

READY FOR THE FRAY



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

The Battle of the Breskens Pocket
By the Canadian Scottish Regiment
From Ready for the Fray
By R.H. Roy

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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British troops were unhappy about their position, they must have been cheered when they discovered that the enemy had withdrawn to the Aardenburg - Middelbourg line.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., 1 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.*

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

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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.

they enjoyed the comfort of living in a home. Beds, white sheets, "whole" houses, warmth, cleanliness, hot water—every item of civilian comfort was relished. There were shops for souvenirs, cafes and bars for social get-togethers,—in general there was plenty to do and plenty to see. There was a chance, too, to clean and press one's uniform, polish boots, and then walk around the medieval city seeking all and any pleasures it had to offer. Some of the men found themselves more exhausted after a couple of days and nights of "rest" than they had been on the Leopold.

A period out of the line meant, among other things, that the Pipe Band could get together and play for the battalion and the civilians alike. It played the men to Padre Seaborn's church parade; it played at the changing of the brigade's "Burgomaster Guard" in front of the 400-year-old hotel de ville; and it played at the Feest Palais when Field Marshal Montgomery held an investiture for officers and men from the 3rd Division and the 2nd Canadian Armoured Brigade. But the music of the pipes and drums, the luxury of sleeping in a soft bed and the pleasure of escorting one of the city's charming young ladies to a dance or elsewhere came to an end all too soon. On November 7 word arrived that the battalion was to move once more, this time to the Nijmegen area to relieve the 325th U.S. Regiment of the American 82nd Airborne Division.

The move to the Nijmegen area, about 120 miles due north-east of Ghent, was the beginning of a three-month period of static warfare for the Canadian Scottish. It was not planned that way—it just happened.

As early as November 2 Field Marshal Montgomery instructed the First Canadian Army to lay plans for two possible major attacks. One was an attack to the south-east from Nijmegen between the Maas and the Rhine Rivers to eliminate the enemy west of the Rhine, an operation which would be a prerequisite to the final thrust into Germany. The other was an offensive from the Nijmegen bridgehead to the north which would carry the army over the Neder Rijn (Lower Rhine) River to Arnhem. The latter was ruled out when the Germans flooded the area north of the Nijmegen bridgehead. The former was postponed as a result of the German offensive in the Ardennes sector of the American front

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in the third week of December.³⁰ All this, however, was in the future when the 3rd Division relieved the Americans along the line between Nijmegen and Groesbeek. As the battalions settled in their new positions on November 13, all they knew was that temporarily, at least, they were on a quiet front.

This period of the Canadian Scottish life may be passed over rather briefly, for during this time it was engaged in no major offensive or defensive operations. Like all "quiet" fronts, however, there was always patrolling and enemy fire to contend with, and many an officer and other rank had more excitement in one or two hours on this than on more active fronts. It is with the battalion as a whole that we are concerned, however, and as such a sketch of the events during this period must suffice.

In their new area, the Canadian Scottish were about two miles from the German border with the forward companies about a mile from Groesbeek. Except for Battalion Headquarters, which had a roof over its head, most of the companies had taken over the underground dugouts built by the Americans during the period they had held the line. The division, at first, had taken over the American system of defence so that the brigade had the three battalions forming three lines of defence, one behind the other. Several days later Major General Spry decided to change this system by having two brigades each with two battalions up with the third brigade in reserve. A regular relief system was started within the division and the brigades, and provision was also made within the battalions to have a number of men go to the rear each day for a bath and a short rest.

A good description of the physical situation as it faced the German 84th Infantry Division during this period of the war is given by the war diarist on November 24. His entry for this day is quoted in part:

The 1st Bn C Scot R (AF) in this holding role is shaped like a club with a long handle. The heavy striking head is formed of the Rifle Companies, Support Coy and the Forward Command Post all in contact with the enemy. Lt-Col. D. G. Crofton is, of course, always the guiding hand here. Some two kilometres to the rear, with Headquarters in a small summer house, is Administration Bn HQ. Here the second in command, Major A. H. Plows, and the Adjutant, Captain E. M. Fraser, hold sway. Grouped around are the company cooks and small

³⁰ Stacey, *The Canadian Army, 1939-1945*, p. 231.

