

The Battle for the Scheldt

Allan George introduces our themed section by detailing the four-phase strategy to clear the Scheldt, arguably the most critical campaign in the west following Normandy.

As the Allies continued toward the German border, their seemingly unstoppable advance was stalling. The situation regarding effective supply was becoming critical. Hoping to secure the remainder of Belgium, advance through the Netherlands and into northern Germany, 21st Army Group was teetering at the end of a lengthy logistical chain trailing back to Normandy. Further south, the Americans encountered the same problems. In the weeks following Operation Market Garden, some of

BELOW: LVT-4s AND M29C WEASELS ON WALCHEREN.
(D CARSON/PROVINCIAL ARCHIVES OF ALBERTA)

the most bitter fighting seen since Normandy occurred during a series of operations designed to clear the estuary leading to Antwerp. With this port open, adequate supply could be restored. What would become known as the Battle of the Scheldt was essential.

A Strategic Necessity

Following Germany's decisive defeat in the Falaise Gap, the Allies made rapid advances across France and Belgium. However, supplies still had to come into Normandy and be driven the long distances forward. These lines stretched ever longer and were increasingly unable to support advances by all

allied armies. The Channel ports were stubbornly held by the Germans, who before – eventually – yielding, destroyed the infrastructure. Dunkirk did not capitulate until May 9, 1945 – after Germany's surrender.

Friction between the various commanders about who should receive logistic support underlay the Supreme Allied Commander, General Eisenhower's growing dilemma on the strategy to be adopted. The Americans favoured a broad advance, while the British – under Field Marshal Montgomery – pursued a narrower strategy thrusting deep into Germany, reaching the great prize of Berlin first. His aim, in part, was for Britain to



RIGHT: LANDING CRAFT ON WALCHEREN. (TOPFOTO)
 BELOW: ONE OF THE COAST GUNS THAT KEPT
 THE SCHELDT CLOSED TO MARITIME TRAFFIC.
 (DUTCH NATIONAL ARCHIVES)

be seen as the principal victor. However achievable or realistic this was, neither strategy could find success unless the pressure on the increasingly stretched and fragile logistic chain was eased. The capture of Ostend on September 28 helped, but seizing a closer, more intact and larger harbour was essential. The obvious answer was Antwerp, and Eisenhower directed Montgomery to open the port.

The principal port of Belgium would always have had to be taken; its capture was a primacy as far back as 1942 when the first plans for the liberation of Europe were formulated. However, Montgomery had a higher priority; leaping across the Rhine to enable him to push his narrow advance. He committed to Market Garden, the attempt to capture bridges across the lower Rhine by airborne and land assault, and so pursued the opening of Antwerp with less urgency.

As the Allies advanced, the Belgian Resistance captured Antwerp's port before the Germans could destroy its facilities and the city was liberated by British 11th Armoured Division on September 4. However, the port could not be brought into immediate use, the Scheldt estuary was heavily mined and the Germans held its north bank and maintained a presence



around Breskens to the south.

Hitler had ordered German 15th Armee to hold the mouth of the Scheldt and formidable defences and coastal artillery were constructed on Walcheren, securing control of the estuary. While these heavy guns were operational, it was impossible to clear the river.

The importance of the port was very much recognised by the Germans. Hitler designated the island a fortress and ordered it to be defended to the last man, while on October 7 General von Zangen, 15th Armee, addressed his men. Each day Antwerp could be denied, he decreed, would be vital, writing: "The defence of the approaches to Antwerp represents

a task which is decisive for the further conduct of the war... After overrunning the Scheldt fortifications, the English [sic] would finally be in a position to land great masses of materiel in a large and completely protected harbour. With this materiel they might deliver a deathblow to the north German plateau and to Berlin before the onset of winter."

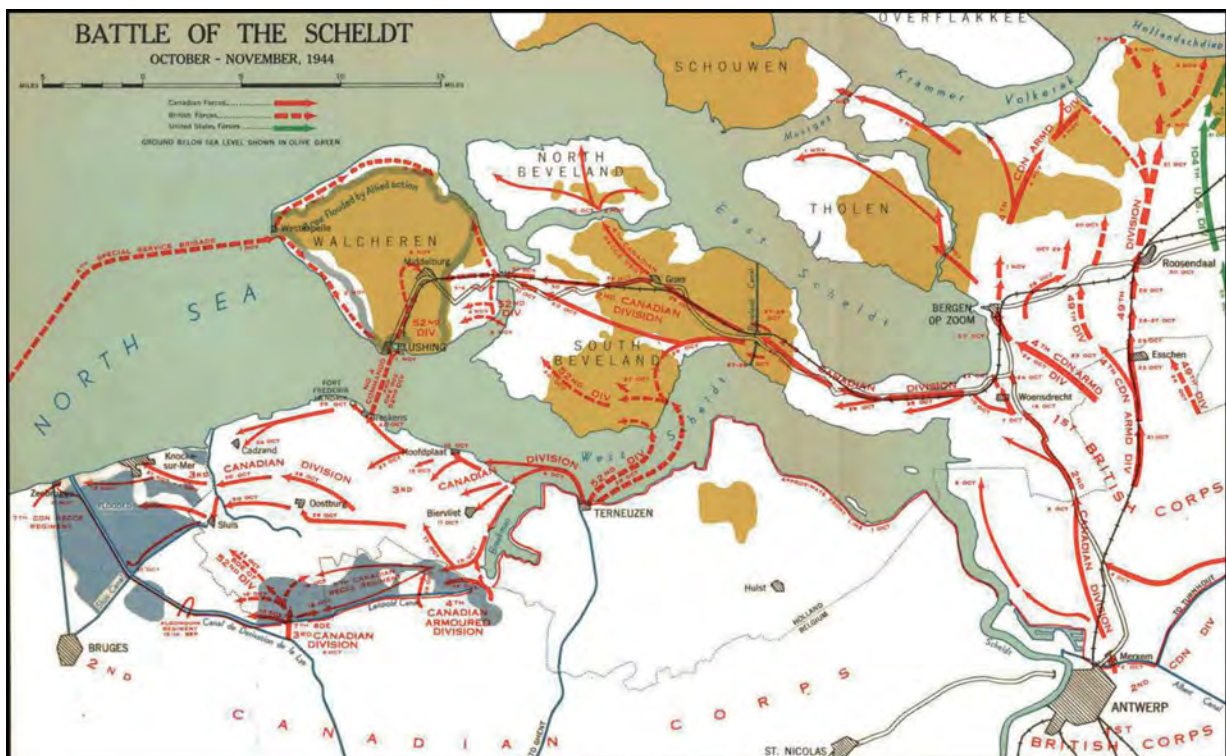
First Canadian Army, under the temporary command of Lieutenant-General Guy Simonds, was allocated the unenviable task ahead. The force was also made up of British and Polish units and faced well-established elements of the German Army. The coming battle had four phases: the securing of access to South Beveland, and three operations: Switchback, Vitality, and Infatuate.

Isolate The Enemy

South Beveland is on the north bank of the Scheldt, in part opposite Antwerp. It forms an isthmus leading to Walcheren and capturing it would isolate enemy forces. Canadian 2nd Division's objective was to clear the area north of Antwerp and secure access to the peninsula, beginning on October 2. It encountered a German battlegroup which offered stiff resistance, particularly around Woensdrecht. Preventing the Canadians going north was a key German objective and they would inflict heavy casualties on the attackers.

