

READY FOR THE FRAY



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

The Battle of the Leopold Canal and the Scheldt
by The Canadian Scottish Regiment
From Ready for the Fray by R.H Roy

CHAPTER X

The Leopold Canal, the Scheldt and Nijmegen

While the Canadian Army had now cleared Le Havre, Dieppe, Boulogne, Calais and Ostend, the greatest prize of all—the huge, undamaged port of Antwerp—still remained blocked to the Allied merchant marine. Antwerp, important in itself, assumed additional importance since it was now obvious that Nazi Germany would succeed in prolonging the war into the winter months. Even with the Channel ports captured, it would take weeks if not months to restore their damaged harbour facilities so that they could handle an appreciable flow of traffic. The strain on the Allies' supply lines was definitely eased, but the demands made on the Allied logistical capabilities were still extremely high. Moreover, not only were there the hundreds of thousands of soldiers and their equipment to provide for and service, but there were now many squadrons of Allied airmen and aircraft based in France. Added to this were the basic imports necessary for the French civilian population.

It can be seen, therefore, that the problem of supply was complicated, demanding and exceedingly heavy. At the same time, it was realized that the maintenance of these services was as necessary to the proper functioning of the army as the flow of blood is to the human body. When military supplies fall short of military needs, the consequences are quickly apparent.

Antwerp, one of the greatest ports in Europe, lies 50 miles inland from the sea. As long as the Germans held the land both

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north and south of the Scheldt River and Estuary—north and south Beveland and Walcheren in the north, and in the south that area between the Leopold Canal and the sea—the enemy commanded the approaches to the harbour. The free use of Antwerp was now a major factor in Allied strategy and as such, in due course, Field Marshal Montgomery gave the Canadian Army complete priority in its operations to open up the port. Of immediate interest to the 3rd Division was the area between the Leopold Canal and the Scheldt, for it was here the division was directed with orders to clean out the enemy from the canal to the sea. This task, Operation “Switchback”, was to involve the Canadian Scottish in some of the dirtiest fighting under the most adverse conditions it was to encounter throughout the war.

The move from Calais on October 2 north towards Belgium and on close to the Dutch border was made without incident. The country through which the convoy passed was almost untouched by war—at least this war—and it was pleasant to see the neat villages and the untouched field crops, and to receive the warm greeting of the French and Belgian townspeople who cheered the troops on their way. Divisional patches and unit badges had been removed from everyone’s uniform as a security measure, but how much good that did is open to question. If the convoy stopped for ten minutes near any village, and if there were any young ladies around, there was bound to be a dozen Canadians pouring bad if not impossible French into feminine ears, telling them about the 20,000 acre cattle ranch they had out west and asking them if they were married. In some respects the Canadian army must have left an amazing impression on the French, Belgian and Dutch civilians if they believed one-tenth of what was told them.

The 52-mile journey from Calais was completed when the convoy rolled into Cleit, a small town about 10 miles east of Bruges, and about three miles from the front line. In this location the last hopes of a five-day rest after the Calais battle were definitely washed out. The 4th Canadian Armoured Division had been patrolling along the Leopold Canal for several weeks. Too weak in infantry to launch a full-scale attack itself, the armoured division had to wait for the 3rd Division to come up from its siege of the Channel ports.

That it would have to be an infantry attack was obvious just

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by looking at the country. Flat as a pancake, the low-lying land was interlaced with canals and drainage ditches, each a natural anti-tank obstacle. The ground itself, much of it reclaimed from the sea, was so close to the water level that to dig a slit trench was almost to dig a well. The roads were mined, most of the bridges over the canals and drainage ditches were blown, and the earth was so sodden that the tanks were almost completely confined to roads. The one apparent bright spot was the information, or at least the impression, later proved utterly false, that the enemy holding the area were of poor quality, a "scratch force" whose morale was low and who could not be expected to put up a good fight. Actually, the enemy facing the Canadians was a crack division, the German 64th Infantry Division commanded by Major-General Eberding.

On October 5th, while the paymaster, Captain G. W. Lockhart, did a roaring business in exchanging French for Belgian francs, Lt-Col. Crofton attended an "O" Group at Brigade Headquarters. The attack was to go in on the following day, and it was to go in under somewhat unusual circumstances. Broadly speaking, the division was to make a two-pronged attack. From the south the 7th Brigade would attack and seize a bridgehead over the Leopold Canal, after which the 8th Brigade would follow through and push towards the north-west. The 9th Brigade was to attack across the Braakman inlet, assaulting the enemy from the rear, and establish a firm bridgehead on the eastern end of the German pocket. This would be a water-borne assault which required some little time to set in motion.

The 7th Brigade was to attack with the Canadian Scottish on the right and the Regina Rifles on the left. During the first phase the Canadian Scottish was to seize Moershoofde and Oosthoek, two villages a few hundred yards beyond the canal. The Reginas' objective was Biezen, several hundred yards deeper into enemy territory. During the second phase of the attack the brigade front would wheel to the north-west, with the Reginas striking out for Eede and Middelburg while the Scottish captured the town of Aardenburg, approximately three miles north-west of the unit's crossing place.

The Leopold Canal is about 75 feet wide where the assault battalions were to cross. On either side are earthen, tree-lined

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banks between eight and ten feet high. As a defensive obstacle it had much to commend it, and the enemy was well dug in on the other side ready to bring their fire on any troops attempting to cross. With the bridges blown, the only way to cross the canal was by using assault boats and a kapok bridge—the same narrow, floating footbridge the Canadian Scottish had tried to use at Calais. To assist the brigade, the North Shore Regiment was attached to it to carry and later paddle the canvas assault boats filled with infantry, and to help the engineers to carry the kapok bridging equipment and get it into place.¹

In order to provide as much protection as possible to the troops during the first few minutes of crossing the water when they would be extremely vulnerable, it was decided to use massed flame-throwers, collected from the 3rd Infantry and 4th Armoured Divisions, which would shoot their liquid fire across the canal five minutes before zero hour. Captain E. M. Fraser's carrier platoon had been given three "Wasps"—carriers equipped with flame-throwers—and these, plus eleven others from the 4th Armoured Division, would sear the enemy machine gun posts in the opposite banks of the canal while approximately the same number would be used on the Reginas' front.² Experiments with the flame-throwers had been conducted with great success across the Canal de Derivation de la Lys on the 4th. It was considered that the flame-throwers, spaced 60 yards apart, and positioned so that their squirts of flame would arc over the south dike to strike the far or north dike and the enemy dugouts immediately behind them, was the most practical and efficient method of neutralizing the enemy defences.

To add to the variety of vehicles and equipment used during the forthcoming assault, the Canadian Scottish was given several "Weasels", a sort of amphibious carrier, while the Commanding Officer was given the use of a "DUKW", a larger, thinly-armoured amphibious vehicle capable of carrying a platoon. "Just the odd destroyer as reinforcement", wrote the war diarist, "would make the Scottish worthy competition of the Royal Navy".³

¹ W.D., 7 Cdn. Inf. Bde., October 1944, Appx. 3, 7 Cdn. Inf. Bde. Operation Order No. 3, October 5, 1944, Operation "Switchback."

² W.D., 1 C Scot R, October, 1944, Appx. 9, "Wasps—Flame-throwing Carriers".

³ *Ibid.*, October 5, 1944.

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It was cold and dark when the rifle companies set out on the long and fatiguing march to their assembly area at Middeldorp in the early hours of October 6. North of the village, along the canal bank, there was a great deal of activity as the engineers completed taping paths to the launching areas and put the final pieces of the kapok bridge in place, their noise being covered by the harassing fire of the artillery. The North Shore Regiment, spread out along most of the brigade front, were getting the assault boats in place so they could be lifted over the canal bank and shoved into the water as quickly as possible. The "Wasps" were warming up, getting ready to move into position just behind the rear bank. These flame-throwers had only twenty seconds' firing time, after which the fluid in their tanks would be depleted. The operation called for neat timing, but the hard work put in the previous day and evening assured a good shoot.

