the last pocket.

The very end of that long operation may be seen through the eyes of a Lieutenant of the 1st Lothians and Border Yeomanry.

"2 November: At approx. 1400 hours the column moved off. three Crocodiles, two Command Churchills [heavy infantry tank], two A.V.R.E.s with Petards, and two Flails, in that order. A lot of shooting from our side ensued. No return fire observed, but we shot at and hit a dug-in gun in a tank turret, another gun in a thick concrete emplacement, and demolished two pillboxes. This was at close range, and though the gunnery side was easy the results were gratifying, the tank turret being split open, and a direct hit on the emplaced gun rendering it useless.

Soon afterwards about 80 prisoners carrying a white flag appeared, and we were given 'Cease Fire.' We

rallied forward, and at 1800 hours were released and made our way back to Knocke. All resistance had ceased, and by 0730 hours the next morning the last Germans in Belgium had capitulated.”

The official end of Operation *Switchback* was at 0930 hours, November 3rd. The battle had yielded 12,500 prisoners, and at the very last had ended on a “whimper.”

A note in the Canadian 9th Infantry Brigade Diary reveals, I think, the deep impression this campaign in Holland was making on many Canadians: “All the country in smouldering ruins. Wisps of smoke drifting over the mud and water.”

17

The Bitter End on Walcheren

THE last five days on Walcheren were macabre—grisly. It is not simple to find words. Walcheren was a microcosm of war; a little island, nine miles by nine, holding the whole hideous story. Invasion, occupation, fortification, bombardment, siege, counter-invasion, destruction. And it was the kind of destruction that made of all the chaos of cities—even of Rotterdam—something almost trivial. Bricks, stone, mortar. Here in Walcheren the land was destroyed, the source of life. At least, we thought so, and the Dutch thought so.

Those last five days on Walcheren were war at its worst, its most senseless, and evil. In defeat the German reveals himself even more than in victory. Heaven knows he is shocking in victory. In defeat he is abject, without . . . I will not write the word in such a context. And as the Spaniards say, *sin vergüenza*.

Consider: the battle was lost, irrevocably. A few men had trickled out through Veere, a few through Vrouwenpolder. But there was no longer an escape route, and no hope of one, no hope of relief. It was over. These Germans on Walcheren could do nothing to impede the Allies

—they could only drag down more dead with themselves in their own shameful ruin. We did not know then how shameful it was; the full story of Belsen, Dachau, Buchenwald, the gas chambers, the extermination of millions, the lamp-shades of human skin, the fats. Most of these things were still locked in the German cupboard. In the late Autumn of 1944 on Walcheren it was still possible to be shocked.

On November 4th there were between 4,000 and 5,000 armed Germans on the island, and of these nearly 3,000 were marooned with between 40,000 and 50,000 civilians in Middelburg. Middelburg stood there grey, remote, rising out of grey water, evoking childhood memories of Grimm, unreal, silent, sinister. No shot went in, and no shot came out. Twenty thousand refugees had struggled into the city from all sides. There was nowhere else to go. They lived on roof-tops. They were desperately short of food. In Middelburg, General Daser, commanding Walcheren, had his Headquarters.

The rest of the enemy were mostly in the north, in the woodland belts lining the dunes of the northwest coast, and in numerous strong-points. Many of them awaited rescue by the British, knowing themselves powerless. But here and there were fanatic groups under "Mad Majors" and dedicated to death. They would fight, and they would die.

There were others, and these were the majority, who would fight and not die, who would kill until the "safe" moment had passed, and then hold up their hands, or run out, some to die on their own mines in their anxiety not to be killed.

All this was unpredictable, and without a single armed enemy Walcheren island was a death-trap. Beneath the floods lay wire and mines, and the Buffaloes were uneasy beasts in which to ride upon those lethal waters of unknown and varying depth. To hit a dike embankment, to touch down in mid-polder, might be death. Very often it was.

In these conditions three brigades of British troops began to converge from three sides towards the heart of the island in the last phases of the battle. The usual military phase "mopping up" had an unhappy sound, so that men

tended to avoid it, as they would a gaffe. For would Walcheren be mopped up—ever? Would these dour, hardy, patient people, whose faces seemed graven out of raw stone, ever again farm these lands? Many doubted it.

