

The Battle of Deventer

April 9/10 1945

By the Canadian Scottish Regiment

**From: Ready for the Fray, 2002
the history of The Canadian Scottish
Regiment**

READY FOR THE FRAY



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

READY FOR THE FRAY

the 7th Brigade was ordered to clear the area of the Twente Canal north-east of Zutphen. For the initial stage of the attack the Canadian Scottish was to be in reserve but, following the success of the Reginas and the Winnipegs, it was to be prepared to seize a bridgehead over the canal about a mile east of the juncture between the canal and the Ijssel. The first phase of the brigade attack met with greater success than expected, with the result that the battalion was not needed. Once again the battalion "stood down" for a few hours, but it was not long before another order came to Lt-Col. Henderson to be prepared to move. This time the brigade was ordered to clear the divisional axis of advance up the main road from Zutphen to Deventer on the east side of the Ijssel.

At seven-thirty on the morning of April 6 the battalion led the brigade on its new push to the north. Beyond the Twente Canal the companies progressed steadily and, despite the numerous fixed defences which the enemy had previously prepared between Zutphen and Deventer, this initial advance met with little opposition. It was not until that same afternoon when the unit was in Epse and beginning to prod the outer defences of Deventer that the enemy started "brassing up the whole brigade area with his artillery".³ The Canadian Scottish in particular bore the brunt of the enemy's harassing fire which included not only the sharp-cracking, air burst artillery shells but rifle and machine-gun fire from across the Ijssel.

That evening the Winnipegs, leap-frogging forward beyond the squadrons of the 7th Canadian Reconnaissance Regiment which were working hand in glove with the brigade, managed to seize a bridgehead over the Schipbeek, a canal running parallel to the Twente Canal which joined the Ijssel immediately south of Deventer. This bridgehead was strengthened when the Reginas moved across the canal on the following day and by April 8 the entire brigade was across and planning to swing north-west into Deventer itself.

The approach to the city, however, was barred by yet another canal — the Zijkanaal — which led off to the north-east. The Reginas were given the task of crossing this waterway while the Canadian Scottish, striking due north from Kolmschate, cleared the area west of the canal so as to push the enemy from the

³ W.D., 7 Cdn. Inf. Bde., April 6, 1945.

TO THE NORTH SEA

brigade's rear and flank. This attack by the battalion went in an hour before midnight. Supported by tanks, flame-throwers and, incidentally, "Monty's moonlight", "A" and "C" Companies, the latter now commanded by Captain McDonnell, made steady progress through the two miles of fields, woods and swampland. The searchlights, their beams reflected from the clouds, cast an eerie moonlight effect over the battlefield. No serious opposition was encountered, although a few platoon actions and machine-gun fire on the right flank kept all ranks very much on the alert, especially No. 13 Platoon commanded by Lieut. W. K. Wardroper of "C" Company. By the morning of April 9 the companies had bagged 36 prisoners and were on their objectives.

Meanwhile the other battalions were having trouble. The first attempt to bridge the Zijkanaal proved unsuccessful so it was decided to use the Canadian Scottish to secure a bridgehead over this "moat" to the Deventer "fortress" further to the north-east, about a mile and a half from Snippeling. This meant a change in the battalion's direction of advance from north to west, and although the unit's night attack of April 8-9 had been completed without serious trouble, it also meant another sleepless night in store for the men.

Operations to force a bridgehead over the canal were started that same afternoon. The Canadian Scottish axis of advance was the main road across the Zijkanaal which, two miles west of the canal, led into the village of Schalkhaar. "C" and "D" Companies were ordered to clear the area up to the bridge at which point they, together with the flame-throwing "Crocodiles", would support with their fire the assault by "A" and "B" Companies. It was dusk by the time the leading elements of the assault companies were able to report that the bridge, although broken, was able to take foot traffic and that the company was crossing over. Enemy mortar fire made life uncomfortable as "A" Company's platoons crossed to widen and strengthen the bridgehead, but within an hour "C" Company was also across and the whole battalion was firmly consolidated on its objective.