The Canadians attempted to advance in unending rain over flooded land littered with traps, mines and lacking in cover. The Black Watch battalion of Canadian 5th Brigade was virtually wiped out in an unsuccessful attack on October 13 in what would come to be known as 'Black Friday'. They were followed by the Calgary Highlanders who were more successful and managed to take the station





at Korteven. It took several days of heavy fighting until, on October 16, Woensdrecht was secured.

The next objective was to capture Bergen op Zoom to the north. As the Canadian 4th Armoured Division rolled forward, it encountered the German 85th Infanterie Division and engaged in vicious fighting. In a single day, one company of the Canadian Lincoln and Welland Regiment lost 50% of its strength. The fighting finally ended on October 24.

Clearing Breskens

The Breskens Pocket was at the mouth of the Scheldt on the south bank and surrounded the ferry port of Breskens. The Germans established a formidable defence along the Leopold Canal to south of the town. Their presence, along with that on Walcheren, closed the Scheldt. Many units from 15th Armee had concentrated around Breskens awaiting ferrying to the north. The pocket was held by the 64th Infanterie Division and they had considerable quantities of artillery and anti-aircraft weapons.

The Canadian 3rd Division began Operation Switchback to clear the pocket on October 6. The first challenge was to establish bridgeheads across the steep-sided canal, with 7th Brigade crossing in two places. Determined resistance slowed progress, but eventually the gap between

the bridgeheads was closed and the Canadians consolidated their foothold. To pile on pressure, Canadian 9th Brigade mounted an amphibious landing at Hoofdplaat, east of Breskens.

Gradually 3rd Division made progress, despite skilful delaying actions. The polder of the pocket – a maze of canals and ditches – was waterlogged, the Germans deliberately destroying the dykes. The effect was to restrict movement to raised roads and deny the Canadians the chance to freely use tanks or manoeuvre. Despite the capture of Breskens on October 21, the Germans fought on until Generalmajor Knut Eberding was captured on November 2, with resistance ceasing the following day.

The third phase fell to Canadian 2nd Division, tasked with capturing the peninsula running between South Beveland and Walcheren. Vitality launched on October 24, and required the Canadians cross the Kreekrakdam Canal, which runs north-south at the peninsula's base.

The first assault was halted by the anti-tank guns of 70th Infanterie Division. However, this formation had been hastily reassembled to make good losses sustained earlier in the year. It was a low-quality unit primarily made up of soldiers suffering from stomach wounds or other gastric ailments. They were unable to hold, collapsing in the face of a second determined assault. Canadian hopes for rapid progress were dashed

ABOVE: A MAP SHOWING THE SCHELDT OPERATIONS. (LIEUTENANT C BOND/CANADIAN ARMY OFFICIAL HISTORY)

by mine-strewn ground and waist-high floodwater – the advance would be a purely infantry affair. Nevertheless, they pushed, assisted by the British 52nd Lowland Division, which assaulted to the north outflanking the enemy. By October 26, the Germans had been forced back to their next line of defence, another canal which protected Fortress Walcheren.

The Tough Nut

Ordered to be held to the last man, Walcheren was a tough nut to crack. The island was fortified with artillery enconced in concrete emplacements and garrisoned by 70th Infanterie Division. The strong defences made amphibious assault difficult, with the sea between Walcheren and South Beveland too shallow and the only land link being narrow 1,200-yard causeway little wider than a country road.

Much of Walcheren had been flooded after heavy bombing by the RAF. It was then attacked from across the causeway from the east, across the Scheldt from the south and by sea from the west in Operation Infatuate. Naval gunfire support was provided by the battleship HMS *Warspite* and the monitors, *Erebus* and *Roberts*. Air support was limited by bad visibility.

Canadian 2nd Division attacked ▶

across Walcheren causeway on October 31 after its eastern end had been taken in a night attack. Rebuffed several times, a shallow bridgehead was eventually established but it proved difficult to advance on because of the strongly dug-in defenders. The Canadians were supported by the 52nd, which managed to outflank the Germans to the south.

Early the next morning [November 2], two beach landings were made. Amphibious vehicles were used to help take the island as it was impossible to deploy tanks in strength because of the floodwater. The first took place at Vlissingen, otherwise known as Flushing, by commandos. They were joined by 155th Infantry Brigade crossing from Breskens. The other landing at Westkapelle, at the northwest tip of Walcheren, was tougher. No.4 Special Service Brigade was put ashore without too much loss, but the group of specialist landing craft assembled to give close support suffered grievously.

Westkapelle was captured the next day and after heavy fighting Domburg was also taken. The main component then moved along the coast to clear the north of Walcheren. Simultaneously, other elements moved southeast to link up with 52nd Division. Middelburg, the island's largest town, fell on November 6.

Aftermath

Resistance ceased the next day. Minesweepers were now, finally, ordered to de-mine the Scheldt. About 100 vessels

were engaged on clearing the 70-mile (113km) channel to Antwerp, enabling its port to be opened on November 28. After the first ship arrived, a steady stream of supplies revitalised the Allies' advance. In early November, Montgomery wrote to Simonds: "[Now] the operations designed to give us the free use of the port of Antwerp are nearly completed, I want to express to you personally and to all commanders and troops in the Canadian Army, my admiration for the way in which you have all carried out the very difficult task given to you.

"...You slowly and relentlessly wore down the enemy resistance, drove him back, and captured great numbers of prisoners. It has been a fine performance, and one that could have been carried out only by first class troops... I congratulate you personally. And I also congratulate all commanders and troops serving under your command. Please tell all your formations and units how very pleased I am."

The death toll was 1,736 with 4,500 wounded. From October 1 through November 8, Canadian First Army had

taken 41,043 prisoners. Its own casualties were 703 officers and 12,170 other ranks, killed, wounded and missing. Of these, almost half – 355 officers and 6,012 other ranks – were Canadians. The official history recorded: "The battle was fought under most unfavourable conditions of terrain and against a resolute enemy who fully understood the importance of the ground he was defending."

Undoubtedly the Scheldt could have been more easily cleared and Antwerp opened sooner had it been afforded higher priority. One Canadian historian, Charles Stacey, wrote: "The fight to open Antwerp had been a Cinderella operation, which for a long period had received from high allied commanders more lip-service than practical priority." Nevertheless, its capture was a strategic boon, the Official History of the Canadian Army noting: "On December 1 over 10,000 tons of stores were landed at Antwerp. It now became the principal supply port for the allied armies..."

"For the first time an unquestionably adequate administrative foundation existed for a major advance into Germany." ●

Antwerp On The Firing Line

German retaliation was swift. Not only was Antwerp's recapture a chief objective during the coming Ardennes Offensive, they also made it a target for the V2, launching the first (unsuccessful) attack on October 7.

Six days later, the city sustained its first V2 strike and they kept coming. On November 27, a British convoy was hit as it passed Teniers Square, killing 26 soldiers and 100 civilians. Weeks later, on December 16, 567 were killed when the Cinema Rex was hit.