A few minutes after five o'clock the companies began to move towards the canal bank, the white tapes guiding them in the pitch black night. "B" Company on the left would cross at Oosthoek and capture that village with the help of "C" Company. "D" Company, crossing between Oosthoek and Moershoofde, would swing right and take out the latter village. "A" Company was in reserve. The preliminary mortar and artillery bombardment was already whistling overhead when at 5:25 a.m. "the flames shot across the canal in very good co-ordination and the sky lit up in a scarlet glow which was visible for miles".⁴ Quickly scrambling into the assault boats, the leading companies followed the last flames to the enemy-held bank. The liquid fire was still burning whatever it struck, and some houses 30 yards north of the canal were set on fire. Flaming gobs of liquid fire were even burning on the water. Any enemy in the trenches immediately opposite the "Wasps" was put out of action, and many who escaped were terrified. Within minutes all the leading platoons were across. By this time enemy machine gunners who were beyond the range or outside the target area of the "Wasps" were coming to life and bringing their fire to bear on the area.

While the assault boats were being paddled across, the en-

⁴ *Ibid.*, Appx. 9, "Wasps—Flame-Throwing Carriers".

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gineers, helped by the pioneers, were bringing the kapok bridge over the bank and pushing it across the canal for "C" Company's crossing. Oddly enough the first persons to come across the bridge were four enemy soldiers who raced over it to surrender. They were taken and "C" Company, later followed by part of "A" Company, crossed over the bridge to the other bank without delay.

The flame-throwers had done an excellent job so that there were remarkably few casualties during the actual crossing. Once on the other side of the canal, and over the far canal bank, the situation was far different. It was like climbing over to the "active" side of the butts on a rifle and machine gun range when it was being used. Not only was there plenty of small arms fire, but the increasing amount of mortar and shell fire, especially south of the canal, made it most evident that the enemy was going to fight hard and that he had plenty of support to back him up.

"B" Company swung to the left towards Oosthoek, circumventing flooded areas in its path and carrying on an almost continual fire fight with the enemy. They pushed forward to command the main east-west road between Oosthoek and Vulipan until halted a few hundred yards outside the latter village late that morning. "D" Company found a large number of the enemy in Moershoofde and, unable to make headway, retired about 500 yards to let the artillery soften up the village. After the barrage the company renewed its attack and with great determination pushed the enemy slowly back from the village. Battling from street to street and from house to house is not a glamorous job. It is a hard, grim business that strains the nerves and calls for a great deal of skill and no small amount of luck. Every window, doorway and corner is a potential death trap, and with the Germans fighting as stubbornly as they did around Caen, it was a slow, exhausting and nerve-tingling operation.

"C" Company crossed the wobbly footbridge about twenty-five minutes after H Hour to find the flame fuel still burning here and there and the stench of burnt flesh already hanging heavy over the area. After moving from the bridge exit, the company made efforts to determine the location and progress

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of "B" Company. The information was received later in the morning that "B" Company was on its objective. Concluding from this that Oosthoek and its approaches were in our hands, Captain Schjelderup decided that the best and quickest course for "C" Company to its objective—the north-west part of Oosthoek—was to move along the near, or protected, side of the dike on the canal and then, on reaching a point short of Oosthoek, to climb over the canal bank and push through "B" Company to its objective.

With No. 15 Platoon leading, the company had gone about 300 yards along the canal when it was realized that the enemy were still holding fast on the other side of the bank, thus forming a wedge or salient between "B" and "C" Companies. With the top of the bank swept by enemy machine-gun fire, the enemy lobbing grenades over the bank, and the company strung along the bank with their feet in or almost in the canal water, it was a very sticky situation. It was here that the company's second in command, Lieut. T. W. L. Butters, was wounded. During the early stages of the battle No. 15 Platoon, commanded by Lieut. R. S. Marshall, made an attempt to get over the bank and clear the area immediately to the north to permit the main body to make an assault on its objective. After cautiously easing themselves over the bank and down to the ground on the enemy side of the dike, the leading platoon found the situation as follows:

Here they were met by a withering hail of machine-gun and sniper bullets. Each man flattened himself to the ground while Lt. Marshall appraised the situation. The enemy were all around and as close as 200 yards. It was impossible to stay where they were so he ordered the platoon to try for a group of houses at the road across a short field about 500 yards away. The enemy had a 75-mm. gun emplaced there and was manning it. The move was made by the "leaps and bounds" method and was accomplished without casualties. . . . At the gun 3 enemy were killed and the gun itself was successfully isolated. The enemy allowed No. 15 Platoon to enter the house and then pinned them there by fire. With the great number of MGs. and snipers all around the house, the Platoon was unable to exit from it and dig in. They had to stay in the house whose walls were not so effective slug-stoppers as 4 ft. of earth would be. To make the best of a bad situation, they barricaded the doors and windows and returned fire to the enemy.⁵

The action by No. 15 Platoon against the heavy opposition

⁵ *Ibid.*, "Charlie Company's Activities", October 6-13, 1944.

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put up by the enemy was not sufficient to make much difference to the remainder of "C" Company along the canal bank. With no contact with "B" Company at this stage, Captain Schjelderup and his platoons became even more deeply engaged in a long drawn-out contest in which every weapon the company possessed was employed. No. 13 Platoon, working its way farther along the canal towards the Reginas, knocked out two enemy machine-gun posts with its Piat at point-blank range. Later, when No. 13 Platoon made its way over the canal bank it found, as the Reginas were finding on their left, that they could not advance, so they retired behind the canal bank until later in the afternoon when they fought their way forward to occupy a house across the road and to the right of No. 15 Platoon. Later company headquarters and the remaining platoon worked their way forward to establish themselves about 300 yards east of No. 15 Platoon. By this time "C" Company was about 700 yards beyond the canal, located in the group of buildings northwest of Oosthoek, facing Biezen, the latter still beyond the reach of the Reginas.

"A" Company, with Captain J. D. M. Gillan as acting company commander, got across the bridge and, as reserve company, had the immediate task of holding that part of the far bank in front of the footbridge. With the Reginas' kapok bridge out, this was still the only bridge the brigade had across the canal. With the forward companies fighting hard for every yard they gained, and with the enemy bringing heavy small arms, artillery and mortar fire all along the front to oppose every effort on the companies' part to improve their situation, the best the battalion could do was to hold tight to the narrow bridgehead it had seized by mid-afternoon.

On the left the Reginas had met with extremely heavy fire as they attempted to push across the flat, open fields north of the canal bank. After a day of heavy fighting and numerous casualties, the battalion was still unable to get beyond the canal and the men were fighting "practically with their feet in the canal". Their kapok bridge was destroyed and their situation was bad. Furthermore, there was a gap between the Scottish and Reginas' bridgeheads. At eleven o'clock that night the

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Winnipegs were ordered to cross over the Canadian Scottish bridge to fill in the gap between the two assaulting battalions.

By the end of the day the Canadian Scottish had secured a bridgehead about 1000 yards wide with "C" and "B" Companies approximately 700 yards deep in enemy territory. Moershoofde and Oosthoek were taken but could not be called secure, since constant enemy infiltration into the outskirts of both villages created a tense atmosphere of alertness which was broken periodically by blazing gunfire as the opposing troops prodded each other's defences. As yet no vehicles had crossed the canal. Ammunition, food and the wounded had to be ferried or man-packed across by boat or by the pontoon bridge during the hours of darkness.