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petrol and ammunition dumps. One and a half kilometers west of here, at Drieheuzen, is "A" Echelon under . . . Headquarters Company Commander, Capt. H. L. Alexander. Paymaster Captain E. V. Taylor maintains his office at "A" Echelon. Most of the Company vehicles are here including the Technical Stores, Armourer, and Service personnel. Those men who are L.O.B.³¹ from the battle lines are also attached to "A" Echelon in varying numbers and for varying times. New reinforcements arriving from No. 46 Forward Reinforcement Company, 2CBRG, are held at "A" Echelon for at least a week's training prior to being sent forward to their battle duties. The last major battalion line is "B" Echelon situated near Grave. Located here is the battalion Quartermaster, Captain E. A. Stewart and his stock of supplies. "B" Echelon is also the HQ of the Canadian Scottish Pipe Band when they are not away working.³²

Life for the men forming the striking end of the "club" was rarely dull. During this period most of the excitement came from two sources — enemy artillery fire, recently interspersed with rocket fire, and patrolling. The latter was carried out constantly by all companies in all kinds of weather. One such patrol — a fighting patrol led by Lieut. M. C. MacKenzie from "C" Company — ran into the sort of trouble that can happen all too easily at the front. Lieut. MacKenzie took his 15-man patrol out into no-man's-land in the hope of ambushing the enemy. No Germans fell into their trap, so before first light the patrol started to return. While doing so it ran into a stronger German patrol and a battle ensued. The Canadian Scottish patrol split up as it retired from the enemy force. Six of the men found their way back to "C" Company's lines. The others crept cautiously back alongside a low ridge. By this time they were lost and moving only by instinct toward their own front. Unknowingly they crossed to the front of the Regina Rifles' positions and walked through a protective minefield. A burst of fire from a Reginas' Bren gun was the first warning they had of their location. This machine-gun fire killed Lieut. MacKenzie, L/Cpl. B. Mawer and fatally wounded Cpl. T. C. Craig. Pte. J. Nimcan recognized the sound of the Canadian weapon, shouted to the Reginas and rushed to their lines to let them know it was a friendly patrol.

³¹ L.O.B.—Left Out of Battle, i.e., those officers or men who, usually by rotation, did not go into an action. This scheme, based on the idea of not putting all the eggs in one basket, meant that each platoon and company had a core of experienced reinforcements around which a sub-unit, knocked about in battle, could reform.

³² W.D., 1 C Scot R, November 24, 1944.

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This was but one of a hundred patrols sent out on this front. Extremely few met with such an unfortunate end. However, moving in the dark, in unfamiliar territory, with the knowledge that the next step might trip a mine or bring a blast of enemy fire — under these conditions nerves become tense and trigger-fingers tight whether one is patrolling or on the lookout for enemy patrols. Battlefield accidents are especially tragic. Considering the circumstances, though, it is surprising there were not more of them.

On December 6, after a week's rest, the Canadian Scottish were back in the line near Beek. Two inches of snow blanketed the ground that day, the first of the winter, but in their new positions, with many of the companies occupying relatively undamaged houses in their present reserve role, the men were comparatively snug. A few hundred yards from Battalion Headquarters was the German border, and the situation of the companies was such that some of the battalion were in Germany and some in Holland. The most remarkable thing about the unit's location, however, was that in many of the houses the electricity was still functioning, if only sporadically. This unique situation did not last long, and soon the Canadian Scottish was taken out of its snug reserve role and ordered forward to the cold, muddy flats between Nijmegen and Ooij. This area, normally close to the water level, had been made more sodden by the winter rains. To top it off the enemy, by opening the gates in the dikes and dams in his area, further inundated the area until movement was restricted to the tops of the dikes and the few stretches of ground a foot or so higher than the surrounding flat fields. One fortunate thing was that enemy shells landing in the mucky ground had far less effect than usual.