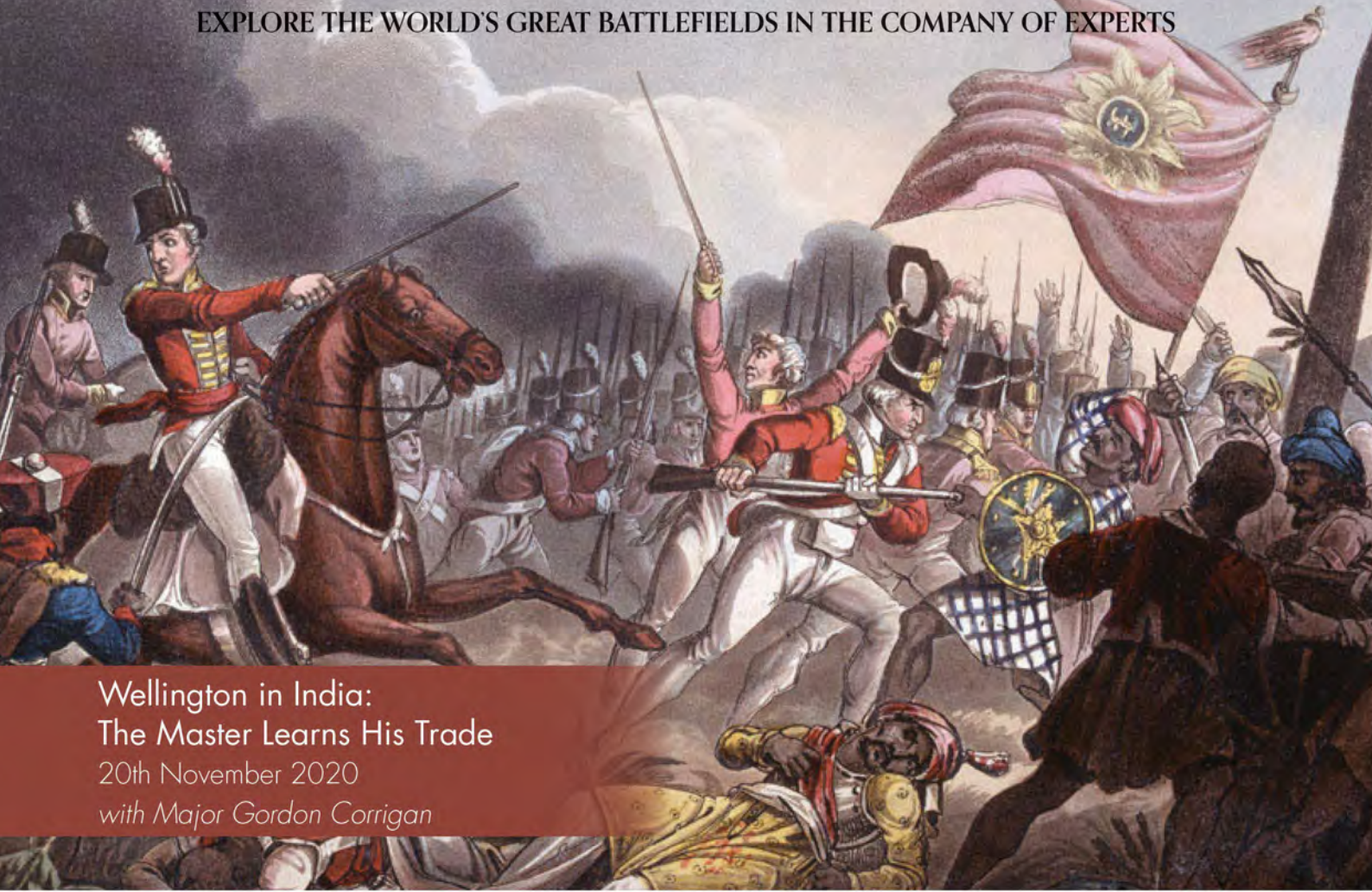
The six-month campaign saw around 1,600 V2s fired at the city – almost half of all V2s launched.

BELOW: CAPTURED GERMAN SOLDIERS UNDER HEAVY GUARD IN MIDDELBURG. (TOPFOTO)



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Breaking Breskens Pocket

Having fought all the way from Juno Beach, the Scheldt presented 1st Battalion, Regina Rifles with its toughest tasking yet – Breskens Pocket and the Leopold Canal. **Arthur Gullachsen** of the Royal Canadian Rifles details the very bloody assault.

From its breach of the *Atlantikwall* defences on Juno Beach, 1st Battalion, The Regina Rifle Regiment was engaged in frequent and bitter fighting throughout the 77-day Normandy campaign. However none of these battles compared to the ferocity of the combat encountered by the regiment during the Battle of the Scheldt.

During that bloody engagement, the Reginas played a vital role in 7th Canadian Infantry Brigade's assault on the Breskens Pocket, a so-called 'fortress' attacked between October 6-13, 1944. Encompassing the south coastline of the Scheldt estuary, this territory was one of two *Festung* (fortresses) established to deny the vital port of Antwerp to the Allies. Assaulting across a section of the

Leopold Canal near the border between the last unliberated section of Belgium and the Nazi-occupied Netherlands, this attack was intended as part of 3rd Canadian Infantry Division's main thrust to overwhelm German resistance.

BELOW: GENERAL CRERAR AND FIELD MARSHAL MONTGOMERY AT A ROADSIDE CONFERENCE, EARLY 1945. (TOPFOTO)





LEFT: THE FLOODING NORTH OF THE CANAL (AUTHOR)
BELOW: A RECCE PARTY (OF THE CALGARY
HIGHLANDERS) EAST OF ANTWERP.
(LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA (LAC))

Recognising the important port had to be denied to the Allies, Hitler decreed that German 15th Armee, formerly based in the Pas-de-Calais, establish fortresses each side of the Scheldt to control its maritime approaches. The Germans knew that despite Antwerp's loss it could still be neutralised as a strategic asset. Meanwhile, for 21st Army Group, the priorities changed. The immediate focus was now the upcoming Operation Market Garden, a series of airborne landings matched with a ground assault to secure a bridgehead over the Rhine and facilitate an advance into the Ruhr.

At this stage, the opposition appeared very weak. The Germans were perceived to be fighting small rearguard actions rather than offering up serious resistance. Allied commanders also hoped that one port in the Pas-de-Calais might be opened up, so the grave need to seize the approaches to Antwerp was not first appreciated. This changed by mid-September when it became rapidly apparent none of the French channel ports were useable. Antwerp, with its excellent harbour facilities, had to be opened. General Sir Bernard Montgomery, GOC 21st Army Group, allocated the task to First Canadian Army. ▶

While victory in Normandy and the heady pursuit of retreating German forces through late August and early September had produced an allied victory euphoria, the advance came to a halt as Anglo-Canadian forces approached the Dutch border. It was here the Germans stopped retreating in the main and despite a complete lack of resources, manpower and mobility, decided to delay – and if possible, repel the Allies.

Strategic Necessity

On 4 September Antwerp fell to the British. The efforts of 11th Armoured Division and the Witte (White) Brigade of the Belgian resistance had generated a great success for XXX Corps, as Antwerp's deep-water port facilities had been captured relatively intact. This was vital. It was hoped Antwerp could ease the logistical problems Anglo-Canadian forces were beginning to encounter as the distances from supply bases in France increased.





Initial Inroads

However, First Army was deployed far from the Scheldt; its main component, II Canadian Corps, was stretched out along the coast from Boulogne to Antwerp, besieging or screening the remaining German port garrisons that were still doggedly holding out. First Army commander, General 'Harry' Crerar, estimated it would take at least ten days to mass the four divisions and one independent armoured brigade in the Scheldt.

Back around the Scheldt, initial attempts to make inroads into *Festung Sud* (South Fortress) on the Leopold Canal were repelled by the dug-in German 245th Infanterie Division. The Algonquin Regiment was initially successful in its amphibious assault on the night of September 13 but was driven back across by heavy counterattacks the next day. The battalion suffered 148 casualties in the fighting, 60 of whom were taken prisoner.