On November 4th, 4th Commando crossed the gap west of Flushing in Buffaloes, reached Zoutenlande, and reverted to the command of 4th S.S. Brigade. 41st and 10th (I.-A.) Commandos began to advance north of Domburg. In Flushing the 5th K.O.S.B. assaulted by night across the Middelburg canal against a still vicious enemy, and the 4th K.O.S.B. began the short and terrible journey along the thickly mined canal banks to Middelburg. In the east Medical Corps brought relief to Arnemuiden. It was there, on that flank, that there was most contact with the Dutch people. There were still houses out of water. The women were above all impressive. In their voluminous black skirts over innumerable petticoats they moved sedately over the solitary roads like ships. Stiff-starched linen bonnets and spirals of gold—or brass—framed red weather-beaten faces with noses like prows. Their arms protruded from short sleeves above the elbows like hams. They were huge women, formidable, *formidable*—it is better in French.

The young women bore signs that they, too, were cast in this massive mould, built to withstand cold, hardship, life.

There was here none of the badinage that had enlivened the troops in Dutch Brabant, no precocious, cheeky urchins in clogs saying, "*Nix in de winkel, Kapitein . . . tin o' bullybif, Kapitein . . . slapen met zuster,*" or even, some of them, "*met muder!*" Only the grave-faced people, silent, through the Bevelands and Walcheren, giving back a "*Ja, kaud, kaud!*" in response to the remark most frequently made to them. It was cold, bitter cold. At least there was no anger.

In Arnemuiden the men stood in silent groups, their baggy pantaloons and tight short jackets broadening their hips and narrowing their shoulders, giving them a curious inert, watchful aspect. The women stood, vast arms akimbo, brass spirals twisted in their hair to dangle against their purpled dewlaps. A funeral struggled through the little town, incongruous. Was not the place full of

death, and where should there be a place in the flood for a coffin!

German soldiers and medical corps men stood about in the square outside the church and outside the "Town Hall," isolated and arrogant, and inside the church, laid out on straw, and with scarcely a place to put a foot, were the wounded and sick, soldiers and civilians. Every barn and hall was filled with sick and wounded, all on straw, and many in pain. Medical supplies had given out.

Seventy-five men were found too bad to be moved, and the rest, the Germans and the German medical staff, were moved to Goes.

The prisoner situation, especially in the west, had become embarrassing. There were more than three hundred prisoners in 4th S.S. Brigade Headquarters at one time, until a place was found for them in their own barracks. There were hundreds more on the beaches, and the wounded were a grave problem.

In spite of the weather the Buffaloes had managed to maintain a ferry service between Breskens and Flushing, but Westkapelle was cut off until November 5th.

Capt. Scarrow of the R.A.M.C. kept his record on Westkapelle beach to the end. Blood transfusion units and surgical units did fine work, but scores of men were in urgent need of hospital treatment.

"Monday (5 Nov.). An L.C.T. got in perfectly and we loaded 70 wounded and 250 prisoners, and then pulled out quickly." Capt. Scarrow described the journey. The wounded lay on the exposed well-deck, and the prisoners huddled in the bows. A heavy sea was running and the L.C.T. was taking in a lot of spray. Capt. Scarrow found two tarpaulins to help shelter the wounded, and managed to get hot tea made in the galley. Half the wounded (he wrote) were soaking wet, and the orderlies tried to wrap blankets round them. The tarpaulins tore in the wind as the gale rose, and the German prisoners were ordered to hold the tarpaulins down. Finally the Germans stood with tarpaulins over their heads sheltering the wounded.

"The wounded were a bit nervous, but there was very little complaining," the diary records.

Around midnight the prisoners in the bows got so frightened that the situation began to look "nasty." They were

quietened down by men with "enough on their plates" already.

"At some time during the night one of the wounded died—a chap named Fawcett. He was pretty badly wounded and the jerking of the boat must have tried him severely. Another of the wounded had barely a chance. We managed to land him alive, but I don't think he lived."

That was the first of many journeys, and the end of Walcheren for Capt. Scarrow and his first cargo. In the days that followed many men were yet to die and to suffer dreadful wounds on that grim island, and for all those there was, it seems to me, a poignancy. Their deaths were an act of revenge.

ii

Seaward lay the dunes and landward the woodland belts over all the northwest and northern coast of Walcheren from Domburg to Fort de Haak, and here 10th (I.-A.) and 41st Commandos fought a five-day battle that was strangely personal, remote and deadly. Events elsewhere in Walcheren might have been happening a thousand miles away, in another war, another world.