There were few who slept that night. It had been a rough day, and there had been numerous casualties. "B" Company's commander later wrote:

While all the company put up a good fight, one of the outstanding was Pte. L. C. Wray. . . . Single-handed he winkled out a sniper who was giving us a lot of trouble, and later in the afternoon he went out and rescued a badly wounded man from under the enemy's medium machine-gun fire and brought him under fire to the stretcher bearers at company headquarters. Another tower of strength was C.S.M. Proverbs, while Signallers Webb and Brown did a good job ably assisted by the company runner, Pte. Wiles.⁶

Among others in the battalion there was a soldier in "D" Company who did outstanding work at great personal risk during the initial assault and in the days which followed. This was Pte. R. H. Rideout, whose attention to the wounded under continual enemy fire during the period the unit spent at the Leopold Canal was to win him a Netherlands award, the Bronze Lion. Lieutenant O. N. Falkins, commanding one of "D" Company's assault platoons, also performed heroic work when leading his men along the canal towards the bridge in Moershoofde. On four separate occasions he led an attack on enemy machine-gun positions, taking each in turn by surprise, and by his action ensuring the success of the company's assault. Later that day Falkins and a runner directed artillery fire on enemy positions in the village. His observation post was itself blasted and holed many times, so close was it to the zone of fire, but he remained

⁶ Personal narrative, Lt-Col. E. G. English.

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there doing his job until the infantry took over where the artillery left off.

It was natural to expect the enemy to try to eliminate the weakly held Canadian bridgehead over the canal, and the expectation proved quite correct. The enemy knew this area very well indeed, and it was perfect for both defence and infiltration, with both visibility and movement restricted by buildings, hedgerows, trees and orchards, especially on the left flank. During the night, apparently, the enemy began to infiltrate between the canal and the road from Biezen—the gap the Winnipegs were on their way to plug—right up to the forward positions of “C” Company. Then, shortly after three o’clock on the morning of October 7, following a brief artillery barrage, the enemy counter-attacked. His first and heaviest blow fell on “C” Company. The fierce action which followed is best described in the words of the people who were there. Lieut. Marshall’s platoon was hit first, and his report starts from the time his sentry reported the enemy, later estimated at about 150 strong, approaching from the west.

Obviously this could mean only one thing! I ordered the sentries to open fire and then I aroused the whole platoon who took their positions in the house. Within minutes the enemy fire became so intense from all sides that we knew we were surrounded. We were fighting with every weapon available but could not drive the enemy back. Grenades were thrown through the windows and in the darkness we were not aware of them until they exploded, often causing casualties. Fortunately, they were the typical German “potato masher” type, which usually caused no serious damage except for the concussion. On two occasions I was blown to the ground by the force of the explosion, but remained unscathed. Gradually as the fire thickened more and more of the platoon became casualties, and unfortunately at that time the men lay where they were hit as every man was busy fighting for his life.⁷

“Some of the enemy”, wrote Corporal J. H. Sinclair later, “were bold enough to look in our windows and the old fight was on. The Jerries were all around the house shouting “Kommen Sie Aus”. After two hours of real western-style gun battle the house was set on fire and things looked rather dark just then”.⁸

Before the enemy had shot tracer bullets through the barn

⁷ Personal narrative, Captain R. S. Marshall.

⁸ Personal narrative, Cpl. J. H. Sinclair, “C” Company, 1 C Scot R, “Crossing the Leopold Canal, October 7, 1944”.

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attached to the back of the house, setting the hay on fire, Corporal Truesdale got in a good shot with his Piat. Some of the enemy had got into an outhouse of the house next door and from this position their accurate sniping had been causing casualties to the platoon. Truesdale fired his anti-tank weapon at it and the outhouse and Germans went up in a blaze of glory.

With the house on fire and with nine wounded and one dead in his platoon, the position was untenable. The platoon commander wrote later:

There were two courses open—one to stay in the house and be burned alive or to rush out and be cut down by German troops whom we supposed to be waiting outside for just this moment. I decided that we should make an attempt to reach the platoon commanded by Lt. Peter MacDonnell, which was about 200 yards away. We gathered our wounded together and I went out through the front door first. To my surprise there was not an enemy soldier outside. I quickly called out to what was left of my platoon, and carrying our wounded we made a dash to our closest platoon. On the way we passed German officers who must have believed we were also Germans. As it turned out this withdrawal was most timely for I had only twelve men left in my platoon and each man carried an average of ten rounds of ammunition. We did, however, come out with all of our weapons.⁹

In the new area the two platoons made ready to beat off further attacks and the wounded were taken care of. Cpl. Sinclair describes part of the action as he saw it:

We carried the boys that were wounded back to the house where Sgt. Smith was acting as M.O. [Medical Officer] as well as being top warrior. As usual he was wearing his coveralls with the legs cut off at the knees, pocket stuffed with loot, Luger [German pistol] in his hand and his old slogan "They'll never get me". We were still in a pretty bad fix as our ammo. was getting low and we were . . . making every round count. Lt. MacDonnell was doing a little observing when a sniper put a bullet in the door jamb right alongside his head. He quite calmly, with his English accent, said: "Do you know, Smithie, I think they are shooting at me!"¹⁰

The reason No. 15 Platoon was able to leave its area without being fired upon was that the bulk of the enemy had penetrated deeper into the company's positions and had rushed No. 14 Platoon and Company Headquarters which, closer to Oosthoek, barred the way into the battalion fortress and the

⁹ Marshall, *op. cit.*

¹⁰ Sinclair, *op. cit.*

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canal crossing north of Middeldorp. Here began a savage battle with the badly outnumbered remnants of "C" Company displaying a remarkable tenacity under the leadership of Captain Schjelderup. Unfortunately wireless contact with Battalion Headquarters and with the supporting artillery broke down at this crucial stage, so that the artillery could not bring down its fire on the enemy which were all around the place. It was obvious that only a counter-attack by the other companies or by the Winnipegs could relieve the situation. In the darkness and the confused fighting which followed, the enemy was to achieve at least partial success before word got back to Lt-Col. Crofton and the counter-attack was set in motion.

Just before the enemy struck Sgt. A. Gri, commanding No. 14 Platoon, had sent men back to pick up rations so that when the enemy attacked, the platoon was caught under strength. By using a covered approach and their own former slit trenches, the Germans were able to overrun the platoon and surround platoon headquarters. At the beginning of the action Sgt. Gri reported to Company Headquarters and then, at great risk, ran back through the enemy throwing grenades and using his Sten gun to cut a path to his men. By the time he got back into the building where his platoon was located he had killed four of the enemy, but that was only the beginning of an hour-long blazing battle. He and his platoon fought back tooth and nail against overwhelming odds for another hour until, with himself the only survivor, his ammunition exhausted and his uniform scorched by the flames of the house burning down around him, he was overwhelmed and taken prisoner.¹¹

The fight put up by this platoon had helped Captain Schjelderup and his Company Headquarters to battle longer with the enemy. The action here was every bit as fierce, with the enemy throwing grenades in through the windows and pouring machine-gun fire through the doors. The body of a German soldier killed at the doorstep of the house held by Company Headquarters was subsequently blown beyond recognition in the grenade fight which followed. Again and again the enemy attacked

¹¹ Information from the citations accompanying the award of the Distinguished Service Order and Distinguished Conduct Medal awarded Schjelderup and Gri for the gallant fight they and their men put up against such heavy odds.

