

THE HISTORY OF THE CANADIAN SCOTTISH  
REGIMENT (PRINCESS MARY'S) 1920 TO 2002



READY FOR  
THE TRAY



**The battle of Leer by the Canadian Scottish  
Regiment**

**From Ready for the Fray 2002**

**The History of the Canadian Scottish Regiment**

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**Victory Campaign Battle of Leer by Mark  
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panies, was one of the most successful actions in which the unit was engaged. With a loss of about 60 killed and wounded from the time the main attack went in, the battalion had wrought havoc among the enemy's ranks.

Of the latter, an estimated 200 were killed, wounded or taken prisoner. The enemy fought hard and at times desperately, but they could not equal the well-led and battle-wise Canadian Scottish. The battalion had knocked the enemy about on ground of his own choosing like a professional fighter battering a newcomer to the ring. It was one of the few times, actually, when the enemy, determined to resist, was obviously poorly led and blundered time and again into the "killing grounds" set up by the Scottish with drastic results. The old picture of the iron-jawed, jack-booted, well-trained German infantry smashing forward with its tanks was now a thing of the past. In its place was the Canadian infantry, so changed in the past six years that it was hard to remember that original militia force, willing but green as grass, essentially civilian in outlook, and operating for so many years with second-hand, patched-up First World War equipment. It had taken six years for the military pendulum to swing, but now it had completed its stroke.

With the 5th Canadian Armoured Division now responsible for the area north-west and north-east of Groningen, the 3rd Division was free to move, this time to the east and north directed on Emden and Aurich. This meant crossing into Germany once more, a move which few relished as it meant operating with a sullen and hostile population around it. There was some compensation in the thought that in Germany there were no restrictions to the use of aircraft for pulverizing a town or city defended by the enemy as there had been in Holland. But that was about all. "Non-fraternization" was the order of the day.

During April 24 the Canadian Scottish concentrated at Eksta about five miles south of Wagenborgen, preparatory to the brigade's immediate job of clearing the area east to the German border. While the Reginas started this task, the battalion had a chance to rest and recoup, use the mobile bath, and even seen an outdoor film put on by the Canadian Legion Supervisor, Mr. Elderfield. Even while the show was in progress, however, new plans were being made for the battalion. It was to come under the command

of the 8th Brigade as a reserve battalion, ready to clear the road north from Nieuweschans if the 7th Canadian Reconnaissance Regiment ran into any trouble along that route. The battalion moved to Nieuweschans early on the following morning, but its assistance was not needed and again it reverted to the 7th Brigade. The next major operation for the brigade was an attack to clear the area bordering the eastern part of the Ems Estuary. Once again this was to involve operating in a flat, low area criss-crossed by innumerable canals and drainage ditches. It was strictly infantry country, as the Polish Armoured Division had found out. That formation had been slowed down in its attempt to drive north and north-west towards Aurich and Emden. The 3rd Division was now ordered to help the armoured division by prying the enemy from his hold on Leer, an important communications centre. Leer itself was to present a difficult problem even for the infantry. Situated at the confluence of the Ems and Leda Rivers, it was protected on two sides by natural water obstacles while in the centre of the town was a circuitous canal which further added to the defensive potentialities of the place.

The first phase of the attack (Operation "Duck") was the responsibility of the 7th Brigade. It was to clear the area bounded by the Ems River on the west, the Leda River on the north and the Ihrhove - Tjacketleger road on the east. With this phase completed, the 9th Brigade would have a firm base for its assault across the river. When Leer had been seized, the 7th Brigade would leapfrog through the 9th to take Loga. In view of the fact that the Canadian Scottish had had a few days out of action, it was designated the task of clearing up to the River Leda.

The battalion had moved to an assembly area about three miles south of Ihrhove very early on the morning of April 26, and by seven o'clock that morning the companies were ready to move off. Owing to the nature of the terrain, the battalion plan envisaged a left hook attack along the river road to Driever and then to Esklum, with "A" and "C" Companies leading and the remaining companies ready to leapfrog through them. This method of approach meant rolling up the enemy from his dug-in positions along the dyke which bordered the Ems and Leda Rivers. It was awkward and left little room to manoeuvre. The more direct route along the line of the railroad, however, offered neither concealment,

protection, nor a decent vehicle route, and the flat soggy area between these two routes would have bogged down the vehicles altogether.