The two forces were about evenly matched in numbers, but the Germans had the advantage of strong defensive positions, of knowing every inch of the ground—for here was almost the only "ground" above water in the island—of knowing their own mine-fields and booby-traps. These last included small radio-controlled tanks known as "Regimental Commander's Pets," and officially named "Go-liaths."

Over the steep dunes and up through the woodland belts "infested with Boche and booby-traps" the commandos fought a battle as bloody as any in this whole long-drawn out affair. In it 10th (I.-A.) Commando added to their honors. The commando consisted of Norwegians, Belgians, French and Dutch, and it had that rare dash and courage often associated with a "Foreign legion"; for

each of these men of the Inter-Allied commando drew a personal inspiration from his exile. This dangerous body of men was supported by Maj. Pocock's surviving force of two Sherman tanks and two A.V.R.E.s, and they had also accepted cheerfully a handful of British officers to swell their numbers. These men were some of those Liaison Officers and R.A. Observation Officers robbed of their original roles by the loss of the Weasels. One of them, Capt. J. A. McDowall, was outstanding. It is recorded that all through this battle he was "often seen leading the charge with a rifle in one hand and a sten in the other, and uttering berserk Highland cries." Maj. Pocock reported that the commandos "were quite shaken by this unparalleled apparition." Doubtless, too, he had a disturbing effect on the enemy.

There were many charges, for the battle was often waged hand-to-hand, and with a terrible ferocity. It began, as it was planned to begin, as soon as the southwest coast had been cleared by 47th and 48th Commandos. While 41st Commando had remained poised in Westkappelle to move south or north as might be needed, 10th (I.-A.) (it may be remembered) had held on in Domburg "very thin on the ground," and very glad to welcome Maj. Pocock's small band of armor on the night of the 3rd.

The tanks proved their value from the outset. One of the Shermans opened fire at once on the Domburg water-tower, an observation post and machine-gun position, and put it out of action. The tanks then moved forward and engaged the enemy on the dunes at 500 yards range until forced to withdraw under heavy mortar fire. It was clear from the outset that the Germans were going to fight for every yard, and it was going to be a hard battle for the tanks. It was impossible for armor to manoeuvre and to get into hull-down positions. Nevertheless, the armor was the vital factor that tipped the balance, and time and again gave the commandos the support that enabled them to press home with the bayonet and grenade.

On November 4th, 41st Commando came into the fight and took over the dune area, while 10th (I.-A.) fought through the woods.

All through the 4th, 5th and 6th a terrific fight raged

for the W 18 battery. This battery, most cunningly and strongly sited on the edge of the woods north of Domburg, was a part of a powerful defensive area dominated by a position to the north known as the "Black Hut." The whole area was thickly mined and booby-trapped and defended by the toughest troops on Walcheren. With the tanks blazing away, with 75 mm. and Bezas, the commandos charged in the face of massed Oerlikons, machine-guns, flame-throwers and mortars.

On the 5th one of the A.V.R.E.s lost its tracks on a mine and the sappers had to clear a way under fire. At that time the battle for the battery and for the "Black Hut" had become one. Trying to manœuvre into fire positions to attack the "Black Hut," the tanks found the dunes so steep that they had to sit fully exposed in order to get sufficient depression on their guns. Caught like "sitting ducks" by a terrific eruption of flame from behind a big dune, the tanks were forced to withdraw, but firing almost blind the gunners were rewarded by the din of an explosion that sounded like a disaster to an enemy magazine.

One by one enemy strong-points were battered and won and minefields were cleared, and on November 6th 300 survivors of the W 18 garrison were taken prisoner, making a total of nearly six hundred prisoners in the first three days of this battle.

There remained the "Black Hut." This heavily fortified gun position in the woods, and with a field of fire commanding the dune approaches, was defended by a body of men dedicated to death and commanded by one of the "Mad Majors." It was, in fact, the last stronghold in the northwest, and on November 7th Typhoons dived down upon it as the commandos made ready to charge in, covered by the supporting fire of the tanks.

It was ten o'clock on the morning of the 7th when the attack began to roll in with the tanks advancing carefully in the wake of the sappers. Even so the leading A.V.R.E. sat on a charge of such power as to blow in the bottom of the tank, killing two of the crew and wounding a third beyond hope.