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and just as stubbornly Schjelderup, C. S. M. Berry, the signallers and others hit back with everything they had. Once again the enemy managed to set the buildings on fire with his tracer bullets, and with the buildings in flames there was nothing for the survivors but to surrender.¹²

It was found later that between them, Company Headquarters and No. 14 Platoon accounted for at least sixty of the enemy killed or wounded. More important, the company had prevented the enemy from thrusting through to the canal, for the resistance they put up alerted the remainder of the battalion and gave the two Winnipeg companies time to swing left to push towards the Reginas. In the early grey light of the morning the Germans formed up the prisoners and marched them away. The other two platoons in the company, several hundred yards away, could see them but did not dare shoot for fear of hitting their own comrades. This action left "C" Company with only two officers and about 35 to 40 men out of approximately 105 all ranks who had made the initial assault across the canal. The rest were killed, wounded or taken prisoner. As the enemy was to find out, it was one thing to take prisoners but something else to hold them. Even before marching away Gri had concealed a knife beneath his clothes. It was to be instrumental in effecting an escape some time later.

By the time the Germans had marched the prisoners away "A" and "B" Companies of the Winnipegs were at the southern approaches of Oosthoek. Since the enemy had jumped on the brigade before the two shallow bridgeheads had been joined, the Winnipegs first had to push back the enemy who had started to establish himself in the area formerly held by Schjelderup's company, before attempting to push directly towards the Reginas. The Winnipegs—to get ahead of our story for a moment—attacked the enemy with every weapon blazing, killing many and taking 64 prisoners who turned out to be from the enemy's 1038 Infantry Regiment. As a result of this successful attack the 30-40 men of the Scottish "C" Company still holding out were relieved.

To go back to the early hours of October 7 once more,

¹² Personal narrative, Lt-Col. V. R. Schjelderup. The enemy tried every trick to find out the location of the other brigades from the prisoners, but with no luck. A brand new reinforcement to the unit captured at this time still wore his "Rocky Mountain Rangers" shoulder patch, which made the enemy Intelligence Officers scratch their heads.

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Lieutenant S. L. Chambers of "A" Company had heard from some men from "C" Company of the German counter-attack when the men had tried to bring up rations to a then non-existent Company Headquarters. Guided by them, Chambers went up to appraise the situation and after scouting around, dodging snipers and crawling about in the mud, found that the two forward platoons, although surrounded, were still holding out. He also contacted the advance elements of the Winnipegs and a platoon of "B" Company. He returned with the information to Lt-Col. Crofton and was later sent back to Brigadier Spragge. When asked about the situation he told the Brigadier that

. . . our troops in the bridgehead were outnumbered and that any reinforcements the Brigadier could send would help. Brigadier Spragge decided to send our carriers, with their flame throwers, across the canal on a raft. At the same time "A" Company was sent forward to occupy the position formerly held by "C" Company. With Captain Ewan Fraser, we managed to get the engineers to raft three carriers and "A" Company's Jeep across. . . .

The carriers were immediately shelled and withdrew.¹³

All day long the battle continued along the front, with the fighting so close at times that several Germans were killed with Commando knives. On the far left, next to the remnants of "C" Company, was Lieut. Hobden's platoon of "B" Company. This platoon had been right at the edge of the fighting during the night counter-attack and for a while expected to be surrounded and eliminated as had Schjelderup and Gri only a short distance away. The men hid their maps, documents and money just in case, and as daylight came the platoon could see the enemy march off the "C" Company prisoners. Then Sgt. Smith sprinted into view from the position held by the two platoons of "C" Company, bringing with him word that there were over 30 men under Lieuts. Mac-Donnell and Marshall still fighting about five hundred yards away, and, as Hobden wrote later, "by his pugnacious attitude he heartened us all". A short time later, continued the platoon commander,

. . . a message got through from No. 10 Platoon that they had been forced back but that the Winnipegers were putting in a counter-attack and would we support it by firing from 1045 to 1100 hours. We did, with every weapon, and when the Winnipegs chased them out of the

¹³ Personal narrative, Captain S. L. Chambers.

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house we shot them. Pte. Kuharchuk shot off fifteen Bren magazines in fifteen minutes in a closed room, and was deaf for weeks after.¹⁴

The attack by the Winnipeggers, together with "A" Company's push to the north-west, helped to secure the left flank of the battalion. "C" Company's two platoons were taken under the wing of "A" Company temporarily, while on the right "D" Company was aided in its bitter struggle by the Scout platoon and by a dismounted squadron from the 7th Canadian Reconnaissance Regiment.

During the remainder of the day the battle continued on all fronts, with "B" Company edging to the west to take over part of "C" Company's responsibilities. On the left the Winnipeggers fought hard for every yard in their attempt to link up with the Reginas. To the front and right the Canadian Scottish found the going every bit as tough with close quarter fighting the only way of dislodging the enemy. Piats and anti-tank guns were used to knock holes in buildings held by the enemy, but owing to the close contact between the enemy and the forward troops, there were few instances where the artillery could directly further the companies' advance.

In this flat, partially flooded area there were few decent observation posts. On military maps contour lines, showing the height of land above sea level, were almost non-existent north of the canal. The gunners knew, however, that the enemy, like ourselves, was restricted to the main roads to bring up his supplies, and these were kept under a constant harassing fire by the 25-pounders while our aircraft struck with their rockets at targets of opportunity farther ahead. The enemy retaliated by shelling and mortaring not only the narrow bridgehead, but the kapok bridges and roads leading into it.

The narrow strip gained by the brigade was slowly and painfully enlarged yard by yard at the cost of heavy casualties. By October 8 both the Scottish and Reginas were holding their respective fronts with only three rifle companies each, the fourth company having suffered very heavy losses in both cases. Both in and behind the front movement was hazardous, and the Com-

¹⁴ W.D., 1 C Scot R, October, 1944, Appx. 9 " 'B' Company, 1 C Scot R". The completion of the Winnipeggers' task—to link the two bridgeheads—took until the early hours of October 9, after two days of hard fighting and heavy casualties. (W.D., R. Wpg. R., October 7-9, 1944).

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pany Quartermaster Sergeants and their carrying parties did a particularly fine job bringing up rations and ammunition over the bullet-swept canal to the companies. As yet there was still only one vehicle over the canal, so what was brought had to be ferried or man-packed.

The enemy was showing no signs of cracking. "D" Company reported it had seen enemy soldiers about to surrender shot by their own N.C.Os. or officers. A number of German gunners who did surrender reported "that their officers held them at their gun positions at the point of a pistol and that reprisals would be inflicted on their families by the Gestapo if they surrendered".¹⁵

The situation of the brigade with the canal at its rear and a flooded area at its front was not a happy one. As yet the three infantry battalions were the only Canadian units which had thrust north of the canal. That the brigade got a bloody nose was hardly unexpected. That it would continue to be battered unless new tactics and fresh reinforcements were brought in was obvious. The attack by the 9th Brigade in the rear of the enemy, already delayed, was a necessary move to ease the pressure on the bitterly contested 7th Brigade front. To succeed in an attack, others things being equal, it was generally conceded that those attacking should have three times the number of those defending, since the latter had by far the greater advantages. In this action the enemy had the equivalent of three brigades to defend his position while so far the Canadians had but one brigade attacking. Even with two of the enemy's brigades responsible for other sectors of the area, the 7th Brigade could do little more than slug its way forward yard by yard and accept the casualties in an unequal contest.

On October 9 it was clear that the plan to have the 8th Brigade pass through the 7th was not feasible. At the same time it was decided to shift the weight of the 7th Brigade to the west. In its present position, with the partly boggy and partly inundated ground to its front making an advance difficult in the extreme, the brigade was just about pinned down. The area where the Maldegem - Aardenburg road crosses the Leopold Canal, however, had the advantage of being drier. The seizure of a bridgehead, or the extension of the present bridgehead westward, would permit the engineers to construct a Class 40 Bailey bridge over the canal.

¹⁵ W.D., 7 Cdn. Inf. Bde., October 9, 1944.

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Such a bridge, replacing the main road bridge blown up by the Germans, would in turn permit both wheeled and tracked vehicles to cross the canal and provide greater muscle to the infantry's attack.

