

The advance of the Canadian Scottish Regiment and the battle of Wagenborgen

The Battle Honour **Wagenborgen** was awarded for the fight to clear this Dutch town in April 1945.

Background

After crossing the Rhine River at the end of March 1945, the 2nd Canadian Division advanced 112 miles as measured by the air, over 1140 feet worth of bridges at various water obstacles, and had taken 5,000 prisoners, all during 16 days of fighting. The 3rd Canadian Division kept pace, clearing Deventer by 11 April, and then dashing almost 70 miles more towards Leeuwarden. In 26 days, the division fought forward 115 miles, constructed 36 bridges, and took 4,600 prisoners of their own. To the east, the 4th Canadian Armoured and 1st Polish Armoured Divisions had begun operating on German soil, and 2nd Canadian Corps set its sights on Oldenburg, 40 miles beyond the Dutch-German border.

The city, a communications hub, proved to be of importance to the defence of the Küsten Canal and the Emden-Wilhelmshaven peninsula. The 4th Armoured fought many actions in the area over difficult terrain and increasing resistance, with the Polish armour resuming responsibility for the division's original objectives west of the Ems. Successfully reaching the North Sea on 15 April, the Poles were relieved by the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division of its commitment west of the Ems below Delfzijl.¹

The 3rd Division then fought north forward towards Delfzijl. The role of the Canadian Scottish has been a footnote in many histories. The entire account of the battle at Wagenborgen in the Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War is, verbatim, as follows:

Relieving the Poles west of the Ems, the 3rd Division met opposition on the approaches to Delfzijl. The Canadian Scottish Regiment, assisted by Sherbrooke

Fusiliers tanks, encountered a stubborn body of enemy at Wagenborgen. A company attack on 21 April was beaten off, and only after a larger operation was mounted next day did the village fall to us; an enemy counter-attack then had to be dealt with. The whole operation cost the Scottish 64 casualties.²

Another history sums up the battle even more succinctly (and without even mentioning the name of the town), stating:

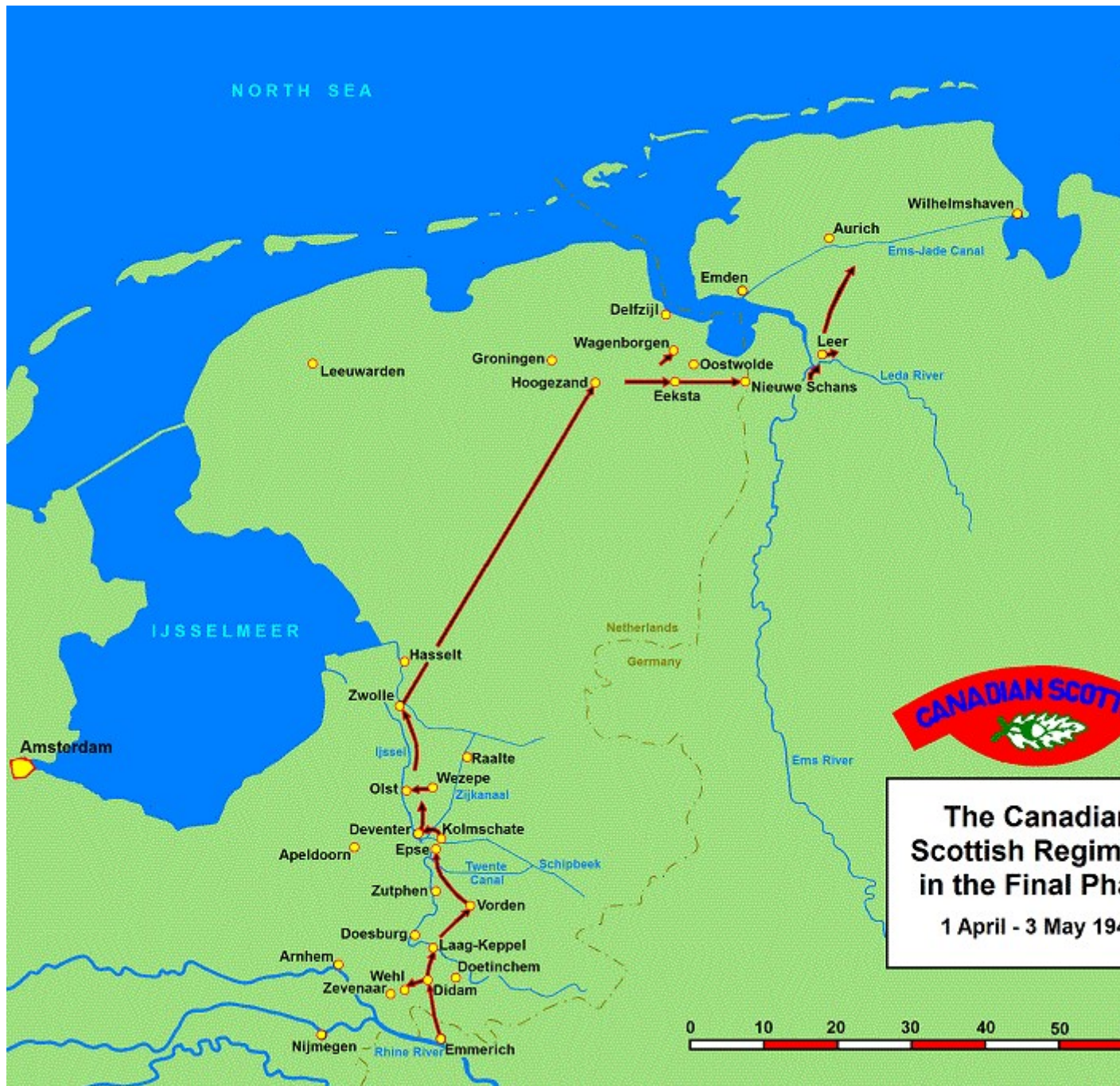
On the 20th (of April) the 3rd Division relieved their Allies of their commitments west of the Ems. Next day the Canadian Scottish Regiment with tanks of the Sherbrooke Fusiliers, closed the noose tighter at the cost to the Scottish of 64 casualties.³

Both accounts mention tanks of The Sherbrooke Fusilier Regiment, while the account by the Canadian Scottish's regimental history indicates that the tank support had come from the Governor General's Foot Guards of the 5th Canadian (Armoured) Division.

The Canadian Scottish in the Final Phase

The Canadian Scottish Regiment crossed the Rhine on 26 March 1945, fought in Emmerich on the far bank, and at the start of April embarked on, in the words of a regimental history, "period reminiscent of that following the breakout from Normandy."

This time, however, although contact with the enemy was sometimes lost, the push to the north was interspersed with several battles and engagements fought with a desperate enemy whose alternative to death was defeat.⁴



Didam was liberated on 3 April, and the Division advanced on Zutphen. The battalion cleared the flank of the 7th Brigade by attacking west of the Zijkanaal during operations against Deventer, followed by the assault on the city itself. The populations of Didam and Deventer had given enthusiastic welcomes to the Scottish, but in neither case was the unit permitted to stay long to enjoy the hospitality. After Deventer, the unit moved to Olst, finding the Germans mounting a rearguard action there. As they fought there, the Regina Rifles entered Zwolle unopposed, and the Royal Winnipeg Rifles leapfrogged past to Hasselt. As the 8th and 9th Brigades set off for Leeuwarden far to the north on 15 April, the Canadian Scottish established patrols around Zwolle over an area of 100 square miles, rounding up stragglers. On 19 April the unit moved to a concentration area at Hoogeveen, near Groningen, where the 2nd Canadian Division had just fought a divisional level battle.⁵

The General Staff Officer I of the 2nd Canadian Division, moving north alongside the 3rd Canadian Division to whom the Canadian Scottish belonged, rendered his opinion of enemy resistance during this phase:

*Lt-Colonel Peter Bennett...later commented that the enemy had been unable to muster any significant support from guns or mortars. As a result, his tactics were to hold important crossroads and villages and to defend every water line. When these were breached, he would withdraw, generally at night. However, in the last nine days before the Canadians reached Groningen, the Germans seemed to lose their old skill in fighting rearguard actions. Co-ordinated direction disappeared and he seemed disposed to withdraw at any hour of the day, generally leaving it too late to be successful.*⁶

The 7th Brigade's mission on reaching the Groningen area was to clear the area around Groningen of enemy troops. The battalion spread out over a twenty-mile front from Groningen itself to Oostwolde, using both wireless and civilian telephones to stay in contact. "C" and "D" companies in the centre of the battalion's line found that they were in closer contact with the enemy than with "B" Company, stationed three miles from the north coast, or "A" Company still in Groningen guarding enemy wounded and a German ammunition dump.

Patrols from the 7th Canadian Reconnaissance Regiment determined that Wagenborgen, a short distance from the centre of the battalion's line, was still held by an unknown number of Germans. "D" Company was ordered to take the village in a one-company attack in the early hours of 21 April.⁷



Wagenborgen from the air, 1946. KLM photo via Joey-Jan.com photo archives

"D" Company Attack - 21 April

Roads leading in and out of Wagenborgen had been blocked, and covered by machine guns and 2.0cm anti-aircraft guns; the Germans also had "plenty" of support from mortars and artillery. The terrain surrounding Wagenborgen was flat,

unobstructed by dense foliage, and "criss-crossed by numerous canals and drainage ditches which limited the avenues of approach for the attackers."

Not only did the enemy have good defensive positions, but it quickly became apparent that he was going to put up more than a token resistance. At dawn on the morning of the 21st "D" Company reported that it was held up at the edge of the village by fire from the enemy's field defences. An attack by stealth, under cover of darkness, obviously was not going to work.⁸

During the course of the attack, while maintaining radio contact was problematic throughout the course of events, the company's wireless set was finally smashed, causing "great inconvenience at a critical time" just as a stronger radio set was secured at Tactical Headquarters.

"D" Company renewed the attack just after noon with support from sections of the anti-tank, carrier and mortar platoons, attacking from the south rather than the southwest as before. The leading platoon under Sergeant J.E. Dodd encountered heavy resistance, the enemy apparently having been reinforced, and accurate fire was brought down on the Canadian Scottish platoons. A Wasp flamethrower tasked to assist Dodd's platoon was destroyed during the advance to contact, and Dodd's platoon was reduced to eight men by the time it had closed to within 150 yards of the edge of the village. Between 16:00hrs and 17:00hrs, with the unit still attempting to work its way forward, the enemy launched a counter-attack supported by heavy machine-gun, mortar and artillery fire. Enemy infantry had infiltrated around the right flank of the company by this time, and after nightfall cut off the lead platoon, forcing Sergeant Dodd and the survivors of the attack to surrender. Company Headquarters, established in a barn, received artillery fire during the course of the action, killing Major A. Compton-Lundie, the company commander, Lieutenant D.G. Huscroft, the battalion Pioneer Officer, and Captain D. Innes, MC of the Royal Canadian Artillery, an attached Forward Observation Officer.⁹

As the battle was winding down, two men performed deeds for which they were eventually awarded bravery medals. Corporal William Knowles of the Anti-Tank Platoon received the Military Medal in July 1945; the citation read:

On 21 April 1945, Corporal Knowles was commanding a section of the anti-tank platoon Support Company of 1st Battalion, The Canadian Scottish Regiment, which was supporting "C" Company in an attack on Wagenborgen, Holland.