There was a need then, on that morning, in the battle for the "Black Hut," for all the Capt. McDowalls, and for

nearly three hours 41st and 10th (I.-A.) Commandos charged over the minefield against the pillboxes, and cut ways through the wire while the Shermans poured in supporting fire with their 75-mm. guns until they were almost red hot.

When at last the "Black Hut" caved in the whole of the ground was "slippery with blood," and the last gun was out of action. One hundred and fifty Germans surrendered, and that was the end of the last real fight on Walcheren, north, south, east or west.

The two Shermans had fired 1,400 rounds of 75 mm. and 30 boxes of Browning ammunition. The A.V.R.E.s had fired 46 boxes of Beza. When Brig. Leicester wrote his letter of thanks to the Commander of the 30th Armored Brigade, he said, "The few tanks we got ashore were worth their weight in gold." It would have been true to say that they were worth their weight in British lives. Without "Pocock's tanks" the battle of the "Black Hut" would have been a very bloody story.

In the dawn of the next day, 41st Commando advanced on W 19, the last battery, while 4th Commando, moving forward on the inside, reached Fort de Haak. But there was no resistance. The "Wild Highlander," Capt. McDowall, left a last-recorded comment: "Oh, what a beautiful morning!"

But that was the morning. The afternoon was more typical of the bitter end on Walcheren. At half past one o'clock a Buffalo carrying a patrol of 48th Commando on its way to contact the Cameronians moving on Veere was blown up on a mine near Serooskerke. Nearly all were killed. No worse casualties had been suffered on any one day in the west since the attack on W 11.

That was the kind of nerve-racking "mopping up" facing the troops in those last days, and each single death seemed worse even than the unlucky accident to Tpr. Leyland.

On the morning of November 4th, while the 4th and 5th K.O.S.B. and the 7/9th Royal Scots were moving cau-

tiously out of Flushing in Buffaloes and on foot, feeling their ways over the flooded fields and the mined dikes under machine-gun fire from isolated pillboxes, a Dutch doctor from the civilian hospital in Middelburg was brought into 155th Infantry Brigade Headquarters. He said that he had managed to get out of the city in a single-seater canoe to bring the news that it was almost certain that the German Commander, General Daser, would surrender to a tank force, but that if there were only infantry he would fight.¹ It might have been a worthless statement, for the German Commander knew that Middelburg was unapproachable with armor, and that, in any case, no armor was yet available.

Nevertheless the Dutchman pressed his views urgently. The population of Middelburg had doubled. Fresh water was scarce, sanitation difficult, medical supplies running short, and the dangers of disease becoming very grave. It was more than probable that all these things were true, and it was clearly desirable to avoid a battle. A long-drawn-out stalemate was intolerable and dangerous.

There was no response, however, to the invitations of Brigade signals. Middelburg remained silent, gloomy, remote and unreal looking. Indeed the whole of the water landscape had a grey and brooding aspect. Grey villages and grey church steeples seemed to ride upon the floods and the morning mists like mirages. A surrender party went out from Brigade under Maj. Dawson of the 7/9th Royal Scots, with the Brigade Intelligence Officer and a Civil Affairs Captain. Their efforts to make contact were ignored, and their exposed position dangerous in the extreme.

The Divisional Commander had ordered that artillery should fire beyond the city, and to the east, but not into it. An assault was a matter of the greatest difficulty. All the bridges leading into Middelburg were known to be mined, and could be blown at the touch of a button. In exasperation Brigade decided to lay down a creeping barrage as a bluff to intimidate General Daser, but the idea was scotched by Division. There was nothing for it but a bold bluff; an approach by Buffaloes pretending to be tanks. It was just possible that a force of Buffaloes might

¹ The lone canoeist was Dr. E. I. Nauta.

swim in over the western moat, while infantry struggled on the direct route, and a dummy attack was staged from the east. It was an outside chance. A single machine-gunner alert to the west of the city could sink a score of Buffaloes at leisure in deep water.

Careful thought was given to this idea, for it seemed the only hope of a swift end. There was little doubt that General Daser was resolved to fight. He was in a strong position, immune from bombardment behind his civilian "hostages," and safe, he thought, from armor. The approach from the west was impossible. In that "impossible" lay the hope of the attackers.