Enemy shellfire, small and medium mortar fire, and fire from his rockets and "Moaning Minnies"—all on a harassing scale of varying intensities and periods — was encountered by the battalion during their stay in the Nijmegen salient. Added to this display was the occasional V-1 flying bomb which was launched by the enemy on a course towards Antwerp or Liege which took them over the unit's lines. These "revenge" weapons, their jet motors sounding like the noise of a Norton motorcycle, were frequently seen over the front. Now and then one landed with a terrific blast near Nijmegen, but none in the brigade area.

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More important to the men at this time was the progress of the Quartermaster, the Regimental and Company Quartermaster Sergeants, cooks and others concerned with preparation for Christmas dinner. The army itself provided the basic ingredients, but the "scrounging" or "liberating" abilities of certain individuals within the battalion could and did make quite a difference. The Canadian Scottish, if one is to judge from the Christmas dinner the unit had at Driehuisen, had "no complaints". Christmas dinner, served traditionally by the officers and sergeants, had everything from turkey to Brussels sprouts, and from buckets of beer to cigars and chocolate bars. This was the battalion's fourth Christmas away from Canada. It was hard to believe that yet another Christmas would come and go before it returned home.

A few hours after the men had their Christmas dinner the battalion was on the move, this time to a position south-west of Groesbeek. The move was part of a shuffle within the Canadian lines brought about as a result of the German offensive in the Ardennes. This major German attack, which started on December 16, drove into the American lines until by Christmas Day the enemy was within a few miles of the Meuse River, about fifty miles beyond their start line. Hitler's plan was to pierce the American front and swing westward behind the British and American lines to seize Antwerp. Strategically his plan was a desperate gamble. The alternative, "unconditional surrender" after a limited number of months of campaigning, was even more desperate.

As a result of the initial German successes, the Canadian 4th and 6th Brigades were ordered into corps reserve in order to combat any thrust the enemy might make on the Canadian front. To fill the gap the entire 3rd Division went into the line, but a few days later the Canadian Scottish was pulled back, making it the only available counter-attacking force at the division's disposal.

January — cold, damp and generally miserable — was another month of static warfare for the Canadian Scottish. There were periods in the line and periods in reserve, and for some of the luckier ones there were a few days' leave in England. Through the B.B.C. and the Army's newspaper, "The Maple Leaf", came news of the terrific Russian offensive which was to beat the Germans back to their own frontier, while in the west the enemy's thrusts

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in the Ardennes were first contained and parried until a counter offensive was launched. Within the battalion itself, however, the best piece of local news came on January 5 when a report arrived from the British 49th Division that Captain V. R. Schjelderup and Sgt. A. Gri had escaped from the enemy and had returned. On the next day both men arrived at the battalion to recount a thrilling escape story. Only an outline of their three-month period behind the enemy's lines can be told here.

After "C" Company Headquarters and part of the company itself was overrun by the German counter-attack on the Leopold Canal, Captain Schjelderup, Captain Brownridge, R.C.A. (with "C" Company as the artillery representative), C.S.M. W. Berry, Sgt. Gri and others were taken under heavy escort to Oostburg for interrogation. When the Germans drew a blank from their questioning,—and the enemy tried every trick to get information about the other brigades—the prisoners were marched to Breskens and then taken by barge to Flushing. Their treatment was rough. Three bowls of watery soup was all the food each man received during the first six days of captivity. At Goes, while huddled together in the town square, a Dutch girl approached the prisoners with a basket of fruit. She was hustled away at the point of a bayonet by the German guards, but not before Schjelderup slipped her a note with his name and rank on it. This information that he was alive later reached Canadian hands.

With the Allies threatening the direct route into Germany, the prisoners were next taken to Middelburg on Walcheren Island where they were confined in the filthy hold of a canal barge. The group had now grown larger with prisoners from other units. A number were wounded, but there was little compassion shown them by the enemy. An example of the treatment meted out by the enemy is given in the following extract. The prisoners by this time had been shifted to a boxcar in a railroad yard near Dordrecht.