While the engineers prepared to construct a Bailey bridge to carry wheeled traffic over the waterway, orders were received from Brigade Headquarters for the battalion to push on and capture the village of Schalkhaar. This would bring the unit to the outskirts of

READY FOR THE FRAY

Deventer and place the brigade in a more advantageous position for attack. A few minutes after midnight the battalion again started off on its second successive night attack. Fortunately, as the tired platoons advanced along the white concrete road, stepping over telephone wires, fallen tree branches and other debris of war, the enemy made no resistance. Major E. G. English, who consolidated his platoons at the very edge of Deventer, wrote later:

During the occupation of this position, which was a large group of buildings, formerly an Asylum, no enemy were encountered. Considerable noise was made in the settling in at 0300 hours . . . so everyone was surprised to find that the company had moved in just 75 yards away from strong enemy positions. The enemy did not realize, however, how far forward the B Coy men had worked. So the enemy sent out a two-man patrol of a C.S.M. and a Sgt, who crawled (completely under our observation) to within five yards of the forward platoon's position. There they stood upright to observe the buildings to our rear. Cpl. (now Sgt.) Kelly held his fire until they stood up and then ordered his platoon to open fire. The Sgt. was killed and the C.S.M. wounded and captured.⁴

While these events were happening near the asylum between Deventer and Schalkhaar, a section of carriers commanded by Sgt. A. R. Minnis was taking up a position north of the village as part of the carrier platoon's task to protect the northern flank of the battalion. To cover the fork on the road leading from the north into Schalkhaar, Sgt. Minnis had his carriers take up a position close to a house about 100 yards from the "Y" in the main road — a site which enabled him to conceal his carriers yet promised an excellent field of observation and fire for his Bren guns. The guns were in position and the eleven men began to make their breakfast when they heard a couple of shots which, they learned later, had been fired at a mortar detachment a short distance behind them.

Racing up the stairs of the house to see what was up, Minnis spotted troops moving along a hedge about 100 yards to the right. The dull cloud and heavy ground mist limited observation to the extent that the section commander was unsure whether the troops were "ours" or "theirs". Certainly they seemed sure of themselves, wandering around "as if they didn't have a care in the world". After a few tense minutes the early morning sun cut through the mist. There was no longer any doubt. The troops were Germans, and

⁴ W.D., 1 C Scot R, April, 1945, Appx. 9, "The Main Activities of 'B' Coy. during April."

TO THE NORTH SEA

heavily armed. The three Bren guns opened fire immediately. Those of the enemy who were both lucky and quick enough leaped into a ditch and tried to crawl away but the Bren gunners pinned them down and the nearby mortar detachment, happy of the opportunity, lobbed some bombs into their midst. "It wasn't long", wrote Sgt. Minnis, "until the white flag was raised and we got 23 prisoners out of that bunch".

It was an excellent catch, but there were more Germans in the vicinity. One of the men used a Piat on a house close to the section's position but no enemy were inside. Then, about an hour later, this aggressive group observed a number of enemy troops, supported by three tanks, forming up at the edge of the woods about 500 yards in front of them. This serious turn of events did not dismay the somewhat isolated carrier men. Very shortly the German infantry began moving down the ditch on the far side of the road and once again the section, again supported by the mortars, opened up a rapid fire with all their weapons, forcing the attackers to withdraw into the woods. At this point, Sgt. Minnis continues:

Just then four Shermans [tanks] came up on our right and started firing on some buildings on our right front. I contacted the Troop Commander and told him about the enemy tanks in the wood. He brought one tank onto the road and fired on the Jerry tank which we could see plainly. This drew fire and our house was hit three times; one shot came through the front window and exploded in the room. Cpl. F. A. Cherry, MM, was killed and Ptes. J. J. Hards, K. D. Williamson, D. MacDonald and Cpl. H. M. Edwards were wounded. We managed to get them out through the back of the house to one of our machines. Then we moved across the road and No. 4 Section [of carriers] came up to reinforce our position.⁵

This entire action lasted under two hours, and by its excellent performance the section beat back a counter-attack launched by an enemy five times its strength, of which some two dozen were captured and as many killed or wounded. For his great personal courage and exceptional leadership, Sgt. Minnis was awarded the Military Medal. The others who were with him — Ptes. L. F. Roussain, W. Johnstone, M. Brodawice, H. W. Thornley and A. W. Kish, together with those who were killed or wounded, deserve equal praise.

The section of mortars under Corporal F. J. Nichol supporting

⁵ *Ibid.*, "Counter-attack at Schalkhaar".

READY FOR THE FRAY

the carriers in this action fought in the best tradition of the regiment. The mortars, at times almost surrounded by the enemy and exposed to fire on all sides, had been employed with deadly effect. Part of the time the range was 100 yards, so close that shrapnel from their own bombs whizzed by within inches of the men who were feeding the mortars. Never had they fired with the target so close and in such desperate circumstances. Cpl. Nichol was awarded a Netherlands decoration, the Bronze Lion, for the part he and his section played in destroying the enemy counter-attack which, had it been successful, would have had serious consequences.