The Divisional Commander decided that if he could muster fifteen Buffaloes, and form a body of 250 men to man them, it would be worth the attempt to get this "Trojan Horse" inside the city. In the event, only eight Buffaloes and 120 men were available. The eight Buffaloes "swam" the Scheldt, embarked the 120 men of the 7/9th Royal Scots and a few machine-gunners of the Manchesters in Flushing, and sailed for Middelburg on a circuitous route.

Had the Divisional Commander known that so small a force could be mustered it is probable that he would have called off the attempt. Absolute surprise was vital. The course was a good ten to twelve miles over a waste of water difficult to "navigate."

While this small force navigated carefully through Hoodekerke and Ter Hooge and a string of submerged villages with their inhabitants marooned on the rooftops longing only for rescue, the K.O.S.B. felt their way dangerously along both banks of the canal, pulling Germans out of holes "under our feet, some dangerous, others not." The canal banks were warrens of foxholes and strong-points, and were sown thickly with Schumines. Progress had been found almost impossible by day, and deadly slow by night. One hundred and fifty yards had been gained on the first night, and even less on the second. Casualties were heavy. The "Dummy" attack would have to go in from the east, and to the northeast of Middelburg the Cameronians, advancing north from the Causeway, were under mortar and small-arms fire as they made an assault crossing of the Middelburg-Veere canal.

There was no doubt that the defenders of Middelburg were prepared to fight, and east of the canal bank on the main line of approach suicide groups still held out in fortified strong-points. Of these groups one of forty men, reputed to be survivors of the 64th Division who had got across from Breskens, were resolved to fight to the last under the most fanatical of the "Mad Majors."

In mid-afternoon the 7/9th Royal Scots in their "Buffalo-Tanks" were rapidly approaching the city from the west. One Buffalo of the leading platoon settled on a mine and sank, and then there were seven. The seven and their hundred men came on steadily, feeling very lonely and peculiar, expecting at any moment the clamor of machine-guns to put a watery end to their adventure. They could hear the din of battle from the east, but in the west all was silence. It was about four o'clock on the afternoon of November 6th when the seven Buffaloes crossed the moat, entered the city through a breach in the walls, opened up their throttles and roared in over the cobbled streets, praying that they looked and sounded like tanks.

Fifteen minutes later the gallant company was being overwhelmed by the furious welcome of wildly cheering crowds gathered in the two main squares. The "Flagship" Buffalo had drawn up outside German Headquarters, but there was not a sign of an enemy soldier. The "Trojan Horse" was at the heart of the city, but their dangerous bluff might be called at any moment.

Maj. Johnston, commanding the force, at once set up a temporary Headquarters in the house of the Burgomaster, and sent his Intelligence Officer, Capt. Jones, and a lieutenant, to demand the surrender of General Daser.

It was just after half past four when these two young officers made their way through the main square, already filling up with large groups of armed enemy troops, and confronted the German Commander and his staff at twenty minutes to five o'clock. It was a situation of farce that might turn upon the instant to tragedy. The German General protested that to surrender to a junior officer was impossible, insulting and undignified. But it was clear that he was uncertain, and the very innocence of the two young officers possibly disarmed some of his doubts. In

five minutes the invaders could have been overwhelmed, but he was not sure.

There were some moments of high tension at that meeting, but when five officers of his Staff handed over their arms the German General was shaken. He handed over his own pistol, but maintained his refusal to surrender. In vain Capt. Jones explained that it was a pure formality at this stage, and that a staff colonel was on his way to take the "official" surrender. But Daser would have none of it.

Realizing that a dangerous situation might develop, the two young officers returned to their Headquarters, leaving the German General aloof and alone. The main square had now filled up with armed enemy troops, and the Buffaloes had taken up positions at the four corners of the square, and with their light machine-guns manned. The Germans seemed docile, but their numbers were overwhelming.

In the Burgomaster's house Maj. Johnston was being deluged with advice and suggestions from the Dutch Resistance when his officers returned with the five German Staff Officers, and no General. A terrific throng of excited civilians and at least two thousand armed Germans were virtually on "Maj. Johnston's doorstep." With barely one hundred men he began to feel that the "funny side" had some less funny possibilities. Action was vital.