The box-car to which they were assigned was to become another torture-chamber. The cold was intense and penetrated to every corner of the car. Only a thin layer of straw covered the steel floor. Doors were of steel and were securely locked. The wooden walls were of two-inch planking. There was only a slight delay before the train moved to Utrecht. Here the car was shunted to a siding to remain for eight days. During this time Typhoons several times attacked the railway yards with rockets but luckily missed the car. Soup was served once

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daily but this was the only food. The men were allowed out of the car once a day on a Latrine Parade. Urinal buckets were placed in the car to be emptied infrequently. No exercise was allowed and no water was permitted to the prisoners until six days had elapsed. Worst of all was the fact that the wounded men received no medical attention other than the amateurish aid rendered by their comrades.³³

Always on the lookout for a way to escape, it was felt by the prisoners that the present moment presented as good a chance as any. Sgt. Gri had managed to conceal a penknife when captured and for the next week while the box-car stood in the siding the prisoners took turns carving an escape hatch in the 2-inch wooden planking of the walls. They were careful to conceal their work from the prying eyes of the guards until at last, with only a thin outside panel of wood remaining, the escape hatch was ready. Close to midnight on October 23, when it was obvious the box-car was being readied for transport to Germany, the remaining thin panel of wood was bashed open and about a dozen officers and men made their escape while the train was leaving the railroad yard. The group split up in two's and three's and set out to contact the Dutch "Underground".

Sgt. Gri and Pte. H. Swartz managed to contact the Dutch freedom fighters and were interrogated for two solid hours before their escape story was accepted. This interrogation was necessary as German intelligence agents tried to pass themselves off as Allied soldiers in order to penetrate and destroy Dutch resistance groups. Once the Canadian Scottish soldiers were accepted, they were "posted" to homes in Hilversum.

Captain Schjelderup, Pte. Trainer of the Essex Scottish and Captain Brownridge, R.C.A., leaped from the moving boxcar and scrambled to some nearby patch of shrubbery. Here they heard German voices and then discovered that the shrubs formed part of camouflage for a German anti-aircraft post. For a whole day they dared not move, but next night, while moving away from this dangerous hideaway, Brownridge was spotted and captured by a German patrol. The patrol was so busy clubbing the defenceless artillery officer that the other two, cold, hungry and weak with exposure, managed to get away and threw themselves on the mercy of a Dutch farmer. They were taken in and passed on to the Dutch

³³ W.D., 1 C Scot R, January, 1945, Appx. 23, "Two Came Back".

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underground. Schjelderup, wounded when captured, had by this time become quite ill. He contracted pneumonia and, despite the medical care and attention he received from his Dutch hosts, it was many weeks before he was able to regain his health and strength.

All the men except Brownridge had made a successful escape, and most of them decided to wait for Schjelderup before attempting to cross into Free Holland, south of the Rhine. Outfitted in civilian clothes and given identification cards, they did what they could to help their hosts by instructing them in the use of Bren guns, Sten guns, Piats and other weapons dropped for their use by Allied aircraft. On at least one occasion C.S.M. Berry, Sgt. Gri and others accompanied the Dutch civilian fighters when they made a successful raid on a German supply train.

On December 27 the men were taken to an area near the Rhine River where once more they were housed by the Underground. Here they stayed until January 2, when, in broad daylight, and in parties of two's and three's, six Canadians and four British paratroops crossed the Rhine by ferry. They paid ten cents for the trip and some German soldiers helped to push the ferry from the dock. Once over they assembled in a factory south of the Rhine. They were just behind the German lines and the most dangerous part of the trip lay ahead.

The trip through the German lines was an epic and deserves a chapter by itself. Crossing the snow-covered fields and partly-iced canals, skirting enemy outposts, being fired upon by German troops, and enduring the bone-chilling cold until their bodies were almost numb, the group kept on splitting up until, on the eve of their return to Allied lines, Schjelderup's group consisted of himself, Gri and Pte. "Scotty" Hardy, a British paratrooper. A number of times the group stumbled over trip wires leading to mines and booby-traps which, with their mechanism frozen solid, did not go off. The ice, too, was not usually thick enough to support a man's weight, with the result that plodding across the frozen fields and crossing the canals was a torture.