The brigade was to work its way to the west on the following day. The news that the 9th Brigade had made a successful landing to the north-east was heartening, but on the 7th Brigade front the enemy continued to resist as stubbornly as ever and further, launched numerous counter-attacks against the Reginas and Winnipeggers during the day and night.

On the extreme left the farthest the Reginas were able to go was within about 200 yards of the blown bridge carrying the Maldegem - Aardenburg road over the canal. At that the Reginas held only the "water side" of the northern canal bank. The enemy clung to the other side. To pry the enemy loose from his hold beyond the main road, Brigadier Spragge decided to use the Canadian Scottish. No special orders were given for a set attack with supporting arms. The battalion was ordered to probe and feel its way as circumstances permitted. "C" Company, now commanded by Lieut. J. L. Gallagher, had been withdrawn from the front several days previously to recoup from the harsh pounding it had received on October 7 as well as to bring it up to about half its full strength. It was planned to send "C" Company back over the canal to the Regina's toe-hold and have it attack westward towards and beyond the road. "D" Company was to give it supporting fire as would "A" Company of the Reginas. If the enemy strongpoint was captured, the plan envisaged a push by the battalion to the north to seize the straggling village of Eede immediately west of the road.

Between midnight and one o'clock on the morning of October 12 "C" Company moved across the canal, contacted the Reginas, and then crept cautiously through the sloppy, sucking mud of the canal bank towards the blown bridge. The men crossed the road and, still without encountering the enemy, extended their hold west of the road with No. 14 platoon on the extreme left, about 200 yards to the west. It was impossible to crawl over the canal bank since the enemy had several machine-guns whose fire swept the top of the bank making it, for them, a perfect "killing

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ground". They also had the road to Aardenburg taped with their machine-guns firing on fixed lines.

"C" Company, lining the water side of the canal bank, immediately began to dig in. It was well they did. After about an hour one or two German patrols bumped into No. 14 platoon and there was a brief exchange of grenades. The first real counter-attack came a bit later, the action taking place with the Canadian Scottish on one side of the canal bank and the Germans, a few yards away, on the other. The company commander reported later:

They [the Germans] worked their way in along the dead ground on the far side of the dyke and began to harass us all along the positions by lobbing grenades over the dyke. The hottest spot was on our left flank, and they were obviously trying to drive us back in from the left. Our men threw No. 36 grenades back over the bank as quickly as we could bring them up. . . . We had a carrying party bringing up grenades as fast as they could and after we used approximately 25 boxes we managed to drive them off. During this novel type of fighting we lost about 10 men wounded and we were forced to withdraw to about 100 yards to the left of the bridge.¹⁶

No. 14 platoon withdrew closer to the bridge with its wounded at about midday, but the left flank was strengthened when "D" Company came up and dug in on the left of "C" Company. The enemy's "potato masher" grenade (*Stiel-Handgranate*) was not as powerful as our own, and the company had inflicted far more casualties on the enemy than he had on the Canadian Scottish. During the afternoon a German First Aid man came over the dike to request a truce of 20 minutes while he cleared out 25 enemy wounded. The truce was granted, and both sides evacuated their wounded in one direction and brought up grenades in another.¹⁷

Along with the grenades the carrying parties brought up some "Compo" rations and word that the village of Eede would be the target for a strike by the air force that afternoon. This strike would reduce the amount of enemy fire coming from the village and assist the attack which, it was planned, would go in that evening. Meanwhile, along the canal bank, "D" and "C" Companies continued to make life for the enemy more uncomfortable than it was for

¹⁶ W.D., 1 C Scot R, October, 1944, Appx. 9, "Report on 'C' Company's Attack on the Bridge Across the Leopold Canal".

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, "Charlie Company's Activities, October 6-13".

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themselves. In one place, the men dug slit trenches horizontally through the six-foot thick canal bank to surprise the enemy.

They did—as they broke down the last six inches of dirt and found their Bren covering an enemy slit trench—occupied. It chattered and some more Supermen became less Super.¹⁸

Once established on the canal bank, Major Pugh and Lieutenant Gallagher went back to discuss the next phase of the attack with Lt-Col. Crofton. It was decided that the attack, now phased back to midnight on October 12-13, would be made by “C” and “D” Companies rushing the enemy’s positions close to the canal bank. Almost immediately “B” Company, commanded by Major English, was to follow through and seize the southern outskirts of Eede, while on the right “A” Company would push to the north-west to attack Eede on its eastern outskirts.

Two hours before midnight, therefore, after a mortar and artillery barrage, the two companies went over the top of the bank, scrambling forward to take advantage of their own “grenade barrage” at H Hour. The men fought their way forward for a distance of about 50 yards, overrunning many enemy positions on the way. “C” Company, like all other companies, was considerably under strength owing to casualties, but even so this company alone took about 65 prisoners during the attack. No. 13 Platoon, commanded by Sgt. T. Byron, captured about 30 prisoners although there were only 14 men in the entire platoon. Shortly after this engagement the company commander wrote:

Men who were particularly outstanding in this show were Cpl. A. H. Palmer who took command of No. 13 Platoon when Sgt. Byron was wounded, Pte. P. Colman . . . who took charge of a section and did very good work in clearing out the Germans from the dyke, and Pte. E. G. Shannon who carried on until the fight was over despite being wounded in both arms. These are men who were mentioned to me, but there were many more, and every man did an excellent job.¹⁹

Lieutenant Gallagher himself deserves high praise for his part in the operation. His leadership, his cool determination and his contagious spirit of aggressiveness on this and other occasions won him the awards of the Chevalier of the Order of Leopold II with Palm and the Croix de Guerre 1940 with Palm.

With both sides of the canal bank cleared, the second phase

¹⁸ W.D., 1 C Scot R, October 12, 1944.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Appx. 9, “Report on ‘C’ Company’s Attack . . . ”

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of the attack could go in. "B" Company pushed farther into the village after midnight, extending the battalion's bridgehead a further 200 yards north of the canal. Meanwhile, on the right, "A" Company was adding its weight to the attack, an attack which deserves at least a brief description by itself.

The Maldegem - Aardenburg road crosses the Leopold Canal almost at right angles. Several hundred yards west of this main road is a secondary highway. Northward from the canal the main road has numerous buildings scattered along each side of it. Paralleled to it, and off to the left, are the more numerous houses and buildings which make up the straggling village of Eede. Three companies, as we have seen, were now on the southern outskirts of the village. "A" Company's task was to seize several buildings immediately west of the main road which, when captured, would link the Canadian Scottish front south of Eede with the Reginas' front then south of Biezen. The axis of "A" Company's attack followed a double row of hedgerows running at an angle from the canal on the left flank of the Reginas' territory north-west to their objective. Captain Gillan's plan was to move two platoons along the northern hedgerow while he, with his headquarters and a reserve platoon, took the southern hedgerow. Although parallel, the two platoons to the north would reach the objective first.

It was pitch black when the company set out. On the southern route No. 7 Platoon, with Sgt. Clarke leading, set such a fast pace that the southern group arrived at the main road before the assaulting platoons. While Sgt. Clarke and a few men prowled forward to examine the houses across the road, the acting second in command, Lieut. S. L. Chambers, seeing shadowy figures coming up behind him, had the rest of the platoon take up fire positions to deal with the "enemy". Fortunately it turned out to be the main body of the company and they were recognized before being fired upon. When word came back that the houses farther on were clear, Captain Gillan distributed his platoons among the houses while he, his headquarters and No. 7 Platoon took over a house for themselves.

In the basement of this house, unknown to the men, was a group of enemy soldiers with a German sergeant in command. The latter heard the Canadians come in and when it was obvious they were there to stay, the sergeant decided to make a break for it.

