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On the night of April 7/8, 1945, the Allies in the West launched Operation 'Amherst' — the last airborne operation of the war — dropping some 700 parachutists of the French 2ème and 3ème Régiments de Chasseurs Parachutistes, part of the Special Air Service (SAS) Brigade, into north-eastern Holland. Their task was to assist the advance of the First Canadian Army to the North Sea by creating maximum confusion behind the German lines and securing vital road bridges. The 46 sticks — mostly 15 men under an officer — came down widely dispersed, often in the wrong spot, but

nonetheless the French everywhere went into battle with vigour and audacity, laying ambushes, attacking headquarters and seizing bridges. Many found help from the Dutch population but there were also cases of betrayal by Dutch Nazis, and losses in killed or captured were considerable. Although they were to be relieved by the ground forces within 72 hours, several sticks had to hold out for much longer before the ground troops reached them. This is the stick of Lieutenant Jean Appriou of the 2ème RCP (4th SAS), pictured in the woods west of the village of Gasselte.

By this time of the war, with the British Army suffering from an increasing shortage of infantry, higher headquarters were wondering why such a large and well-trained formation was being left unemployed in Britain. At the same time, commanders and troops in the SAS Brigade were chafing to see combat before war's end. This combined into a situation where many were looking for ways to use the SAS troops before it was too late.

OPERATION 'AMHERST' FRENCH SAS IN HOLLAND, 1945

By Karel Margry

OPERATION 'AMHERST'

On the morning of March 28, Brigadier David Belchem, Chief of Operations and Planning at Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery's 21st Army Group Headquarters, asked Carver to come and see him with regard to the possibility of employing SAS troops in conjunction with the First Canadian Army in Holland. Carver told him what resources were available and Belchem rang this through to Brigadier Churchill Mann, the Chief-of-Staff of the First Canadian Army. The following day, March 29, Carver flew to First Canadian Army Headquarters, which was then at Grave near Nijmegen in the Netherlands, to confer with Mann. The latter described the army's intentions and suggested an area in north-east Holland where the two French battalions could operate to great advantage.

On March 24, the First Canadian Army had begun crossing the Rhine at Rees in Germany. It had then wheeled sharply left, re-entering Holland from the east, and its Canadian II Corps now stood poised with two infantry and one armoured division in a cramped area along the line Emmerich—Doetinchem, ready to begin its northward advance through north-east Holland towards the North Sea. It was here that the Canadians saw a role for the SAS.

Carver explained to Mann that SAS troops were trained and organised to operate in small parties of about one officer and ten to 15 men, either parachute-dropped or Jeep-carried, and could best be used dispersed over a wide area to cause utmost confusion and prevent a retreating enemy from forming a new line. He stressed that they did not have the heavy arms to fight pitched battles and could therefore not be expected to take and hold any objectives against an organised attack. He expounded that in the present circumstances the parachutists should be overrun, i.e. relieved by the advancing ground forces, within 72 hours after being dropped.

The following day, March 30, at a meeting chaired by Colonel Ted Beament, the Canadian Army's Chief Operations Officer, and attended by Carver, Lieutenant-Colonel W. B. G. Reynolds, the army's GSO1 (Air), and Lieutenant-Colonel Maurice De Rome, the Special Forces representative at Canadian Army HQ (responsible for SOE and 'Jedburgh' operations), an agreement in principle was reached to use SAS troops in the Canadian sector.

That same afternoon Carver wrote out an appreciation on the use of SAS troops for General Henry Crerar, the Canadian Army Commander, in which he explained the technicalities of SAS parachute and Jeep opera-

tions and considered the pros and cons of using SAS troops in the area envisaged. In a meeting later that same day, General Crerar accepted Carver's suggestions and gave his approval for three SAS operations. On the army's right flank, the 5th (Belgian) SAS would be deployed in a ground role with Jeep teams operating ahead of and in conjunction with the Canadian 4th Armoured Division, soon to be replaced by the 1st Polish Armoured Division (Operation 'Larkswood'). In the centre, the two French parachute battalions would be dropped to facilitate the northward advance of the Canadian 2nd Infantry Division to the North Sea ('Amherst'); and on the left, 2nd (British) SAS would operate west of the IJssel river to assist the Canadian advance towards western Holland ('Keystone').

The general plan for Operation 'Amherst' was for the 2ème and 3ème RCPs to be dropped in the triangle formed by the towns of Groningen, Coevorden and Zwolle about 48 hours in advance of the leading ground elements of Canadian II Corps with the following tasks: (1) to cause the maximum confusion throughout the area and thus prevent the enemy from taking up any



Major-General Richard Gale, commander of the British I Airborne Corps, of which the SAS Brigade formed part, addressing the troops of the 2ème RCP at their base camp in Orwell Park near Ipswich in Suffolk.

fixed positions; (2) to try and prevent demolition of bridges by removing the demolition charges in order to hasten the advance of Allied ground forces; (3) to try and preserve Steenwijk (Havelte) airfield for the use of the Royal Air Force; (4) to pass all available information on enemy dispositions back to First Canadian Army and subordinate formations; (5) to provide guides for the advance of the ground forces, and (6) to raise resistance in the area.

By rolling out an airborne carpet in front of the ground forces in order to secure bridges to speed up the advance, 'Amherst' was in effect a kind of miniature version of Operation 'Market-Garden', the Arnhem undertaking of the previous September.

The decision to launch 'Amherst' was delegated to Lieutenant-General Guy Simonds, the commander of the Canadian II Corps. First Canadian Army initially estimated that the earliest this operation would be required would be April 14, which was then two weeks away. (As it turned out, it was launched seven days earlier.)

Having now secured deployment of his brigade, Carver flew back to his headquar-

ters at Halstead in Essex and gave Colonel Guy Prendergast, his deputy, an outline of the planned mission. The following day, April 1, Carver visited Air Vice-Marshal James Scarlett-Streatfeild, the commander of No. 38 Group, RAF (which was to provide the troop-carrying aircraft), at his headquarters at Marks Hall in Essex and informed him of the plans. By this time the earliest launching date had already been drawn forward to the night of April 5/6, just four days away.

On April 2, Colonel Prendergast and two SAS staff officers flew to Canadian Army Headquarters and, in two days of meetings with the Army staff and representatives of No. 38 Group, RAF and No. 84 Group, RAF (which was to provide air support and resupply), drew up the detailed plans.

The two French battalions were to be dropped in a triangular area 40 kilometres wide at the base and stretching 60 kilometres from south to north. Dividing line between their respective sectors was the north-south Assen to Hoogetveen railway line, with the 2ème RCP assigned the area to the east and the 3ème RCP the one to the west. The para-

chutists were to drop in sticks of either 15 or 12 men, each stick commanded by one or two officers. Each stick of 15 was to be subdivided into two self-contained half-sticks for operations. The 12-man sticks were each to comprise three Jeep crews of four men each.

They were to secure a total of 22 objectives: 18 canal and river bridges and four airfields. (This part of Holland, the province of Drenthe, was fragmented by numerous waterways, the main ones being the Hoogetveen Vaart, Beilervaat, Oranjekanaal and Drentse Hoofdvart canals. In all they featured nearly 150 bridges.) The 2ème RCP was to seize and hold 11 bridges (nine road, two railway); the 3ème RCP was to secure (in order of priority) two airfields at Steenwijk, another one at Eelde (near Groningen), five road and two railway bridges and, lastly, the airfield at Leeuwarden.

It proved difficult to find suitable dropping zones but final plans were agreed on at SAS Brigade HQ on April 4. In all, there were to be 20 drop zones, each of which would be the target of one to three sticks.

Each battalion would land with four wireless transmitting sets with which they could maintain contact with SAS Brigade HQ in England. In addition, every half-stick was issued with a small receiver set, each with a separate code, through which they could receive instructions through the BBC.

The air plan called for the two French battalions to be flown to Holland in one lift of 65 aircraft supplied by No. 38 Group, RAF. The parachutists were to fly in 47 Stirling aircraft, 23 of them carrying the 2ème RCP and 24 the 3ème RCP. Eighteen Halifax aircraft were to parachute-drop 18 armoured Jeeps, nine for each battalion. (A Jeep could be dropped suspended from five large parachutes.)

The parachutists were to depart from three airfields in Essex and Suffolk: Rivenhall, Great Dunmow and Shepherds Grove. From Rivenhall, 16 Stirlings of Nos. 295 and 570 Squadrons would carry 16 sticks of the 2ème RCP to six different drop zones. From Great Dunmow, 16 Stirlings of Nos. 190 and 620 Squadrons would carry 16 sticks — seven of the 2ème RCP and nine of the 3ème RCP — to eight different drop zones. The remainder of the 3ème RCP would depart from Shepherds Grove in 15 Stirlings of Nos. 196 and 299 Squadrons, which would aim for six different drop zones. In addition to dropping a stick, each Stirling was also to drop four containers, two carrying food and two carrying a Bren gun and mixed ammunition. Time interval between aircraft dropping on the same DZ was set at ten minutes.



On April 4, three days before the launch of 'Amherst', the two French SAS battalions were moved to a concentration area close to their departure airfields. Here men of the 2ème RCP stand waiting at Orwell Park, located south-east of the city alongside the River Orwell, for transport that will take them to their new destination.



From 1945 to 2016. On May 26, veterans of the 7th Armoured Division (The Desert Rats) attended a commemoration at the memorial in Orwell Park School to remember the men of the 22nd Armoured Brigade, including the 5th Royal Horse Artillery, who were camped in the grounds before moving to Normandy. The French SAS were stationed there from February 1945 onwards.



Mushroom Farm was an army camp near Braintree in Essex. Here the SAS men were sealed in to be briefed, issued with weapons and kit, and await the green light for the operation.

The 18 Jeeps were to be carried by 18 Halifaxes of Nos. 296 and 297 Squadrons departing from Earls Colne and aiming for six different drop zones (each of them also the target of at least one parachute stick), the plan being to drop three Jeeps on each DZ. The vehicles were to be dropped about one hour after the parachute sticks had jumped, the latter having set up beacon lights to guide them in. Unfortunately, the French SAS paras had never been trained to drop from the same aircraft that carried the Jeeps, so by necessity their crews (four to a Jeep) had to fly in Stirlings with the rest of the troops and jump separate from their vehicles.

The aircraft would fly in over friendly territory, their route first crossing the Channel to Brussels in Belgium and then turning on a north-easterly course to Enschede in the Netherlands and then north to the various drop zones. No. 38 Group had made clear that they feared friendly anti-aircraft fire more than enemy Flak or night-fighters, so First Canadian Army ordered a complete anti-aircraft silence over the whole 21st Army Group area for the night of the drop. Finding the correct dropping zones would be done by means of Gee, the radar navigation system which pinpointed a target by means of crossing two radio beams. To deceive the enemy into thinking that a much-larger airborne operation was underway, the deception plan called for 143 simulators (dummy parachutists with ammunition set to detonate when touching ground) to be dropped from the Stirlings. Also, prior to the drop, medium bombers of No. 2 Group, RAF were to attack selected targets to create the impression of a larger attack area (this part of the scheme was later scratched).

As the troops were to be relieved within 72 hours, resupply air drops by No. 38 Group were considered unnecessary. Instead, Typhoon fighter-bombers of No. 84 Group would be on call to drop supplies in containers.

Canadian Army intelligence estimated enemy strength in the 'Amherst' area at 12,000, of which 9,000 were coast defence troops and 3,000 reinforcements and recruits of the 1. Fallschirm-Armee. Canadian intelligence had lost track of the 6. Fallschirmjäger-Division, which was moving west to take up the line of the Twente Canal between Zutphen and Hengelo and units of this division could perhaps be expected in the 'Amherst' area, together with numerous rear-area troops.

As regards the role of the Dutch resistance in the operation, their strength was not believed to be very thick on the ground due

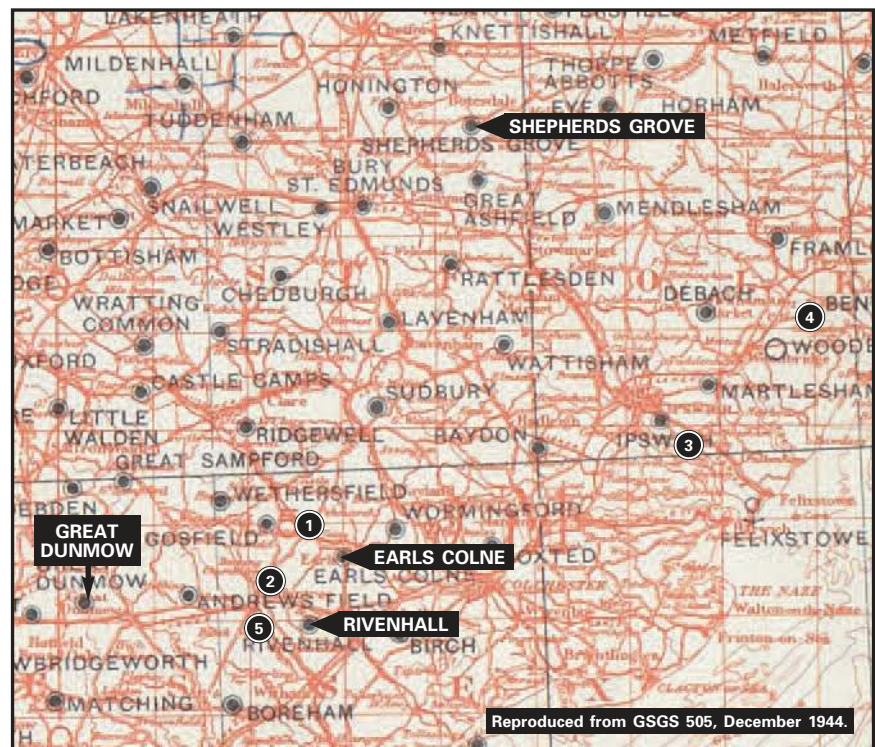
to the fact that the open and flat terrain in that part of Holland offered little concealment and did not lend itself well to organising Maquis-like activities, so the planners did not reckon with any large-scale support from Dutch interior forces. Lieutenant-Colonel De Rome certainly wanted to raise what armed resistance groups were active in the area but both he and Carver were reluctant to give them an early warning lest it jeopardise the security of the operation. It was therefore agreed that a code-message mobilising the resistance — 'De boot is omgeslagen' (The boat has capsized) — would only be broadcast via Radio Orange (the Dutch service on the BBC) on D+1.