Guided by gun flashes and the various sounds of battle, the small group reached the forward outposts of the 41st Reconnaissance Squadron of the British 49th Division on the afternoon of January 5. Dirty, haggard and in ragged civilian clothing, the

three escapees, covered by British rifles until their identity was established, were given hot tea laced with rum before being taken back for medical treatment and a rest.³⁴ It had been quite an adventure.

January, dragging its cold feet along a path of frozen earth, soon passed. February was to be a month of intense activity for the Canadian Corps, and for weeks the concentration of tremendous stockpiles of ammunition, petrol, engineer stores and so forth in the rear areas had grown to such an extent that it was obvious a major campaign was in the offing. The main highways — “Opal”, “Diamond”, “Maple Leaf” and similarly named military routes — were humming with traffic. Off the major routes the tempo slowed down somewhat as tanks, trucks and other vehicles slipped and slid along the muddy secondary roads to their various dumps, harbours and parks. Wherever one looked, there were unmistakable signs that the three-month period of static warfare was about to end, and these signs, much more obvious in the rear than at the front, were not misleading.

As has been mentioned previously, before making a final, all-out thrust into the heart of Nazi Germany, the enemy forces west of the Rhine had to be eliminated. To accomplish this object, the Allied commanders had drawn up a plan which

... visualized a series of massive blows along the entire length of the front. The direction, timing and strength of these great operations were influenced by conditions of weather and terrain, the necessity of capturing suitable sites for crossing the Rhine, and the obvious advantage of forcing mobile warfare upon an enemy whose reserves of motor fuel were known to be dangerously low.³⁵

One of the first two massive blows which would open up the new year's campaign was the operation by the Canadian army, Operation “Veritable”. This offensive, launched from the Nijmegen salient, was to clear out the enemy between the Rhine and the Maas Rivers up to the Wesel - Geldern line, an area approximately thirty miles long and twenty miles wide. In this area the enemy had three main lines of defence, “first, a screen of strong outposts; then the Siegfried Line, running through the Reichswald; and finally the Hochwald ‘lay-back’ position covering

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Stacey, *The Canadian Army, 1939-1945*, pp. 236-237.