For the main body of the battalion and for the brigade, the morning hours had been busy ones. Delighted with the progress made by the Canadian Scottish, Brigadier Gibson ordered the Winnipegs over the canal to tighten the brigade's hold north of Deventer and to prepare to seize the city itself in conjunction with the Scottish. Then engineers, working under enemy fire, completed their bridge, and supporting tanks and "Crocodiles" were up with the infantry acting like rivets to the steel plate front of the brigade. Lt-Col. Henderson and his Tactical Headquarters, following Lieut. Kirk-Owen's message that he had found a new site for them, moved over the canal and up into the village after a hair-raising ride over the bridge and along the road which was under enemy shell and mortar fire. Even when Tactical Headquarters was established near the crossroad where the tanks and the Winipegs passed to take up their new positions, enemy shellfire made the Commanding Officer and his staff wish for a return to the days when suits of armour were in style.

Soldiers, at least, were accustomed to high explosives and shrapnel shells and automatically took measures to protect themselves. It was a sad sight, however, to see the number of Dutch civilians who were wounded or killed during this day; civilians who stood by the bridge or near the road welcoming the oncoming troops and tanks. The Medical Officer, Captain Glick, and his men gave as much attention to these civilian casualties as to the soldiers, and where necessary all the medical facilities available to the troops were offered to the civilians.

At ten-thirty that morning Lt-Col. Henderson held an Orders Group for the attack into Deventer. The Canadian Scottish on the right and the Winnipegs on the left would cross the start line at

TO THE NORTH SEA

twelve-thirty, supported by tanks and flame-throwers. Intelligence as to the numbers and positions of the Germans was good, for, by a very unusual coincidence, the telephone line between Schalkhaar and Deventer was working and Dutch civilians, phoning their friends behind the German lines, reported the enemy to be in a most unhappy state of mind.⁶

The attack went in on time with "B" Company on the left and "D" Company on the right, followed by "A" and "C" Companies respectively. Between the wood near the asylum where the companies formed up and the edge of the city was an open field about 500 yards wide. Across the centre of this field was a wide anti-tank ditch. Once they advanced into this field, the leading companies encountered heavy fire from the front and left flank. Rifle grenades, machine-gun fire, and other supporting weapons were used by the enemy to halt the advance. Near the ditch the fire became heavier and in "B" Company Lieut. C. L. Mitchell, commanding the leading platoon, was killed and Lieut. K. M. Little, another platoon commander, was wounded. Major English reported later:

At this point it was apparent that the Company would not have enough strength for the final attack. Sgt. Kelly came back through considerable fire to Company Headquarters which was with the rear platoon and confirmed the situation. Then [I] asked for and received permission to use the "Crocodiles" which were standing by for Phase II of the operation. This decision proved to be the best possible, for when the flame-throwers blasted at the 20-mm. guns, the enemy broke and allowed the company to carry through to the final objective.⁷

The execution carried out by the Crocodiles on the enemy's fortified strongpoints was the turning point of the battle. Although both the leading companies had suffered considerable casualties, they pushed forward over the anti-tank ditch and into the town hard on the enemy's heels instead of waiting for the other companies to pass through them as previously planned. Once the enemy was on the run the best idea was to keep him running, even though it called upon the last reserves of the men who were dead tired after two days with almost no sleep.

As the leading companies entered the city, Captains W. G.

⁶ Also unusual is the fact that 11 years later Lieutenant Wardroper of "C" Company met two of the Dutch resistance fighters in the United States, both of whom had helped the battalion at Deventer.

⁷ "The Main Activities of 'B' Company . . .", *op. cit.*

READY FOR THE FRAY

McIntosh and S. L. Chambers, leading "C" and "A" Companies respectively, followed close behind them and spread out on either flank to clear the city blocks. Members of the Dutch Underground, wearing orange armbands, met the Canadians and guided them through the streets. Captain Chambers wrote:

We had far more difficulty forcing our way through the jubilant civilians than we had from the enemy. The Underground man with me kept popping into houses to telephone into the next block to find out where the Germans were and in this way we eventually reached the railroad embankment. We came under fire from a small park but No. 8 Platoon under Sgt. J. H. Diamond returned this fire with such vigor that most of the Germans fled and the German officer working around the flank surrendered to Lieut. Cornish of No. 7 Platoon.⁸

