

READY FOR THE FRAY



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

The battle of Calais

By the Canadian Scottish Regiment

From Ready for the Fray

By R.H. Roy

CHAPTER IX

The Breakout—From Hill 168 to Calais

On Tuesday, August 8, everything was ready. The cooks, as usual, had been up at the crack of dawn preparing an especially good breakfast for the men, and shortly afterwards the carriers, Jeeps and other vehicles were marshalled into blocks preparatory to moving. Petrol tanks and extra jerricans had been topped, the wireless sets had fresh batteries, Bren and Sten gun magazines were loaded, grenades were primed, 2- and 3-inch mortar and Piat bomb cases were filled, maps had been issued, and a thousand other items had been checked and taken care of. It had been a good rest, and the news of the advances made along the American and British fronts had given an extra fillip to morale. There was an air of confidence and expectancy among the men—confidence in themselves and expectancy about the outcome of the attack then under way by the First Canadian Army.

The 3rd Division's immediate task was to take over the positions of the attacking force to enable the reserve brigades to be used. The division's future role would depend on the outcome of Operation "Totalize". If the operation made the progress it was hoped, the 3rd Division would be employed to follow up the 1st Polish Armoured Division, one of the two armoured divisions which were to crack and pierce the enemy's last belt of defences south-east of Caen.

The roads were packed with vehicles of every conceivable type. Not only was there the constant movement of trucks carrying men, equipment and supplies to the front, but the entire division was

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south-east of Tourville, and with the 2-inch mortar the heaviest available weapon, there was more than the usual amount of fire and movement taught in battle drill employed by the platoon and section leaders. Although driven back a few hundred yards from the junction itself, the company managed to seize the wooded knoll south-west of Tourville, a position which commanded the ground leading into the peninsula just as the enemy commanded the higher ground leading out of it. In this action, and it was strictly a "B" Company show where junior leadership was especially outstanding, the company had about fifteen casualties including the commander of No. 12 platoon, Lieut. E. G. Schwandt, who was killed. By holding on to the ground it won, the company provided a firm base for the brigade push on the following day.

The brigade attack on Tourville and the heights beyond on August 28 met with little opposition. The Germans had been forced to abandon hundreds of vehicles and a terrific amount of warlike stores they could not take across the river, and it became increasingly obvious that their retreat was beginning to resemble a rout. The mass of wrecked and abandoned vehicles around Elbeuf served as an indication of the difficulties under which the enemy was operating, or trying to operate, and the comparative ease with which the 3rd Division established itself across the Seine promised greater results farther north. With the bridgehead across the Seine secure, the Canadian Corps again took up the chase, this time driving towards Dieppe, Boulogne and Calais. The 7th Brigade was given a day's rest when it went into divisional reserve on August 30, but it was a short rest—so short that when the "A" Echelon vehicles came up with the men's packs and a change of clothing, there was no time to take advantage of it. The word was to push on again, fast.

Just before moving off on August 30 the Canadian Scottish lost its C.O. when Lt-Col. F. N. Cabeldu, DSO, was appointed to command the 4th Infantry Brigade of the 2nd Division. The battalion was to have the somewhat unusual distinction of providing the army with three brigadiers, two of whom were promoted in the field since Brigadier J. M. Rockingham, formerly with the regiment, had been appointed to command the 9th Brigade. On taking command of his brigade, Brigadier Cabeldu was asked if he could recommend an officer to command the Royal Regiment

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of Canada, a unit which had seen heavy fighting and had the misfortune to lose most of its senior officers. Cabeldu, thinking of his former battalion, said that he had seven field officers who had the battle experience and seniority to fill such a post. He picked the senior field officer of the Canadian Scottish, Major Lendrum, who took command of the Royal Regiment of Canada about a week later. Lt-Col. Lendrum was awarded the DSO for his ability in commanding his new battalion in subsequent operations. Brigadier Cabeldu also gained further honours and awards, both Canadian and foreign, for his skill and aggressiveness while commanding the 4th Brigade from the capture of Dieppe to the end of the war. Major D. G. Crofton, with Major L. S. Henderson as second in command, took over command of the Canadian Scottish a day after the battalion arrived at Calais.

The pursuit from Rouen to the Channel ports was even more hectic than the first four days. Calais lay about 110 air miles to the north and it was toward Calais and Boulogne the 3rd Division was directed. The war diarist describes the first day's move after Tourville as follows:

If we thought we had advanced quickly from Louviers en Auge to Elbeuf, we now saw what real speed was! The line of advance continued NE with the 2 C.I.D. [Cdn. Inf. Div.] flanking our left and the 4 C.A.D. [Cdn. Armd. Div.] flanking our right. Every carrier and vehicle was loaded to capacity with men and equipment. No T.C.Vs. were available so the small overflow of troops were handled by leap-frogging them forward then allowing them to march and again picking them up while the Bn. momentarily consolidated in a position. Thus began the most fluid of our operations to date. At times we were not completely sure where all our troops were. However, they eventually turned up and none were lost. No one minded walking as, while doing so there was a much greater opportunity to exchange greeting with the civilians who lined the roads of villages and crossroads. Troops and vehicles were again bedecked with flowers and flags. We seemed to be close behind the retreating enemy, who was falling back in disorder. As he did so the F.F.I. and organized civilians harassed him.