On completion of the operation, all parachutists were to rendezvous at the airfield at Steenwijk-Havelte.

First Canadian Army issued its operational order for 'Amherst' early on April 5. By then the earliest target date was set for the night of April 6/7. If the operation was on, SAS Main HQ was to be alerted by 7 a.m. preceding the night of the drop and No. 38 Group by noon of that day.

Having completed the outline plans, Pendergast and his staff flew back to England. The following day, April 4, he briefed the French battalion commanders, Major Pierre Puech-Samson of the 2ème RCP and Lieutenant-Colonel Jacques de Bollardière of the 3ème RCP, telling them to make their preliminary plans forthwith. That same day, the two French SAS battalions were moved into a concentration area at Mushroom Farm, an army camp near Braintree in Essex, for equipping and briefing, working out the details of each stick, and packing the Jeeps in parachute crates. Although the two battalions had a combined strength of about 900, quite a few of the new recruits had not yet completed parachute training and in the end only some 700 were selected to go on the operation (339 of the 2ème RCP and 357 of the 3ème). The French paras were very eager to go. The morning before the drop, six privates were in hospital in Paris with injuries or sickness. Within six hours of having heard that an operation was to take place, they landed at Earls Colne, just in time to report for duty.

That evening, Brigadier Carver visited the French, delivering a speech in which he said: 'You are about to proceed on a very important operation, which I hope will make up for the disappointments you have suffered in the cancellation of other operations. Your job is to cause the maximum confusion in the enemy lines, to save some bridges from destruction in order to increase the speed of our advance and by your example to raise the resistance movement in the area. Think over all the training you have done and the operations you have carried out, so that you lose no opportunity to put your experience into practice in what might be the last battle of the European war.'



The parachute missions were to depart from four airfields, the 2ème RCP from Rivenhall and Great Dunmow, the 3ème RCP from Great Dunmow and Shepherds Grove, and the 18 regimental Jeeps (to be parachute-dropped from the bomb bays of Halifaxes) from Earls Colne. Other locations indicated are [1] SAS Brigade HQ at Halstead, [2] No. 38 Group HQ at Marks Hall, [3] Orwell Park, [4] Rendlesham Park and [5] Mushroom Farm.



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In the afternoon of April 7, the troops were taken to the airfields. After kitting up, many sticks had a group photo taken. This is stick No. 11 of the 2ème RCP commanded by Aspirant Marcel Edmé, pictured at Great Dunmow.

The following day, April 5, Brigadier Carver flew to Canadian Army Headquarters and set up a small Tactical HQ SAS Troops there, from which he planned to oversee and control the operation. To keep up with developments, he had arranged that any messages from the parachutists received at SAS Main HQ in England would be passed on to him via a Phantom radio link or by teleprinter. Also, Phantom sets at Canadian Army could intercept the wireless traffic between the paratroops and SAS Main.

The following day, April 6, Carver visited General Simonds to arrange the timing of the operation. Carver felt somewhat hurried as earlier that day Coevorden, at the south-east corner of the 'Amherst' area, was taken by the Canadian 4th Armoured Division and several of the proposed dropping zones were

already overrun, too near Allied lines to be effective, or already within the Allied bomb-line. That evening, General Simonds ordered the drop to take place on the following night, that of April 7/8, weather permitting.

A message to that effect immediately went out to SAS Main HQ and to No. 38 Group. With little more than 24 hours to go, there was a hurried re-organisation of the plans, with last-minute changes in drop zones, hasty briefings of pilots and sticks on their changed missions, and re-arrangements for the radar control. The final drop zones were not fixed until 11 a.m. on April 7, just nine and a half hours before the first aircraft were to take off. As it finally turned out, six of the originally selected 25 drop zones (Nos. 1, 2, 5, 7, 9 and 14) were cancelled and 19 zones actually used, ten by the 2ème RCP and nine by the 3ème RCP.

'AMHERST' IS LAUNCHED

On the afternoon of April 7, the two French battalions were driven to their departure airfields. It was here that some of the deficiencies of the troops' parachute training became evident. Many of the men had to be shown how to correctly put on their parachute harness, and hurried rehearsals were necessary to show everybody how to attach and release the leg-bags. Many of the Stirling aircrews stepped in, helping the men to arrange kit and parachutes. Owing to the last-minute changes in dropping zones, adjustments had to be made to ensure that the right sticks were on the right aircraft, with each of them knowing where they were now going to drop. The language problem did not ease the situation and there was much rushing-about and confusion.

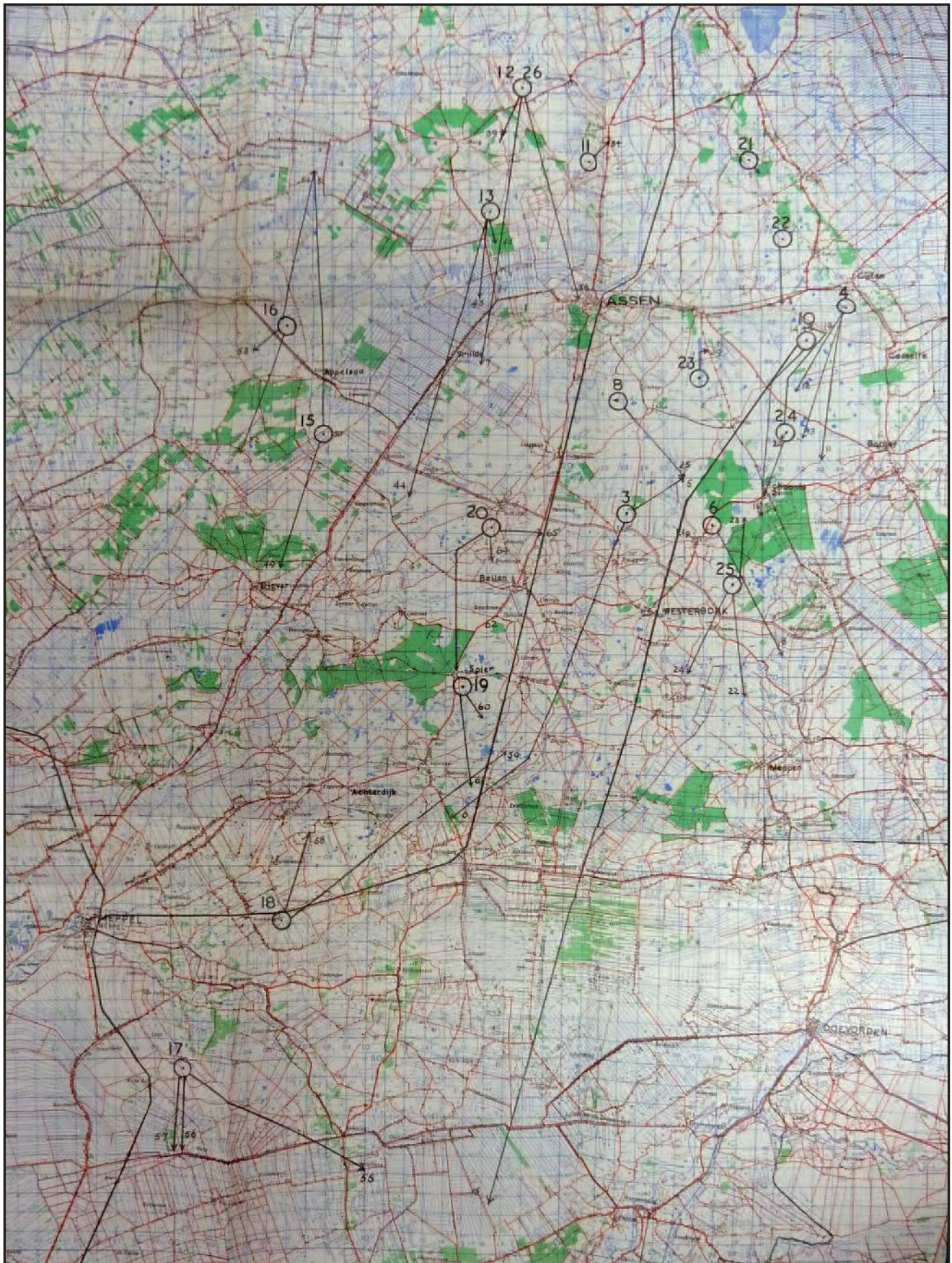
A late arrival at Great Dunmow was a four-man 'Jedburgh' team' (code-name 'Dicing'), sent out by Special Forces Headquarters and tasked with organising the Dutch resistance in the area. Led by British Major Robert Harcourt and further comprising Dutch Captains Carel Ruys van Dugteren and Arie Bestebeurtje and British radio operator Sergeant Claude Somers, they were assigned to fly as part of stick No. 21 of the 2ème RCP.

At this late hour, an unexpected hitch occurred. With weather forecasts predicting low clouds and thick fog over the dropping zones, the No. 38 Group commander, Air Vice-Marshal Scarlett-Streatfeild, got in touch with Major-General Richard Gale, the commander of I British Airborne Corps (to which the SAS Brigade was subordinated) at his headquarters at Rickmansworth in Hertfordshire, to discuss whether the operation should be on. He stated that with such bad visibility he could not guarantee extreme accuracy in the drops. Such accuracy was particularly needed for the dropping of the Jeeps, since their crews would be waiting for them on the DZs. Under the circumstances, Scarlett-Streatfeild said he did not think the dropping of Jeeps of any value, as they would almost certainly go astray. Gale agreed and at 1900 hours decided to cancel the Jeep drop. It was a very last-minute decision and with great consequences for the operation for much of the SAS's planned tactics were based on the mobility provided by the Jeeps.



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Sous-Lieutenant Henry Corta's stick No. 10 of the 2ème RCP posing at their Stirling aircraft at RAF Rivenhall.



Map from Brigadier Mike Calvert's official report on Operation 'Amherst' showing the 19 drop zones used and indicating with thin arrowed lines where the sticks destined for these zones actually landed. The numbers at the end of the arrows are not the stick numbers as used by the two regiments (1 to 23 for the 2ème RCP and 1 to 24 for the 3ème RCP) but the aircraft chalk numbers, which were different and ran from 1 to 65. They add

up to 65 because they include the 18 aircraft assigned to drop the Jeeps — a part of the mission that was cancelled at the last minute. For some unexplained reason, stick No. 13 of the 3ème RCP (chalk 51) is missing from the map — it landed near No. 10 (chalk 54) close to DZ 16. Drop zone 12 was used again (re-numbered 26) on D+1 to drop stick No. 23 of the 2ème RCP (chalk 7), which had failed to take off on the first night.



In addition to the 700 parachutists, the Stirlings dropped a total of 143 dummy parachutists fitted out with small-arms simulators. The one shown here was actually used in 'Amherst'.



Two of the parachutists landed in water and drowned. Both are still buried in the Netherlands. *Left:* The grave of Lieutenant Louis de Sablet d'Estières, leader of stick No. 5 of the 3ème RCP, in the municipal cemetery on Witterweg in Bovensmilde. *Right:* The grave of Sergeant Yago Ragnacci from stick No. 21 of the same regiment in the General Cemetery on Torenlaan in Beilen.



Above: The stick that landed furthest south in the 2ème RCP area was No. 4 commanded by Lieutenant Jean Sriber. They came down close to the town of Dedemsvaart, a full 45 kilometres from their prescribed drop zone. One man, Soldat Pierre Rufenacht, sprained his ankle in the jump. Learning from local Dutch where they were, they soon linked up with the Canadian ground army, scout cars of the 18th Armoured Car Regiment (12th Manitoba Dragoons) already reaching the town that same evening. For the next few days, the SAS men carried out patrols, searched the area for stray Germans and on April 11, in two separate ambushes on the Ommen to Hardenberg road, destroyed two enemy supply vehicles. In all, they captured seven German soldiers and killed or wounded four others. Prior to leaving for the rendezvous point at Coevorden, they posed for a group shot with members of the local resistance. *Right:* The picture was taken in front of No. 360 Langewijk, which remains completely unchanged.



It was taken so late that the French commanders and Jeep team leaders only learned of it while already enplaned or even after take-off, and some of them never learned of it at all. At least one Jeep team leader, Lieutenant Denys Cochon of the 2ème RCP, spent a whole night at his agreed dropping zone, ready with beacon lights, waiting in vain for his vehicles to be dropped. (After the operation, Brigadier Carver was extremely angry with Prendergast, his deputy, for having conceded to the Jeeps being cancelled without any protest.)

Take-off on the three airfields began at 2030 hours and was completed one hour later. All 47 aircraft took off, except one. A Stirling of No. 620 Squadron at Great Dunmow had engine trouble and was unable to take off. The 15 parachutists, stick No. 23 of the 2ème RCP under Aspirant Pierre Lagèze (one of the Jeep teams), transferred to another aircraft but by the time they were ready it was too late to go. (The stick would drop the following night).