As "A" and "C" Companies took over the lead to push through to the Ijssel River, Deventer was already beginning to celebrate its liberation. The happy, rejoicing citizens, free for the first time in five years, thronged the streets, singing, dancing, waving flags, rooting out the few collaborators with the enemy, all in a state of intense excitement that the long-awaited moment of liberation had come. The civilians were greatly interested in and cheered on the Canadian Scottish soldiers who, with the assistance of Deventer's well organized and smoothly functioning Underground fighters, pushed steadily — if erratically — on. Now and then shells from German guns would land in the streets, killing or wounding some of the Dutch civilians. The city's telephone exchange, seized by the Dutch, was being held with difficulty but was still functioning. A patrol from "A" Company led by Lieut. Schneider sent to relieve the civilian fighters found that Lieut. Wardroper and men from "C" Company had beaten them to it. This officer later described the event as follows:

I was ordered to take two platoons (Nos. 13 and 14) to capture the Telephone Exchange. No. 14 Platoon, after moving along a small lake in a park area to open ground on the river embankment, got itself pinned down in a fire fight with some of the enemy who had crossed the river. Before proceeding with clearing the centre of town I had to take No. 13 Platoon to extricate them. . . . With the two platoons I turned south-east and with the assistance of the Dutch Resistance Forces seized the telephone exchange which I left in the hands of a Dutch Lieutenant and proceeded to the main square of the city and the City Hall. We went down the main streets while the Dutch soldiers scoured the back alleys catching the Germans as they

⁸ Personal narrative, Captain S. L. Chambers.

TO THE NORTH SEA

popped out of back doors. At one point my platoon was mobbed by fifty deliriously happy girls from a nursing school who flung themselves about the necks of my men amidst the odd burst of machine-gun fire and stray shells from across the Ijssel. We rounded up about forty or fifty Germans. . . .⁹

Wardroper then was taken to the City Hall, where a full meeting of the city council was in progress. There arrangements were made with Mr. Ankersmit, the Acting Burgomaster, to warn all civilians off the street until the city was completely cleared.

By five o'clock in the afternoon the Canadian Scottish and the Winnipegs were in firm control of the city. Here and there small pockets of the enemy held out, but these were eliminated one by one either by the Canadians or the Dutch Underground. The latter rendered the battalion, and indeed the brigade, sterling assistance during the entire battle and were instrumental in making the operation a success.¹⁰

Once again the Canadian Scottish were not permitted to enjoy for many hours the enthusiastic welcome tendered them by the citizens of Deventer. On orders from the divisional commander the brigade was to pull out, leaving the Queen's Own Rifles, which had been attached to the brigade during the previous few days, to hold the city. The new job for the battalion was to take over the positions of the North Nova Scotia Highlanders and the Highland Light Infantry of Canada, and to hold these positions which, in all, encompassed an area five miles wide and two miles deep a short distance north of Deventer. When the companies, now miniature battle groups with a section of mortars, carriers, etc., attached to each, took over their widely scattered areas on the morning of April 12, they sent out patrols which extended the unit's coverage even farther to the east, north and west.

It was the carrier patrols covering the roads close to the Ijssel River that first bumped into the enemy just south of Olst, a village five miles north of Deventer on the banks of the river. During the evening "B" Company was ordered to take the town and to seize the ferry the enemy was using close to the town to cross the river. Major E. G. English took the company from Wezepe, where it had been guarding the battalion's right flank, to Boschkamp, the nearest village to the company's objective. Here he contacted a

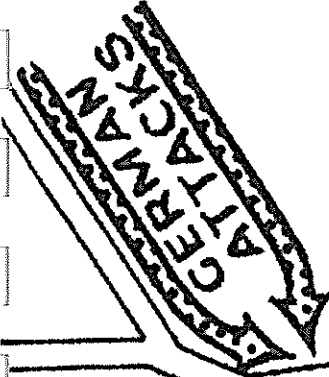
⁹ Personal narrative, Lieutenant W. K. Wardroper.

¹⁰ W.D., 1 C Scot R, April 10-11, 1945.

9-10 APRIL

1000

Yards



SECTION
CARRIER
PLATOON "C"

ANTI-TANK
DITCH

"D"

"B"

"A" Schalkhaar

"B"