[At 1410 hours] the Bn. paused to reorganize and have a hasty cold lunch. The men had come over 20 miles. This was not enough so the merry mad movement continued towards Neufchatel. We were stopped for the night after covering another seven miles. We were two and one-half miles SW of Neufchatel and situated on a slope, which commanded the approaches from that direction. This area had been bombed dreadfully some time ago. It was one of a few such areas where the R.A.F. had suspected a robot bomb site. During this day's

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rush we had passed several fly-bomb sites but had not stopped as they were of no importance to us—they contained no enemy.²²

The chase went on and on, through Neufchatel farther north, past Londinieres, Eu, St. Valery-sur-Somme, Montreuil-sur-Mer, Etaples, Nesles, skirting Boulogne to the outskirts of Calais itself. It is difficult to estimate how many miles the battalion travelled by road from the time it left Olendon but 250 miles would be a conservative guess. It was slow going at first, but once the divisions picked up the momentum there seemed to be no stopping. Everyone had his favorite story to tell about the chase, and some of the stories would make a book in themselves. Now and then some group would go “swanning” off in the wrong direction and find they were far ahead of the leading elements. The “homing instincts” of the hard-working “A” Echelon drivers and those responsible for keeping the unit supplied with food, petrol and other necessities were remarkable, considering they were operating in a strange country, with only the most basic knowledge of French. Each evening a map reference designating the pick-up point for supplies would be given by brigade headquarters, and off the drivers would go, find the supplies, load the trucks, bring the supplies back to the unit, grab what sleep they could, and be ready to go again early the next morning. The transport platoon and despatch drivers did a remarkable job, as did the administrative and quartermaster personnel. For them it was a weary task, and around the end of the chase some of the drivers would stop their vehicles and fall asleep in their seats.

Between the time when the Canadian Scottish had captured Hill 168 and the battalion's arrival at the gates of Calais there had been tremendous advances made by the Allied armies on a front stretching from the English Channel to the borders of Switzerland. On August 15 Allied forces from Italy had landed in Southern France and, sweeping up the Rhône Valley, had joined with the main Allied armies in the north by September 11. On August 25 French troops entered Paris. A few days later the Canadians captured Dieppe without opposition. On September 3 the British Second Army, driving hard through the First World War battlefields, crossed the Belgian frontier to capture Brussels and, in a major effort, went on to seize Antwerp the next day. Farther

²² W.D., 1 C Scot R, August 31, 1944.

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east the American armies had rolled forward so that by the second week in September their forces were at the German border. The greater part of France was free, and some of the more optimistic were claiming that the end of the war was in sight.

The greatest problem confronting the Allied commanders at this point was supply. Every day during the pursuit the Allies' lines of communications grew longer until, by the middle of September, the armies were hundreds of miles away from their main supply bases in Normandy. To carry the thousands of tons of supplies used and consumed every day by the Canadian Army alone put a terrific strain on the transport. To carry the greater amount of supplies required by the British and American armies farther away from the Channel, and to transport this amount in sufficient quantities to permit the armies to carry the war immediately on into Germany, was beyond the capabilities of the Allies. The capture of the Channel ports by the Canadian Army thus became an important factor in the strategic planning of the Allied commanders. Unloading supplies at these ports would cut hundreds of miles off the present long line of communications. Dieppe, captured by the 2nd Division, was already being put to use but the quantity it could handle was small. Antwerp was seized with its docks intact, but the enemy commanded the approaches to its harbour. Boulogne and Calais, together with Dunkirk and Ostend, remained in enemy hands. The latter were given to the 2nd Division to capture, while the 3rd Division was ordered to seize the former.

The position of the Canadian Scottish in the Pihen-les-Guines area, four miles south-west of Calais, was rather unusual. For months it had been they who were confined in a bridgehead with their back to the sea. Now the position was reversed. The German garrisons in Calais and Boulogne were ringed by Canadian forces to landward, while seaward the Strait of Dover presented no avenue of escape or reinforcement. In its present location, too, the battalion was closer to England than it had been since leaving there. From the various high hills one could look across the Strait and see the white cliffs of Dover.

To the enemy, however, this proximity had meant other things. Offensively he had installed huge, 16-inch guns which dominated the Strait to an extent where he could hurl shells into Dover itself.

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These guns, especially those at Cap Gris Nez and Sangatte, were still shelling British soil when the 7th Brigade arrived and took up positions a few miles behind them. In this area, too, the enemy had constructed many of his flying bomb launching sites. In fact, Brigade Headquarters was situated only 600 yards from a V-1 launching ramp which was directed to fire on London. This particular site was not completed but, according to civilian information, the Germans had been working on it three weeks ago.²³ That was one aspect of the enemy's activities in the Pas de Calais. Defensively the Germans had worked for years preparing fortifications, weapon emplacements, minefields, anti-tank obstacles, field defences, and so forth against the Allied landing which they expected would be launched in this area. Although the enemy planned these defences to counter an attack from the sea, they were nevertheless a formidable barrier to a land attack as well.

Since it was decided that the 8th and 9th Brigades would first start operations against Boulogne, the 7th Brigade and the Toronto Scottish Regiment (M.G.) were given the task of sealing off Calais. Numerous small probing attacks and reconnaissance patrols were made to test the enemy's defences and to see if there was any way through the wide, flooded area around Calais. At the same time the brigade operated to hamper the enemy in every way possible by cutting the road and line communications between the two ports and between Calais and Cap Gris Nez. The first major effort in this latter respect came on September 13 when the brigade attacked Mount de la Louve, a dominating feature about two miles behind the coastal guns. The reason for making this attack prior to the main assault on Calais was threefold. First, the coastal guns were still active and causing considerable damage to Dover as well as presenting their usual threat to Allied shipping in the Strait. Second, it was realized that an assault on Calais "while the Cap Gris Nez batteries were free to bother our backsides" was next to impossible.²⁴ And third, the harbour of Boulogne could not be used when captured since these same guns commanded the entrance to that harbour.

²³ W.D., 7 Cdn. Inf. Bde., September 9, 1944. The French civilians also gave the Canadians a great deal of information concerning the German defences in and around Calais.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, September 14, 1944.