Putting on a bold front Maj. Johnston strode through these multitudes into Daser's Headquarters. There are numerous records of what happened next. One official account states that a 2nd lieutenant borrowed some extra "pips" and promoted himself to the local acting rank of lieutenant colonel. Another states that Maj. Johnston borrowed one of his captain's pips and temporarily and locally promoted himself. Neither of these stories appears in the War Diaries of the 7/9th Royal Scots or of 155th Infantry Brigade.

At any rate, after some argument, and with Maj. Johnston very anxious to get the situation more in hand, Daser relented. By that time almost the entire German garrison was docilely occupying the two main squares, but the sounds of war from the east were disturbing.

It was half past six o'clock when Maj. Johnston reached

his Headquarters to find new and alarming problems. The Dutch Resistance were as fearful as he was himself that the Germans might change their minds, and somehow the demolition charges had to be removed from the bridges.

Daser's G.S.O. 1, a "Typical Nazi" and a "very unpleasant type," was detailed under guard to organize parties of German sappers from among the "prisoners." This was quickly done, but to make sure that bridges were not blown the G.S.O. 1 had to stand in the middle of each bridge as he gave his orders, and waited, not without anxiety, for the charges to be removed. This procedure was followed until the last bridge was cleared.

Meanwhile Maj. Johnston had sent an urgent appeal to Brigade for reinforcements. The city, he said, was packed full of people "like a ghetto," and all were hungry, all expectant.

Slowly the hours ticked away until at midnight Maj. Johnston wirelessly Brigaded, "I feel I'm sitting on a magazine." His one hundred men were feeling very lonely still guarding the massed armed prisoners in the squares.

Soon after nine o'clock a message had come in that the H.L.I. were on their way, but had struck "severe resistance" at an anti-tank ditch one mile east of the city. This was the stronghold of the "Mad Major."

At half past ten o'clock there were hopes of "C" Company of the Royals, and at midnight brigade reassured Maj. Johnston with the promise that the K.O.S.B. were sailing up the canal in Buffaloes.

It was finally half past three o'clock on the morning of November 7th when a patrol from Maj. Johnston's Company arrived back inside the walls with the first of the relief troops. That afternoon 2,030 prisoners were counted and evacuated out of Middelburg, and the battle of Walcheren was officially at an end. The city had fallen without a shot. The only casualty suffered by Maj. Johnston's "Company" in the performance of their last role was a painful one: the Company Sergeant-Major had broken his coccyx. But, as the Commander of 52nd Division said, it had been an "almighty gamble," and it came off only because it achieved absolute surprise and complete success at odds of more than twenty to one against in men alone.

There was no clear-cut end to the battle of Walcheren, nor to any part of the long process of military clearance and civil rehabilitation. Here, perhaps for the first time, the noble word "Liberation" had an unhappy connotation that was to make of it in the years ahead as full of horror as invasion. The Dutch of Walcheren, the Bevelands, and of all the country lying between the Leopold canal and the Scheldt estuary, had suffered most tragically in the battle, and they saw their sufferings reaching far into the future. Yet their kindness, their fortitude, their lack of bitterness, was an inspiration to troops, themselves strained often to the limit.

On that day of surrender in Middelburg many were still to die. At half past four o'clock on the morning of that day the "Mad Major" was winkled out of his lone pillbox by the H.L.I.,¹ revealing at the last an unseemly regard for his own life. His normal military role, it turned out, was that of The Permanent President of Courts Martial. Perhaps he had good cause to take his chances in a "lone pill-box" at the end.

Later on that day Veere surrendered to the Cameronians after a night of harassing fire which had done little to calm the nerves of Maj. Johnston's Company throughout their long vigil. It had seemed probable that Veere would fight, but at the last, as the Cameronians began their assault, they were met by two enemy officers and three other tanks under a white flag. The Cameronians thereupon took the surrender of 13 officers and 620 well-armed men with adequate supplies of ammunition.

At noon on the 8th the 52nd Division finally declared the end of all "organized opposition" on the island. In the days that followed isolated bodies of Germans were rescued from roof-tops and from scores of marooned positions on those uncharted and dangerous waters. "Men moving everywhere—all kinds of boats on the water. Schumines very bad," wrote the unhappy diarist of 4/5th Battalion Royal Scots Fusiliers as the Battalion went about

¹ There was still shooting from this point up to noon. At about 9:30 that morning the divisional commander came under fire on his way in.

the work of "mopping up" in Buffaloes. A lieutenant-colonel was picked up at Vrouwenpolder. An island at Gapinge yielded 140 cold and hungry men very glad to exchange their rifles for fiber suitcases. The prisoner count on the island swelled to 8,000 to make a total of 22,000 prisoners in the Scheldt battle, or one-third of those men who had escaped across the estuary in the early days of September when we were looking the other way.