The other 46 aircraft had an uneventful flight to Holland and all of them dropped their sticks between 2330 and 0045 hours.



A sizable group of the 2ème RCP under the battalion commander, Major Pierre Puech-Samson, assembled in a wood near the small village of Witteveen, making it their base of operations for the duration of 'Amherst'. This photo of Puech-Samson was taken in their forest hide-out.

Released with them were 185 containers, plus 30 more for the Dutch resistance. In addition, prior to reaching the DZs and afterwards, 14 of the Stirlings dropped a total of 143 dummy parachutists with simulators. There was no anti-aircraft fire anywhere and all Stirlings returned to base safely. The only trouble encountered was that some of the dummy parachutists had caught on the tail of the aircraft and the blank charges had gone off immediately, the detonating ordnance causing the aircrews to think that they were being chased by enemy fighters all the way back to England!

In all, 691 men jumped. Only one man, Aspirant Pierre Roux of stick No. 15 of the 3ème RCP, was unable to jump, his parachute having opened inside the aircraft, and he returned to England aboard the Stirling. (He would arrive overland with the Jeeps on April 10). In another aircraft — the one carrying stick No. 20 of the 3ème RCP under Capitaine Gilbert Paumier — the dispatcher, British Sergeant Andre Philips, himself jumped after his stick, armed only with a Colt revolver, and he fought with the French paras throughout the battle.



Having heard that a German general had his command post in the nearby village of Westerbork, Puech-Samson sent Capitaine Alexis Betbèze's stick and half of his own stick to attack it. The headquarters was in the Café Slomp in the centre of the village. The assault developed into a short, sharp battle in which Generalmajor Karl Böttger, was grievously wounded and some 20 other Germans killed or wounded, but which cost the SAS three men killed and four officers wounded, two of them captured by the Germans.



The former Café Slomp, today the Hotel-Restaurant De Westerburcht, still stands at No. 7 Hoofdstraat.



The two German officers killed in the attack, Oberstleutnant Max Busse and Rittmeister Wilhelm Janssen, today lie in the German military cemetery at Ysselsteijn in the south of the Netherlands.

As always, there were casualties in the landings. Two men, Lieutenant Louis de Sablet and Sergeant Yago Ragnacci, both of the 3ème RCP, fell into water and drowned. At least ten men broke a leg or seriously sprained an ankle on hitting ground. One officer, Capitaine Pierre Sicaud, commander of the 2ème Squadron of the 3ème RCP (stick No. 10), dropped into a pine forest and was blinded for three days.

The drop did not accomplish great accuracy, the majority of the 46 sticks landing wide off the mark. Most came down between two and ten kilometres from their assigned dropping zones, with several landing even further away, and one stick as far as 45 kilometres from its DZ. Only six of the sticks landed precisely on the correct zone.

The mis-drops were caused by an unforeseen problem with the Gee navigation radar. Gee worked best when the two beams sent out by its stations intersected at a 90-degree hook, giving a clear indication when the receiving aircraft was directly above the target. However, the mobile Gee radar stations with First Canadian Army had had insufficient time to change to geographically better-suited positions and the result was

Right: Capitaine Betbèze's stick posing for a group photo a day or two later — now only 11 strong having lost four of its members (two men killed and two men captured) in the Westerbork action. Betbèze is kneeling on the right. Note the light-coloured scarfs worn by several of the men which were actually the yellow recognition panels issued to each man as a means of identification to friendly fighter-bombers.

that the angle of cut of the radar beams was so narrow, only about 16 degrees, that accuracy was considerably impaired.

In addition to coming down in the wrong place, sticks also landed widely dispersed. With 10/10th cloud at 2,000 feet, the paras were dropped at between 1,500 and 2,000 feet altitude, which meant that their parachute descent lasted nearly two minutes. Coupled with the strong wind (13.5 knots or 25 kmh) this caused the paras to drift even further from their DZ and land far away from each other.



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Left: Prior to the attack, Puech-Samson had received detailed information on the German headquarters from a Dutch policeman, Opperwachtmeester Derk-Jan Stoel, who lived two doors away from the Café Slomp and had come cycling up to the Witteveen woods with a colleague to pass on information that allowed the French to draw up a plan of attack. The assault group was then guided to the target by another Dutchman, Willem van der Veer, who was actually an Allied secret operative. A sergeant in Dutch Troop of No. 10 (Inter-Allied)



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Commando, Van der Veer had jumped into Holland six months earlier as part of an SAS mission to the Dutch resistance and had been acting as a weapons instructor ever since. Always in hiding, he had stayed for a while at Stoel's house, so he knew Westerbork well. After the action, the two men were photographed together: (L-R) Opperwachtmeester Stoel, his wife, Sergeant van der Veer. Right: The picture was reputedly taken outside the Stoels' house at No. 11 Hoofdstraat. However, although it looks similar, it is clearly not the same house.



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Left: The war memorial outside Westerbork's town hall includes a plaque (right) honouring the SAS parachutists and their motto 'Du ciel la liberté' (Freedom comes from the sky). Sculpted by Charles



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Hammes and dedicated in 1949, the plaque was originally in the façade of the town hall but when a new war memorial was created in 2004 it was added to that one.

Right: Four kilometres north-east of Westerbork, stick No. 8 of the 2ème RCP, led by Lieutenant Michel de Camaret, set up in the barn of the farm of the Pol family on the north bank of Oranjekanaal near Orvelte. Here farmer Matthijs Pol and other family members pose for a snapshot with the French paras at the barn.

Due to the mis-drops, many sticks spent their first hours trying to discover where they were. Some knocked at farm doors, others stopped Dutch civilians out on a stroll (it was a Sunday) or questioned civilians they happened to bump into. In general, the Dutch proved of great assistance, providing guides, information and food, and taking care of wounded. On the other hand, this part of Holland contained a relatively large proportion of collaborationists, members of the Nationaal-Socialistische Beweging (NSB, Dutch Nazi party) and other Nazi sympathisers, and there were quite a few cases where Dutchmen betrayed the presence or hiding location of French paras to the German authorities.

To increase their problems, the paras found that the maps they had been issued with were not very good. Aerial photos of their DZs and targets had been taken on the afternoon of April 5 but there had not been time to issue each stick with prints. However, this was not the only thing that hasty planning and last-minute changes had caused to go wrong. For example, on recovering their containers after landing, several sticks found that the Bren guns packed in them were still in their factory grease and had to be cleaned before they could be taken into use. Other sticks failed to recover all their containers (This later led to the persistent misconception that many of the Stirlings had been loaded with only two instead of the prescribed four containers).

Another thing that went amiss was rear-link communications. Each half-stick had been given its own receiver and unique code to receive instructions through the BBC. However, broadcasting time was limited to only four hours a day and it proved impossible to pass messages for each of the 46 sticks in that time; there was also no general code in which one could communicate with all sticks rapidly. The result was that many sticks were left in the dark as to what higher headquarters expected of them once the operation got under way.



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Further down along the canal stood a flax-mill and close by was a canal lock with footbridges, guarded by a German detachment. In the early morning fog, De Camaret attacked this position, hoping to capture the sluice bridges and maybe the draw-bridge at Orvelte, a kilometre further on.



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Left: The flax-mill still stands along the canal. De Camaret's men nearly overwhelmed the bridge detail but then came under fire from other Germans and were forced to pull back. Right: A memorial cross today commemorates the single SAS

soldier killed in the action: Caporal-Chef Antoine Treis. The plaque and cross were originally mounted on the rear wall of the mill, at the spot where Treis fell, but in 2011 was moved to the front of the building to make it more prominent.



Three days after the action, on April 11, armoured Jeeps — the Jeep platoon of the 2ème RCP under Capitaine Robert Moulié with two vehicles and B Company of the 5th (Belgian) SAS with ten vehicles — reached the Oranjekanaal from the south (they had begun operations from Coevorden that day). Together with De Camaret's men and Dutch civilians, they improvised a bridge over the locks, enabling the Jeeps to cross over to the north bank where they relieved several sticks of the 2ème RCP that were still fighting in the Schoonloo woods.

Despite the problems encountered, the French paras everywhere went into action with great audacity and zeal. All through the area, ambushes were laid on roads, German vehicles and horse transport were shot up, bridges were scouted out and, if found intact, de-mined and held for as long as could be safely done. With sticks coming down all over the area, each one had its own individual adventures and encounters.

The Germans reacted immediately and violently, instituting large search and destroy operations, attacking known French positions and, in several instances, executing captured parachutists under Hitler's infamous Kommando-Befehl. They also took reprisal measures against Dutch civilians suspected of having helped the French, arresting people and carrying out executions.

THE 2ème RCP

One of the earliest and most-spectacular French actions was also one of the most costly. Stick No. 12 of the 2ème RCP, led by Capitaine Alexis Betbèze, commander of the battalion's 3ème Squadron, came down near the small village of Garminge, well south-west of its planned DZ. After assembling his men, Betbèze heard from Mr Kuiper, a school teacher in the nearby village of Witteveen, that a German general had his headquarters in the village of Westerbork, six kilometres to the north-west.

This was Generalmajor Karl Böttger, the commander of Feldkommandantur 674, the Wehrmacht district in north-eastern Holland. Originally stationed in the city of Groningen, the day before Böttger had been ordered to set up a defensive line along the Hoozeveense Vaart with four companies of Feldgendarmarie and another along the Oranjekanaal further south with two newly-arrived Luftwaffe battalions.

Looking for a bivouac in nearby Witteveen wood, Betbèze stumbled upon Major Puech-Samson, his battalion commander, and his stick of Squadron de Commandement (HQ Squadron) personnel. He too had heard about the German general in Westerbork from H. P. Th. van Lohuizen, the director of the magnetic observatory in Witteveen. Together, Puech-Samson and Betbèze decided to attack the German command post,

which was in the Café Slomp in the centre of the village. However, before they set out, two Dutch policemen appeared. One of them, Opperwachtmeester Derk-Jan Stoel, told the Frenchmen (with Van Lohuizen acting as his interpreter) that he lived next-door to the Café Slomp and gave valuable information on the situation in the village, enabling Puech-Samson and Betbèze to draw up a plan of attack. Stoel returned to Westerbork, promising he would return at 1 p.m. to guide the French in. When he showed up again, he brought with him an Allied agent. This was Sergeant Wim van der Veer, a Dutch Commando who had been dropped into Holland the previous October as an SAS weapons instructor (SAS team 'Portia'). As it happened, Van der Veer had for a time stayed in hiding in Stoel's house, he knew Westerbork well, and it was decided that he instead of Stoel would guide Betbèze and his 18 men to the target.



The small house on the south bank helps to pinpoint the exact spot where the Jeeps crossed.

At 3 p.m. on April 8, the SAS party entered the village, approaching the Café Slomp from the rear. However, the Germans spotted them and opened fire. The Frenchmen went into the assault, one section charging at the café and another crossing the village street to attack it from the front. Generalmajor Böttger, in long leather coat and brandishing a machine-pistol, emerged from a front door. Hit by a bullet, he fell gravely wounded (the French were convinced he was dead, but he survived). Two other German officers, Oberstleutnant Max Busse and Rittmeister Wilhelm Janssen, who also came out, were killed. An intense fire-fight raged for over an hour, hand-grenades being thrown by both sides and bullets smashing windows all around, until finally the Germans gained the upper hand and the French were forced to withdraw.

The Germans had lost ten men killed and about 20 wounded, but the SAS had suffered too. Nearly half of Betbèze's force had become casualties: three men killed — Corporals Robert Bonjean, Jean-François Cognet and René Marché — and four men wounded: Betbèze himself, Sous-Lieutenants Edouard Lorang (the battalion Intelligence Officer) and Alain le Bobinnec, and Adjutant Jean Bouard. The latter two were found by the Germans and taken prisoner.

A chaotic and tense situation reigned in the village after the attack, as ambulances evacuated the many German wounded and excited Germans held and questioned local inhabitants suspected of having assisted the attackers. Seven of them were detained at the café for several hours but eventually all were released.

Just four kilometres east of Westerbork, stick No. 8 of Lieutenant Michel de Camaret, the commander of the 2ème Squadron, had landed in the fields between the Oranjekanaal and the Schoonloo woods to the north. Before dawn, De Camaret and his men had set up a base at the farm of the Pol family on the north bank of the canal. At the lieutenant's request, farmer Matthijs Pol and his 15-year-old son Hendrik-Jan went out with their horse and cart to bring in Corporal-Chef Jules Brasse who had sprained his ankle in the jump. At 7 a.m. several SAS men joined De Camaret at the farm: one half of stick No. 15, led by Aspirant Maurice Richard, which had got separated from the stick's other half (and from their stick leader, Sous-Lieutenant Georges Taylor); plus Sergeants Georges Mahé and Pierre Pacifici and Corporal-Chef Antoine Treis, who had

Right: Two of the Belgian Jeeps (distinguishable from the French Jeeps by the chalked names on the windshield) were pictured at the Pol farm.

been unable to find their own stick, No. 22. With those reinforcements, De Camaret now had 26 men to fight with.

Just a kilometre to the south-east was a bridge across the canal, leading to the village of Orvelte. Halfway towards it, there was also a canal lock with foot bridges across the lock gates. Just beyond the locks, on this side of the canal, stood a large building, the flax-mill of H. F. Reijntjes. Both the Orvelte bridge and the locks were valuable objectives so shortly after dawn, shielded by a thin early-morning mist, De Camaret led his men towards them.