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The part played by the Canadian Scottish during this attack resulted in few casualties, despite some accurate shelling by the enemy's heavy and medium guns. The former's 16- and 18-inch shells roaring overhead sounded like an express train, but without observation the enemy's gunners made no serious hits within the battalion. Some of the companies, on reaching their objectives, made use of some excellent German bunkers in the area which provided good protection as well as a fair amount of German rations. It was a nice change from the "Compo" and bully beef rations the men had had for weeks. Patrols sent forward towards the coast south of the main batteries managed to nab a number of prisoners who reported that the rumbling noises heard that evening were demolitions carried out by the enemy as they retreated farther into the concrete fastness of the Cap Gris Nez fortifications. The Scout platoon, commanded by Lieut. W. H. Olsen, penetrated to Ambleteuse and came across the first robot "baby tank" encountered by the battalion. The Pioneers took care of that, and destroyed enemy telephone lines and exchanges while they were at it.

On September 15, while the brigade continued its task of containing Calais and "winkling out" the enemy wherever possible, the Canadian Scottish was taken out of the line and placed in divisional reserve. The attack on Boulogne was due to go in on the 17th, and the battalion was to come under the direct command of the divisional commander, Major-General D. C. Spry, DSO, to be used where and when necessary. The unit's move several miles to the south to the Le West area was accomplished without incident. As it turned out, the battalion was not needed, and three days later it returned to Calais. There was one incident during the unit's stay near Le West worth recording. The Pipe Band played a Retreat for the villagers and soldiers alike. Afterwards one of the civilians mentioned that the Pipe Band of the 16th Battalion (The Canadian Scottish) C.E.F. had played in the village when it had come to the area for a rest from the trenches during the First World War.

Not until September 25 was Operation "Undergo", the code name given to the assault on Calais, ready to be launched. Boulogne had fallen a few days previously, thus permitting the bulk of the

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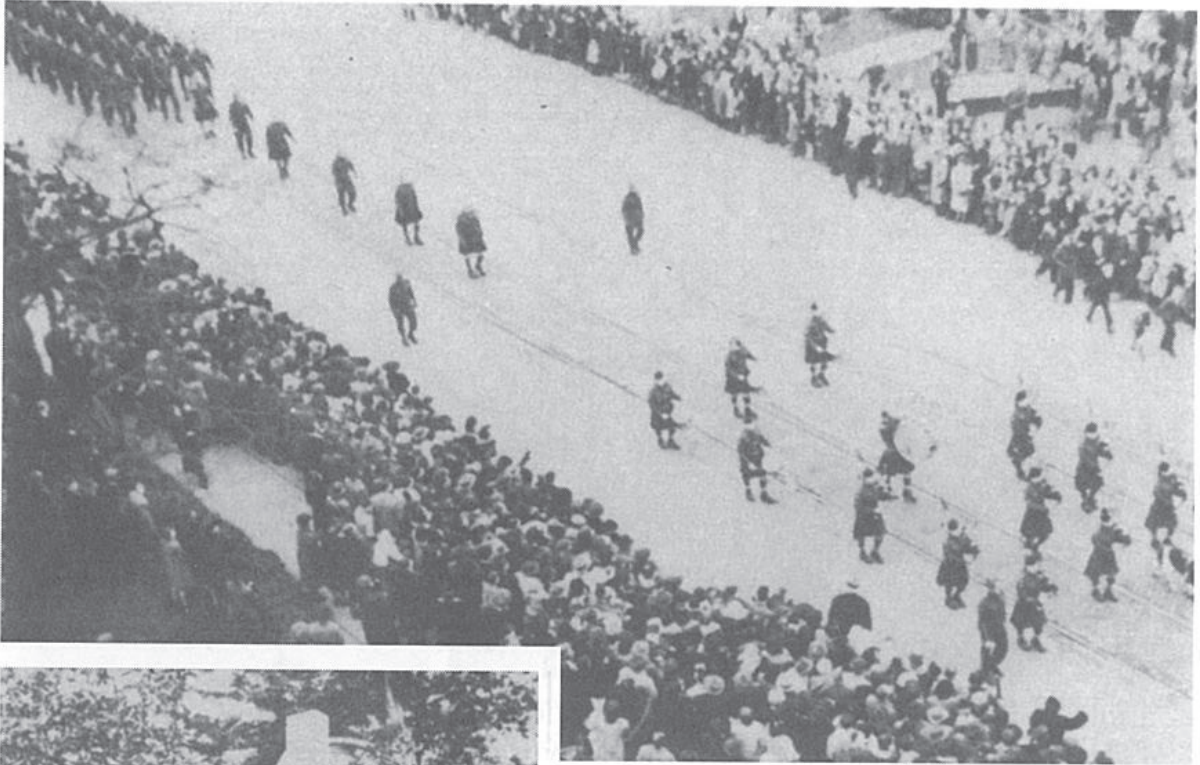
Luncheon at the Mansion House, London.
The Princess Royal and the Lord Mayor
of London.

Picked party moving to Mansion House,
London, for special luncheon, 1945.

Inspection of the 4th (Occupation) Battalion
by the Princess Royal, Witley, England, 1946.



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Return of the 1st Battalion to
Victoria, January, 1946.



Dedication of the Regiment's
Permanent Memorial in Pioneer
Square, Victoria, 1951.

Aid to Civil Power. The Fraser
River floods, 1948.



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division to move up to Calais. Equally important, the heavy assault guns and equipment used against Boulogne were free to support the 3rd Division's attack on Calais. While these forces were moving into position, the 7th Brigade continued to harass the enemy's outposts. An excellent example of these raids and patrols was that led by Sgt. A. Gri against an enemy strongpoint on the outer defences of the city. The guns in this strongpoint had been a thorn in the side of the brigade for some time, so it was decided to send No. 14 Platoon out to capture the garrison of the strongpoint and blow up the guns.