"A" and "C" Companies pushed off towards Driver at first light and got into the village with little trouble. They then continued on to Kloster Muhde, from which "A" Company was to fight its way to Esklum, when the enemy began to put up a strong and determined resistance. While the company was engaging the enemy, artillery fire from north of the Leda began to register along the company's positions. Despite being wounded by this fire, Captain P. F. McDonnell continued to direct "A" Company during the sharp fighting which followed, an act which was to win him the Military Cross.

One of the main obstacles to the further advance of "A" Company was one or more machine-gun posts situated in a farmhouse on the northern outskirts of Kloster Muhde. "C" Company was brought forward to lend a hand and, covered by the fire of two of the platoons, Lieutenant W. K. Wardrop and his platoon raced forward to take out the enemy position. Although the only approach to the farmhouse was completely exposed, the platoon attack was successful. Those of the enemy not killed or taken prisoner retreated to the open country to the south-east, leaving most of their weapons behind.

By the time Major J. J. Andrews arrived to take over the command of "A" Company, plans had been made for Typhoon and Mustang aircraft to rake the enemy's gun sites and weapon pits with rocket and machine-gun fire. These aircraft roared into action early in the afternoon. By this time "A" Company was ready to push on, having made arrangements for a strong mortar shoot on Esklum with high explosive and phosphorous bombs. By four-fifteen in the afternoon the wrecked and burning village was captured. During this attack two carriers were blown up by land mines. The pioneers who went to clear the river road picked up approximately 300 mines between the two villages, an indication of the defensive measures the Germans had taken prior to the attack.

That evening "C" and "D" Companies took over the task of carrying the attack eastward to secure the southern bank of the Leda River. "C" Company started along the dyke to Heerenborg a

few minutes after ten, moving cautiously to avoid the numerous mines and booby traps and conscious, too, that the Polish forces contacted by the battalion during the afternoon had warned of at least a company of the enemy entrenched in positions beyond the railway track. Some six hours later, however, all the companies were on their objectives and reporting very heavy shelling from enemy guns firing high explosives and airburst shells. "D" Company, on the extreme right, began clearing the area eastward as far as the railroad embankment. Since early on the morning of the 27th a considerable number of enemy had been observed off to the right, the company consolidated its right flank along the line of the railroad track itself.

During the day a small patrol from "D" Company, consisting of Lieutenant W. B. Laurie and three men, made a reconnaissance towards Tjackleger. This patrol bumped into a party of Germans and only one of the patrol made his way back into the company's lines. In order to secure the road junction at Tjackleger, in effect the last of the battalion's objectives, "D" Company was ordered to take it out. At five o'clock in the afternoon the company made a successful drive along the river embankment, capturing or killing over two dozen of the enemy. Artillery and mortar fire made the going tough, but in two hours' time, aided by a platoon from "C" Company as well as by the excellent counter-battery fire of our own artillery, the village was captured. This meant the last position which the enemy could use to fire on or observe the assault crossing by the 9th Brigade, was secure. Later patrols to the east came back with information that the enemy had apparently pulled back, while patrols to the south-east contacted elements from the Polish Armoured Division. The way was now open for the assault on Leer. Just to be on the safe side, German civilians in the area, some of whom had replaced mines on the road the pioneers had previously lifted, were sent to the rear. Their interference had resulted in a "Wasp" flame-thrower being blown up, killing one man and wounding another. Had the circumstances been reversed, and the Canadian Scottish been German troops, the fate of the civilians can easily be surmised.

On April 28 arrangements were made to allow the North Nova Scotia Highlanders to concentrate their companies in and around Esklum in preparation for their attack across the Leda at three in

the afternoon. At the same time, having completed their task, the Canadian Scottish, less elements from Support Company which would give fire support to the "North Novies", prepared to withdraw from the dyke to be ready for the second phase of Operation "Duck". After being relieved by the North Shore Regiment of the 8th Brigade, the battalion withdrew to Hillkenborg on the same evening, pleased not only with a job well done, but also happy to hear the 9th Brigade's attack was doing well.