However, during the night, a force of 50 Luftwaffe soldiers had taken up position in another farm, that of Arend Enting located just beyond the flax-mill, and eight of them were guarding the canal lock, armed with rifles and Panzerfäuste. A fierce fire-fight erupted, two of the Germans being killed and two of the Frenchmen — Aspirant



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Left: The farmhouse stood unchanged until 2007 but was then pulled down to make way for a new house, built by the new farm owner Geert Willems (right), which however looks



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remarkably similar and still makes for a good match. The barn where the parachutists were photographed has also been replaced with a modern version.

Richard and Sergeant Mahé — being wounded. The guard detail was overwhelmed but the noise of combat had alerted the other Germans in the Enting farm and they reacted immediately. As De Camaret's men prepared to dash across the open backyard of the flax-mill a volley of fire rang out, killing Caporal-Chef Treis with a bullet through the throat.

Soon the French position became untenable and De Camaret ordered a withdrawal.

Taking their two wounded and six prisoners with them, they withdrew to the Pol farm, continuing on into the Schoonloo woods, both for better cover and to safeguard the Dutch family from reprisals.

German troops — a mixture of SS, Organisation Todt and Landwachters (Dutch Nazi militia) — soon engulfed the farm, searching for enemy soldiers. They discovered Caporal-Chef Brasse, injured in the jump, and took him prisoner. They threatened to hang

the Pol family but farmer Matthijs Pol convincingly played innocent and the family got away unharmed.

Later that day, at 3 p.m., another fire-fight broke out at yet another farm along the canal, that of farmer Berend Mulder located about a kilometre north of the Pol farm, when a German patrol bumped into the half-stick under Sous-Lieutenant Taylor. The latter was killed, hit by two bullets in the stomach; the other five Frenchmen got away.



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Left: De Camaret's men posing near the locks with members of the Pol family and inhabitants of the other farms along the Oranjekanaal. Right: Both farms seen in the background have



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made way for modern buildings, the one on the left (No. 42) in identical style but the one on the right (No. 43) in an altogether different architecture.



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Left: Stick No. 5 of the 2ème RCP under Sous-Lieutenant André Simon came down near the village of Westdorp. As they emerged from a farm where they had asked for information, they became involved in an encounter with a group of Germans who had been warned of their presence by another farmer. Caught in an open field with only straw bales for cover, three of the Frenchmen were killed and four wounded, three of whom were taken prisoner. In April 2016, on the 71st anniversary of the action, this small memorial was unveiled, across the road from the farm at No. 9 Schoonloërstraat, to commemorate the three men killed: Caporal-Chef Albert le Saux, Caporal René Péron and Soldat Serge Levasseur. **Right:** On a tree on the north bank of the Oranjekanaal at the village of Wezuperbrug is a small plaque commemorating three other French SAS



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troopers: Sergeant-Chef Robert le Gras, Sergeant Gabriel Judet and Sergeant Aimé le Berrigaud. Members of stick No. 20 of the 2ème RCP under Lieutenant Andre Varnier, they were killed in a battle with German troops in the Ellertsveld woods north of the village on April 9. The fight over, their bodies were roped to a vehicle and dragged behind it to Wezuperbrug where they were dumped alongside the canal. When they were found, this led to a persistent story, widely accepted for decades, that they had been executed under the regulations of Hitler's Kommando-Befehl. The plaque was put up by an SAS veteran, former Sergeant Gilbert Hentschké of the same stick, in 2007 about one kilometre east of the Wezuperbrug canal bridge, but unfortunately not quite at the correct spot where the bodies had been found.

Ten kilometres north-east of Westerbork, stick No. 5, under Sous-Lieutenant André Simon, landed outside the small village of Westdorp, and shortly after assembly, their presence betrayed by a Dutch farmer, became involved in a fire-fight with a group of German Fallschirmjäger. Three men were killed (Caporal-Chef Albert le Saux, Caporal René Péron and Soldat Serge Levasseur,) and three others (Caporal Charles Besnard and Soldats Jean-Pierre Usséglio and Jean Delasalle) wounded and captured. The rest of the stick, including two more wounded, Caporal Georges Allin and Soldat Charles Dupuis, escaped into the Borger woods.

They eventually managed to join up with a stick from the battalion's HQ Squadron. This was stick No. 20 under Lieutenant André Varnier which had come down about a kilometre north of them. On the second day, April 9, this group came under severe pressure from German search parties, and had to hastily move position. Three members of Varnier's stick — Sergeant-Chef Robert le Gras and Sergeants Gabriel Judet and Aimé le Berrigaud — were killed. Their corpses were later found to show wounds from automatic weapons fired at close range, which led to the persistent story that they too had been executed on the spot under the Kommando-Befehl.

Just a few kilometres north of where Simon and Varnier saw action, four sticks had come down in or near the Boswachterij Gieten, a tract of wood located within the triangle of the towns of Rolde, Gieten and Borger. They were sticks Nos. 3 and 6 of the 1er Squadron, led by Lieutenant Jean Appriou and Sous-Lieutenant Henri Stéphan respectively; stick No. 7 of the 2ème Squadron under Lieutenant Michel Legrand, and stick No. 16 of Capitaine Pierre Gramond, the commander of HQ Squadron. Quickly making contact with each other, and now some 60 men strong, they set up a base in the Gieten wood from which they could lay ambushes on three main roads passing it: the Assen-Rolde-Gieten road on the north side, the Gieten-Gasselte-Borger road on the east side and the Rolde-Borger road on the west side.

However, en route to lay a first ambush on the Rolde to Gieten road on the night of April 8/9, one of the scouts, Sergeant Guy Lesné of Legrand's stick, was killed at the Huis Heidehof estate and nothing came of this first attempt.

On the second day, April 9, a patrol reported the presence of a German force in the village of



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Left: Four sticks of the 2ème RCP dropped near to each other and assembled in the Gieten woods, forming a force of 60 men and setting up a base from which to lay ambushes on the roads in the area. Two of the men, Aspirant Victor Stéphan, the assistant doctor, and Soldat Jean Troller, both of Lieutenant Jean Appriou's stick No. 3, carried a camera into battle, making this group one of the most-photographed of the whole of 'Amherst'. Posing for this group shot is stick No. 7 led by Lieutenant Michel Legrand (who is himself not in the picture).



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Left: On the second day, April 9, the group attacked the headquarters of the Nationalsozialistische Kraftfahr-Korps (National Socialist Motor Corps, NSKK) which was located in the rectory at Gasselte, the village just east of their forest hide-out.



EGPAD

The assault force comprised three of the four sticks in the group, making up a force of about 40 men. **Right:** On their way to the target, the men prepared for action at the barn of forest keeper R. Pronk.

Gasselte, just east of their base in the woods. One detachment, stationed in the rectory of the village church, was in fact the headquarters controlling the units of the Nationalsozialistische Kraftfahr-Korps (National Socialist Motor Corps, NSKK) stationed in occupied Holland. Commanded by a German officer, Obersturmführer Klaus, it consisted mostly of Dutch Nazi collaborators. The French decided to raid the enemy HQ, drawing up a plan for a daylight attack from three sides to start at noon.

Emerging from the wood and advancing through the gardens, the various groups, some 40 men in all, cautiously approached the rectory. However, as they began going around the house they were spotted by the NSKK men who opened fire with rifles and a machine gun, wounding Sergeant

Right: Pronk's forester's house and barn stood on the edge of the Gieten woods, just inside the trees on the north side of what is today Bosweg. Both buildings have since been pulled down but Willem van Hemmen, who as a seven-year-old heard the gunfire of the fight at the rectory and who today lives on Bosweg, pointed out to us where they stood.



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The attack was a decisive success, the NSKK detachment surrendering after a short, sharp skirmish. This blurred snapshot was taken at the rectory shortly after the end of the battle when the men radioed back the outcome of their action to the command post in the wood.

Georges Briand and killing Caporal Fernand Bégue. At Appriou's order, two of his men, Caporals Marcel Urbain and Louis Goudivèze, charged across open ground and threw high-explosive and smoke grenades through the front windows, after which the rest of the SAS group closed in, firing their weapons and throwing more grenades. Soon the enemy garrison came out, hands in the air and surrendering. Four of the NSKK had been killed, three wounded and ten captured. The attack was a complete success. Taking their POWs, a staff car that stood parked in front of the building, and the body of Caporal Bégue with them, the paras withdrew back into the woods.

The attack had an aftermath that could have had serious consequences. As soon as the French had left, the locals started plundering the German headquarters. However, two of the NSKK men had escaped capture by hiding in the basement and they witnessed the pillaging from there. When a Luftwaffe company arrived in the late afternoon to re-occupy the village, they reported what they



Left: One trooper had been killed in the assault, Caporal Fernand Bégue, hit by a bullet in the throat. His body was carried back to

the wood camp and buried, wrapped in a parachute. **Right:** Today a memorial in front of the rectory commemorates Bégue's loss.



Above: This picture was taken at the site of the action a few days later when the SAS men returned to Gasselte after link-up with the ground army. The rectory building can be seen through the trees. **Right:** They were sitting on the garden fence of the house next-door, No. 1 Dorpsstraat.

had seen and the German commander, a Hauptmann Willke, thereupon rounded up all 300 men of the village in the Protestant church next to the rectory, threatening to kill them with hand-grenades. The burgomaster, Jan Eldert Tuin, although a member of the NSB (Dutch Nazi party) and appointed by the occupying authorities, bravely pleaded with Hauptmann Willke to refrain from doing so. When the latter then threatened to execute every tenth man in reprisal for the pillaging, the 16 culprits gave themselves up. They were taken to Assen prison but, surprisingly, nothing further happened to them and they were liberated when the Canadians arrived a few days later.





Left: The leaders of the three sticks involved in the attack, pictured as they marched back to their camp (L-R): Lieutenant Jean Appriou, Lieutenant Michel Legrand and Capitaine Pierre Gramond. *Right:* The ten prisoners taken at the rectory were



taken along into the woods. In front are the two officers captured, Obersturmführer Klaus and Untersturmführer van de Bent, the latter a Dutchman. Most of the personnel in the NSKK detachment were in fact Dutch collaborators.



Lacking a POW cage, the prisoners were roped together using parachute cord. Only the two officers, who had given their parole not to escape, were left untied. On the left stands the German staff car that stood in front of the rectory and was

used to bring back Caporal Bégue's body. Bégue's field grave can be seen in the background, marked with a white cross. (In 1949, his remains were repatriated to his home town of Antananarivo on the island of Madagascar.)



Left: The prisoners tried to fraternise but the French gave them a cold shoulder. Identified here are Soldat Dominique Quénouelle from Legrand's stick (with carbine) and Soldat Emil



Soupé looking into the camera. *Right:* Conversing with the prisoners here are (L-R) Lieutenant Appriou, Sergeant Marcel Tricard and Aspirant Guy Merlo.



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Corporals Louis Goudivèze and Marcel Urbain from Appriou's stick. It was their action, charging across open ground in front of the rectory and lobbing grenades through the windows, that had decided the fight at Gasselte.



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Each regiment had been issued with four wireless transmitters and as it happened the radios of both the 1er Squadron and HQ Squadron of the 2ème RCP ended up with this group in the Gieten wood. (L-R) Soldat Troller and Marcel Mougne from Lieutenant Appriou's stick operated the 1er Squadron radio, code-named 'Archiviste 11'. On April 9, Capitaine Gramond used his wireless link to arrange a re-supply drop by Typhoon fighter-bombers, particularly to replenish his dwindling stock of ammunition.



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Caporal Charles Collignon, Caporal-Chef Georges Lalis (from Gramond's stick) and Sergeant André Renaud operated 'Archiviste 36' of HQ Squadron. Lalis is turning the handle of the radio's dynamo and Renaud, with headphones, is sending and receiving the Morse messages. (The man on the left has also been named as Soldat Emile Soupé).



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Above: Two brothers meet in combat: Lieutenant Henri Stéphan, leader of stick No. 6, and Aspirant Victor Stéphan, assistant medical officer in stick No. 3. Henri had evaded France in the summer of 1942, had reached Great Britain in May 1943 and had joined the Free French paratroops in July 1943. He had already seen action in Normandy (where he was wounded in combat) and in eastern France and the Ardennes. His brother had joined the SAS from liberated France and was relatively new to the unit, having only gained his parachute wings in December 1944. There were quite a few pairs of brothers in the French SAS, mainly because many replacements were recruited from local Maquis groups. *Left:* Sergeants Georges Briand and Louis le Goff, also from Appriou's stick, man the Bren. Many sticks on landing found that the Bren guns dropped with them in containers were still covered in their factory grease which had to be cleaned first, leading to loss of precious time on the first night.