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He tiptoed up the cellar stairs which led into the kitchen, the room Gillan and Chambers had taken over. Gillan, reclining on a few sandbags with his feet up against the cellar door, felt someone try to open the door. Thinking it was one of his men still searching around, he pushed the door closed without giving the matter much thought. A minute later the door was pushed open again with greater vigour, forcing Captain Gillan's knees up around his neck. With the door open the German sergeant made the motion to hurl a grenade in the room, but the grenade struck Gillan's steel helmet while the German was still holding it. "He went head over heels down the stairs on top of his men", wrote Gillan later, "while I thought the sky had fallen in".²⁰

There was a wild flurry in the next few minutes. Gillan, stunned and wounded, crawled out of the room. Chambers, also wounded, was tussling with a German in the darkness. C.S.M. Vance quickly saw the attack was coming not from outside the house but from the cellar, so No. 7 Platoon poured down the steps and quickly took the German sergeant and his men prisoners. Chambers, meanwhile, was being patched up by his batman, Pte. "Barney" MacDonald. It was obvious he would have to be evacuated, so aided by MacDonald he started off across the fields towards the rear. About a hundred yards away Chambers, unable to go farther, called for a stretcher. One was brought up and, wrote Chambers later:

. . . with MacDonald carrying the front end of the stretcher and the two stretcher bearers, Daly and Roy carrying the back end we started off. One of our own companies, seeing three heads bobbing along a hedgerow from the direction of the German lines, opened fire on us with a Bren gun and managed to shoot me through the leg and to break Roy's arm. We all landed in the mud in a heap. Without the slightest hesitation Daly got up on his knees and proceeded to put dressings on Roy's wounds and mine. If the Bren gunner had fired again he would have shot Daly right through the head and Daly knew it. Following this, MacDonald volunteered to crawl directly towards the troops who were firing on us, to persuade them to stop.²¹

"Neither Daly nor MacDonald ever received a decoration, nor was either ever promoted", Chambers continued, "yet both seemed to take this sort of risk in their stride as a matter of course every day they were in battle".

²⁰ Personal narrative, Major J. D. M. Gillan.

²¹ Personal narrative, Captain S. L. Chambers.

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This is true not only of these men, but also of many more like them, men whose names do not appear in the roll of honours and awards, nor in the pages of this book. Yet they were the very backbone of the battalion, the men who made success possible. Their patience and endurance, so often assumed to the point of being taken for granted, was a tribute to their rarely expressed patriotism. Their courage lay latent within them, ready when called upon, known to those about them and very, very rarely challenged without being shown in action. It was here in the cold, rain-swept mud flats along the Leopold Canal—a place where mud stuck to one's rifle, boots and equipment, where uniforms seemed eternally sodden, and where the enemy was but grenade-throwing distance away—it was here and places like this that the veterans will remember when the pipes and drums strike up their stirring martial music in easier and more peaceful times. If ever a regimental spirit was put on trial, where sheer doggedness and endurance on the part of all ranks was put to the test, it was in the soggy flats around the Scheldt.

During the early evening of October 13, after a day of beating back enemy counter-attacks and attempts to infiltrate between the companies, the Canadian Scottish received the welcome news that the engineers had completed the bridge across the canal. For an entire week the brigade had had to claw its way forward in a battle reminiscent of the infantry battles of the First World War, with no tanks, no carriers, and no vehicles of any sort to help it. With the bridge complete, and the engineers and pioneers busy clearing the road of mines, the armour could be brought in to blast the enemy from his entrenched positions around Eede.

The enemy, meanwhile, was having a field day not only with his mortars and field artillery, but also with his heavy coastal guns situated some fifteen miles away at Flushing on the island of Walcheren. The 7th Brigade's area north of the canal was small, the whereabouts of the company locations known, and the supply routes obvious. With maddening regularity the coastal guns hurled their large shells into the bridgehead, many of them smacking into the canal bank close to the bridge. Sometimes they registered a hit on a building or a vehicle, in which case the target disintegrated. Fortunately

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Allied aircraft commanded the air and enemy observation posts were as scarce as our own, which meant the Germans could not correct their fire and thus create more havoc than they did. Even so, it was a nerve-wracking business for the troops.

The first troops of tanks over the bridge came up to the southern edge of Eede on the following day. Lt-Col. Crofton, always close up to the front line positions whenever possible, accompanied by Major Lamb, the squadron commander, had gone forward to reconnoitre a place where the armour could get in a trial shoot prior to a strong infantry and armoured attack on the village. The troops of tanks met determined opposition, but they shot up several enemy pillboxes and strong-points which, with "A" Company's assistance, yielded 45 prisoners.

To prepare for the attack on the 15th, patrols were sent out by "A" Company and the Scout platoon on the night of October 14-15 to probe west of the village and north to the crossroads in the centre of Eede. Corporal A. E. MacDonald and two men took on the latter task and, having found the information they sought after a brush with a German patrol, MacDonald sent the two men back with the information. He himself then went over to the western flank in front of "D" Company's positions to see what he could discover about an enemy pillbox. This enemy position was so well camouflaged that its location had not been spotted. MacDonald found it in a clump of bushes and at the same time the enemy spotted him. They tried to get him with grenades and machine-gun fire, but he managed to crawl away. Cut off from a direct route back to the Canadian Scottish lines, he made for the canal and swam to a point where he was out of the enemy's line of fire. From this position he made his way back to Battalion Headquarters. With the information he gave the unit the pillbox, so long a thorn in the battalion's left flank, was destroyed by shellfire the next morning. MacDonald, as a result of this action, was awarded the Military Medal.

On October 15, the day of the proposed attack, one of the enemy's coastal guns made a direct hit on the Bailey Bridge over the canal and holed it. Although there were a few tanks in the bridgehead there were not enough for the planned attack,

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and it was not till the following day that the battalion pushed into the village. The attack became a hard slugging match. Of the three "Wasps" sent forward to help "A" Company, one became mired in the mud, another could not get past a road block and the third was blown up by a land mine. "A" and "D" Companies managed to get into the northern part of the village by eight o'clock in the morning only to meet a fierce enemy counter-attack. The bitter, close quarter fighting which followed lasted until early in the afternoon when the tanks and self-propelled guns broke the back of the enemy assault. Farther to the east the Winnipegs had sent patrols unopposed into St. Kruis, while to the west the Reginas, passing through Eede, were having as difficult a time as the Scottish, trying to get into Middelbourg.

The rain, the mud and the cold wind whipping in off the North Sea continued to make life miserable for the men. Almost two weeks of this kind of fighting without relief was having its effect on the battalion. The shelling and mortaring, the continuous close quarter fighting, the understrength platoons which meant double duty for those who were there, and the frustration of wallowing about in the muck and mire of the bridgehead without being able to give the enemy a really resounding crack which would settle the battle once and for all, were beginning to tell on both morale and efficiency. It was with great relief, therefore, that the men received the news on the morning of October 18 that a British brigade was going to take over the front on the same afternoon. That meant at least one or two days' rest. Never was a group of men happier to leave an area than the Canadian Scottish was to leave the bridgehead over the Leopold.

As the men come out of the line we might pause in this narrative just for a moment and take note of the battalion in comparison to its state several months previously. One of the most noticeable features about it was that the battalion was now, comparatively, about 100 or more men under strength. Platoons on the Leopold Canal were but two sections strong. Those platoons which took the brunt of the fighting, therefore, were frequently called upon to perform tasks which were difficult

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to accomplish even when their ranks were full. It is to their credit that they succeeded so frequently as they did.