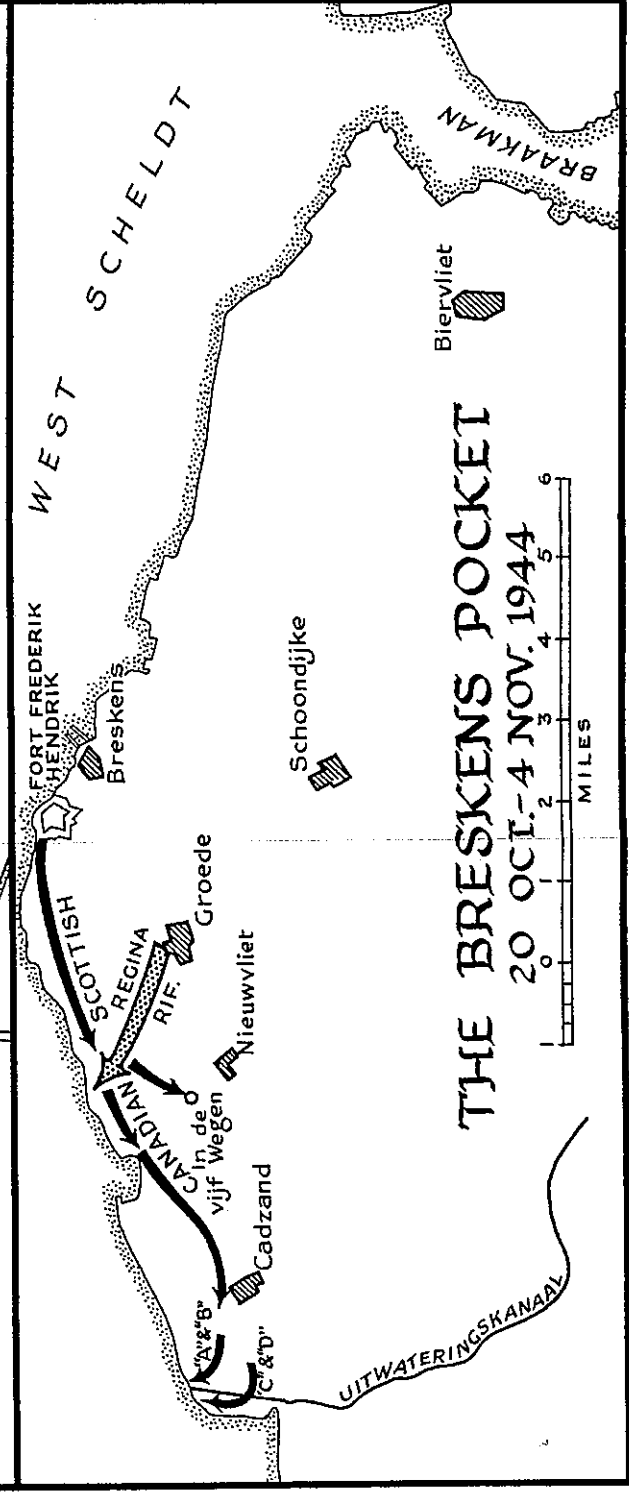
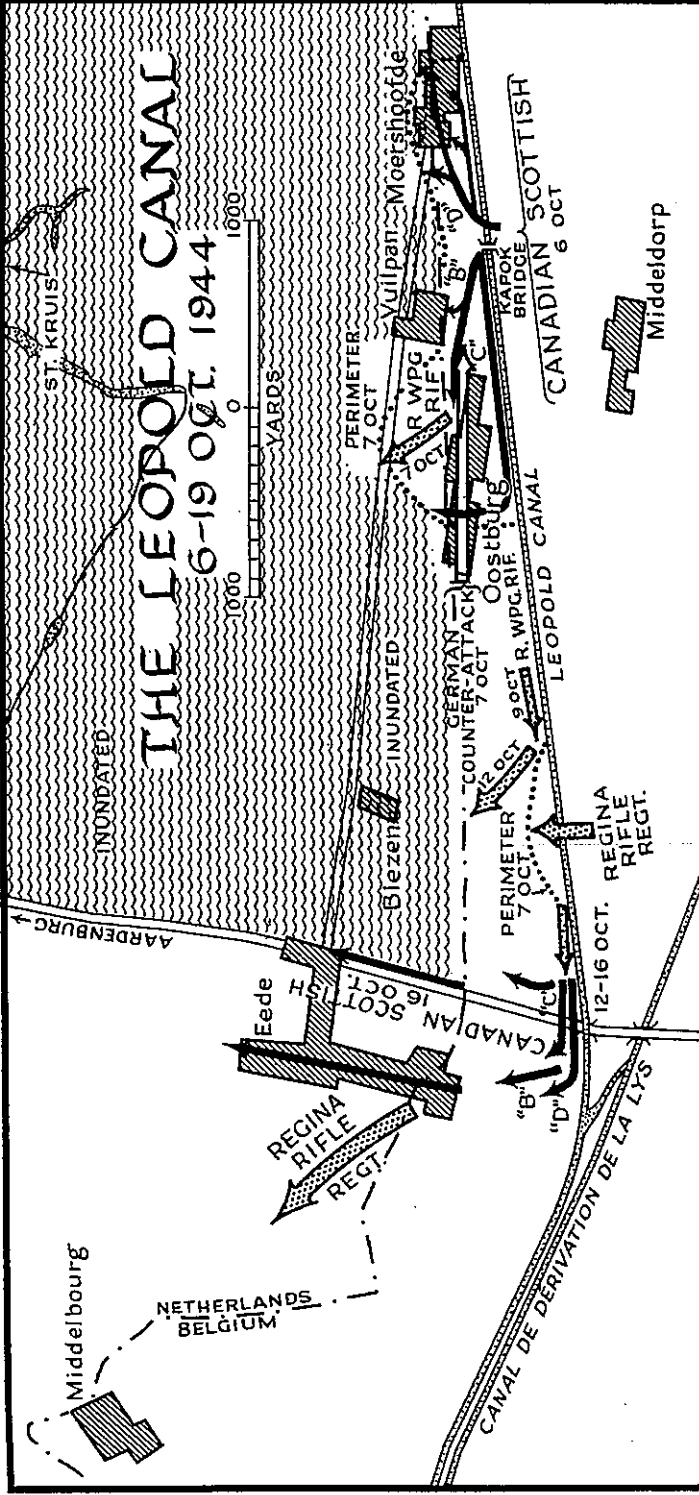
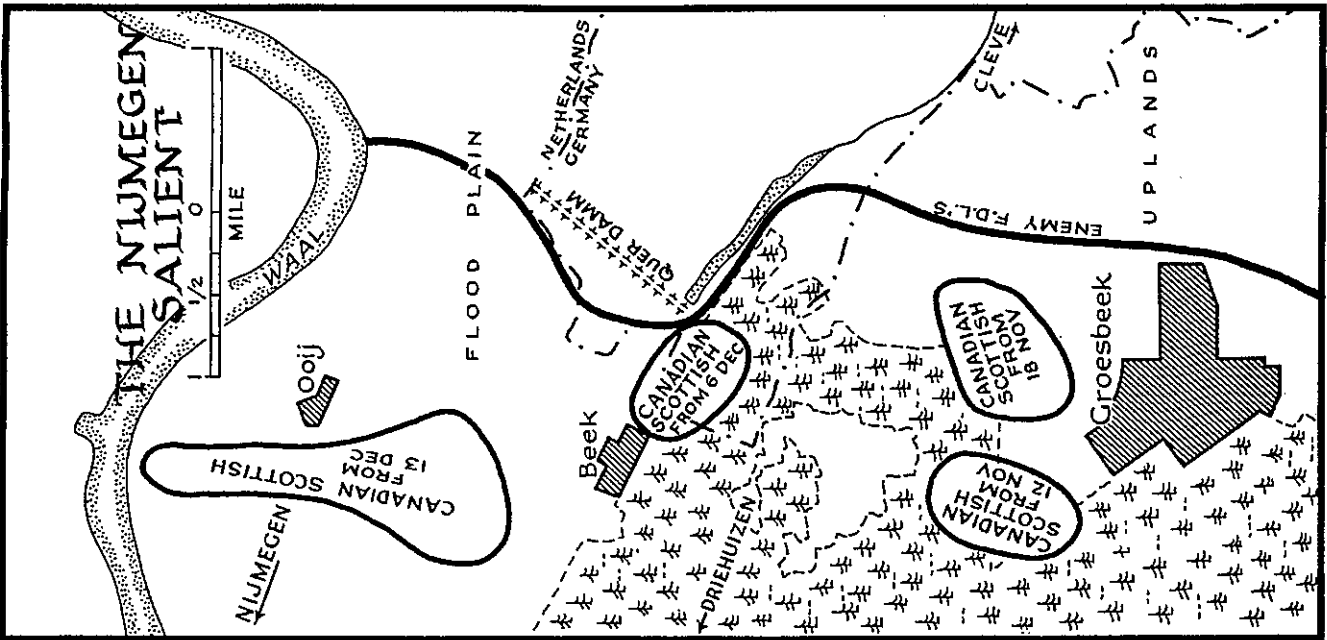
READY FOR THE FRAY