Elsewhere, 1st Polish Armoured Division and elements of the 4th Canadian Armoured Division met

success in clearing the southern portions of Antwerp in late September, but the setback that befell the Algonquins made it clear more would be required. It was first envisioned that II Corps would take the flooded approaches to the Scheldt with two divisions, the main objectives being Walcheren Island, South Beveland and the Breskens Pocket. But, it was

at this point, on September 17, that Market Garden took centre stage and consumed attention and resource.

The Germans exploited the distraction, largely unhindered by allied air power. Despite the operations conducted by Polish and Canadian units, the German LXXXIX Armeekorps was able to evacuate from the Scheldt and avoid being cut



ABOVE: HANDHELD FLAMETHROWERS HAD BEEN USED TO COVER CANAL CROSSINGS, BUT THE WASP HAD GREATER RANGE. (LAC) RIGHT: GERMAN SOLDIERS CROSSING FROM VLISSINGEN INTO BRESKENS. (AKG IMAGES)

off, leaving others – most notably 64th Infantry Division – to fortify the area to deny Antwerp for as long as possible. The 64th was led by an experienced general, Knut Eberding, who was particularly skilled in defence. The Canadians also misjudged enemy strength. At the same time, the resources and manpower available to the Canadians were not abundant. In mid-September, Lieutenant-General Guy Simonds – now acting commander of First Canadian Army – was forced to detach his one of his two corps to support the flank of the Market Garden push. As this operation ran its course and floundered in the face of determined resistance and challenging terrain, the Scheldt steadfastly remained in German hands.

It was only by early October that II Corps had redeployed to assault the estuary. Simonds' formation now consisted of the 2nd and 3rd Canadian Infantry Divisions, 2nd Canadian Armoured Brigade (which meted out armoured units to support other infantry and rarely fought as one entity) and 4th Canadian Armoured Division. Moved roughly 90 miles

(145km) from the Channel ports, the infantry divisions and independent armoured brigade were assembled with the infantry of the 4th Canadian Armoured Division.

Simonds, as First Canadian Army commander, issued the following direction to II Corps' HQ on October 2:

“(a) Attack and destroy, or capture, all enemy remaining in the area of Belgium and Holland, south of the West Scheldt. (Operation Switchback)

(b) [On conclusion of Switchback] Develop operations with 2 Cdn Inf Div to clear Zuid Beveland.

(c) Capture the island of Walcheren (Operation Infatuate).”

Switchback

With Operation Switchback falling to 3rd Infantry Division, the challenge was four-fold. First, it would have to assault numerous water obstacles and negotiate terrain deliberately flooded by the Germans. Second, what little dry land there was would act as channelled kill-zones for German machine guns, mortars and artillery. Third, the possibility for armour to manoeuvre or even enter the battle

was constrained as it was restricted to the easily defensible raised roads atop the dykes.

Finally, the Germans had more than 65 light anti-aircraft guns of 40mm or smaller and 23 heavier 8.8cm Flak guns, the former brutally effective against infantry, the latter a lethal tank killer. Ammunition was plentiful and they had hundreds of machine guns and dozens of mortars. On top of all this, there was nowhere for the Germans to retreat – excluding evacuation by sea – so the defenders were trapped with their backs to the wall. Hard resistance was expected.

The first phase – and 3rd Division CO Major-General Dan Spry's main effort – was an assault across the Leopold Canal, tasked to 7th Canadian Infantry Brigade. The western part of the German perimeter was protected by two canals, the Dérivation de Lys and the Leopold. They ran parallel to each other until Strooiburg, where the Lys changes course and goes southeast while the Leopold continues east. ▶

BELOW: A MG42 TEAM COVERS THE LEOPOLD CANAL FROM ATOP A NEARBY DYKE. (AKG IMAGES)



BELOW: MACHINE GUNS AND FLOODED TERRAIN MADE ADVANCE A BLOODY PROPOSITION (AKG IMAGES)

The Allies had already gained a foothold to the east across the Lys, so along the frontage between Stooiburg and Moerhuizen, two regiments of 7th Brigade would assault, followed by a third. This bridgehead would capture Middelburg (Maldegem) in the west, Aardenburg in the north and Moershoofd to the east.

Then, 8th Canadian Infantry Brigade would pass through these positions to push northwest to the Sluis Canal. Two days after the canal attack a second assault was planned to draw German reserves away and weaken their counter-attacks, plus their lack of mobility would further undermine their ability to make a decisive effort. This landing on the northern shore of the pocket, across the Braakman inlet, at Hoofdplatt, would be undertaken by 9th Canadian Infantry Brigade and would utilise LVT-4 Buffalo and Terrapin transports to land troops. The 7th was then to push northeast and linkup with 9th Brigade, while 8th Brigade worked its way toward the coast.

Short On Manpower

Lieutenant-Colonel Foster Matheson, CO 1st Battalion, The Regina Rifles was first briefed about the upcoming operation while his regiment was involved in the final stages of fighting for Calais. On October 2, a recon party and company headquarters reached Celie, 2,000 yards (1.8km) south of the Leopold Canal to conduct initial planning. The Regina Rifles had recently been

reorganised into a different regiment than the one that had fought in Normandy. Its 'B' Baker Company had taken over as First Canadian Army's Headquarters Defence Company, replacing the company-sized Royal Montreal Regiment (RMR), which in turn filled the gap left in the Reginas.

The Reginas also received replacements to make up for the horrendous losses sustained that summer. However, Canadian manpower was short and the army was still an all-volunteer organisation at this time. The bottom of the reserve of trained infantry in England had been reached and reinforcements from other trades were frantically being re-trained. While enthusiastic, these former clerks, drivers and anti-aircraft gunners, were not experienced infantry.

As the final movement into assembly areas south of the Leopold was being completed, fire support preparations were also finalised. To facilitate surprise, no artillery barrage would be used but in turn the artillery allocated to subdue German batteries was massive. In support would be the 12th and 23rd (Self-Propelled) Field Regiments of the Royal Canadian Artillery (RCA), British 107th Medium Regiment, Royal Artillery, and other field regiments of the 4th Canadian Armoured Division. Artillery concentrations would be on call for pre-registered targets, each of which had an assigned codename. The man responsible for this tremendous organisational effort, Brigadier Stanley Todd, was very experienced, having organised the fire plan for 3rd Division



on D-Day and having been the Division's RCA commander since then.

Switchback would also see the mass use of a weapon the Canadians had yet to use in strength, the Wasp II. Based on the Universal Carrier and having a flame dispenser in the place of a machine gun, the Wasp II was a small, yet deadly armoured vehicle and extremely effective at subduing enemy infantry positions. A total of 27 had been assembled and it was hoped their jets of flame, effective to 140 yards, would buy enough time for the first platoons to assault the canal.

Swept By Fire

H-Hour came at 05:30hrs on October 6. Crossing over the canal in canvas assault boats in the Regina Rifles zone was the RMR and the Regina's



'A' Able Company. East of 'A' was 1st Battalion, The Canadian Scottish Regiment, which was also engaged. Each company attacked with one platoon at first, to be followed by another as the boats, crewed by men from The North Shore (The New Brunswick) Regiment – on loan from 8th Brigade – went back and forth across the 90ft (27m) canal.

The intense counter-battery barrage on German artillery and the impact of the massed jets of flame on German positions on the canal was only partially successful. While in the assault zone of the RMR, the first platoon and the reserve managed to cross encountering little opposition, 'A' Company, commanded by Major Ron Shawcross, immediately had their boats swept by fire and could not cross.