The platoon attack went in about two o'clock in the afternoon. Supporting artillery, 4.2- and 3-inch mortar fire allowed the platoon to get within 50 yards of the enemy before being spotted. During the dash across the open ground and over the numerous wide drainage ditches, Ptes. McArthur and Wheeler were killed by machine gun fire. Two rifle shots fired by Gri at the machine gunner stopped any further activity in that quarter. The platoon report continues:

At this point the battle was on. Cpl. Boud took No. 6 Sec [Section] and skirted the field to the right to clear 4 bldgs. beyond. One of these was already burning. . . . The second bldg. yielded good results. Twenty-eight enemy emerged and surrendered. Cpl. Boud took the party back and L/Cpl. Shepherd checked the remaining bldgs. After finding them clear he, . . . with the aid of a German First Aid Man, evacuated Wheeler. Meanwhile No. 5 Sec under Cpl. Silverman advanced in the centre. Sgt. Gri moved with this party. The first MG no longer was firing so Sgt. Gri scrambled across to the first dugouts and tossed in two No. 36 grenades. One more enemy came up after the explosion. Then the remainder of the section was called up and they set to work to clear the remainder of the trenches and dugouts. There were no more live enemy in the position. They found the machine gunner whom Gri had shot at. He was shot between the eyes. By now 45 minutes had elapsed . . . so two Very lights were [fired] calling for smoke to be laid down to cover the withdrawal.²⁵

The whole action was completely successful. The excellent co-operation between the artillery and mortar crews and the platoon itself, together with the work of an experienced group under the able and courageous leadership of Sgt. Gri, made it an almost perfect raid. Twenty-nine Germans were captured, close to dozen were killed or wounded and the guns were destroyed. Sgt. Gri

²⁵ W.D., 1 C Scot R, September, 1944, Appx. 22, " 'C' Company's Attack. . . . "

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received a well merited Military Medal for his dash and bravery while leading his platoon.

Of the numerous difficulties inherent in the division's attack on Calais the most serious were geographic. Calais was almost completely surrounded to landward by low, flooded ground which, laced with water-filled ditches and canals, and covered by enemy fire, greatly restricted the assault front. Moreover, within the city itself were many canals, all well defended, which divided it into islands and imposed further obstacles. The area west of the city provided the only good avenue of approach, an area which also contained the enemy's main coastal guns. It was here the enemy had positioned himself in a line running from Escalles through Noires Mottes, Belle Vue Ridge, Vieux Coquelles to les Baraques.

The garrison itself, commanded by Lt-Col. Schroeder, was composed of naval, army and air force personnel. It was estimated that the enemy garrison totalled close to 7,000 men, and if they were not the fanatical SS type, they had a great many reinforced bunkers and concrete weapon posts which would reinforce their courage as they protected their bodies. Numerous air strikes against these enemy positions prior to the attack had helped to "soften up" the garrison, but had by no means cracked their will to resist.

The plan of the attack, basically, was similar to that used against Boulogne but adapted to the geographic peculiarities of Calais. The attack would open with a heavy air and artillery bombardment on the city's outer defences. While the 9th Brigade completed the capture of the Cap Gris Nez batteries, the 7th and 8th Brigades, supported by two regiments of tanks from the 2nd Canadian Armoured Brigade, would attempt to seize the high ground running from Escalles to Vieux Coquelles. With this dominating ridge secure, the second phase would see the reserve battalion, attacking on an ever-restricting front, push forward along the coast road to penetrate the inner ring of defences. During the first phase the Canadian Scottish was to be in reserve as the 7th Brigade struck out for Coquelles and the height of land east of Belle Vue, the brigade left flank being protected by the 8th Brigade clearing the enemy up to Sangatte. With the height of land in the 7th Brigade's hands, the Canadian Scottish, carried in "Kangaroos" (armoured personnel carriers) would whip forward

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to be in a position where they could set out to capture the Sangatte batteries and the Fort Lapin strongpoint on the coast.²⁶

At quarter past eight on the morning of September 25 the heavy and medium bombers, pressing home their attack despite bad flying weather and heavy "flak", roared low over the front, subjecting the enemy to a terrific pounding which was continued by the field and medium guns when they had passed. At ten o'clock, when the last bomb had fallen, the brigades surged forward. They made good progress against stern opposition so that by six o'clock in the evening the Canadian Scottish, carried by the 1st Canadian Armoured Personnel Carrier Squadron, started off in a cloud of dust toward the wooded area atop Belle Vue ridge. Enemy guns bracketed the road with shell fire all along the route, but crouched behind the steel sides of the carriers, the companies arrived without casualties just before dark. The Regina Rifles, then still under heavy shell fire, were holding the ridge so the Scottish "debussed" and dug in on the same ground. That evening, after conferring with the C.O. of the Reginas, Lt-Col. Crofton learned that their "B" Company was located at La Grand Cour farm, about 2,000 yards north-east and thus closer to the coast. He decided, therefore, that "A" and "C" Companies should move up to this farmhouse and attack Oyez Farm and Fort Lapin during the night, using the forward Reginas' position as a firm base. After daylight "D" Company, commanded by Major D. V. Pugh, and "B" Company, commanded by Major E. G. English, would then leap-frog to seize Le Cran and Fort Nieulay.²⁷ The weather, however, had deteriorated during the evening and got worse as "A" and "C" Company commanders set out to reconnoitre the ground.

That night, as Lt-Col. Crofton wrote later,

will long be remembered as one of the dirtiest of the war; ploughed fields and chalk pits, a howling wind off the Channel and a driving rain, and almost impenetrable blackness made our task an extremely difficult one.²⁸

The foul weather and a map showing a track which in reality

²⁶ Major W. H. V. Matthews, "An Account of the Assault on Calais, 25 Sep - 1 Oct 44. . . ." This account made available to the author by the Historical Section, Army Headquarters.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ CSR Archives, "Battle Narrative by Lt-Col. D. G. Crofton, covering part played by 1st Bn., The Canadian Scottish Regiment in Operations of Calais—Cap Gris Nez".