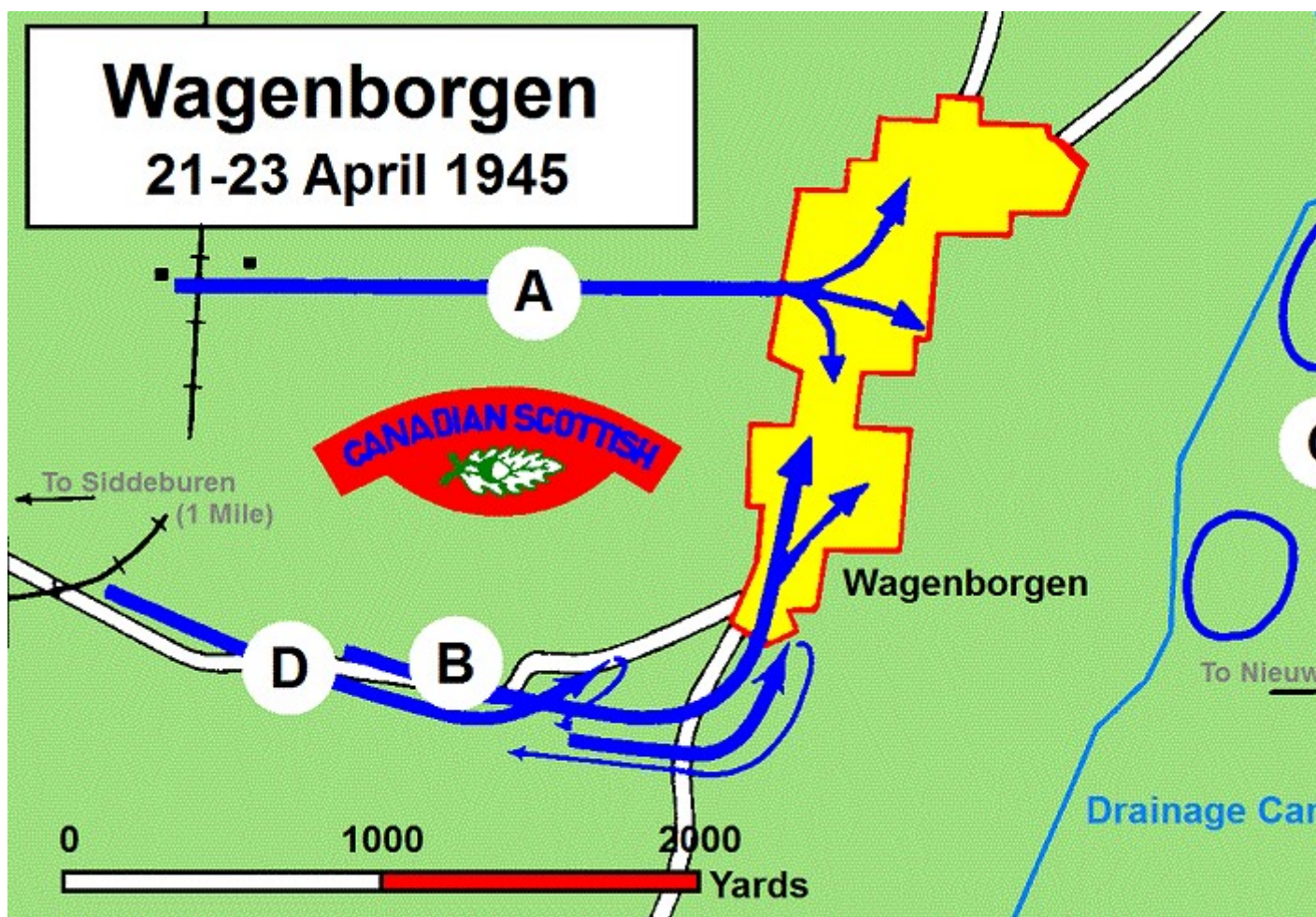
The area in which Corporal Knowles had his gun was under extremely heavy enemy shell and machine gun fire. He continued firing until he had used up all his ammunition. Just at this time, one platoon of "D" Company was forced to withdraw to the vicinity of Corporal Knowles position and when he observed that the Company Commander and several others had been wounded, he organized and assisted in their evacuation on his carrier. This Non-Commissioned Officer then organized the platoon of "D" Company and together with his own detachment occupied a new position with a view to preventing any further penetration.