On the opposite side was a large dyke, in some places as wide as the canal. On the waterside of this the RMR – so far, the only element to cross – feverishly began to dig in. Other than the dyke, there were no terrain features to speak of, the countryside that wasn't flooded being flat farmland. By first light the Germans had regrouped and began sweeping the top of the dyke with machine guns and mortaring the RMR's shallow bridgehead. A large pillbox to the west had machine gun embrasures that swept up and down the canal with enfilade fire, causing tremendous casualties.

'D' Dog Company crossed and was established by 08:55hrs, with 'C' Charlie able to follow by 10:20. The re-grouped 'A' crossed over with its remaining men and deployed in the centre with what remained of the three RMR platoons.

ABOVE: ALLIED TROOPS PASS THROUGH THE RUINS OF BRESKENS. (TOPFOTO)

October 6 saw extremely close combat between 'C' and the 1038th Grenadier Regiment. 'C's 14 Platoon, led by Sgt Kenneth Bergin because its regular commander, Lt Jimmy Carson, was Left Out of Battle (LOB), was nearly wiped out in an attempt to move forward that evening. The sergeant recalled: "I ordered an advance and led the platoon over the top of the embankment, but the enemy fire was so heavy that those not killed or wounded had to reverse their attack and regroup on the waterside."

Shortly after discussing the situation with 'C' commander, Major Leonard Gass, Bergin returned to rally his men: "Before we could proceed, Maj Gass's runner reached me with orders to ►



LEFT: A FIELD HOSPITAL DURING THE BRESKEN LANDINGS. (D CARSON/PROVINCIAL ARCHIVES OF ALBERTA)

BELOW: FOLLOWING THE LANDINGS, LVTS MOVED HEAVY EQUIPMENT INTO BRESKENS. (NATIONAL ARMY MUSEUM)

return to his position. Just as he finished uttering these orders, a burst of machine gun bullets struck him, killing him instantly, so I ran and crawled back to Gass' trench but by the time I got there he and those with him [the company HQ] had been killed." Shortly after, Sgt Bergin was wounded and captured.

The night saw more counterattacks, with mortar and machine guns intensifying a ceaseless barrage. At 01:45hrs a Kapok bridge, which the Canadian 16th Field Engineer Company had erected to allow supplies and reinforcements to cross into the bridgehead, was knocked out.

In response, artillery was directed on to German positions with 12th Field Regiment, RCA, firing continuously with its 25Pdr guns. The regiment's batteries put in concentration after concentration, their crescendo of shells suppressing both enemy movement and artillery.

Humane Truce

The Germans continued to apply pressure. The next night, multiple counterattacks were driven off by heavy fire from the Regina Mortar Platoon combined with intense Bren and rifle fire from the reduced infantry

platoons. The quantity of ammunition spent was vast, as Rfn Denis Chisholm, of the mortar platoon, recalled: "Our six mortars had been in continuous action and in one three-hour period had laid down more than 1,000 bombs on our immediate front. This together with 12th Field Regiment, which fired 2,000 shells in one 90-minute period, gives some intensity of the battle."

The three remaining companies of the Reginas were strung out across the bridgehead with 'C' on the right, 'A' in the centre, and 'D' on the left. Captain A L Gollick recalled: "Efforts were made to gain depth by extending groups to the front, but this was impossible owing to the terrific volume of fire which answered every movement." Two British Columbia Regiment Shermans brought up to support the bridgehead were disabled as they fired across the canal; one by an 8.8cm shell, the other, curiously reported in the Regina Rifles War Diary, by sniper fire destroying its sights and optics.

The centrepiece of the enemy resistance was the village of Graaf Jan, 540 yards (500m) north. Casualties were occurring at a tremendous rate and many wounded could not be reached



or evacuated. Despite the fierce fighting, humanity prevailed with a half-hour truce at noon on October 8 allowing both sides' wounded to be collected.

It was not until October 9 that relief was finally brought to those inside the embattled bridgehead. The landing of 9th Brigade at Hoofdplaat weakened the German's defensive pressure, while 7th Brigade's third regiment, the Royal Winnipeg Rifles, also attacked and with the other two regiments slightly expanded the bridgehead. 'D' Company of the Reginas renewed the assault on the troublesome pillbox, finally silencing the bunker with PIATs on October 10. This allowed the Canadians to move west, closer to the meeting of the Lys and Leopold canals. Further assaults by the Canadian Scottish and Royal Winnipeg pushed on to the main road north to Eede and cleared Graaf Jan.

At last, the tanks could roll. The British Columbia Regiment finally advance into the bridgehead on October 14 – after 8th and 9th Field Squadron, Royal Canadian Engineers finished bridging the canals at Stooiburg. The M10 tank destroyers of the 3rd Canadian Anti-tank Regiment also moved to support the infantry.

Resistance Crumbles

At long last, German resistance started to crumble. The Reginas, now considerably under strength in spite of taking on 92 replacements continued to hold against declining opposition until 7th Brigade was relieved by the elements of the British 52nd Lowland Division on October 18.

Six days later the Reginas were redeployed to continue the advance, moving along the coast further into the now shrinking Pocket. At this point the fighting was grinding to a close and most of the enemy encountered quickly, if not immediately, surrendered. Advancing on Groede the following day, 'D' Company came across some suspicious concrete buildings, curiously mocked up to look like civilian premises with painted windows and business titles. Its commander, Major Greg Cooper, recalled: "I found the first building, larger than the others, to be full of a throng of enemy all standing

with gear all packed and unarmed as far as rifles and machine guns were concerned." He went on to say: "The enemy were soon marshalled in a long line of twos and threes and marched off along the route we had come in, 250 of them as it turned out."

Crossing the Leopold Canal was one of the First Canadian Army's most bitter engagements. It was largely an infantry and artillery contest, during which the firepower of the RCA and the determination of the assaulting infantry resisted dogged and desperate German counterattack. Regina Rifle Regiment casualties as reported for October 1944 listed 45 killed, 288 wounded, 51 missing. There were also 74 non-battle casualties (exhaustion, accidents, illness) for a total of 458, with the regiment receiving 387 replacements. The number of men lost by the Rifles is almost equivalent to four rifle companies. Not included in these figures are the losses sustained by the Royal Montreal Regiment, this formation was functioning at company strength but effectively ceased to exist following the first day.

BELOW: CLEARING BRESKENS ENABLED THE AREA TO BE USED AS A STAGING POST. (NATIONAL ARMY MUSEUM)

However, the establishment of a bridgehead drew in the majority of the 64th Infanterie and enabled the defensive efforts of the RCA and 7th Brigade to fix them in place and inflict numerous casualties. In doing so, they weakened German defences in the east, allowing 9th Brigade's landing to succeed. Breaking Breskens Pocket was a costly, but decisive, affair. From this point on, resistance crumbled as the Germans were squeezed into a fast-shrinking perimeter with their backs to the sea. *Festung Sud's* last, battered, defenders finally surrendered on November 2. ●

Captain Arthur Gullachsen, CD, PhD, is an Assistant Professor with the RMC History Department at the Royal Military College of Canada in Kingston, Ontario. A member of the Royal Canadian Regiment (RCR), Captain Gullachsen studied for his Department of National Defence-sponsored PhD in History at the University of Western Ontario 2013-2016.