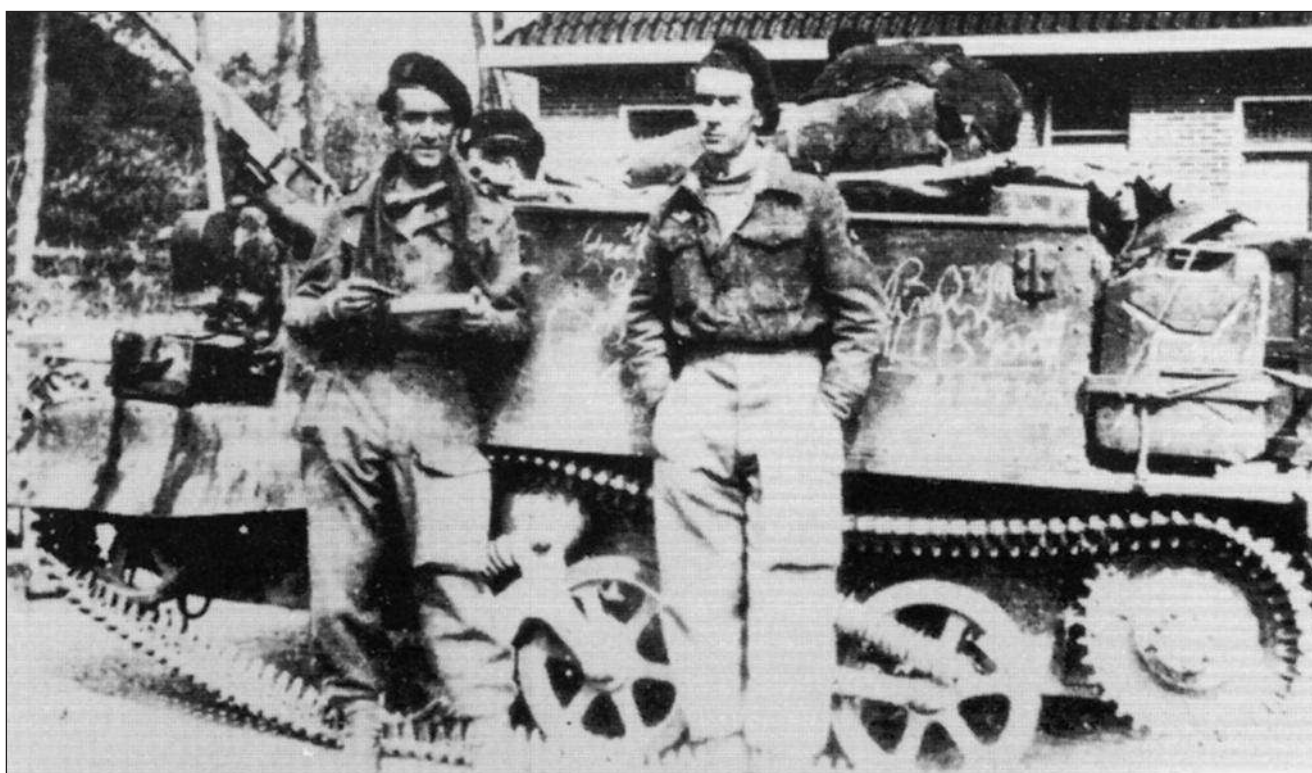


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Right: The Protestant Church at Gasselte where the Germans assembled 300 of the village's male inhabitants in order to find out who had pillaged the German headquarters in the rectory after the French raid. The German commander, Luftwaffe Hauptmann Willke, announced deadly reprisals if the culprits did not report in. After a few anxious hours, during which the Nazi burgomaster of Gasselte pleaded passionately for the life of the hostages, the 16 offenders came forward and they were driven off in lorries south to Borgen, where they were locked up in the building of the local ULO secondary school. The next day they were marched back northwards ten kilometres to Gieten where they were put in a cold-storage railway truck in the marshalling-yard, the lack of ventilation nearly suffocating them until one man succeeded in opening a small ventilation grill. The following day, the train drove them to Assen, where they were incarcerated in the local jail. Fortunately for them, liberation came before worse happened to them.



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Above: The SAS force in the Gieten woods held out until April 12 when they met armoured cars of the 8th Reconnaissance Regiment (14th Canadian Hussars), the vanguard of the Canadian 2nd Infantry Division, at Rolde, west of the woods. Canadian carriers thereupon brought all the SAS troops to Rolde. Gasselte was liberated the next day, April 13, when this picture was taken in Dorpsstraat. First to enter the village, at 4 a.m., was again the 8th Recce Regiment but the Canadians stayed only for a short while, soon moving out again northwards to Gieten. At 8 a.m. they were followed by a column of the 1st Polish Armoured Division, notably Cromwell tanks of No. 2 Squadron of the 10th Mounted Rifles under Captain Jan Salwa, who had been probing north looking for a place to cross the Buinen-Schoonoord Canal. *Right:* The Bren carrier stood in front of the same house where the SAS troopers were photographed earlier (see page 16) eating their rations.



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Left: At Rolde the 45 prisoners taken by the four sticks during their various actions and ambushes were handed over to the Canadians.



Here they are being marched off to the rear. Right: The house at No. 15 Hoofdstraat has been altered but is still recognisable.



The inhabitants of Rolde were out on the street to celebrate their liberation. Note the two SAS Jeeps in the background.

The SAS force in the Gieten wood continued their road ambushes as before. The evening after their raid on Gasselte, two Typhoon fighter-bombers of No. 146 Wing (from airfield B-89 at Mill) dropped four supply containers to replenish their ammunition, food and medical supplies. The following day, April 10, laying an ambush on the Rolde to Gieten road, they shot up a Red Cross ambulance of the Organisation Todt, wounding and capturing a German medical officer. On the fifth day, April 12, the Canadian 8th Reconnaissance Regiment (14th Canadian Hussars), spearhead of the Canadian 2nd Infantry Division, reached Rolde, finally relieving the paras. By then they had amassed a total of 45 POWs which they handed over to the Canadians.

Right: The house on the left is in fact the same as the one seen in the previous photo.





WYBO BOERSMA COLLECTION

Above: The Jeeps were those of Jeep Platoon Betbèze, which had been operating out of Coevorden since April 11, and on the 12th sent patrols to scout out the villages of Borger, Gasselte and Rolde and the town of Assen. This is Jeep M5834315, manned by Aspirant Marcel Edmé and Soldat Etienne le Chevalier with Soldat Pierre Thonnerieux at the wheel. Standing on the right is Lieutenant Appriou. **Right:** The one behind was M4230250 crewed by Caporal-Chef Jean Contet, Soldat Paul Gautray and Caporal Alain Papazow (AKA as Alain le Corre, a pseudonym adopted because he was Jewish) at the wheel.



WYBO BOERSMA COLLECTION

The Jedburgh team jumping with the 2ème RCP landed near Hooghalen, on the regional boundary south of Assen. They had a mixed fate. Major Harcourt was captured on the first day. Captain Bestebreurtje sprained his ankle and was out of the battle (he spent four days and nights hiding and crawling about until finally picked up by Dutch farmer Jan Schutten, who hid him in his house until liberation on the 12th). However, Captain Ruys van Dugteren and Sergeant Somers, the radio operator, had better luck. They were found by forest-keeper Teun Leever, a member of the Knokploeg Drenthe-Noord, the main armed resistance group in this province, who brought them to a hide-out in the woods near Amen. For the next eight days, Ruys van Dugteren radioed through intelligence brought in by the resistance men and women. He also organised an arms drop, a Stirling of No. 38 Group dropping 22 containers to a reception committee of 15 men on a DZ just two kilometres from the Nazi concentration

Right: Today just an unobtrusive parking spot on Hoofdstraat, close to the main road junction in the centre of Rolde.



ATB



Above: While waiting for transport to the SAS rendezvous point at Coevorden, the French troopers stayed in the Rolde village school. Six members of stick Gramond posed for a group picture in the school yard (L-R): Soldat Stanislas Frás, Caporal-Chef Georges Lalisse (the radio operator), Sergeant Marcel Tricard, Sergeant Roger Fuzeau (who had broken his jaw in the parachute drop), Soldat Jean Molle and Soldat Marcel Legendre.

camp at Westerbork on the night of April 10/11. After a hasty weapon instruction by Ruys and Somers, the resistance men used the weapons to harass the Germans until the arrival of the Canadians two days later.

On the night of April 8/9 (D+1), the one stick that had failed to take off the previous night — No. 23 of the 2ème RCP under Aspirant Pierre Lagèze — was dropped east of Smilde (i.e. some ten kilometres too far to the west and in the wrong regimental zone). One man, Sergeant Jean Marie Ravenel, got his parachute entangled with that of a container and he fell to his death. Another man, Caporal-Chef Raymond Guyon, broke his knee. The others found help, Dutch farmer Enge Voortman picking up Guyon with his horse and cart and hiding him at his farm until liberation. Enge's brother, Jan Voortman, found the rest of the stick in a wooden summerhouse, and suggested that they seize the bridge over the Drentse Hoofdvaart (known as the Veenhoopsbrug) at Smilde, which carried the Assen to Meppel main road. After some persuasion, Lagèze agreed. On the evening of April 10, the French paras silently

Right: The following day, April 13, another Jeep platoon of the 2ème RCP — the two vehicles under Capitaine Moulié — arrived in Rolde to help carry the men back to Coevorden. Identified on the back of this Jeep are (L-R): Soldat Legendre (left rear), Caporal Goudivèze (with carbine), Aspirant Merlo and Sergeant Le Goff.



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The school (which stood behind the photographer) has since been replaced with a modern apartment building but the house with the thatched roof in the background still stands at No. 1 Schoolstraat.



WYBO BOERSMA COLLECTION

Right: Of the four-man 'Jedburgh' team that jumped with the 2ème RCP, only two members — Dutch Captain Carel Ruys van Dugteren and British radio operator Sergeant Claude Somers — were able to contribute to the action. Picked up by forester Teun Leever, the leader of the armed resistance group of the villages of Amen and Rolde, the two men set up a command post in the woods, passing back intelligence brought in by the underground workers and organising an arms drop to the resistance. Among other things, the Dutch Interior Forces group appropriated the saloon car of SS-Brigadeführer Eberhardt Schöngarth, the Befehlshaber der Sicherheitspolizei und Sicherheitsdienst (Commander of Security Police and Security Service) in the Netherlands, which had been ambushed by stick No. 8 of the 3ème RCP under Lieutenant Edgar Tupet-Thomé along the Drentse Hoofdvaart canal on April 9. Schöngarth was the highest Gestapo officer in occupied Holland and the one responsible for the massive retaliation shootings at De Woeste Hoeve after the ambush of SS-Obergruppenführer Hanns Rauter the previous month (see *After the Battle* No. 56). Soon after, the resistance group posed for the photographer with their prize (L-R): Teun Leever, 'Jedburgh' Sergeant Somers, Daan Meenken, Swijtze Postma (with hat), Hillegienus Komduur, two unidentified men, and Jan Feijen. *Right:* The picture was taken near Leever's house, vaguely seen in the background of the wartime photo. It still stands at the entrance to the Dianaheide holiday park, two kilometres south-west of Amen. Leever started this campsite after the war.



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approached the bridge, killing one German and capturing three of the bridge guard detail. Supervised by the French, Jan Voortman and another Dutchman, Jan Daling, removed the explosive charge, dropping it into the water. Thereupon the paras and their POWs withdrew back into the woods.

That evening, a strong force of 40-60 Germans returned and re-mined the bridge with explosives. The following day, April 11, they decided to blow the span. However, the charge failed to go off, so they sent some men to fetch a new detonator from Assen. While they were away, Jan Voortman and his father boldly sneaked back to the bridge and let the explosives drop into the canal a second time. When the Germans returned, they were much surprised, and angered at the sabotage, but

had no choice but to go back to Assen for yet another demolition charge. Lagèze decided to intervene. When the Germans returned in the afternoon, his stick lay waiting and opened up on them, driving them away in panic. The Germans returned in the evening but this time

the paras withdrew. However, when the Germans tried to carry the explosives to the bridge in a wheelbarrow, the French attacked them again. The bridge was never blown and was still standing when the Canadian spearheads reached Smilde on the 13th.

Right: At the village of Zuidlaren, about midway between Assen and Groningen, stands an unusual SAS memorial. It marks the field where a stick of the 2ème RCP that had landed in the extreme north of the regimental area — No. 18 under Lieutenant Jean Lasserre — became embroiled in a fire encounter with a large German force on the morning of April 9. They had been betrayed by farmer Hovenkamp in whose barn on Lageweg they had spent the night. One man, Soldat Paul Duquesne, was killed at the farm and ten others taken prisoner. Only Lieutenant Lasserre and four other men, one of them wounded, got away. Unveiled on April 9, 2017, on the 72nd anniversary of the action, the memorial also commemorates stick No. 19 which also came down south of Zuidlaren. Commanded by Adjutant Louis Bourrel, it found shelter at a farm along the Gieten road but the farmer, a member of the Dutch Nazi party, also betrayed their presence to the Germans and the entire stick was taken prisoner. The memorial, which names the members of both sticks, stands on Lageweg, across the road from No. 19.



ATB



The 1er Squadron of the 3ème RCP was the hardest hit of all units deployed in 'Amherst', losing 35 men killed, captured or wounded out of 105. Stick No. 1 under Lieutenant Albert Rouan thought they had found safe shelter at the Anniehoeve, a lone farm in the flat open countryside of Zeijerveld.

THE 3ème RCP

The 1er Squadron of the 3ème RCP, comprising sticks Nos. 1-7, landed in the far northern corner of the regimental zone, between Assen and Norg, and found itself in a very awkward position from the start. This part of the country was very flat, cut by numerous canals and ditches, and without woods to find concealment, the only hiding places being provided by small copses and farms that dotted the countryside.

Stick No. 1, led by Lieutenant Albert Rouan, was able to assemble only 13 men, one of whom had broken a leg in the jump. Two men could not be found. With no cover anywhere, they approached a nearby farm, the Anniehoeve on Binnenweg outside the small village of Zeijerveld, and the inhabitants allowed them to hide up in a large barn, where they settled in among the straw. At dawn four Germans arrived at the farm to collect milk. They must have seen or heard something, or the farmer had betrayed the French, for two hours later a strong German

force arrived, which surrounded the farm and opened up on the barn with machine guns. The Germans called on the French to surrender, and when that remained unanswered, they set fire to the barn. Hopelessly trapped, the SAS men boldly attempted a break-out but this was smothered in fire. All were taken prisoner, ten of them wounded in the hail of bullets and hand-grenades.