On November 11th Maj. Pocock rode with his two battered Shermans into the ruined village of Westkapelle "and there abandoned them to the looting of the local populace." With that every mechanical contrivance that had landed with "T" Force on the 1st of the month was "written off."

Day after day through all November sappers and troops did their best to clear the way for the civilian Dutch to begin the giant task confronting them. And day after day in that grey aftermath the enemy mines and booby-traps took their toll.¹

18

The Port is Opened

ONE day after the official announcement of the end on Walcheren, Polish armor chased the last of the enemy south of the Maas across the huge Moerdijk bridge, and all southwest Holland was cleared of Germans. It was November 9th.

From the roof of a farmhouse by the roadside a mile or two from the broad river a Polish officer watched the Germans straggling like ungainly ants over the swaying footbridge. The main spans were already blown. In a very real sense we were not much nearer the end than we should have been in the first week of September had all

¹ Dutch and British engineers working together with super-human efforts drained the island of Walcheren in eighteen months. Today it is again rich polder land. But the trees were all killed by the salt, and without trees there were no birds to feed upon the pests. New trees were planted in 1947.

the chances been taken. The bitter price for "Arnhem"—"The Account Rendered," North called it—had almost been paid.

Late in October the whole of Twenty-First Army Group had faced to the west, and the last dreams of moving north or east had been put in their place. The somber mass of the Reichswald forest stood as a dark and ominous sentinel guarding the way through to the Rhineland and to the Rhine. It was a time for re-thinking, and for new thinking.

In southwest Holland the remnants of seven German divisions fought delaying actions over all that stretch of featureless country west of a line from Nijmegen to Roermond. It is a piece of country laced with canals and water-cuts and with belts of woodland rising barely a foot or two above the flats. Through all that miserable October-November the sky was joined everlastingly in a grey mass to the watery earth, and it was almost impossible for armor to operate effectively. It was an infantryman's war as surely as the worst of the First World War had been.

With its right flank across the Maas at Grave and with the bridgehead held at Nijmegen, the Second Army launched its offensive with 12th Corps on October 22nd, two days after 1st Corps, under Canadian command, had advanced to secure the Canadian flank. Slowly three armored and five infantry divisions compressed an elusive, harassing enemy towards the river through mazes of minefields and across innumerable waterways. In all that twenty days of miserable progress through z'Hertogenbosch, Tilburg and Breda until the last enemy crossed the last bridge, there was not an action that could be called a battle, and not a place that could be remembered.

There was no doubt then in anyone's mind that a long and dismal winter lay ahead, and never have the Highland pipes sounded more mournful than did the pipes of the Highland Division in featureless wood after featureless wood in those dreary days. In spite of the promise of September, in spite of Arnhem, Nijmegen and the Grave bridge, the Maas and the Rhine loomed still as tremendous obstacles, reinforced by the barrier of the Roer and its threatening dams.

The enemy had lost, but he had won a lot of time.

Depression settled over all Holland. In the north, which included the cities of Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht, the Germans were in firm occupation, and the people faced the winter on a diet of tulip bulbs. The roads leading south from the dreary Maas line were pitifully filled with refugees moving out of their ruined lands and battered villages with the small bundles of possessions they had salvaged. Old men pulled handcarts on which old women squatted, expressionless in the midst of all that they still possessed. For all these, too, the dreams of early autumn had slowly faded. It would be a bitter winter.

And the Port of Antwerp was still closed to shipping. While the armies re-grouped through November, and the Canadians moved into the Nijmegen bridgehead, the Navy fought their battle against time in the waters of the Scheldt and the Antwerp docks, possessed by a sense of urgency that had never faltered from the outset. More than one hundred mine-sweepers swept the seventy-mile channel of the estuary from the sea to the docks sixteen times, while the city withstood the incessant bombardment of the V2s. At last, on November 26th, three coasters reached the Port of Antwerp safely, and on that day 219 berths had been cleared by the Naval divers working ceaselessly for nearly two months in the icy water. Two days later the Canadian-built Liberty ship, the *Fort Cataract*, led a convoy of eighteen ships safely up the estuary to dock, and one of the longest and most intricate and dangerous mine-sweeping operations of the war was completed.