Further Reading

Terry Copp, *Cinderella Army: The Canadians in Northwest Europe 1944-1945*

Charles Perry Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*

R. Daniel Pellerin, "You Have Shut Up the Jerries" Canadian Counter-Battery Work in the Clearing of the Breskens Pocket, October–November 1944" in *Canadian Military History*: Vol. 21: Issue. 3, Article 3

Mark Zuehlke, *Terrible Victory: The First Canadian Army and the Scheldt Estuary Campaign: September 13–November 6, 1944*

Gordon Brown, Terry Copp, *Look to your Front...Regina Rifles: A Regiment at War: 1944-1945* Library and Archives Canada RG 24 Volume 15,200, File 744. *1st Battalion Regina Rifles War Diary*

First Canadian Army A & Q War Diaries, October 1944. Volume 13,659. Microfilm T-7092. Daily casualty figure reports totalled

Hostile Shores

Opening the Port of Antwerp was a hugely difficult task involving the Royal Marine Commandos and other units. **Michael E Haskew** details the bloody effort to seize Walcheren.

Through the darkness Lieutenant-Colonel Cecil Farndale Phillips, RM, gazed at the assemblage of military might before him. Soon it would be unleashed on a hostile shore.

This was not the first time Phillips had been in harm's way. He led No.47 Royal Marine Commando on Gold Beach and received the DSO for gallantry in Normandy. Five months later, another formidable challenge awaited. He wrote: "Midnight, October 31, saw the force, which was about to

embark on a precarious operation, in Ostende Harbour. Here was suffused lighting by which one could discern dim shapes moving about from craft to craft and from craft to jetty... the forms of all manner of LVT, Weasels, landing craft and all the impedimenta connected with a large-scale amphibious operation. Last-minute plans both

BELOW: MEN OF THE LOWLAND REGIMENT AND THE KING'S OWN SCOTTISH BORDERERS (155TH BRIGADE) PUSH THROUGH VLISSINGEN (FLUSHING). (SGT STIGGINS/IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM)

tactical and administrative were being discussed when at about 0020 the force weighed anchors... A few miles out of Ostende the force assembled, contacted its escort force and set sail for Westkapelle."

Operation Infatuate, the seizure of Walcheren Island, was under way. The last of a series of offensive efforts to open the Scheldt and Antwerp, Infatuate proved a stern test for 47 Commando and other elements of 4th Special Service Brigade: Nos.48 and 41 Royal Marine Commando; the



attached No.4 Army; and No.10 (Inter-Allied) Commandos. On October 24, Admiral Sir Bertram Ramsay, C-in-C, Allied Naval Expeditionary Force for the D-Day operation and beyond, had released 4th Special Service Brigade under Brigadier B W 'Jumbo' Leicester to create the nucleus of the assault force.

Stalemate, Speed And Supply

For nearly two months, the Germans in Normandy held the Allies in check. The landings of June 6 had established beachheads, but progress had been slow. In late July, Operation Cobra unleashed a torrent of soldiers and tanks of the newly activated US Third Army under General George S Patton. He, Bradley, and Montgomery surged



ahead, rushing toward the frontier of the Third Reich.

Cobra succeeded beyond expectations, but as the Allies advanced their supply lines lengthened, depleting stockpiles. Although the deepwater port of Cherbourg, 350 miles (563km) away, was in allied hands, its facilities were a shambles. The Germans staunchly defended the Channel ports of Boulogne, Dunkirk and Calais after Hitler declared each one a "fortress" so the primary avenue of supply for the allied armies remained the Normandy beaches, particularly the Mulberry Harbour at Arromanches.

A Bridge Too Far

This was becoming unsustainable. As Field Marshal Montgomery's 21st Army Group fought its way north and east, the great Belgian port of Antwerp – second largest in Europe – was occupied intact on September 4. When 11th Armoured Division clanked into the city, the Belgian Resistance seized key locations. The swift movement did not afford the Germans time to destroy the harbour with its 26 miles (42km) of docks and heavy equipment.

Still, there was one major impediment to the enlistment of Antwerp in the war effort. The city is 60 miles (97km) inland from the North Sea, at the head of the Scheldt estuary. German forces held these ribbons of river and as long as they did, Antwerp was useless. Montgomery did ▶

ABOVE: ONE OF THE POWERFUL COASTAL GUNS DEFENDING WESTKAPPELLE. (OFFICIAL PHOTOGRAPH)
LEFT: LVTs WAITING AT BEVELAND PRIOR TO THE EMBARKATION OF TROOPS. (TOPFOTO)



refocused the 21st Army Group on opening the Scheldt. The delay would prove costly – had 11th Armoured continued its September advance, the Scheldt might have been cleared weeks earlier. Even with its capture, there would be some delay in opening Antwerp, the Scheldt was sown thickly with mines. It would take time to clear. Every day was critical.

The withdrawal of the German 15th Armee, facilitated by Montgomery's preoccupation with Market Garden, allowed the enemy to slip away. They left behind a division to reinforce the estuary defences, including those on the key island of Walcheren – already the most formidable of Hitler's *Atlantikwall* fortifications.

Battle Of The Scheldt

The effort to clear the Scheldt, under way by October 2, took on a renewed sense of urgency. A three-step campaign was unfolding. Operation Switchback would clear the Germans from the Breskens Pocket, just south of the Western Scheldt, while Vitality

not give priority to opening Antwerp. He was fixated on preparations for Operation Market Garden; a chance to shorten the war, but a risky gamble. The masterstroke was intended to seize bridges across the Lower Rhine and other rivers of the Netherlands, utilising them in a dagger thrust into the Ruhr, Germany's industrial heart.

While assembling forces for the ill-fated operation, Montgomery detailed Canadian First Army, under Lieutenant-General Guy Simonds, with the task of clearing the Scheldt. Without adequate supply, the Canadians managed as best they could, quickly realising First Army's task was monumental.

Commitment To The Scheldt

In early October, a simmering difference of opinion boiled over. Ramsay railed against Montgomery's neglect of the Scheldt and General Eisenhower, C-in-C Allied Expeditionary Force, wrote to Montgomery on October 9 that he must recognise "the supreme importance of Antwerp".

Montgomery chafed at Ramsay's interference, but by mid-month he



ABOVE: BRITISH TROOPS READY TO PUSH INTO THE NEXT STREET IN FLUSHING. (OFFICIAL PHOTOGRAPH)
RIGHT: LVT-4s AND M29C WEASELS MOVE MEN ASHORE FROM WAITING LCTS. (NATIONAL ARMY MUSEUM)



LEFT: CZECH HEDGEHOGS PROTECTING A BUNKER ON WALCHEREN. (MARY EVANS PICTURE LIBRARY)
BELOW: SHELLS EXPLODE AHEAD OF BRITISH TROOPS NEAR FLUSHING. (OFFICIAL PHOTOGRAPH)

included assaults north and east of Antwerp across the isthmus connecting the peninsula of South Beveland, east of Walcheren, to the mainland. These initiatives resulted in some of the toughest fighting of the war.

The ground was saturated as the Germans intentionally flooded low-lying areas that were already below sea level, impeding progress. Casualties were heavy and while

both efforts continued, Simonds worked closely with Captain Anthony Pugsley, RN, to organise Infatuate, the seizure of Walcheren, a spit of land encompassing an area just over 83 sq miles (215km²).

Planners had determined that seizing Walcheren required amphibious assaults due to the sodden, flooded landscape. The movement of troops onto and across the island would be facilitated by a variety of tracked vehicles, which became indispensable. Two points were chosen for the landings and Infatuate was divided into mutually supporting components.