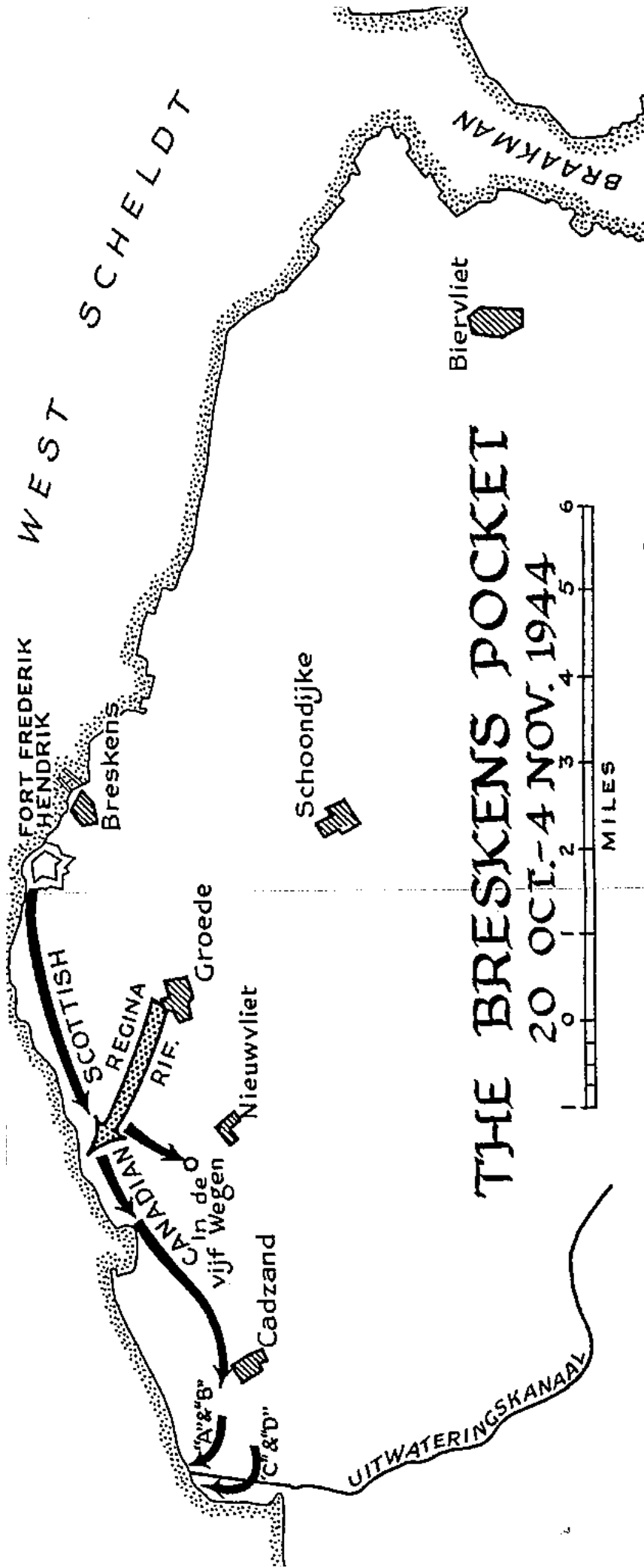
the approach to the Rhine at Xanten".³⁶ In addition the enemy had flooded many square miles of low-lying ground which made it extremely difficult to get at close grips with him.