On December 1st the first 10,000 tons of cargo was unloaded, and the next day the Germans breached the dikes of the Neder Rhine and closed the way to the north with an inland lake. Almost the only piece of land left to fight over on the road to the Rhine was the Reichswald forest, and it was realized that by blowing the seven Roer dams the Germans could call to their aid another great water barrier. Two weeks later Hitler made his all-out bid for victory in the Ardennes offensive.

In the first days of that drive immense quantities of United States P.O.L. arms, and ammunition and trans-

port were overrun by the Germans, and all would have had to be replaced from Cherbourg had Antwerp remained closed just two weeks more. Had the final clearance of the Bevelands and Walcheren taken thirty days instead of ten, the position of the Allied armies would have been perilous in the extreme.

Antwerp had been opened just in time. It not only was a major factor in enabling the Allied armies to withstand the attack at a time when they needed all the supplies they could get, but at the last it provided the sinews of war for Twenty-First Army Group to mount its great attacks across the Maas and Rhine, the Weser and the Elbe, and to the shores of the Baltic. It was indeed the vital prerequisite of victory.

NOW

BLACK THURSDAY

MARTIN CAIDIN

**The epic story of the most
savage air battle ever fought . . .
the Flying Fortress attack on
Schweinfurt, October 14, 1943**

“The raw, vital courage of the men, the beauty and malleable endurance of the B-17’s, the dark, deadly blossoms of flak, the incredible frenzy of the attacks by more than 1,000 German aircraft — it’s all here in a proud and honest book.”

— Chicago Tribune

U6067

288 pages

\$.75

To order by mail, send price of book plus 5¢ for postage and handling to: Dept. CS, Ballantine Books, 101 Fifth Ave., New York, N.Y. 10003

*To the great sea novels of World War II
— The Caine Mutiny, The Cruel Sea —
add the German counterpart . . .*

SHARKS AND LITTLE FISH

by Wolfgang Ott

From the harsh discipline of the barracks, the barroom brawls and drunken revels in brothels, to the appalling ruthlessness of sea war — Ott spares his readers nothing of what he saw and endured himself as a German submarine ensign in World War II.

“A work of extraordinary power!”

— The New York Times

U7051

432 pages

\$.95

To order by mail, send price of book plus 5¢ for postage and handling to: Dept. CS, Ballantine Books, 101 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10003

**THE FLAMING "GUTS AND GLORY" ACCOUNT
OF THE UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS
IN THE FIRST GREAT BATTLE OF THE PACIFIC**

THE BATTLE FOR GUADALCANAL

**by Samuel B. Griffith, II
Brigadier-General, USMC, Ret.**

"Has probably never been so well told as it is in this book by a Marine veteran . . . He misses nothing. The savagery, the bitterness, the humor, the prudence and the audacity shown on Guadalcanal blaze and burn in his words."

— *The New York Times*

320 pages 16 pages of photographs 75¢

"An excellent book in the style of *The Longest Day* . . . Recommended without reservation for all ranks!"

— *Marine Corps Gazette*

To order by mail, send check or money
order to Dept. CS, Ballantine Books, 101
Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10003 |

*An important addition to
the history of World War II . . .*

THE THOUSAND PLANE RAID

by Ralph Barker

The story of the first massive air raid of the war — the thousand bomber raid on the German city of Cologne . . .

This is the raid that first established the principle of concentrated use of air power in World War II — when the stakes were all or nothing for the R.A.F.

With photographs

A Ballantine War Book Original 75¢

To order by mail, send check or money order to
Dept. CS, Ballantine Books, 101 Fifth Avenue,
New York, N.Y. 10003

THE 85 DAYS

is the story of the Canadian First Army in the savage battle to capture Antwerp — the only port that could supply the Allied armies in a sudden victory over Germany. From the highest level of the Supreme Command to the brutal assault through flooded lowlands and fortified towns, here is the battle that could have brought victory in Europe in 1944.

“A tribute to the bravery and endurance of troops whose glories have hitherto remained unsung.”

—Manchester Guardian