Conducting Infatuate I, the army's No.4 Commando – under Lt-Col Robert W Dawson – and the attached French Troops of No.10 (Inter-Allied) Commando, with supporting armour and ancillary units, would

spearhead. They were to come ashore at Vlissingen (also known as Flushing) in the south, under cover of darkness. The 155th (Lowland) Infantry Brigade, under Brigadier J McLaren, would follow. The Commandos were to establish a bridgehead, allow the infantry to pass through and occupy Vlissingen and then turn north toward Middelburg, the provincial capital of Walcheren, linking up with the Canadian 156th Brigade advancing from South Beveland.

Infatuate II, an amphibious landing at Westkapelle, was assigned to 41, 47, and 48 Royal Marine Commando under Brigadier Leicester and the attached No.2 Dutch, No.4 Belgian, and No.5 Norwegian Troops of the (Inter-Allied) Commando. The Marines were to establish at Westkapelle, advance southeast along the coast, silencing German batteries along the Western Scheldt, and then turn northwest to the town of Vrouwenpolder.

The Vlissingen landings were slated for 0545hrs, hopefully surprising the defenders and diminishing any retaliatory barrage. The Westkapelle operation was set for 0945, since the invasion force there required a rising tide. The 10-ton, LCA (Landing Craft, Assault), capable of carrying 35 soldiers, would be the primary transportation for Infatuate I with ▶



BELOW: ONE OF THE MANY BUNKERS GUARDING THE SCHELDT FROM WALCHEREN. (MARY EVANS)

20 LCAs departing Breskens, which the Canadians had taken on October 22.

Infatuate II was to be launched from two LCT (Landing Craft, Tank) types, the 350-ton LCT(3) and 200-ton LCT(4). These vessels carried tracked landing craft, the LVT-2 and LVT-4, known to the British and Canadians as the 'Buffalo' and able to transport 30 men or 4 tons of supplies. The LVT-4 also incorporated a hinged tail ramp for vehicles or guns. These would carry the Commandos across the beach at Westkapelle. In the event, those that survived provided critical transportation over otherwise impassable terrain.

Assigned to Support Squadron Eastern Flank (SSEF), numerous other types of craft were detailed for Infatuate II, including rocket-firing LCT(R) and LCFs, armed with anti-aircraft guns. Hopefully, these craft would draw the majority of fire and return it in kind, allowing the troop-laden LVTs to reach the beach unharmed.

More than 200 landing craft and support vessels were deployed off Walcheren during Operation Infatuate. Capt Pugsley also assembled a heavy bombardment squadron to fire on shore batteries and soften up the landing areas. The elderly Queen Elizabeth-class battleship *Warspite* and the monitors *Erebus* and *Roberts* would bombard the coast with their 15in guns.

In preparation, Simonds asked the RAF to bomb dykes on Walcheren to flood inland areas and incapacitate as many German positions as possible. In early October, Bomber Command carried out multiple raids, dropping 1,000lb and 4,000lb bombs to rupture these ancient earthen barriers. The sea rushed in.

Canadian intelligence estimated Walcheren was defended by approximately 7,000 to 10,000 Germans, both army and naval contingents. Their senior officer was Generalleutnant Wilhelm Daser, of 70th Infanterie Division. The island was studded with formidable bunkers and casemates with walls several feet thick, protecting large-calibre artillery and machine guns. The beaches were littered with mines and obstacles and a no-retreat order was in place.

The dirty business of taking Walcheren, one of the least-known but most arduous fights of the war in Europe, got under way on October 31 as Canadian 2nd Division launched attacks across the causeway between the island and South Beveland. After four assaults, the Canadians established a foothold and were relieved by the 52nd (Lowland) Division. Codenamed Operation Mallard, flanking movements deepened the perimeter on the eastern edge of Walcheren in early November.

Infatuate Initiated

At 0445hrs on November 1, more than 300 British and Canadian guns clustered around Breskens began bombarding targets. As scheduled, 4 Commando rushed ashore at Uncle Beach, southeast



of the heart of Vlissingen. Swiftly they silenced a pillbox housing a 75mm gun and took out an observation bunker. The German reaction was slow, but cannon and machine guns began chattering. Several LCAs were hit. Moving rapidly, the Commandos bypassed some points of resistance, allowing the follow-on 155th Brigade to clear them. Expanding their beachhead, the Commandos advanced toward the centre of Vlissingen, 'Old Town', and encountered objectives codenamed as familiar locales for easy identification.





LEFT: LVTs FERRY SUPPLIES BETWEEN LCT 952 AND THE SHORE AT WESTKAPELLE. (OFFICIAL PHOTOGRAPH)
BELOW: BRITISH TROOPS FIGHT THROUGH THE RUBBLE OF FLUSHING, WALCHEREN. (OFFICIAL PHOTOGRAPH)

Two more days of street fighting were required to clear Vlissingen. As darkness fell on November 2, the Royal Scots assaulted the Hotel Britannia, the German command centre to the southwest of the centre. The area was 200 yards from a large breach in a dyke and heavily flooded, the Scots wading through 5ft of floodwater. They pressed their attacks on the 3rd, killing 50 Germans. By noon the following day, the 600 defenders of the gutted hotel – among the last holdouts in Vlissingen – surrendered.

Decisive Hours At Westkapelle

Meanwhile, on October 31 the assault at Westkapelle began with German shore batteries (W13 and W15, closest to Westkapelle, and W17 and W11 on the flanks) duelling *Warspite* and *Roberts*. The vessels of the SSEF gamely sacrificed themselves, drawing fire away from the LVTs. The first Commandos came ashore at 1000hrs and within a half-hour most of 41 Commando and elements of No.10 and No.48 had landed. They were under steady fire each side of a large gap blown in one of the dykes.

Captain Dan Flunder of 'A' Troop, 48 Commando, recalled vividly: ▶

Troops 1 and 2 covered the flanks while No.3 moved from the north toward 'Braemar', with two killed clearing a pillbox at daybreak. Advancing west toward the naval barracks at 'Hove', No.3 was stalled at a heavily defended line of buildings. No.4, the Heavy Weapons Troop, paused to retrieve its two 3in mortars from a sunken LCA and moved machine guns to a crossroads at 'Bexhill'. After taking casualties on the beach, 5 Troop followed No.3 through Braemar and attacked 'Worthing', a barracks near the waterfront. No.6 reached Bexhill in time to repulse several counterattacks.

By the time the 4th King's Own Scottish Borderers, 155th Brigade, came ashore, the Germans were alert. One LCA was sunk, killing all 26 aboard. Small-arms fire criss-crossed the beach. Most of the battalion's equipment got ashore, but accurate artillery fire disrupted communications. Nevertheless, four companies were moving inland before 0800hrs, clearing pockets of resistance and bolstering the Commandos.

RAF Typhoons roared in, blasting open bunkers that were impervious to anything the infantry carried, and by 1100 the situation was in hand. A roadblock at Bexhill prevented German reinforcements from

reaching the town. Artillery was hustled off LCAs and manhandled through the streets of Vlissingen. Late in the afternoon, the 5th King's Own Scottish Borderers and 7/9th Royal Scots came ashore, tightening the allied hold as fighting progressed to the town's northern edge.