It became apparent, as the news came in that evening of the rapid gains made by the 9th Brigade, that the enemy, having failed to defend the outer water defences of the city, was not going to make a last ditch stand in Leer itself. By the late afternoon of the 29th the Reginas were in the 9th Brigade's bridgehead, and that evening the remainder of the 7th Brigade was ordered to concentrate in Leer preparatory to the attack on Loga, a short distance to the east.

Only sporadic shell fire was falling when the Canadian Scottish marched through its former positions and across the bridge the engineers had built at Esklum. Once in Leer the acting Commanding Officer, Major W. H. V. Matthews, held an Orders Group for the attack on Loga which was to go in at first light. The initial attack was to be made by the Reginas and Winnipegers with the Canadian Scottish exploiting their success. The opposition was expected to be light, but all were warned to expect the most favourable avenues of approach to be dotted with mines — an expectation which later proved to be true.

The attack met with complete success against very light opposition so that by nine o'clock the battalion was on its objective with the rubble-packed streets acting as the main obstacles to the general advance. Some 60 prisoners were taken, and more were rounded up later in the day so that by the time the Reginas had completed clearing the area between the eastern outskirts of Loga and the river, the brigade had gathered up some 500 prisoners. This action cleared the way for the Polish division, and around five o'clock that evening the leading elements of this formation passed through the brigade to keep the retreating enemy on the run. For days if not weeks it had been obvious that the enemy was just about at the end of his will and ability to resist. Nazi Germany had been pounded by massive blows from the air and its armies,

air force and navy mauled almost beyond recognition on all fronts. It had taken a long time for these facts to penetrate the dark and slimy mind of Adolph Hitler, but by the end of April, with his eastern and western fronts torn to shreds, with the vaunted Luftwaffe almost completely swept from the skies, and with the Allied forces triumphantly cutting their way into the heart of Germany, Hitler committed suicide at his headquarters in Berlin.

News of this event was broadcast by the B.B.C. at ten-thirty on the evening of May 1, leading the brigade war diarist to comment that "if this is true then it is indeed a day of great rejoicing".<sup>21</sup> Further startling news came on the following day when the B.B.C. announced the capture of Field Marshal Von Rundstedt by the Americans, followed a few hours later by word that the German forces in Northern Italy had surrendered unconditionally. As the brigade, now out of contact with the enemy, moved north to prepare for an attack on Aurich on May 3, the news announcers told of the capture of Berlin.

As these news reports came tumbling one upon the other over the wireless sets during the first days in May, there was no thought of slackening the division's pace in its drive to the north. As yet there was little evidence that the enemy was crumbling and on the point of surrender on this front, even though he was in retreat. On May 4th, therefore, as the battalion concentrated near the small village of Aurich-Oldendorf, about six miles south-east of Aurich, Lt-Col. Henderson and his Intelligence Officer, Lieutenant S. F. Letner, went to Brigade Headquarters to be briefed on the brigade plan of attack. When they came back the Commanding Officer called his officers to receive their orders. That was at three o'clock. After an early supper the companies concentrated in the village itself and Tactical Headquarters was set up by seven-thirty. Twenty minutes later came the tremendous news over the B.B.C. A meeting had been held "between Field Marshal Montgomery and high ranking German officers and . . . now all resistance on the part of organized enemy forces had ceased on our front".<sup>22</sup> A few hours later word came from Brigade Headquarters that as of eight o'clock on the following morning, May 5, a cease fire would come into effect. The war diarist expressed the feeling of the Canadian

<sup>21</sup>W.D., 7th Cdn. Inf. Bde., May 1, 1945.  
<sup>22</sup>W.D., 1 C Scot R., May 4, 1945.



Scottish when he wrote: "It was hard to realize that it was true and there would be no more fighting";<sup>23</sup>

There was no wild celebration within the battalion that evening or on the following days. Those who had a bottle of cheering or on their friends. At these individual parties talk centred mostly on former comrades and common dangers shared in the past year. On the afternoon of May 5, Padre Seaborn<sup>24</sup> had one of the largest congregations since the unit left England when he held his church service in the old Lutheran church in Aurich-Oldendorf. It was a brief but moving service and, standing silent sentinel in the memory of everyone there, were those 367 officers, N.C.O.s and men of the regiment who sacrificed their lives for the victory so recently achieved.