The standard of training of the reinforcements reaching the battalion at this period was poor, and some of the antics of the "greenhorns" brought groans from the veterans. Part of the problem was that a fresh reinforcement coming to the unit at this stage was thrust into a rifle company with little ceremony. There was not time to take him aside for a fatherly talk, nor could he enjoy the privilege of becoming accustomed to warfare on a "quiet" front. There was no quiet front—in fact, unless he was pushed forward to fill the gap there would be no front. The following comment by an officer during the last days at Eede, although probably not typical, was nevertheless not uncommon. His platoon had gone up to relieve part of "A" Company on the morning of October 17. He had half a dozen new reinforcements with him.

Throughout the day we sniped and caused the enemy a few casualties. Nothing unusual occurred throughout the night but the fires in the village that were still burning caused sufficient shadows to keep the platoon in a continual state of alarm. The lack of training of the new reinforcements was no help. The next morning at dawn the enemy poured a concentrated artillery fire on us for about ten minutes and caused us approximately seven casualties. The casualties in nearly all cases were caused to my new reinforcements. One man in particular wanted to see what a shell looked like as it burst and unfortunately one burst on the hard road in front of his position and caught him standing up. He was not touched by fragments, but we used approximately ten shell dressings to close his wounds which had been caused by blast.²²

There was one thing about this problem. On the Leopold Canal a reinforcement quickly became a veteran or a casualty. There was, nor is, no room for amateurs in war. Even the professionals get struck down all too frequently. In No. 14 Platoon, for example, there was only one soldier, Pte. Lucas, who remained of the original members of that platoon who landed on D Day.²³ Proportionately the officers were worse off. Between D Day and October 20 forty-two officers—more

²² Marshall, *op. cit.*

²³ W.D., 1 C Scot R, October 20, 1944. During the fighting on the Leopold Canal the Canadian Scottish suffered a loss of six officers and 136 other ranks killed or wounded. (Information supplied by the Historical Section, Army Headquarters).

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than the battalion had on D Day—had been killed or wounded. A few who had been wounded had returned to the battalion, but the score was still high, especially in the junior ranks.

Despite these difficulties the Canadian Scottish was much more experienced and consequently more efficient than it had been on D Day. To watch it move from one place to another, or to shake itself out in battle formation, or to fight its way forward in an action, was to watch a smooth working deadly machine. Cooperation within the battalion between the rifle companies and support company's platoons, or with the tanks, artillery and heavier supporting units, functioned automatically and almost subconsciously. In a way it was like drilling on the parade ground. When the soldier has had a month or so of it he almost knows what the N.C.O. or officer is going to say before he says it. The battalion had reached that stage in battle. The men were now professionals and if new apprentices sometimes blundered around a bit, a clip on the ear—either by the enemy or by the veterans—usually set them straight very quickly.

The British Brigade that took over the boggy flats held by the 7th Brigade had been trained for mountain warfare. If the British troops were unhappy about their position, they must have been cheered when they discovered that the enemy had withdrawn to the Aardenburg - Middelbourg line. On the next day, October 19, contact was made with the larger Canadian bridgehead to the east. In order to enlarge and quicken the successful operations to the north, the divisional commander decided to employ the 7th Brigade in close conjunction with the remainder of the division. On October 20, therefore, the Canadian Scottish was again on the way to the front.

The Leopold Canal would not be forgotten. Although the brigade had not grabbed much "real estate", it had caused the enemy to commit the reserve battalions of his three infantry regiments to its front to stem the brigade attack, and in so doing it had made it somewhat easier for the rest of the division. At the same time the brigade's operations had cost Major General Eberding's 64th Infantry Division considerable casualties. Had the brigade been able to rest and recoup for a few days after the Calais battle before being thrust into action on the Leopold, it is quite possible the enemy would have suffered even more.

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The move from the rest area in the little village of Wisken north-east to Biervliet, a town captured by the 9th Brigade after its amphibious assault across the Braakman inlet, was accomplished in a matter of hours. The trucks bouncing over the pot-holed dirt roads on top of the dikes and canal banks carried the men through a desolate area. The farms were usually inundated and most of the buildings were burned or blasted. "Occasionally", wrote the war diarist,

. . . we would pass through an area where bodies had still not been buried. The sickening sweet smell of dead humans and animals would form a vision of slaughter in our mind's eye as we hurried on. Villages which crowded the edges of the dykes were often found to be completely uninhabitable. The few civilians who were seen poking about disconsolately in the ruins of their homes would only sometimes wave. They had been left with nothing.²⁴

Biervliet itself was three quarters ruined, but a number of barns and houses were found to keep the men dry and comparatively comfortable.

About seven or eight miles to the north-west the 9th Brigade was pushing on to seize Schoondijke and Breskens. When these towns had been captured, it was planned to have the 7th Brigade push through them to clear the enemy from the area between Groede and the coast. By October 22 both towns were captured and Fort Frederik Hendrik, an old fort on the outskirts of Breskens, was being invested. This advance permitted the battalion to come up to the outskirts of the old fort preparatory to its push along the coast.

For the next ten days the Canadian Scottish was engaged in an action which was a cross between the battle for Calais and that for the Leopold Canal. The coastal area itself had numerous fixed defences—concrete pillboxes, field defences, reinforced emplacements, etc.—most of which had their approaches covered with numerous minefields and liberal amounts of barbed wire and anti-personnel mines. Farther inland, the flat, open, flooded polder country again restricted armoured support to a secondary role. So far the fight had been, and was to continue to be, one where infantry was pitched against infantry.

From October 23 onward the Canadian Scottish pushed

²⁴ W.D., 1 C Scot R, October 20, 1944.

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their way forward from the area south of the old fort westward along the coast. It was a case of constant prodding and patrolling, seeking ways through, over or around minefields and flooded areas, and enduring shelling from the enemy's supporting and coastal guns, especially those in Flushing.

Perhaps the most difficult time experienced by the battalion was four days after the attack. By that time the unit had cleared the enemy from his positions to a point approximately two miles west of Fort Frederik Hendrik. The Reginas, swinging to the coast from Groede, had overcome strong opposition to capture that part of the coast directly north of Nieuwvliet. The plan for October 27 was for the Scottish to pass through the Reginas to capture further enemy fortifications about a mile farther west. This was part of a larger plan to encircle the town of Cadzand, believed to contain the enemy's divisional headquarters.

At twenty minutes past seven on the morning of the 27th "A" Company, with "D" Company following 500 yards behind it, crossed the start line. During the morning and early afternoon all went well with the companies inching their way forward and capturing almost three dozen prisoners during the morning. Shortly after noon, however, the enemy, sensitive to the potential threat to his flank by the three-quarter-mile advance by the Scottish, began to bring an increasing amount of shell fire on the leading companies. Recently overrun German slit trenches and dugouts offered some protection, but when the artillery fire eased up a bit "A" Company pushed on. The final assault of the day was led by No. 9 Platoon. The men in this platoon, advancing along a road at the foot of a dike, were suddenly met by a hail of fire from all sides. It needed only a second to realize that the enemy had allowed the leading elements of "A" Company to pass through them and had then closed in. As the war diarist relates:

No. 9 Platoon's runner, Pte. Bowling, was sent back to warn Company Headquarters of the situation. A bloody battle ensued with every ounce of fighting energy that the gallant "A" Company men possessed. They gathered themselves into coordinated groups and answered the enemy with a hail of Bren and rifle fire. But the uneven battle could not last. Their ammunition was soon exhausted and their position in the open below the muzzles of the German machine-guns

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was untenable. Only 12 men of "A" Company escaped being overwhelmed in the action.²⁵

There was nothing that could be done to rectify this unhappy situation, for by the time "B" Company and the carriers came up the enemy had whisked away the prisoners and had fallen back.