RIGHT: THE 3IN MORTAR WAS A VALUABLE SUPPORT WEAPON DURING THE LANDINGS. (OFFICIAL PHOTOGRAPH)
BELOW: GERMAN PRISONERS CAPTURED DURING THE WALCHEREN LANDINGS. (OFFICIAL PHOTOGRAPH)

“Several craft in our wave were hit, including my own, and as we limped in at reduced speed there was a Buffalo on fire behind me. ‘A’ Troop had 10 casualties before getting ashore, and shells were beginning to fall pretty thickly in the gap as we landed... As I looked back I saw our Buffalos burning fiercely...”

The heavy naval bombardment had little initial effect on the big German guns, and one correspondent was awed by the spectacle: “I thought it all seemed very unreal – until a couple of German shells fell among us,” he wrote. “Guns blazed away from almost every craft and shells of every calibre went screaming to land on the shore and among the German batteries and beach fortifications. But more and more shells dropped among us.

“On an eminence to the left of the town were four large German guns in concrete emplacements, and these were shooting pretty accurately... By this time several landing craft were afire and burning fiercely. Then I saw an unforgettable sight – dozens of landing craft bearing hundreds of men wearing green berets –



the men of the famous Royal Marines. They were all singing – yes, singing – as they went into that hell of fire, shell and flying metal. ‘They’ve got guts,’ said one sailor.”

The SSEF took fearful losses with nearly 300 killed or wounded – a 29% casualty rate – but the Marines scrambled ashore as numerous LVTs blazed, a couple loaded with ammunition erupting skyward. Some tanks, including Churchill AVREs

equipped with spigot mortars and Sherman Crab flail tanks to deal with mines, foundered in the surf but others managed to come ashore. ‘A’ Troop, 41 Commando, moved along the southern edge of Westkapelle and fired on a German observation tower. A German-speaking Commando yelled for the occupants to surrender and then bolted up the spiral staircase to take the position.

‘B’ and ‘X’ Troops of 48 Commando ran the gauntlet but emerged from their Buffalos unscathed. Quickly they overran two pillboxes south of the gap and captured a radar station. Still, several LVTs were riddled with fire or had struck mines, belching smoke and flame. The LVT slated to carry the Commando machine gunners was still aboard its LCT when an enemy shell smashed it, killing the crew.

At 1230hrs, 47 Commando came ashore; three of its four LCTs were hit during the run-in and discharged their LVTs in deep water rather than beaching. In the confusion, some drifted off course, coming ashore in the wrong location. Marine Fred Wildman remembered, “Just after we landed, Jimmy Day, a huge popular chap who had a lovely sense of humour, was killed by an air burst shell.”

After fighting through Westkapelle, the Commandos advanced against stiff resistance. No.41 turned north along the dunes ringing the strip of coastline that remained unflooded, capturing batteries W15 and W17 and occupying the town of Domburg. No.48 moved steadily southeast, executing a brilliant tactical manoeuvre to capture W13. By the end of the day, these troops controlled a six-mile stretch of the Walcheren coast.





Early on November 2, 48 Commando took Zoutelande, bagging 150 prisoners. Phillips and 47 Commando passed through here, taking the lead toward the Vlissingen gap. "Slight opposition was met during the late forenoon and early afternoon on the outskirts of Battery W11," he recalled, "and in the evening (1700hrs) an attack was unsuccessfully made on W11. The troops were then rather scattered and five troop commanders were all casualties."

Captain Guy 'Jeep' O'Connell remembered the fierce engagement: "Most of our radio sets were out of action. Night was falling, and ammunition was very short. By midnight we had one position with 50 men a quarter mile from the battery and another back on a German searchlight position..."

"A cold wind was blowing, and the sand got into our eyes and ears – and worst of all into our weapons... Jerry launched a counterattack from some

woods on the inshore side of the dunes. They came at us, calling on us to surrender. Well, by way of reply, we gave them all we got, drove them off, and except for being shelled weren't troubled for the rest of the night."

W11 with its four 150mm guns was taken the next morning. Phillips had been required to cope with extreme conditions, co-ordinating movements among the featureless dunes and flooded landscape while enduring intense fire. "Once underneath the guns, 47 Commando charged," wrote Cpl Ernie Staphnill of 'A' Troop, "and although only having small firepower and hand grenades the Germans soon gave in."

After W11 fell, Phillips pressed ahead and 47 Commando attacked batteries W3 and W4, each with three 75mm guns surrounded by minefields, anti-tank ditches and garrisoned by 300 Germans. Just after 1800hrs both were in British hands. The primary objective, the elimination of the German batteries that commanded the Western Scheldt, had been accomplished.

"One thing I remember," explained O'Connell, "is pushing on and taking three or four more positions down to the second gap. That's the Flushing Gap. And we were just able to see 4 Commando, about 400 yards from us on the other side."

The Final Phase

The linkup with 4 Commando, advancing northwest from Vlissingen, occurred on November 4. Phillips noted: "4 Commando in Flushing moved across the gap the day after 47 ►

ABOVE LEFT: A PAK 40 7.5cm ANTI-TANK GUN EMPLACED AT NIEULAND, MIDDELBURG. (OFFICIAL PHOTOGRAPH)
BELOW: 41 MARINE COMMANDO AND SUPPORTING LVTs LANDING ON WALCHEREN. (NATIONAL ARMY MUSEUM)



RIGHT: A GERMAN PRISONER HELPS BRITISH MEDICS BRING IN A WOUNDED MAN. (OFFICIAL PHOTOGRAPH)
BELOW: A CHURCHILL AVRE AND CRAB FLAIL WRECKED AT WESTKAPELLE. (DUTCH NATIONAL ARCHIVES)

had reached it and joined the Northern Area (41 RM and 10 IA Commandos) and helped them in the successful completion of their battle.”

While 4th Special Service Brigade continued to advance, elements of the 52nd Division completed Operation Mallard, expanding the lodgement from South Beveland to Walcheren. Subsequently, the last 11 operational Buffalos of 11th Royal Tank Regiment and ‘A’ Company, 7/9th Royal Scots, were ordered to make a reconnaissance of Middelburg. Executed on November 6, the reconnaissance became an unexpected liberation, as the Germans surrendered in droves believing British attack to be imminent. Moving west from the Mallard bridgehead, 5th Highland Light Infantry arrived to accept more than 2,000 prisoners, including Generalleutnant Dasler.

For the next two days, British forces eliminated German troop concentrations on the northwest coast of Walcheren, an effort necessarily postponed until the batteries guarding the Scheldt had been captured. On November 8, the last Germans on Walcheren surrendered, and with it the last large artillery battery – W19 with five 94mm guns.

The Scheldt had been cleared – finally. The tenacious German defence denied allied use of Antwerp for 85 critical



days, but now the Royal Marine Commandos and their comrades turned to the sad duty of collecting their dead, which totalled 489. Overall, the killed, wounded and missing at Walcheren neared 1,500, and the five-week offensive to open Antwerp had cost the Allies 13,000 casualties. German losses on Walcheren included 1,200 dead and 2,900 captured and during the entire battle for the Scheldt approximately 12,000 were killed or wounded and 41,000 taken prisoner.

There had been no shortage of heroism and devotion to duty among the Commandos, infantry, RAF and

Royal Navy personnel who contributed to the victory and though many LVTs had been lost in the fighting, the ugly but essential Buffalos had made the effort possible, slogging across a most inhospitable battlefield.

A hundred Royal Navy minesweepers took 22 days to clear the estuary of mines. Once this was accomplished, Antwerp finally became operational, with the arrival of the first convoy on November 28. At peak activity, the port facilities handled 22,000 tons of supplies daily, fuelling to the ground campaign that finally achieved victory in Europe. ●