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did not exist resulted in the two company "recce" groups losing their way, but with a fortunate result. "A" Company's commander described the situation in these words:

It was a filthy night, black and pouring with rain. Roger [Schjelderup] and I took our "O" Groups to recce the start-line. In the process we literally dropped in on Bn. H.Q. of the Reginas who were in a hole about 10 to 15 feet deep. As I recall it, four times we did the same thing. Finally we left our N.C.Os. and officers at a protected cross-road and Roger and I went on. After stumbling and sliding for about three quarters of an hour (it was then about three in the morning) we became aware that all the noise about us was not the storm. Further investigation proved we were on sandy soil and we could hear the surf beating in. A further recce revealed we had somehow slipped in between the enemy and were very close to our objective. We ascertained the extent of the gap in the "impregnable" West Wall. Roger then returned to send down "A" Company to me and bring down his own. I stayed to recce further the positions for them. My leading elements arrived under Doug Gillan and in short order we were tidy on our objective.²⁹

Sangatte, a small village beside the coast, was firmly in our hands by first light. Then, while one platoon cleared out a nearby block-house, Major Matthews observed enemy movement to the south on the slope of the Noires Mottes ridge. A few rounds fired in this direction produced a vigorous show of white flags so his second in command, Captain J. D. M. Gillan, went up to investigate. The enemy position contained two huge 406-mm. cross-channel guns, and the battery commander surrendered himself and his half-inebriated crew to Gillan.

Meanwhile "C" Company, temporarily held up outside Sangatte by machine gun posts, had come up and both companies started to work their way up the narrow coastal strip toward Calais, four miles to the west. It was a slow, methodical task since none of the blockhouses could be by-passed and even those cleared out later caused a bit of trouble when the enemy infiltrated back into them. Near Le Cran "C" Company was held up by an enemy flame-thrower but this was taken out and the advance continued against heavy small arms, mortar and dual-purpose gun fire which swept the sand dunes and narrow roadway over which the men travelled. Tactically it was an awkward business, like trying to hit a man on the jaw with two extended fingers. The well-tried "fire and movement" tactics, however, were proving their worth.

²⁹ Personal narrative, Lt-Col. W. H. V. Matthews.

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Shortly after eleven o'clock the companies regrouped to clear out a strongpoint near Oyez Farm. Following an artillery shoot of the area, two platoons, one from each company, were to capture the strongpoint, after which two platoons from "A" Company would push through to take out Fort Lapin and les Baraques. This attack went in early in the afternoon, and once again the men fought their way forward sending back numerous prisoners to the battalion's P.O.W. cage established at Sangatte. Houses, slit trenches, weapon pits and pill boxes were taken out with grenades, machine guns and the bayonet, the defenders fighting for the most part only until it was obvious that they would be killed or captured. For most the latter had the greatest appeal. By seven o'clock that evening "A" Company was on the outskirts of les Baraques which had been completely flattened by bombing. One platoon proceeded to blast its way to the eastern end of the village while the other turned left to attack Fort Lapin. "A" Company's commander wrote later:

After a brisk fight one fort was captured with some 50-60 PW [prisoners of war]. It was discovered, however, that the area consisted of not one, but several forts, so that the bulk of the defences had still to be overcome. Before this process, which had begun so well, could be continued, the order was received to withdraw since they were too near the target area of a proposed heavy bombing attack. All forward troops were drawn back to Trouille Farm while the bombing took place.³⁰

The move back, made under the cover of darkness, brought the two companies to a point where they were still two and a half miles beyond Sangatte. This move left two sections from Lieut. J. J. Andrews' mortar platoon in front of the infantry platoons. The mortars had a good site, right on the safety line, and they preferred to sit tight rather than go back.

The air bombardment between eight-thirty and eleven o'clock the next morning was designed to help a three-pronged attack by the brigade. Along the coast the Scottish would continue its drive swinging right from les Baraques. A mile to the south, in the swampy area, the Winnipegs would attempt to rush the main road crossing near Greviere while the Reginas, farther south, would try to get into the city through the factory area on its outskirts. During the morning of September 27 the bombers swept in again,

³⁰ Matthews, *ibid.*

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once more subjecting the enemy to a terrific pounding. Propaganda leaflets, together with safe conduct passes to those wishing to surrender, were dropped at the same time but the real "punch line" was the weight of aerial bombs and rockets released by the air strike.

During the afternoon the leading companies, now supported by armour, were ready to attack Fort Lapin once more. However, when crossing a stretch of sandy ground swept by machine gun fire, the artillery F.O.O.'s wireless set went out of order thus making it impossible to bring down supporting fire on the fort. The tanks banged away at the enemy position from Trouille and later came forward closer to the infantry where their shelling set one of the forts on fire. The companies, receiving little cover from a smoke screen which the wind rendered almost useless, waited until after dusk and then made a silent attack on the fort.

One of "A" Company's platoons, commanded by Sgt. "Sandy" Clark, managed to work its way forward under heavy machine gun fire through a maze of barbed wire to the steel doors of an enemy bunker. With grenades the men blasted the enemy out of their shelter. A number of Germans surrendered and an additional platoon came up to help clear the other forts. Among those captured was the commander of the Fort Lapin garrison. This gentleman, "neat and trimly dressed", was quite outraged at the lack of courtesy shown him by Canadians who had spent the last two days battling through fixed defences and fire from every type of German weapon to capture the place. He wished to surrender to a General Officer, but was casually told by Matthews: "That's just fine, but unfortunately there are no General Officers handy, but after you have been searched you can go to a P.O.W. cage and perhaps you may find a couple around there to do the right thing to".³¹ Meanwhile "C" Company, with the remaining platoon from "A" Company, had pushed on into les Baraques which they cleared out almost to its eastern outskirts by nightfall. From the fort and the village some 150 prisoners were sent back to the battalion's P.O.W. cage.