Stick No. 2, led by Lieutenant Joseph Ferchaud, landed on top of a German convoy moving along the Assen to Groningen main road and was completely scattered, most of the men being taken prisoner and only Ferchaud making good his escape.

Stick No. 3 under Sous-Lieutenant Jean Valayer landed inside Assen, coming down among houses of Sluisstraat on the western edge of town. Finding ten Germans in a nearby farm shed, they quickly took them prisoner. One man in the stick had broken an ankle, and Sergeant Marc Loï was missing (he would survive in hiding in Assen until liberation). Guided by farmer Lammert

Slofstra, Valayer and his 12 troopers started out westwards towards their assigned DZ, taking their prisoners along. After tramping through the night, they hid up in an isolated barn on Koelenweg belonging to the Mulder farm. By then, Valayer had lost the tail of his stick (including two of the POWs) and had only two of his men left, Sergeant Jean-Jacques Doal and Soldat Ibrahim Azem. However, during the morning four strays from other sticks joined them: Soldats Marcel Lévêque and Robert Spina (from Rouan's stick No. 1), Soldat Jean Pierre Munch (stick No. 5) and Caporal Pierre Bévalot (stick No. 7). Later that morning farmer Reint Mulder discovered the men, and soon a small crowd of civilians stood outside the barn, fraternising with the paras.

Valayer and his men stayed in the barn throughout Sunday and Monday. However, the man assigned to guard the eight POWs on the first night fell asleep and, on waking up, found that they had escaped. It was either them or two Dutch Landwachters who had passed with a horse and cart on Sunday that went to alert the Germans, for early on Tuesday (April 10) a force of Germans and Landwachters surrounded the barn and opened up with machine guns. After an hour, they fired tracer bullets into the thatched roof which set the building on fire. Hopelessly trapped, the seven paras attempted a break-out on both sides of the barn. However, the doors at one end were locked and the men here, Valayer, Munch and Spina, burned to death inside the building. Azem, Bévalot and Lévêque were killed as they rushed out on their side. Only Doal survived, out of ammunition and being taken prisoner. (The other ten men of Valayer's stick, under Sous-Lieutenant Robert Raillard, would hold out near Bovensmilde until link-up with the ground force on the 13th).

Stick No. 4, led by Sous-Lieutenant Pierre Poli-Marchetti, was dropped the furthest north of all, coming down between the villages of Norg and Peest. As they searched for their containers, they came across a small airfield (the Luftwaffe reserve airfield of Peest), which they saw was heavily guarded. A mid-morning, one half-stick went to look for their objective, reputed to be a V1 launching site. They found an installation which they thought was their target and, although it looked dismantled, made sure to destroy it. (Allied intelligence was wrong. In actual fact, there were no V1 sites in this part of



However, they were betrayed and a German force with machine guns surrounded the barn where they had hidden up (seen here at centre). They refused all calls for surrender and, when the Germans set fire to the barn, made a desperate attempt to

break out. Caught in a hail of bullets and hand-grenades, ten of them were wounded and the entire stick was taken prisoner. Right: A small metal plaque, affixed to the barn wall by the French SAS Veterans Association, commemorates the tragedy.



Right: An almost identical but even more deadly tragedy occurred at another barn, less than two kilometres away from the Anniehoeve. Farmer Reint Mulder had a stand-alone barn on Koelenweg. Here on April 10, seven men under Lieutenant Jean Valayer, the leader of stick No. 3, were also betrayed. The barn was surrounded by a force of Germans and Dutch collaborators and then set on fire, but when the men inside tried to break out, the door at one end turned out to be blocked and three men burned to death inside the burning building. Of the four that managed to get out on the other side, three were killed and one captured. The incinerated remains of the three men who perished inside the barn — Valayer, Soldat Jean Pierre Munch and Soldat Robert Spina — were buried near the burned-out building.



The barn was rebuilt and a house added to it later. Today, a plaque on the barn commemorates the names of the six victims.

Holland). At dusk, the stick encountered German troops searching the area and in the ensuing fire-fight four men, including Lieutenant Poli-Marchetti, were separated from the group. Sergeant Charles Lévêque took

charge of the stick and the following morning, with the help of two Dutchmen, Bertus Gelling en Roelof Reinders, found a good place to hide up. For the next week, the SAS men lay low during the day and laid road

ambushes at night. On the fourth day, the four missing men re-joined them, hungry and exhausted from being chased. Not until April 14, the seventh day, were they finally over-run by Canadian forces.



Above: Capitaine Charles Picard, the 1er Squadron commander, found on assembly that his stick leader was missing (Lieutenant De Sablet, drowned in an irrigation ditch near Smilde — see page 8) and that he was well off his target. With the flat open countryside offering little or no cover, they eventually hid up in an area of low underbrush known as De Fledders and for the next six days attempted to mount ambushes and radio back intelligence on enemy columns passing their hide-out. These snapshots were taken on the first day. *Right:* Picard (centre) and his men with Jacob Lubbers (with cap), a Dutch farmer who together with his son Jan was held in custody for a while by the French.

Right: 'Amherst' was all about securing bridges for the Canadian ground force. However, with the Germans blowing virtually every one of the 150-odd bridges in the province, the SAS were able to secure only very few. A resounding success was achieved at the village of Appelscha, where Lieutenant Maurice Duno and his men of stick No. 12 seized and held the drawbridge over the Opsterlandse Compagnonsvaart canal.

Stick No. 5 under Capitaine Charles Picard, the squadron commander, on landing found that they were in a wide expanse of fields completely devoid of cover. Four men were missing (Lieutenant De Sablet, drowned; Soldat Munch, killed with Valayer; Soldat Jean-Marie Battesti, captured by the Germans, and Soldat Marcel Fabert, killed in a lone encounter with the Germans at nearby Zuidvelde). Finding that he was five kilometres south of his DZ, Picard led his men north and at daybreak hid up in an area of low underbrush known as De Fledders near the Norgervaart canal. There they stayed for another six days, passing back information via their wireless set and attempting to lay ambushes on the roads at night, until finally relieved by Canadian forces on April 13.

Stick No. 6, led by Sous-Lieutenant Paul-Marie Boiteux, came down 18 kilometres south of its planned DZ, and south of the Oranjekanaal. With daylight, they spotted a large factory building, the potato-flour mill at Oranje. A Dutch cyclist told them it housed a German unit and that there was a bridge across the canal in front of it. By now civilians had found their containers but the

Right: The Stokersverlaatbrug as it is called remains exactly as it was in 1945.



WYBO BOERSMA COLLECTION



ATB



WILLEM GERLACH

Left: Local doctor Willem Gerlach had a camera and he took numerous snapshots. Here Duno and his men stand at the northern end of the bridge. The traffic signs giving directions to Assen, Meppel and Steenwijk are indicative of the bridge's



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importance to regional traffic. Right: The house that stood at the northern end of the bridge — the bakery of Hendrik Stoker — has been pulled down, the gap creating space for a new road leading northwards.



Left: Duno's men pictured in front of the house and (right) at the garage of the Café Hulst on the other side of the canal.

Bren guns in them had first to be degreased. That done, they went to scout out the mill but, as they approached, the Germans opened fire on them and five of the SAS men were captured, one of them wounded. Pulling back, the stick found refuge in a farm barn. Sergeant Pierre Juillard detracted the pursuing Germans by opening fire from the outside, being wounded and captured in the act, but stopping the Germans from searching any further. After they had left, the remaining nine SAS men made the barn their base from where they laid night ambushes for four days until overrun by the Canadians on the 12th.

Stick No. 7, commanded by Lieutenant François Boulon, came down near the correct DZ but landed almost on top of a German convoy moving on the Assen to Norg road and, on assembling, found that one man was missing (Caporal Bévalot, subsequently killed with Valayer). They set up a base in a small wood near the village of Norg but on the second day, April 9, were attacked by a German force with machine guns, grenade-launchers and flame-throwers. Three men were wounded, one of them, Soldat André Boudé, dying of his wounds. The remnant of the stick moved east, towards Assen, but early next morning (April 10) was again attacked by Dutch SS. Three more men were wounded and all were captured. Two of them, Lieutenant Boulon and Soldat Robert Dedieu, were executed alongside Soldat Jean Loeillet (from stick No. 22 of the 2ème RCP), one German and ten civilians (seven resistance men and three black marketers) in the Assen municipal sports grounds later that day. Only five men escaped capture, being overrun on the 13th.

In all, the 1er Squadron suffered the highest losses of any SAS squadron in 'Amherst': 11 killed, at least 27 captured (13 of them wounded) plus one more wounded — 39 men out of 105, a loss rate of 37 per cent.

Further south in the 3ème RCP sector, the 2ème Squadron was mainly tasked with securing bridges. One of the most-successful ones was stick No. 12 under Lieutenant Maurice Duno. Dropped not far from their DZ, they took five hours to assemble. As they marched eastwards to their objective, the village of Smilde, they passed through the village of Appelscha where they found a sturdy draw-bridge (the so-called Stokersverlaatbrug) over the Opsterlandse Compagnonsvaart canal. It was undamaged and unguarded, so Duno

Right: The two houses on the far bank stand unchanged.



On the third day, April 10, a patrol sent out by Duno contacted Capitaine Pierre Sicaud, the 2ème Squadron commander, who had collected men from various sticks in a wood south of Appelscha. They joined Duno's force at the bridge. Here Sicaud (centre) holds up a Dutch flag to which a small banner with the Cross of Lorraine, symbol of the Free French, has been tied.





Left: Dutch underground workers, members of the Knokploeg Drenthe-Noord (with white armbands), proudly pose with their allies and liberators. (L-R): Jan Bulthuis, unknown, Ritze Vos, unknown, Soldat Albert Rambeau, Sous-Lieutenant Pierre Bourdon (from stick No. 11), Sous-Lieutenant Louis Brunet

decided to dig in and try to hold it. With a wood just two kilometres away, he felt safe enough in case a hiding place was needed against a stronger enemy force.

For the next three days, Duno and his 14 men held on to the bridge, shooting up German vehicles that unsuspectingly approached their position. The first one, a car that emerged out of the village that first morning, was riddled by Duno's Bren gunner, killing the occupants, one of them a Major. The second one, appearing the following morning and engaged at 100 metres' distance, stopped

and two Germans emerged with their hands up, one of them again a Major. The third, a bus that approached on the road running parallel with the canal from the direction of Smilde, was first halted with two Gammon bombs, one in front of the vehicle and one behind, and then engaged with the Bren. One occupant was killed, the others surrendered.

Throughout this period, the stick sent out patrols, looking for other paras and capturing isolated Germans. On the third day, they contacted Capitaine Sicaud, their

squadron commander, who was still blinded from the drop, and who had assembled men from various sticks in a Dutch resistance hide-out (known as the 'Prince Bernhard Barracks') south of Appelscha. Sicaud decided to have his force join Duno's stick at the bridge, making the Café Hulst his command post. By that day, the total number of Germans captured had reached 47. Tjamme Rooks, a farmer who lived 400 metres from the bridge, had offered his pigsty and this is where they were kept, guarded by two paras.



Left: On April 13, a troop of armoured cars of the Canadian 18th Armoured Car Regiment (12th Manitoba Dragoons) reached Appelscha and relieved the SAS force. This Staghound was pictured on the northern bank of the canal.



Right: People pass into history but bicycles remain. In 1952 both Jan Bulthuis and Ritze Vos were awarded the Dutch Bronze Cross for their resistance work.



In the background stands the Mulder Brothers flour-mill, on the roof of which the SAS men had set up a machine-gun post. **Right:** The flour-mill remains to link past and present. The view is westwards.



Left: Locals swarm around the Canadian vehicles in front of the Stoker bakery, now unfortunately no longer standing. **Right:** Today a memorial to the Régiment de Chasseurs



Parachutistes SAS stands on the south bank of the canal, a few metres from the bridge. It was unveiled in April 2015 on the 70th anniversary of the liberation.



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Another stick of the 3ème RCP, No. 13 led by Lieutenant Albert Vidoni, came down near the village of Haulerwijk, 12 kilometres north-west of Appelscha. Having captured four Germans at a farm, they proceeded to shoot them in cold blood — an act that abhorred the Dutch locals who witnessed it. After dawn, the stick was attacked by a large German force. One man was killed, five were captured, four of them wounded, and the rest of the stick was dispersed. Soldat Henri Pintaud is today commemorated on the war memorial in the Eikenhof Cemetery in Haulerwijk (above). Lieutenant Vidoni, wounded in the hand and now all on his own, found refuge in the villa of Lambertus Kok, the burgomaster of Oosterwolde. Although a member of the Dutch Nazi party, Kok did not betray him but warned the local doctor who treated Vidoni's wound and notified the local resistance. Their leader, Roel Voortman, brought Vidoni to another safe house in the village of Haule where he stayed for three days. On April 13, Voortman took Vidoni and two other stray SAS troopers that he had picked up — Caporal Raymond Hauser and one other man from Lieutenant De Sablet's stick No. 5 — on bicycles to join Capitaine Sicaud's group at Appelscha. *Top right:* En route there, in the village of Oosterwolde, they were photographed amid a swarm of excited civilians by the local dentist, Homme Zuidersma. On the bikes are (L-R) Caporal Hauser, the unidentified trooper (behind Hauser), Roel Voortman (carrying Vidoni's rifle) and Vidoni (with hand in sling).