As a result of the leadership and exceptional personal courage displayed by Corporal

Knowles, a firm position was held thus permitting another company to pass through to complete the battalion task.¹⁰

Corporal George Hugh Jackson was also an NCO in the Anti-Tank Platoon, whose MM was awarded in November 1945:

Sergeant Jackson, now Anti-Tank Platoon Sergeant of Support Company, 1 Battalion, Canadian Scottish Regiment, landed in France on 6 June 1944 as a Lance-Corporal. Sergeant Jackson participated in every engagement of the unit from D Day to the cessation of hostilities, working his way quietly and efficiently until he now holds the rank of senior Non-Commissioned Officer in the Anti-Tank Platoon. This Non-Commissioned Officer proved himself a reliable and resourceful leader and during the many actions of the battalion has often been with leading rifle companies at the head of his detachment during the attack. On 21 April 1945, during the attack on the town of Wagenborgen, Holland, his detachment was with D Company. The company was hotly engaged prior to reaching its objective and many casualties were suffered. Here Sergeant Jackson displayed great initiative in using his detachment as infantry to give covering fire to a forward platoon which was pinned to a single axis by strong enemy small arms fire. He was everywhere, encouraging his men fearlessly in their self-appointed infantry task. Later this Non-Commissioned Officer carried wounded back to his own carriers to assist in their evacuation under fire. When enemy artillery set D Company headquarters building on fire and all was a raging inferno, Sergeant Jackson, disregarding his own safety, continued to remove wounded from the building to safety until all further aid had to be abandoned. Throughout his service Sergeant Jackson has inspired confidence in his abilities and has been an inspiration to the men he has commanded. His utter disregard for his personal safety and his able leadership in action were a credit to the regiment and will continue to be held as an example by all the personnel with whom he has been associated.¹¹



Several carriers and anti-tank guns were abandoned during the withdrawal of "D" Company, which was "temporarily disorganized" following the loss of its headquarters. Lieutenant D.R. Butchart, attempting to reorganize the platoons and withdraw the company, was also wounded in the process. The supporting detachments of mortars, anti-tank guns and carriers successfully "kept the enemy at bay" as the rifle platoons disengaged.

The repulse of "D" Company came as a shock to Battalion Headquarters and led to swift action on the part of (Commanding Officer) Lt-Col. Henderson. The somewhat complacent attitude within the battalion, brought on by the long advances against little opposition during the past week, and the feeling that the war was almost over, was quickly transformed into a rock-hard determination to make the enemy regret his action. The scattered companies were immediately called in. "B" Company was recalled from Oostwolde and placed in "D" Company's former position south of Wagenborgen; "A" Company was relieved of its guard duties in Groningen and moved about a mile west of the town, while "C" Company, in Nieuwolda, was to turn its attention north-west instead of north-east.¹²

The Canadian Scottish now prepared to mount a full-scale attack. While the War Diary of the 7th Canadian Infantry Brigade noted on April 23rd that policies were in place restricting the use of aerial bombing of Dutch towns, 4.2-inch mortar and artillery support was prepared while "A", "B" and "C" Companies mounted patrols towards the town throughout the night of 21-22 April. At 07:00hrs, the CO held his

"O" Group for the attack on Wagenborgen. "A" Company under Captain S.L. Chambers was to execute a left flanking , attacking from the west into the northern part of Wagenborgen. "B" Company under Major E.G. English was to attack from the south-west, and capture the roadblock barring the way into the southern part of the town. After removing the roadblock and clearing a path through the mines, a troop of tanks would move up in support. "D" Company was to remain in reserve and provide support where needed. "C" Company was tasked in a cut-off role to the east. The attack was scheduled for 23:00, to make use of cover of darkness, with a 15-minute preparatory barrage of mortar and artillery fire.¹³

Battalion Attack - 22 April

"A" Company set off just before 23:00 with mortar fire protecting its left and artillery intended to keep enemy heads down; the mortar fire instead aroused German suspicions and brought down fire among the company, including Lieutenant M.G. Van Santvoord, commanding No. 8 Platoon, leaving two of the company's platoons commanded by corporals (Corporal Lawrence took over 8, and No. 9 Platoon was commanded by a Corporal Macklin). Nonetheless, "A" Company secured a foothold in the town, and planned to establish a company fortress overlooking the main north-south road, holding there until scheduled house-clearing operations started at dawn. While doing so, a numerically superior force of Germans was encountered and a confused action ensued. One platoon of Germans was "mowed down at about a 10-yard range by No. 9 Platoon" while moving single-file down a road; another group of Germans fired one of the pair of houses occupied by 7 Platoon; 8 Platoon were able to silhouette them against the flames and they were "picked off."