In order to overcome these successive lines of defence, a tremendous weight of artillery was massed behind the Canadian Army front. Over 1,000 guns, one-third of which were mediums, heavies or super-heavies, were to bring down the tremendous volume of over 160,000 shells prior to the initial assault by the one armoured and six infantry divisions. In addition, air support was planned on a maximum scale. One thousand fighter and fighter-bomber aircraft were to be available to provide close support from the Second Tactical Air Force, while R.A.F. Bomber Command was to employ 1,000 heavy bombers in the immediate area of battle.

The final touches to the plans and preparations for this operation were completed by the first week in February. On February 6 Brigadier Spragge called his commanders for an "O" Group at his headquarters to receive their orders. The stage was set. The scenery was familiar. It remained only for the "actors" to be given their roles.

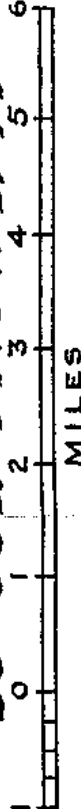
³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 238.





THE BRESKENS POCKET

20 OCT. - 4 NOV. 1944



WEST
SCHELDT

BRAAKMAN

Biervliet

FORT FREDERIK
HENDRIK

Breskens

Schoondijke

SCOTTISH

REGINA
RIF.

Groede

Nieuwvliet

CANADIAN
In de
vijf Wegen

Cadzand

'A' & 'B'

'C' & 'D'

UITWATERINGSKANAAL

MILES

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

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

* * * * *

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

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

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