HOMME ZUIDERSMA



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The photo was taken in the centre of the town, on the corner of Brinkstraat with Molenweg, just short of the canal bridge.



WYBO BOERSMA COLLECTION



WYBO BOERSMA COLLECTION



WYBO BOERSMA COLLECTION

Left: Patrolling the woods south of Appelscha, men of Lieutenant Edmond Hubler's stick No. 9 came across a Jewish family from Amsterdam which had been in hiding in a forest hut since December 1943. Jozef and Mietje Lezer and their two

children, 17-year-old Mia and eight-year-old Philip, were elated to see their liberators. *Centre:* Here mother and daughter pose with Lieutenant Hubler. *Right:* Mia and her mother with the other officer in the stick, Sous-Lieutenant Marc Boyé (far right).



ATB

Another important canal bridge that was saved by the SAS parachutists was the so-called Veenhoopsbrug over the Drentse Hoofdvaart at Smilde, six kilometres east of Appelscha. Although in the 3ème RCP zone, it was secured by a stick from its sister regiment. Aspirant Pierre Lagèze's stick No. 23 of the



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2ème RCP had been unable to take off on D-Day so they jumped the following night, April 8/9. One member of the stick, Sergeant Jean Marie Ravenel, got his chute entangled with a supply container dropped by his aircraft and he fell to his death. He still lies buried in the Kerkenveld Cemetery at Smilde.



The bridge they saved was also rescued because a local man, Jan Voortman, on two occasions cut loose the demolition charge and let it drop in the water — the second time almost under the nose

of the Germans! Lagèze's stick harassed the German bridge detail and, through various attacks, prevented them from re-mining and blowing the span until the arrival of the Canadian ground force.

With so many men, and so many prisoners, Sicaud radioed for resupply and two Typhoon fighter-bombers of No. 146 Wing dropped four supply containers on April 11. Two days later, on the 13th, armoured cars of the Canadian 18th Armoured Car Regiment (12th Manitoba Dragoons) reached Appelscha and relieved the SAS force.

Another stick of the 2ème Squadron, No. 8 under Lieutenant Edgar Tupet-Thomé, came down near the Berkenheuvel wood outside the village of Diever, 12 kilometres south of Appelscha. On the second day, April 9, they ambushed several German vehicles on the road along the Drentse Hoofdvaart canal, including a motorcycle combination that turned out to contain important documents. They also, in company with men from Capitaine Sicaud's stick, attacked a German barge and a river tug that came sailing up the canal, sinking both vessels with grenades and gammon bombs and killing or capturing the crews. That same afternoon, at the request of the local resistance, they went out to arrest the collaborationist burgomaster of Diever, Pier Obe Posthumus, tying him to a tree.



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The swing-bridge, which crossed the canal at a skew angle, has since been removed to be replaced by a modern drawbridge 100 metres south of the old one. This is where the old bridge was located.

Right: Initiated in the last month of the war, 'Amherst' witnessed the brutal oppression that characterised the last stage of the Nazi occupation of Holland. The Germans reacted ruthlessly to the landings, burning down farms and executing civilians suspected of having assisted the SAS troopers. One such incident occurred at the village of Diever, 16 kilometres south of Appelscha. In the afternoon of April 10, a company-size German force was preparing to enter the village to quench unrest that had arisen between locals, who considered themselves liberated by the French paras encamped in the nearby woods, and Dutch Nazi sympathisers. Just at that moment a patrol from Lieutenant Edgar Tupet-Thomé's stick No. 8, which had been alerted by a local resistance leader, opened up on the Germans at the eastern end of the village, killing and wounding several. Realising the size of the enemy force, the French soon broke off the fight and Thomé quickly moved his bivouac deeper into the woods. However, the Germans, enraged by the incident, descended on the village, randomly rounded up 11 male inhabitants, lined them up and shot them out of hand. One man, Koop Westerhof, miraculously survived. Hit by two bullets, he played dead until he could get away after dark. Today a monument on Bosweg, on the spot where the executions took place, commemorates the ten victims.



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However, the following day, just as they were engaging a group of Germans at the eastern end of the village, a much-larger German force, about 150 strong, fell down

on Diever, forcing the French to disengage. In an act of reprisal, the enraged Germans arrested 11 civilians, lined them up along the edge of the local cemetery and summarily

shot them. Only one man survived the execution. Thomé's men retreated further into the woods, and subsequently joined Sicaud's and Duno's force in Appelscha.



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An even worse incident occurred that same day further south in the 2ème RCP area. Stick No. 14 under Sous-Lieutenant Francis Nicol had landed in the Spaarbankbos woods near the hamlet of Toldijk, just north of Hoogeveen, and assembled at the farm of Jan Vos on Wijsterseweg. Heavily attacked by German troops from the town on April 9, they broke off the fight and moved eastwards, guided by a Dutchman, Koert Dekker. After they had gone, the Germans searched all the farms on Wijsterseweg, shooting three members of the Scholing family and fatally wounding the mother. They then rounded up 15 men suspected of having helped the French and marched them off northwards. That evening, at Eursinge, one man, Hayo Wubs, tried to escape

but he was shot. The following morning, April 10, the group reached the small village of Spier, where they were handed over to a detachment of Ordnungspolizei under command of a man named Jung. Shortly afterwards, the 14 men were led a short distance into the woods and executed. Today, there are two memorials commemorating the tragedy, one on Wijsterseweg at the farms where the men were rounded up (above left and right) and one just north of Spier where the 14 were shot (below left and right). The former, dedicated in April 2011, lists the 19 victims from this community. The cross at Spier, already unveiled in April 1948, included two more men found shot in the Spaarbankbos wood and thus states the number of victims as 21.



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Right: The day after the murder of the civilians, Spier became a scene of combat when a large group from the 3ème RCP under the command of the battalion commander, Lieutenant-Colonel Jacques de Bollardiére, occupied the crossroad village. They had come from the nearby woods where five sticks had congregated and where this picture was taken. Looking into the camera on the left is Major Jean Simon, the battalion second-in-command, who would be killed at Spier a few hours later.

Some 12 kilometres to the south-east from Diever in the 3ème RCP sector, five sticks of the Squadron de Commandement (HQ Squadron) all came down not far from the Meppel to Assen main road, north and south of the village of Spier. The sticks involved were Nos. 19 (Lieutenant-Colonel De Bollardiére, the battalion commander), 20 (Capitaine Gilbert Paumier), 21 (Sous-Lieutenant Jacques Dreyfus), 22 (Capitaine Claude Valières) and 23 (Sous-Lieutenant Lothaire Grumbach).



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The French troops dug in around the crossroads, making use of a large earthenwork that the Germans had constructed for use as

an emplacement for an anti-tank gun. At rear is the Café Ten Buur.

Colonel De Bollardiére set up a command post in the woods west of Spier and gave out orders for sticks and individual stray soldiers to assemble there. By the third day, April 10, his force had grown to about 30-40 men and, expecting the arrival of the Canadian ground force shortly, he decided to occupy Spier. Positioned astride a main road, the crossroad village was obviously an important objective. De Bollardiére asked for air support but this was refused because of the policy of 'not shooting up Dutch villages unless it was a tactical necessity'. He decided to go ahead anyway.

That evening, his men attacked the village, driving out the enemy, killing some and capturing a few, at the cost of two wounded. On one corner of the Spier crossroads stood the Café Ten Buur. In the preceding week it had been a German command post and the

Right: The café, today Brasserie Spier, still stands at the crossroads.



ATB



Left: Major Simon was killed when a large German force attacked Spier from the north, having just taken over manning a Bren gun after its operator, Sergeant Claude Campan, got a bullet in the head. Today, a symbolic field grave by the

side of the road marks the spot where the two men fell. **Right:** For over six decades, the plaque named only Simon but in 2010 the text was amended to incorporate Campan's name as well.



Having been relieved in the manner of the US cavalry in the Old West, the SAS troopers relax on the edge of the gun pit. The Dutch girls are (L-R) Geesje Smit, Femmie Smit, Ans (an evacuee from western Holland) and Roelfien Ruben.

Capitaine Gilbert Paumier (standing left) and men of his stick pictured after the action. The exact location is unsure.

Germans had built a large open dugout across the road from it. Here the paras took up position.

The following morning, numerous curious civilians were milling around the crossroads so when Pieter Cort van der Linden, the former mayor of Groningen (who was in hiding from the Germans), reported in, De Bollardië asked him to organise a security team to check on any collaborationists who might be spying for the Germans. The previous day, April 10, the Germans had executed 14 civilians (they had been arrested near Hoogetveen on the 9th in reprisal for helping French paras), and the corpses were still lying in a nearby wood. Enraged by the atrocity, De Bollardië asked the Dutch to remove them for burial.

At 1 p.m., a force of about 200 German Fallschirmjäger was seen coming towards Spier down the Assen main road. The French waited until they were 50 metres away and then opened fire. In the sharp battle that ensued, the SAS suffered nine casualties, two of them fatal: Sergeant Claude Campan, the Bren gunner, killed by a bullet in the head, and Major Jean Simon, the battalion second-in-command, wounded in the head after he

took over the weapon (he died in a hospital in Hoogetveen that evening). The French were running out of ammunition and about to be overwhelmed when — 'in the best manner of the films' (as the Canadian Official History put it) — armoured cars of the 8th Reconnaissance Regiment arrived and drove

away the Germans. It was a timely rescue at a critical moment. As Brigadier Calvert later put it in his report: 'In attacking and taking Spier, De Bollardië showed great offensive spirit but, in view of the size of his party and lightness of his weapons, he did perhaps bite off more than he could chew'.

Right: The thatched roof in the background is that of the Zanting farm, which stood across the road from the Cafe Ten Buur. Much altered, it is today the Hotel de Woudzoom.





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Just as had happened elsewhere in Europe, 'Amherst' saw regular warfare mixed with the settling of scores between patriots and Nazi collaborators. A particularly dark incident occurred outside the small village of Punthorst, in the far south-western corner of the 'Amherst' area, on April 8. Two sticks of the 3ème Squadron of the 3ème RCP, No. 15 under Sous-Lieutenant Jacques Bouffartigue and No. 16 under Aspirant Gérard Lagallarde, had landed south of the village and joined up with a resistance group under Jos Bonvanie. After consultation, they decided to arrest the several families living in the area that were members of the Dutch Nazi party NSB. Two men, Soldat Yves Loichot from Bouffartigue's stick and Dutch resistant Kees de Roos, went on a motorbike to arrest three families. As they arrived at the farm of the Santing family at No. 16 Dekkersweg (above), the three sons of the family, all NSB landwachters (militiamen), entrenched themselves in the house, opening fire on their opponents from a first-floor window. Loichot and De Roos, who had taken cover in the ditch across the road, were both killed by a bullet in the head. A girl next door, Lenie Spijkerman, sped to the Staatsbossen woods to inform the SAS paras of what had happened. When Caporal-Chef Raoul Loichot heard of the death of his twin brother he, together with Sergeant Jacques Noël and a few resistance men, immediately went to the farm.

Entering the house, they heard noise in the hayloft and riddled it with fire. Four men — the three Santing brothers, Jacob, Willem and Harm, and their father Hendrik — staggered out, bleeding from multiple wounds, and were finished off on the spot. But this was not the end of the bloodshed. That evening, enraged by the loss of their compatriot, Jos Bonvanie and his resistance group executed four others: Hendrik Santing's wife, two members of another arrested NSB family (Klaas and Rutger Prins) and the son of a third family, 15-year-old Alex Duif. Within a few hours ten people had died.



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Shortly after liberation, two crosses were erected to mark where Yves Loichot (left, seen here with his brother Raoul on the left), and Kees de Roos (right) had fallen.



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Left: Eight days later, on April 16, Loichot and De Roos were buried in the town of Meppel. Here the cortege passes through Weerdstraat on its way from the Stephanus Church to the Hesselingen Cemetery. Leading the procession (and wearing a paratrooper's helmet) is Jos Bonvanie. Above: A tranquil street, unchanged in over seven decades.



The procession entering the small cemetery.



Still a secluded burial ground on the edge of Meppel today.

In the far southern end of the 3ème RCP zone lay one of 'Amherst's' main objectives, the Luftwaffe airfield at Steenwijk-Havelte. The 3ème Squadron had assigned two of its five sticks to secure it. One of them, No. 17 commanded by Lieutenant Yves Gayard, on assembly found that two men were missing and one other had broken his ankle in the jump. Also, they had landed five kilometres too far to the north-east, near the village of Ruinen, so they started making their way south-westward. Early next morning, April 9, they de-mined a sluice bridge over the Hoogeteense Vaart, cutting the cables and dropping the aircraft bombs in the water. Shortly after, two Canadian scout cars of the 18th Armoured Car Regiment (12th Manitoba Dragoons) arrived from the south and asked them to guard the bridge for the night.

Next morning, mounted on the armoured vehicles, Gayard's men went to reconnoitre the airfield. However, they found it pitted with bomb craters and totally unusable. In adding the aerodrome to the list of targets, No. 84 Group intelligence had badly fouled up, overlooking the fact that 114 B-17s of the US Eighth Air Force had dropped 271 tons of high-explosive on it on March 24, completely destroying the runway. With the Allies now so near, the Germans completed destruction by wholesale demolitions that continued until the 12th, then abandoned the airfield.