ASYLUM

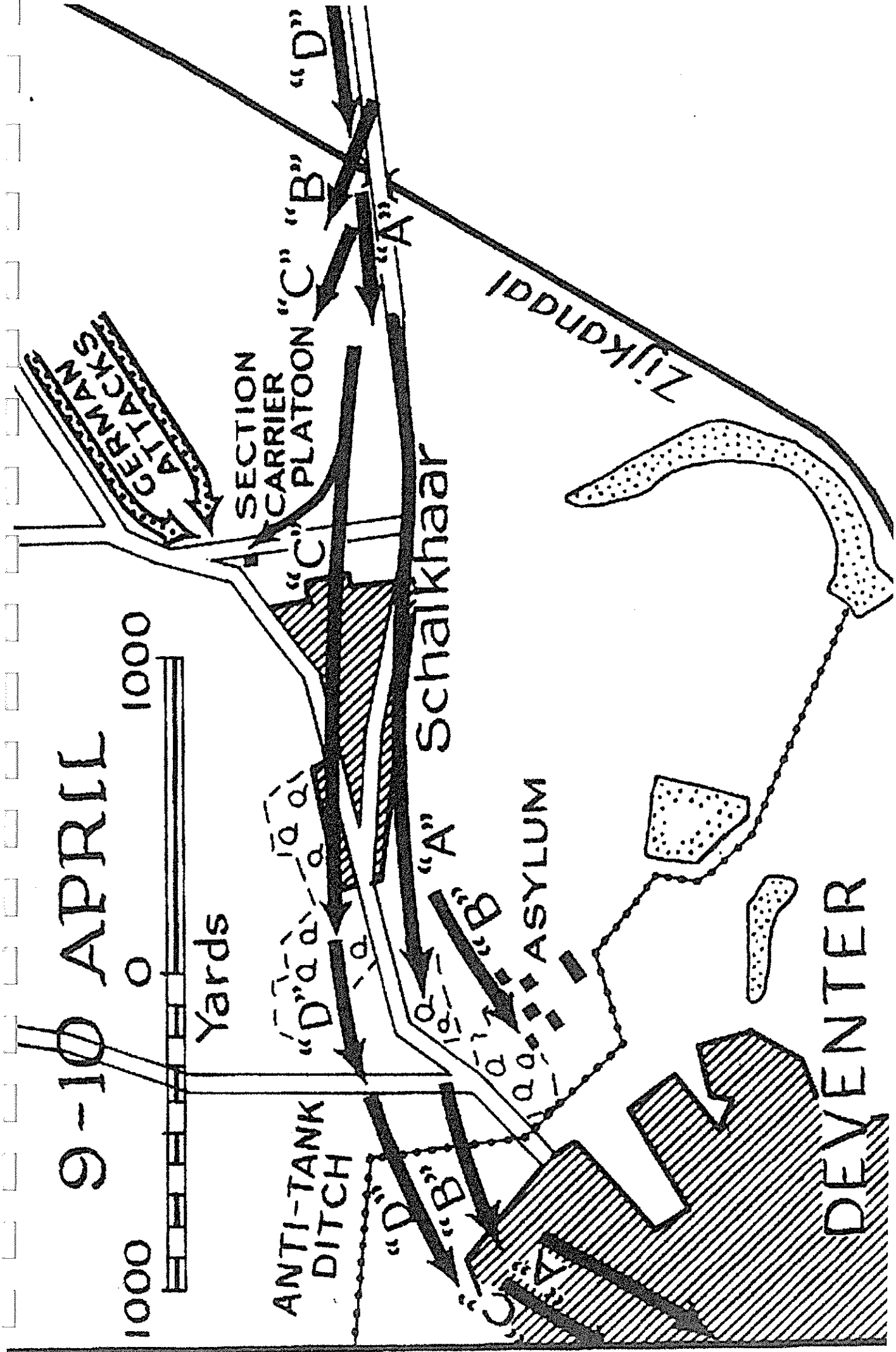
"C"

"B"

"D"

Zijkamp

DEVENTER



Ready For The Fray was the first of a dozen books written by the author on Canadian military and defence matters. Dr. R.H. Roy, CD, Ph.D., FRHS, served as an Infantry Lieutenant in the Italian and North-West European theatres during the Second World War, after which, having completed university studies, he worked in the Army Historical Section in Ottawa for two years. Thereafter, he taught History at the University of Victoria, and was the first to be appointed to its Chair of Military and Strategic Studies which he held for many years prior to his retirement as *Professor Emeritus*.

Dr. Roy, as Honorary Lieutenant Colonel of 741 (Victoria) Communications Squadron since 1988, continues to participate actively in promoting the interests of the Army Reserves within the Canadian Forces.

* * * * *

Major D. M. Grubb, CD (Retired), the editor of the additional material for the years 1955-2002, began his service in 1962 through the Canadian Officers' Training Corps at the University of Victoria. His Commanding Officer there was Major R.H. Roy. Thereafter, as an Army Reserve officer he served in The Canadian Scottish Regiment, with two interruptions caused by his civilian obligations, from 1965 to 1985, prior to transferring to the Personnel Selection Branch.

Major Grubb holds a Master of Arts Degree in Linguistics, a Diploma in Education, and accreditation in editing from the USDA Graduate School.

Cover design by:
Bunker to Bunker Publishers.



ISBN 1-894255-11-9



9 781894 255110