With Fort Lapin and the village cleared, and with the Winnipegs firm on Fort Nieulay, "B" and "D" Companies were now brought up for a full scale attack on the old citadel within the

³¹ Crofton, *op. cit.*

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city itself. During the evening part of "B" Company had been used to give covering fire to the engineers clearing mines and filling in the worst craters along the coast road. Many of the former were naval shells rigged up as land mines and were so powerful that they blew two Sherman tanks in half on the first day of the attack.³²

Now that the entire battalion was up to the canal, Lt-Col. Crofton planned to cross the whole battalion over this main water obstacle and carry the battle right into the heart of the enemy's defences. With the coast road now passable, No. 3 Platoon of the 6th Field Company, R.C.E., brought up kapok bridging equipment and collapsible canvas assault boats for the battalion. That night a 90-foot kapok bridge was assembled at les Baraques and under the cover of darkness the bridge and boats were brought down to the canal. The crossing was to be made a few hundred yards east of the old citadel by "D" Company using the assault boats. The other companies, carrying the bridge, following hard on their heels, would pass through "D" Company into the city.

Around midnight the men moved off. "D" Company swung east from les Baraques for a short distance and then south, scrambling helter-skelter over the various ditches and craters towards the crossing place. Unfortunately the assault boats had all been holed by artillery fire, but it was hoped some means of crossing the canal would be found on the spot to replace them. The main crossing was to be directly west of the old citadel from an "island" of land which was almost surrounded by canals, the chief of which ran between the "island" and the walls of the old citadel. The route had been reconnoitered several hours previously and Lieutenant Hobden and several others were on the "island" waiting for the guides which he sent back to bring up the company. It was while in this position, and while waiting for the main body to come up, that a ten-man German patrol passed by them, having come from an old bastion north-east of the citadel which had been thought unoccupied.

Meanwhile the men in "B" Company had carried the kapok bridge down to the first of the canals between les Baraques and the "island" followed by "C" Company. It was at this point that enemy tanks, dug in near the old bastion (or Bastion II as it was called), waited until the men were in comfortable range and then

³² W.D., 7 Cdn. Inf. Bde., September 25, 1944.

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poured their fire diagonally across the road along which the men were travelling. This fire ripped into and demolished the bridge and effectively placed a wall of fire between the attacking companies, cutting them in half. Immediately following this, very heavy machine gun and mortar fire was brought down on the battalion from the defenders in the bastion, which pinned down roughly half of "B" and half of "D" Companies north of the canal as well as the remainder of these companies which were now cut off on the "island". "D" Company Headquarters and the platoons from "D" and "B" Companies immediately dug in or used bomb craters for shelter. The company was very close to the enemy, and when daylight came they were completely pinned down, for any attempt to move brought withering fire on them from the bastion on their left, the citadel in front, and from enemy positions on their right. The battalion was now in a rather sticky position. On the morning of the 28th the war diarist describes the situation as follows:

[At 0810 hours] Lt. Olsen of the Recce Pl reported to Bn HQ that the forward coys could neither advance nor withdraw from their present positions. The posn now stood as follows: "D" Coy and 2 Pls. of "B" Coy. were across the canal. "A" Company occupied Fort Lapin. "C" Coy was at [the eastern outskirts of les Baraques] and had some remnants of "A" Coy and "B" Coy with them. "D" Coy sent in its location as [the western end of the railroad bridge]. "A" Company was busily engaged in evacuating wounded Germans from the hospital section of the fort they were occupying. The Recce Pl which was forward in an attempt to aid the other companies found itself under heavy fire and unable to move from the church at [les Baraques]. The outlook was not altogether pleasant. The enemy had us just where he wanted us and it seemed we could do very little about it. But of course he was in no better position. His forward elements were surrounded by our forward elements and vice versa.³³

This situation, in effect, left only "A" Company as the one rifle company free to move. During the day this company managed to capture a blockhouse between Fort Lapin and the bastion which relieved the pressure on "C" Company. "D" Company and part of "B" Company, meanwhile, were in a most unenviable plight. To add to their discomfort, their area was the site of an old garbage dump and the bombing and shelling had opened up much that was better undiscovered. Around mid-morning, over the com-

³³ W.D., I C Scot R, September 28, 1944.

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pany's hourly listening period on their weak wireless set, Major Pugh received orders to sit tight as there were rumours of some sort of truce. Cold, wet, cramped and hungry, the platoons had no other alternative.

The rumour turned out to be a fact and that evening, after a day of little change as far as the Canadian Scottish was concerned, word was received from Brigade Headquarters not to fire unless fired upon. It was something like a training scheme in England where the umpire declares a "truce" between the "Red Army" and the "Blue Army". After an unsuccessful attempt to have Calais declared an open city, Lt-Col. Schroeder, commanding the Calais garrison, had requested a 24-hour truce in order to permit the civilian populace to leave the city. This was agreed upon and Schroeder was given until noon of September 30 to carry out the arrangements. The "cease fire" continued that night until the "truce" went into effect at noon on the 29th. Under the terms of the truce, of course, the Canadians could not regroup their forces nor could the enemy regroup his. It was as if two wrestlers, straining for mastery, were frozen in their position, their muscles relaxed, but each retaining his hold on the other. For the Canadian Scottish platoons stuck out on a limb, the unnatural calm, welcome in some way, still meant hours of waiting and watching without food.

Although movement and activity within "D" Company's area was very limited, there were a couple of small brushes with the enemy. At one point a German patrol trying to gain contact with the fort was allowed to come right into No. 12 Platoon's position and all were captured. Some time later a medical orderly was permitted by the enemy to take the wounded prisoners back to Canadian Scottish lines. Through him Pugh sent word of his intentions to try to break out, but no comment on his intentions, either for or against, was heard over the wireless. In fact, among the forward elements, many of whom had no contact with the other owing to the enemy's field of observation, there was a rumour going around that the truce had not been accepted. That day, too, Major Pugh had made a reconnaissance of a long, concrete building close behind his company area and had discovered it housed a railway gun. He was fired on and made a quick exit.

