

READY FOR THE FRAY



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

**The Liberation of The South West Achterhoek
By the Canadian Scottish Regiment
From Ready for the Fray
By R.H. Roy**

CHAPTER XII

From the Rhine to the North Sea

It was cloudy, and the wind had not quite lost the tang of winter as the men plodded off through the ruins of Emmerich to the mobile bath set up in the eastern outskirts of the city. Easter Sunday, despite the scenes of wreckage and carnage on all sides, was peaceful. Peaceful, in war, is a relative word, for although the enemy was being pushed beyond artillery range to the west and north-west by the 8th and 9th Brigades, there was a great deal of activity down near the river where the engineers were putting the final touches to their huge Bailey bridge over the Rhine. In the streets, too — at least in those which were passable — there was intense activity as the guns, tanks, carriers, jeeps, supply vehicles, mobile workshops and a variety of other vehicles passed to and fro, keeping the division supplied with everything from boxes of ammunition to fresh supplies of maps and aerial photographs. There was the noise and movement of men on the march, but there was no shelling.

The padre that morning was holding Easter services for "A" Echelon and Rear Battalion Headquarters. It was a voluntary church parade and the attendance, some 87 all ranks, was good.¹ Easter service for the rifle companies in the brickworks in the western side of the city was to be at two in the afternoon. About an hour before the service was ready to start, a brigade warning order came through for the battalion to be on one hour's notice to move. Padre Seaborn held the service as scheduled, using a pulpit con-

¹ Personal diary, H/Captain R. L. Seaborn, April 1, 1945.

READY FOR THE FRAY

structed with broken brick and decorated with flowers by the men. However, the service was cut short when the Canadian Scottish received the message to get under way immediately.

This order started the battalion on a period of movement and manoeuvre for the next six weeks, a period reminiscent of that following the breakout from Normandy. This time, however, although contact with the enemy was sometimes lost, the push to the north was interspersed with several battles and engagements fought with a desperate enemy whose alternative to death was defeat.

At three-thirty on the afternoon of April 1 the convoy began to move, taking the road leading due north from Emmerich. Two miles from the city the Canadian Scottish again crossed the border into Holland where, wrote the war diarist, all ranks "were greeted with the overwhelming friendliness that the Dutch people . . . always afforded us".² That evening the unit took up defensive positions at Broek, a small village about a mile south of Wehl, while the Reginas cleared out the latter town after dark.

With Wehl clear, the Canadian Scottish was then ordered to form a "Jock column"—an infantry and armour column, small in numbers but with better than ordinary mobility and firepower—which was to move due north from Wehl to clear the main road to the Ijssel River at Laag-Kappel. This column was held up by enemy fire from field defences across the road about a mile north of Wehl, but, at the same time the column was dealing with this enemy rear guard, the brigade received fresh orders from Major-General Keebler to halt its push to the north and to strike westward to seize Didam and Zevenaer. Before "A" Company, which provided the infantry part of the "Jock column", returned to the battalion, it rounded up 40 prisoners with no loss to itself.

The unit's move to Didam was made with "C" Company leading in an "advance to contact" formation. It consisted of the company itself (somewhat understrength), a section of anti-tank guns, a section of mortars, a section of carriers and a Forward Observation Officer. Once again only light opposition was encountered which was overcome or pushed aside, so that before daylight on April 3 the Canadian Scottish was firm in Didam. Considering the opposition encountered the advance had been slow, but the

² W.D.; 1 C Scot R, April 1, 1945.

TO THE NORTH SEA

alternative meant greater risk and possibly higher casualties. Admittedly, too, there was a certain amount of over-caution on the part of some during these first few days, a not unnatural feeling immediately following the slugging matches such as the battalion had fought at Heseler Feld and Emmerich.

For almost five long years the civilian populace of Didam had been under the heel of the Nazi invaders of their homeland. For weeks they had heard the rumble and roar of battle as the Allies pushed down the other side of the Rhine, only a few miles from the town. Then came word of the crossing and on April 3, with great joy, the men, women and children of Didam streamed out of their shelters and cellars to greet the first Canadians to enter their town. Their joy at being liberated was unbounded. "These people are genuinely happy again", wrote the war diarist, "and it gives us reason to feel that the discomforts that we put up with at times are more than worth it. It is not necessary to be able to hold a conversation with them to know of their appreciation of the Allied armies".

The battalion's stay in Didam was brief. Canadian cigarettes were traded for eggs, the children soon had most of the gum or candy the soldiers possessed, and for a few hours the unit basked in the glow of welcome given it by the Dutch civilians. It was a scene which was to be repeated many times in the next few weeks, and served as a tonic to all ranks after the fighting in Germany.

While the men were lapping up the attention given them in Didam, plans were being laid for a change in the axis of advance. The divisional commander gave the 8th Brigade the task of capturing Doesburg while the 9th Brigade was directed on to Zutphen. The 7th Brigade was to mop up all the areas which had not been touched by the other two brigades, which meant clearing north and west of the River Ijssel. The warning order to move reached the Canadian Scottish early on April 4, and shortly after noon the battalion headed north-east towards Vorden, arriving there without incident early the same evening.

The battalion was now about 17 miles north of Emmerich, but if their advance in the past few days had been made against little opposition, all indications pointed to a change in this pleasant state of affairs. The 9th Brigade, fighting on the outskirts of Zutphen, was having a rough time of it. Progress was slow and their casualties were heavy. To ease the pressure on the 9th Brigade,

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*.

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