In the meantime, "B" Company had also established itself in the southern portion of Wagenborgen; while No. 10 Platoon under Lieutenant Blair assumed cut-off duties and entered from the left, 11 and 12 Platoons made their way beyond the road block and to a point 500 yards north of the forked road leading into Wagenborgen.

Under the skillful leadership of Major English, the platoons shot their way into the outskirts of Wagenborgen with the cut-off platoon reaping a harvest with its Bren guns as the enemy was forced back. The very few casualties suffered by the company is a tribute not only to the company commander, but to the leadership of the battle-wise N.C.O.s as well.

By dawn of April 23, with "A" and "B" Companies firmly established in the northern and southern edges of the village, there was a lull in the battle. This lull for the companies in the village was brought about, evidently, by the attempt of about two companies of German troops to withdraw from Wagenborgen to the north-east, a route which took them along the road running in front of "C" Company's position.

"C" Company was nicely dug in, forming a company fortress at the canal junction about 1,000 yards east of Wagenborgen. the company had been quiet during the night although they could hear the enemy moving about to their front. As dawn broke, the excellent "cut-off" possibilities of the company's field of fire became immediately apparent, and a telephone line was quickly strung between the forward platoon and Company Headquarters to supplement the wireless set. When daylight came and the men saw about 200 Germans moving along the road to their front, No. 15 Platoon

held its fire and waited until the enemy came closer. Then, at a command, four Bren guns and seventeen rifles opened fire on a target such as most of the men had never seen before. The enemy was caught flat-footed and paid for it. Later Sgt. B.C. Parsons, commanding No. 15 Platoon, contacted Captain McDonnell to tell him what a perfect "killing ground" the area on the company's right front would be for the battalion's mortars. Arrangements with the mortar platoon to cover the area were quickly made, and between the rifle company and the mortar crews the eastern approaches to Wagenborgen became a death trap to the enemy.¹⁴

The lull ended early in the morning of the 23rd when a runner from 7 Platoon reported to the commander of "A" Company that several hundred Germans were forming up north-east of the town for an attack. Corporal Macklin, the NCO platoon commander, was wounded during the night, and his place taken by Corporal Armstrong. During the ensuing counter-attack, the regimental history notes that Armstrong did "very well." Captain Stewart Leslie Chambers, also, did well, and was recognized with the award of the Military Cross in July 1945:

On 21 April 1945, Lieutenant Chambers was commanding "A" Company, 1st Battalion the Canadian Scottish Regiment in the attack on Wagenborgen, Holland.

Patrols from the company had determined that the enemy was in position in considerable strength in the northern outskirts of the town. By evening, the company, which was advancing along the railway tracks, was in position and launched an attack. Against (stiff) opposition a wedge was driven into the town extending to the eastern limits, thus cutting off any possible withdrawal. Lieutenant Chambers' company then proceeded to clear the remainder of the town and pushed south to join up with "B" Company. During the night the enemy counter-attacked from the north in force and succeeded in knocking out four of the tanks supporting Lieutenant Chambers' company. This officer directed his men in a most able manner against an enemy force considerably stronger than his own. The commander of one of his platoons was a casualty and Lieutenant Chambers kept continual personal contact with this platoon, giving the Non-Commissioned Officer in command very valuable guidance and assistance and encouragement to the men by his cheerful and confident bearing.