Farther inland, forming the left flank of the battalion, "C" Company was pushed on to the village of In de Vijf Wegen. It reached a position about midway between the start line and this tiny village and dug in for the night. On the next day the company resumed its attack, encountering conditions which were more or less typical of those met by the rest of the battalion. A member of this company wrote later:

Just before light L/Cpl. Cox and two others went on a patrol to determine how far ahead of the leading platoon the enemy was. About 50 yards ahead of the leading platoon (No. 14) they looked in a dugout on the side of the canal embankment and captured four Germans.

Later in the morning Sgt. MacDonald of No. 16 Platoon took a patrol forward and cleared out an anti-aircraft post about 400 yards ahead and captured quite a few prisoners. As a result, when the company moved forward into Vijf Wegen in the early afternoon there was no opposition in the way of small arms fire, but unfortunately we were spotted by the enemy's O.Ps. and were shelled unmercifully just as we were reaching our objective. No. 13 Platoon lost a whole section of men.

Poor Jimmy Myhon and Paul Rieger were killed and the rest were wounded. L/Cpl. E. G. Earlien, who was badly hit in both hands and one foot and was bleeding badly was very efficiently patched up by Baudet who applied tourniquets while stretcher-bearer Johnstone was tending Pte. J. G. A. Veilleux, also badly wounded.²⁶

Sgt. C. J. Smith, acting as Company Sergeant-Major, did an excellent job of getting the wounded men evacuated back over a road under the enemy's direct 88-mm. gun fire.

Of the various nasty and dangerous obstacles with which the men had to contend, few were more disliked than the anti-personnel mines. German ingenuity in manufacturing these deadly objects doubtless brought praise from their own commanders, but brought a string of curses from the engineers

²⁵ W.D., I C Scot R, October 27, 1944.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, Appx. 9, "War Diary, 'C' Company".

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and pioneers whose task it was to deal with them. During the slugging match along the Scheldt towards Cadzand the Germans had scattered a great number of these anti-personnel mines which took their toll among the Canadian Scottish as they pushed westward. Not all killed. Some were meant to wound or to maim, the theory being that one man wounded would eliminate that man from the front as well as two others who would carry him back. Among others, both veterans and reinforcements, who were wounded as a result of these mines was Lieut. N. T. Park, who lost his leg when he tripped an anti-personnel mine.

By the end of the month the battalion had pushed along the coast to within rifle range of the Uitwateringskanaal, northwest of Cadzand. The coastal strongpoints, many of which were so well sited and mined as to make it extremely difficult for a large force to get at them, made the going very tough. The battalion's supporting platoons brought their anti-tank and mortar fire to bear on numerous occasions to support companies and platoons attempting to get at closer grips with the enemy. It was a trying period, one which called upon all the tenacity and determination the Canadian Scottish possessed.

One humorous incident is recalled at this stage of the battle by the commander of "B" Company. He writes:

It was during this final few days that a typical Bairnsfather episode took place within "B" Coy. After three days and nights without any chance of a sleep, and when we finally captured a large house on the dyke some 400 yards from an enemy strongpoint, and finding this house to have an excellent cellar, I decided in the interests of the war in general to get forty winks in spite of enemy mortar and artillery fire, and laid my weary head down on a sack of vegetables. After about ten minutes of this bliss I was awakened by Lieut. Corsan. He informed me that a runner had just arrived from Bn. HQ with an urgent message addressed to me personally, and would I please give him an answer as he had been told by the Adjutant not to return without one. I crawled up what was left of the stairway to see a very forlorn looking runner who had a rough trip getting to our positions. As a matter of fact I was surprised anyone had got through at all. The runner handed me a message which, when opened, read: "Please remit by return the serial number of your company's typewriter!"²⁷

Everyone, it seemed, had their troubles on the Scheldt.

The Canadian Scottish cleared the last of the enemy from

²⁷ English, *op. cit.*

LEOPOLD CANAL — THE SCHELDT

its front on the first days of November. The Germans had established themselves in a couple of reinforced concrete forts in and around the lifesaving station at the mouth of the canal. On November 1 a "C" Company patrol, later reinforced, had tried to take out the German position but it was beaten back. The enemy had ample ammunition and they were uncomfortably liberal with it. From his Tactical Headquarters on the northern outskirts of Cadzand, Lt-Col. Crofton decided first to encircle the position and then to use all the rifle companies against it. "C" and "D" Companies crossed the canal while "B" and "A" Company, east of the canal, remained where they were.

Late that night the companies closed in with grenades and machine-guns, splitting the darkness with streams of tracer bullets and the flashes of exploding bombs and grenades. West of the canal the companies ran low on ammunition, so R. S. M. Fisher organized a carrying party from the Scout platoon to keep them well supplied. For his work on this and many previous occasions, Fisher was made a Member of the Order of the British Empire.

By the morning of November 2 the enemy was still holding out. Lacking immediate armoured support, and unwilling to push his men through barbed wire and minefields to the enemy's concrete emplacements, Lt-Col. Crofton decided to see what he could do using his 3-inch mortars and 6-pounder anti-tank guns. Shortly after nine o'clock, in cooperation with the Reginas, the anti-tank guns came up beside the former German blockhouse Crofton was using to house his Tactical Headquarters. Despite the fire from the enemy's 20-mm. guns which was ricocheting off the walls of the blockhouse, the anti-tank gunners held a pattern of high explosive shells right on the target. When they finished, the Reginas' and Scottish mortar platoons took over and pounded the enemy strongpoint, setting at least one building on fire and further demoralizing an already shaken German garrison. Several shoots of this nature soon produced the desired result. About midday

. . . a German officer came out of one of the forts holding a white flag. He had to advance about 700 yards direct to the Scottish HQ. As he came through our company lines he was met and blindfolded and escorted in where I met him and we made use of a partly demolished house to talk terms. I told him the terms were unconditional surrender and sent him back with the message to his commander. It was not long

READY FOR THE FRAY

before more white flags appeared. Accompanied by Lieut. Burge I went forward to the main fort to receive the surrender of the Garrison of about 300 all ranks. The German commander handed me his Luger pistol in token of surrender for himself and his men.²⁸

The surrender of the German garrison north-west of Cadzand was followed within a few days by the seizure or capitulation of the last German pocket in the Scheldt estuary. The way to Antwerp was now clear. In his message thanking the troops for their long period of "fighting . . . under the most appalling conditions of ground and weather", Lieutenant-General Simonds quoted an extract from a captured order issued by the German commander. It read in part:

After overrunning the Scheldt fortifications, the English would finally be in a position to land great masses of material in a large and completely protected harbour. With this material they might deliver a death blow at the north German plateau and at Berlin before the onset of winter . . . and for this reason we must hold the Scheldt fortifications to the end. The German people are watching us.²⁹

These words, meant for the German soldiers, indicate the importance of the Canadian victory in very concise terms.

For the Canadian Scottish, one officer and 34 other ranks stronger now that the "A" Company prisoners had returned to the fold, the most important thing on the agenda was rest—seven whole glorious days of rest in Ghent. Since landing on D Day five months previously the battalion had had only one week's rest. Since that time there had been the fighting at Hill 168, the exhausting pursuit, the battle for Calais, and then the weary month-long grinding battle on the Leopold and along the Scheldt by understrength platoons. These battles had worn the unit down. It was exhausted, and overdue for a period of complete relaxation. On November 3 the brigade piled into trucks and headed for Ghent.

The week the Canadian Scottish spent in Ghent passed all too quickly. About four o'clock in the afternoon the battalion rolled in to the ancient city to receive a tumultuous welcome from the civil population. All ranks, in one's, two's and three's, were taken into the civilian homes, and for the next few days

²⁸ Personal narrative, Lt-Col. D. G. Crofton.

²⁹ W.D., 7 Cdn. Inf. Bde., November, 1944, Appx. 7, Message from the Army Commander, November 4, 1944.