During the night of September 29-30 a further attempt was

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made to reach "D" Company. At the same time the indomitable Sgt. Gri, whose platoon had been cut off with "D" Company, was told to make an attempt to break out of the pocket. Led by Sgt. Gri, his platoon worked its way to the concrete building housing the railway gun. Major Pugh describes what happened:

Dead silence for three quarters of an hour suddenly was broken by firing and shouting. Sgt. Gri finally found an entrance to the cement building and the platoon unearthed 105 Germans. These were shepherded back to the company area and gone over. We now had a problem as we wanted no part of them by daylight. An interrogation showed that the swamp between us and the battalion was the only feasible route out. The Germans would not file past their own area as the place was marked "MINEN". They were led into the swamp and after several tries a route was found waist high through the water. . . . I reported to the C.O. at Bn. H.Q. where the truce was confirmed.³⁴

As if to underline the old saying "it never rains but it pours" an investigation of the quarters of the crew of the railway gun uncovered plenty of rations, the first the men had had for two days. Never had army rations tasted so delectable.

When Major Pugh returned to his company during the early hours of September 30 he carried word that at the cessation of the truce there would be a final, large-scale attack on Calais. The attack would be heralded by an air strike immediately after the truce was over. Medium and field artillery would again bring their fire to bear on known enemy strongpoints and to help things along, "Crocodiles"—Churchill tanks equipped with flame-throwers—would be available to support the infantry. These terrifying weapons were spectacular to watch in action, and if their aim and accuracy were limited, their effect on the enemy was extremely demoralizing. The Canadian Scottish attack was timed for the second phase of the assault at four in the afternoon, and once again it would be directed against the northern part of the city. "A" Company, still the only company completely free to manoeuvre, would first capture the bastion after which, under the cover of darkness, the remaining companies would storm the citadel and push farther along the waterfront.

The first phase of the attack was still in progress when the reports of the enemy showing little resistance began to come in.

³⁴ Personal narrative, Major D. V. Pugh. Other small groups of "B" Company isolated on the "island" were able to withdraw independently after this action.

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Along the front where the Reginas and Winnipegs were fighting their way forward more and more white flags could be seen waving as fort after fort gave up as the Canadians closed up on them. During this period Lieutenants Chambers and Milton, whose platoons were to lead "A" Company's assault, were busy reconnoitering their front and picking a route through an area filled with crude but obvious booby-traps. At four o'clock, screened by smoke on the right, the attack went in. Chambers describes the action in part as follows:

My fort was surrounded by a barbed wire entanglement . . . This was overcome by the arrival of an anti-tank group, whose commander drove his M-10 tank destroyer up Booby Trap Hill and cut me a neat gap 10 yards wide with shell fire. He also managed to put a solid shot through the heavy wooden door and we could hear this rattling around inside. . . . The two old French tanks in Milton's fort were speedily disposed of by two Shermans.

Covered by a medium artillery barrage No. 8 platoon less two Bren groups raced along the beach and through the gap in the wire to our fort. Corporal Cherry emptied a Sten gun through the door and we then found the fort to be empty.

There was a fair amount of fire going on at Milton's fort and leaving Corporal Cherry to consolidate the Bren groups I took a fighting patrol of six riflemen to assist Milton. We climbed up the side of the fort to a tunnel entrance. . . . We proceeded through the tunnel and joined some of Milton's men in a small hospital inside the fort. There we found two "B" Company men, Corporal Rea and Private Hole, wounded and taken prisoner a few days ago. They were very anxious to tell us how well they had been treated and about a dozen Germans even more anxious were standing around to encourage this.³⁵

Later the company's battle flag, one presented by Her Royal Highness Princess Mary before D Day, was hoisted over the Nazi Swastika which had been flying from the north-west bastion, or Bastion II. About 600 years previously, within a few yards of that bastion, an ancestor of the Princess Royal had raised his banner after laying siege to Calais for a year. He was King Edward III, the victor of Crecy, who also had come to Calais by way of Caen.

With the bastion captured, a succession of white flags appeared in a long line on the northern outskirts of the city up to Fort Risban and the bastion at the harbour mouth. Rather than wait for nightfall, therefore, Lt-Col. Crofton decided to exploit success immediately and push beyond the battalion's objectives. "C" Com-

³⁵ Personal narrative, Captain S. L. Chambers.

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pany passed through "A" Company and once over the railroad bridge and beyond the citadel kept moving eastward meeting little opposition. "D" and "B" Companies, now free to move, followed behind clearing the area of the citadel and taking numerous prisoners. At about seven o'clock "C" Company's leading elements had reached the battered locks spanning the water course connecting the harbour channel with the inner basin (Bassin Carnot). Lieutenant R. S. Marshall was ordered to take his platoon over the wrecked sea locks and investigate the area beyond. Lieut. Marshall and his men scrambled over the twisted remains of the locks high above the turbulent waters below. "On the far end of the bridge", he wrote later,

there was a bombed-out railway station. I sent one section to investigate this while I continued with my other two sections to check the bunkers which were known to hold German troops. Soon we were taking in prisoners without any resistance as they were completely intoxicated. From the aroma we gathered that they had apparently been drowning their sorrows in gin while the bombing had been going on. Soon after clearing the line of bunkers fronting on the shore we were challenged by German sentries.

Fortunately with me I had Corporal Backus who spoke German. He called out to the sentries to surrender. They were quite willing to do so but said that they were guarding the Commandant of the Harbour Defences Garrison. We told them to inform their Commander to surrender. Eventually the German Commander called for a representative from my platoon. I sent Corporal Backus. . . .³⁶

After further talk it appeared that the commander of the harbour forts wanted to surrender, but only to a senior officer. Marshall informed Captain Schjelderup of the situation, and the latter tells in his own words the events which followed:

Being a Company Commander, I saw no reason why I would not be suitable for the job . . . so I was guided towards the fort. It was very dark but the prepared break in the barbed wire was found without much difficulty. As I approached it I was challenged and promptly gave the prearranged password "London" as instructed. With some misgivings I entered the fort and was promptly met by an officer who guided me . . . to the underground enemy Headquarters.