The leadership, undaunted courage and devotion to duty shown by Lieutenant Chambers in this difficult battle, which was his first as a Company Commander, gave the men courage and helped to a great extent in the successful capture of Wagenborgen.¹⁵

Chambers' first act after hearing of the enemy's intention to counter-attack was to call for artillery, and "C" Company, also observing the enemy forming up, had likewise called for shellfire on the Germans now marching across their front. When the artillery did arrive, it landed toward the rear of their column, with the effect of driving them toward Wagenborgen, cutting through their ranks and disorganizing them. "A" Company was surrounded and outnumbered again. Hoping to seal the gap between their positions and "B" Company, Chambers had requested support from the Carrier Platoon. The enemy now sliced any tenuous contact between the two rifle companies, However, in the words of the regimental history:

Actually the enemy, unless he could overcome either of the companies, was himself in a trap, for on all sides he was surrounded by Canadian Scottish companies which, although outnumbered, were so positioned that should the Germans attempt to retreat in any direction they would run into a "killing ground" covered by Canadian Scottish weapons. When it was realized that those of the enemy who got into the village between the two companies had either Panzerfausts or Panzerschreck anti-tank weapons, Chambers sent a message to stop the carriers. In reply he was told that tanks were available and were on the way up to help him.¹⁶

"B" Company had been heavily counter-attacked throughout the morning, pushed back each time with heavy losses. Major English had returned to Tactical Headquarters by jeep before the main attack and contacted the troop of Governor General's Horse Guards tanks at Siddeburen, offering to guide them up to "A" Company.

All went well until the jeep, followed by the four tanks, ran into a tree barricade across the road. The tanks were able to push their way around it to the right, but English and his jeep had to make a wider detour to the left. Before he had completed his detour to rejoin the tanks, the latter had clattered into "B" Company's area. Here, although warned of the stretch of ground held by the enemy before he could reach "A" Company, the troop commander decided to race through the village at high speed and take his chances.¹⁷

The lead tank was hit as it approached "A" Company's positions; the remainder turned right instead of turning left, and rolled into German-occupied positions, where two more were knocked out. Only one tank of the four escaped the dash into the village. In the meantime, fighting continued throughout the morning. At about noon, "B" Company spotted a party of roughly fifty enemy soldiers trying to pass through their area from east to west - "C" Company effectively barred passage to the east and "A" Company was still holding out in the north - and Major English decided to hold fire as they seemed "too disorganized" to be a counter-attack. As the party entered an open field, the company opened up with five Bren guns and two 2-inch mortars, killing and wounding an estimated 90% and capturing the remainder. Major English received the Distinguished Service Order; his citation read in part:

Leading his company under cover of darkness against this town held by a strong force of determined and well dug-in enemy, he skilfully directed his platoons through mines and heavy fixed line machine gun fire to the outskirts of the town. As the attack progressed into the built up area, the fighting became fluid and furious. With utter disregard for his personal safety, Major English moved from platoon to platoon giving a word of direction here and encouragement there. After very heavy fighting, the town was captured but during the night the fanatical enemy launched three counter-attacks, which were beaten off. By morning, "B" Company had linked up with "A" Company on the other side of the town and the position was secured. The success of this attack was largely due to the leadership and skill displayed by Major English. His actions in this engagement were an inspiration to all his men and were in accord with the highest traditions of the Canadian Army.¹⁸

Fighting continued into the afternoon; one of "D" Company's platoons was sent to seal the gap between "A" and "B" which though narrowed, could not be sealed. A

three-man carrying party did manage to get food and ammunition to "A" Company during the afternoon. by nightfall, the small German infiltration parties had been thrown out of Wagenborgen and it was declared secure and in the early morning of April 24th, the Irish Regiment of Canada relieved the Canadian Scottish Regiment in place, part of an overall relief of the 7th Brigade by the 11th.

The capture of Wagenborgen, despite the confused fighting and somewhat isolated positions of the companies, was one of the most successful actions in which the (Canadian Scottish Regiment) 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.¹⁹

Battle Honours

In 1958, the Canadian Scottish Regiment received 17 Battle Honours for the Second World War, but the action at Wagenborgen had not been included among them. Thirty years later, a former commanding officer set into motion events that eventually resulted in the granting of the Battle Honour "Wagenborgen" for participation in these actions to:



7th Canadian Infantry Brigade