THE END OF THE OPERATION

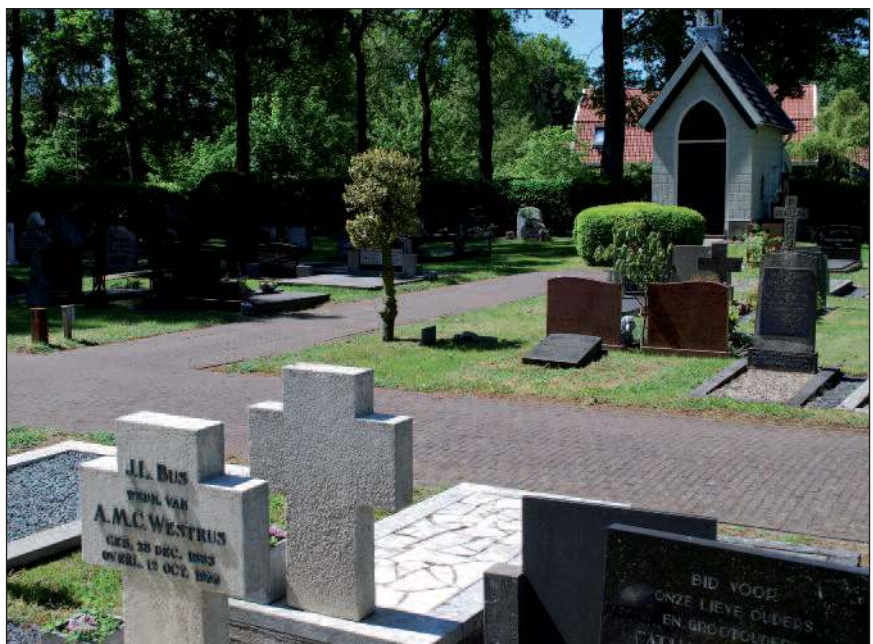
The contact established by the 12th Manitoba Dragoons on the early morning of April 9 was one of the first meetings between the ground forces of Canadian II Corps and the French SAS. The very first link-up had occurred the day before, April 8, when a section of four armoured Jeeps of the 5th (Belgian) SAS Battalion, operating out of Coevorden, contacted a stick — No. 4 of the 2ème RCP under Lieutenant Jean Striber — that had been dropped so far south that they landed near Dedemsvaart, south of the Hoogeteense Vaart. By April 10 the Canadian armoured cars had still contacted only about 70 parachutists (four sticks) in the Meppel area.

It had been assumed that the SAS troops would be reached by ground forces in not more than 72 hours, hence they had landed with rations for only three days. However,

Right: Loichot no longer lies at Meppel as his remains were transferred to the French military cemetery at Kapelle in the south-western Netherlands in 1949. The cold-blooded shootings at Punthorst were juridically investigated by the Dutch and French authorities after the war. The resistance men who had executed their fellow-countrymen were sentenced to three months in 1952 but they never served time, the charges being dismissed. The SAS veterans were questioned by the French police but never prosecuted.



Jos Bonvanie pays his respect at the grave of Yves Loichot.



Right: The stick that came down furthest south in the 3ème RCP area was that of Lieutenant Pierre Baratin. It landed just south of Balkbrug, a crossroad village on the Ommen to Meppel road. Their main action was sabotaging the Meppel to Zwolle railway line and stopping an enemy train. Here, members of the stick pose for a snapshot with two local girls at Balkbrug. Standing (L-R): Soldats Antoine Murati and Octave Bernault, Caporal Robert Prévost, an unnamed Dutch girl, Soldat Henri Lagarde and a Dutch girl that acted as a guide. Kneeling: Soldat Antoine Padovani.

when this period was about to expire on the 10th, only about a quarter of the French paras had yet been overrun. Considering whether he should ask his troops to fight their way back to friendly lines, Brigadier Calvert, who was still superintending the operation from First Canadian Army Headquarters, decided against this, as this would mean coming out in the open, crossing canals, etc. Instead he ordered that sticks with casualties or in difficulties were to lie low and await relief, and that the others should continue to harass the enemy. To increase the chances of relief, he asked General Crerar to deflect part of the 1st Polish Armoured Division west into the 'Amherst' area. The Army Commander however decided that he would not be justified in diverting an important part of his force from its main object in order to save what was comparatively a small unit, particularly as food was reported to be plentiful where they were operating; and Calvert, in retrospect, agreed that his judgement had been sound.

Despite Crerar's negative decision, a part of the Polish division did veer north-west into the 'Amherst' area. Early on April 10, the 10th Mounted Rifles, the division's armoured reconnaissance regiment, supported by a squadron of the 10th Dragoons Motor Battalion, set off north-westwards from Coevorden 'to rescue some paratroops who, having completed their mission, were in a very precarious situation behind the enemy lines'. At 1 p.m. they reached Witteveen, south-east of Westerbork, where they found the group of the 2ème RCP under Major Puech-Samson, by now 64 strong. Mounted on the decks of the Cromwell tanks, the SAS men were brought back to Coevorden.

Anticipating the return of paras that had been overrun, and with Steenwijk airfield (the originally planned rendezvous point) unusable, Colonel Prendergast and a small staff had on April 9 set up a small headquarters, known as Tac 20 Liaison, at Coevorden in readiness to receive them, evacuate wounded, and arrange for their return to the UK.



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Today, the old Ommen to Meppel road is only a minor connection whereas the lateral road through Balkbrug has become the dual-carriage N377 Zwolle to Coevorden highway. This is looking westwards down Zwolseweg.



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Left: The same men and girls posing at the local windmill. **Right:** Locally known as De Star, the mill stood on Molenweg just east of the main village crossroads but by 1974 it stood



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so surrounded by high buildings that it was moved a few hundred metres further east to a new location more out in the open.



Left: The sticks that had landed in the southern zones were also the first to link up with the ground forces, scout cars of the 12th Manitoba Dragoons already reaching Balkbrug on April 8. The Canadian main force reached the village three days later. Here



Kangaroos of the 1st Armoured Personnel Carrier Regiment and Sherman tanks of the 10th Armoured Regiment (The Fort Garry Horse) queue up in the canal-lined village street. **Right:** Time has brought few changes to Ommerweg.

With the cancellation of the Jeep drop, SAS Main HQ had immediately started organising to bring the Jeeps to Holland in other ways. Ten of them were flown over to the Continent on April 8 and they arrived at Prendergast's headquarters at Coevorden on the 10th. Manned with personnel from sticks that had already been overrun, they were organised in platoons of two or three vehicles, eight of the Jeeps going to the 2ème RCP and two to the 3ème. Starting on April 11, they sent out search patrols to the north and north-west, locating and bringing back missing sticks and evacuating wounded. Several of the Jeeps had encounters with German troops and came back with prisoners. One Jeep party went as far north as Groningen in a vain search for SAS troops that had been reported marching through the city as POWs.

The French were helped in this task by their colleagues of the 5th (Belgian) SAS Battalion. Some 280 strong and equipped with 33 armoured Jeeps and several 15cwt lorries mounting 3-inch mortars, they had already reached Coevorden with the Canadian 4th Armoured Division on the 6th, but then had to wait until the arrival of the 1st Polish Armoured Division before they could start their planned role of operating ahead of the armour (Operation 'Larkwood'). On April 9, one of their Jeep platoons already shortly contacted Puech-Samson's group,



Canadian Army photographer Lieutenant Daniel Guravich pictured French paratroops who 'beat the Canadians to Balkbrug by a few days' talking to the Kangaroo crews.



Left: On April 10, the 1st Polish Armoured Division sent a task force into the 'Amherst' area from Coevorden, the 10th Mounted Rifles and the 10th Dragoons Motor Battalion despatching three mixed columns to contact the SAS paratroopers. Around noon, No. 1 Squadron of the 10th Mounted Rifles reached the group of the 2ème RCP under battalion commander Major Puech-Samson at the Witteveen woods (see page 9). Mounting the squadron's



Cromwell tanks, the 64 SAS men were brought to Coevorden, where the SAS troops were to rendezvous after relief. At the village of Dalen, halfway there, Puech-Samson (centre) stopped to talk with the 10th Mounted Rifles commander, Major Jerzy Wasilewski (right), on top of the latter's command tank. **Right:** The meeting over, Puech-Samson climbs down from the Cromwell, while a Dutchman chalks another greeting on the rear of the tank.



Map showing all the towns and villages mentioned in our story. The Assen to Hoogeveen railway line (marked bold) was the boundary between the 2ème RCP and 3ème RCP, the former dropping east and the latter west of it.



Left: Once they became available on the third day of the operation, the SAS Jeeps did yeoman service in reinforcing the parachute sticks, evacuating their wounded and sending out long-range patrols. By April 13, Jeep Platoon Betbèze was operating well north of the original 'Amherst' area, fighting with the Canadian forward troops east of Groningen. This is Jeep M5834315, which we earlier saw at Rolde (see page 21),



pictured at the village of Noordbroek on April 15. In the back are Aspirant Edmé and Soldat Le Chevalier, and looking into the camera is Soldat Thonnerieux. *Right:* They stood parked on Markt, the village square, but both houses seen in the wartime photo have since disappeared. All that remains is the house beyond, the former village teacher's house, now the local library.



Coevorden lies close to the Dutch-German border and, as they waited for the other sticks to dribble in after relief, few of the SAS men could resist making a short trip to set foot on enemy soil. These men were pictured at the bridge over the Vechte

river at Laar, a small village just across the border south-east of Coevorden, captured by the Canadians on April 5. As evidenced by the white flags, the road-block had not been defended. The uniformed German is a customs officer.

then still at its base in the Witteveen wood, who reported their casualties from the Westerbork raid but said they needed no further help. On the 11th, another Jeep platoon drove out to Orvelte and rescued a group from the 2ème RCP that was fighting in the Schoonloo woods.

By April 14, the Canadian 2nd Infantry Division had wholly passed through the 'Amherst' area and had started the battle for Groningen (which would prove difficult and last for four days). This meant that all of the SAS troops had been overrun and indeed by the 15th — eight days after the start of the operation — most of those not killed or taken prisoner had reported in. On being assembled at Coevorden, the SAS troops

Right: The bridge has been replaced by a modern version. This is the road entering the village from the south.





After a few days, the SAS troops were brought to Nijmegen, there to await air transport back to Britain. Soldat Albert Rambeau and Caporal-Chef Maurice Layral of Luitenant Duno's stick No. 12 of the 3ème RCP (left) and Caporal Paul le Guilly of



Sous-Lieutenant Henry Corta's stick No. 10 of the 2ème RCP (centre) all had their picture taken on Keizer-Karel-Plein, the large roundabout square in the centre of town. Right: The same view at the turnoff to Groesbeek today.



Left: Sergeant Bernard Carry and friends from Aspirant Edmé's stick No. 11 of the 3ème RCP. From the third day of the operation onwards, they had crewed two vehicles of



Jeep Platoon Bethèze. Right: They were in Molenstraat, the street that runs into the heart of Nijmegen from the Keizer-Karel-Plein.



Left: Soldat Albert Frantz and Caporal-Chef Guy Pasquet from Major Puech-Samson's stick at the big road bridge over the Waal river, one of the main targets of that other airborne undertaking in the Netherlands, Operation 'Market-Garden', of seven months earlier. Right: The famous bridge today.



were moved back to Nijmegen, there to await air transport back to the UK. It took some time to arrange aircraft but by April 21, 14 days after their take-off to Holland, the majority of the French SAS were back at their base camps near Ipswich.

'Amherst' had been quite costly for both sides. As for casualties inflicted on the enemy, the two SAS battalions claimed a total of 269 killed, 70 wounded but unconfirmed, and 187 taken prisoner. In material damage they claimed 29 enemy vehicles destroyed or captured and three railway lines cut. (The actual number of Germans killed was much lower, about 40).

French losses added up to 33 killed, 35 wounded and 92 missing — a grand total of 160, meaning a loss rate of nearly 23 per cent. All of the 92 missing had in fact been taken prisoner. Most ended up in northern Germany, the wounded in a Kriegsmarine hospital in Wesermünde near Bremerhaven, many others first in the Sandbostel POW camp, from which on April 16 they were transferred to the Milag-Marlag internment camp at Westertimke near Bremen (see *After the Battle* No. 137), where another group had already arrived on the 14th. Here, 67 of them were liberated on April 28. The wounded were not liberated until May 7.



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On April 20, air transport became available and the SAS were taken to Eindhoven aerodrome (Allied airfield B-78) where Dakotas of No. 46 Group stood waiting. The remnants of stick No. 20 of the 2ème RCP posed for a last snapshot on the runway before take-off

to RAF Woodbridge in Suffolk: (L-R) Lieutenant André Varnier, Sergeant-Chef Paul Golder, two unidentified men (either Sergeant Manuel Olivier, Caporal André le Bihan or Soldat Emile Coriton), Sergeant Roger Berteloot and Soldat Charles Schweitzer.

It is difficult to make a precise assessment of Operation 'Amherst'. The Canadian commanders, Crerar and Simonds, seemed satisfied with its results; General Gale of I British Airborne Corps and Brigadier Calvert were full of praise. Gale considered that the effect on enemy morale was 'considerable' and

concluded that 'numerous troops who were badly needed for defence against advancing ground forces had to be deployed over a very wide area against these French regiments.' There was much criticism on the planning and preparation of the operation, especially among French commanders and junior offi-

cers, but in general the execution was judged a success. However, the question remains whether the Canadian advance would have been any slower without the use of the SAS troops. With the Germans being as disorganised as they were, it probably did not make much difference.



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The main memorial to Operation 'Amherst' is the French SAS monument in Assen. Located on the corner of Balkenweg and Oude Hoofdvaartsweg, it was dedicated on the

40th anniversary of 'Amherst' in April 1985. A plaque on the monument records the names of all 33 men of the 2ème and 3ème RCPs that fell in the operation.