One cannot do justice in a volume such as this to that amazing period immediately following the victory in Europe. Hitler's Third Reich lay in ruins, and with it half the continent. Literally millions of Europeans had been uprooted from their homes, communications and transportation facilities had been wrecked, and national economies were close to the barter level. Refugees were everywhere, and with the end of the war every road began to carry first a trickle and then a swarm of men, women and children returning to their homeland from prison camps, forced labour factories, and a vast variety of other places where, directly or indirectly, they had been compelled to go in support of, or in refuge from, Hitler's war machine. It was a chaotic situation which, now that the guns were still, presented to the Canadian soldier the incredibility and wonder of a fantasy.

Something of this on a military level was expressed by the 7th Brigade's war diarist in the first few days after the cease fire when he wrote:

This without doubt has been the queerest and most fantastic day of the war. German troops trying to surrender all over the place—not knowing where they are to go or what they are to do. Russians, Poles, Yugo-slavs, Italians, Frenchmen, wandering around looking lost. Civilians in some places waving and smiling, in other places spitting and

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> The entire battalion was pleased to read in unit orders a few days later that H/Captain Seaborn was awarded the Croix de Guerre Avec Etoile de Vermeil for his outstanding work with the Canadian Scottish from D Day to the end of the war.

## Victory Campaign Battle of Leer biz 596, 28-4-1945 by Mark Zhuelke

In the early afternoon of the 28<sup>th</sup> April 1945, Typhoons shot up targets in Leer and, 35 minutes before the stormboats were launched, the artillery opened a heavy bombardment.

Brigadier Rockingham CO of the 9 Canadian Infantry Brigade observed: "The shooting was for the greater part excellent, as burst after burst was seen along the dykes where the enemy was entrenched." 30 However, on the 9 Brigade's right flank, the German positions were too close to our assembly area for the artillery to give support and a contrary wind made a normal smoke-screen impracticable.

Nevertheless, the North Nova Scotias employed their 2-inch mortars, firing smoke, to screen the attack and they were helped by weapons of the Camerons and the 1st Battalion, The Canadian Scottish Regiment. "D" Company of the 7 Infantry Brigade, carrying the assault boats, left the cover of the dykes, dashed to the river banks, boarded the boats and were soon on the other side. "The Germans were completely surprised; they were found covering in their trenches and "three machine-guns were captured, fully loaded, before firing a round". 31

The remainder of the North Nova Scotias followed "D" Company and in a short time had penetrated deeply into the southern portion of Leer. Meanwhile, two miles south of the town, The Highland Light Infantry of Canada launched their boats on the Ems, moving downstream to the point at Leerort. Although delayed en route, they received such excellent support from the artillery that their landing was virtually unopposed. The H.L.I. then pressed forward into the centre of Leer "against sniper and Panzerfaust fire". 32 On the left of the brigade The Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry Highlanders encountered the heaviest opposition. As their boats crossed the Ems, 400 yards wide at this point, they were engaged by machine-guns from both flanks. The leading companies reached the eastern bank at 3:08 p.m.; but sustained German fire sank two boats in a second wave and 15 men were believed drowned. (Brigadier Rockingham afterwards questioned "the suitability of the type of lifebelt" then used.) The battalion mopped up resistance along the adjacent dyke and proceeded methodically to clear the western part of Leer. 33

There was fierce street fighting in the process. Germans infiltrated our positions and, at times, "fought with the greatest dash and bravery". 34 Great care was needed to avoid clashes between our own troops. Another difficulty arose in connection with the build-up: wind, tide and engine-trouble plagued the engineers' efforts to maintain ferry service across the rivers. Finally "Duck" was halted on the night of the 28th, to be resumed on the following morning. The operation then proceeded smoothly and by 6:50 p.m. on the 29th Brigadier Rockingham was able to report that his brigade had all its objectives—that is, as far as the railway running through the eastern section of Leer. The fighting on the 28th and 29th cost his three battalions 70 casualties in all. 35

26-30 APRIL



Leer

30 APR. "A"

Loga

"C"

Ledd

Tjackleger

Esklum Heerenborg

Kloster Muhide

Driever

26-27 APR.

Ihrhove

R. EMS