Below ground it was lighted and eventually I entered a room about 12 by 12 with a polished table in the center. To my surprise I was greeted with meticulous formality. The Commandant was standing

³⁶ Personal narrative, Captain R. S. Marshall.

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rigidly at attention at the doorway and lined up behind the table were five officers of his staff also standing like ramrods.³⁷

Captain Schjelderup took it upon himself to demand unconditional surrender of the forts, a condition which the German Commandant understood perfectly, having spent some time in the United Kingdom and being able to speak English fluently. However, he was uncertain whether to fight on or not. Schjelderup continues:

First of all he [the German commandant] had no knowledge that Calais itself had fallen and when I told him so he obviously disbelieved me, or at least he was suspicious. Above all, for some reason he had an overriding fear that he and his men would be turned over to the F.F.I. In spite of my telling him that I already had batteries of flame throwers in front of his positions and had several hundred bombers on call, he refused to surrender without doing so to an officer senior to myself. Perhaps he had some reason to question my authority for I was a scruffy looking young Captain with my battledress torn, filthy and blood-stained. When an impasse was reached I acceded to his request . . . for two reasons: (1) It would have been ridiculous to risk lives in an assault that night under such circumstances. This garrison was still ready to fight and had received no orders to surrender as had the troops met earlier that day. (2) I knew that a delay there may have held up the final clearing of Calais for possibly another day. This, I knew, must not happen for time was critical in getting the port into operation again.³⁸

This information was passed on to Lt-Col. Crofton. As there were still enemy strongly entrenched in fortifications around the harbour which had not yet been captured, Crofton arranged to meet him. The meeting took place at two o'clock on the morning of October 1. Lt-Col. Crofton describes the scene as follows:

When I, Schjelderup and C.S.M. Berry arrived at the gates of the fort we were met by an armed guard and two large police dogs. We were escorted into the Fort and into the Officers' Mess, where we found the Colonel and his eight officers dressed up in their best uniforms—some wearing Iron Crosses. The meeting was stiff and formal. The Commanding Officer surrendered his Harbour Forts along with 196 men and the eight officers. I gave him until five A.M. to hand over everything complete, arms and ammunition, etc., and said they were to be lined up outside the main Fort—which he did. Their only fear was that we would turn them over to the French as they were afraid of reprisals.³⁹

Early that morning Lieut. Marshall, a corporal and two men

³⁷ Personal narrative, Lt-Col. V. R. Schjelderup.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

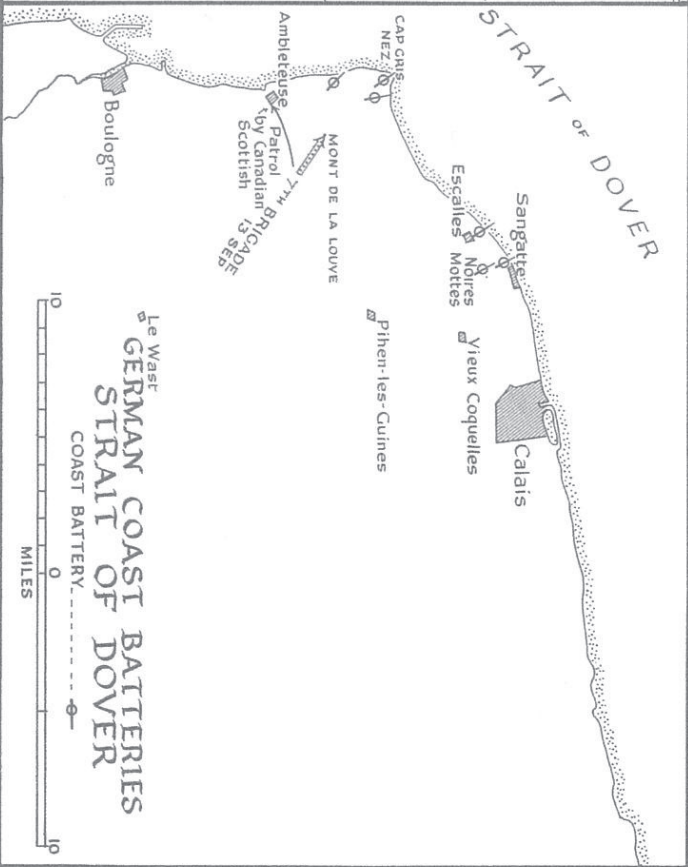
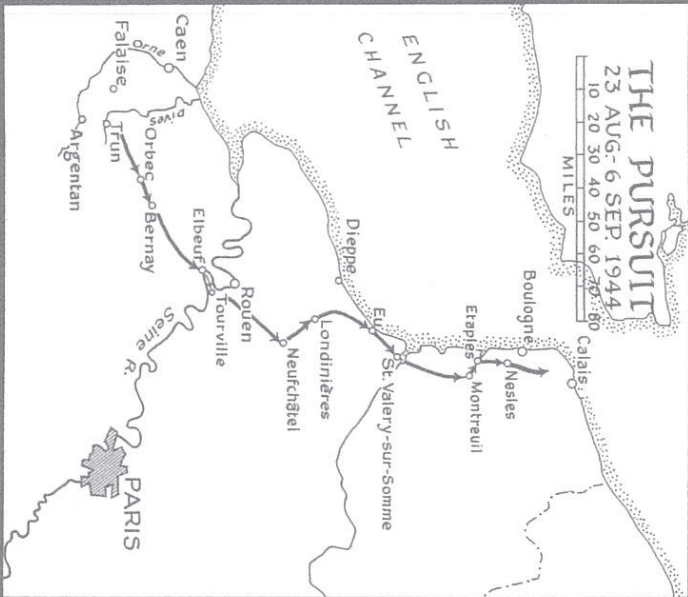
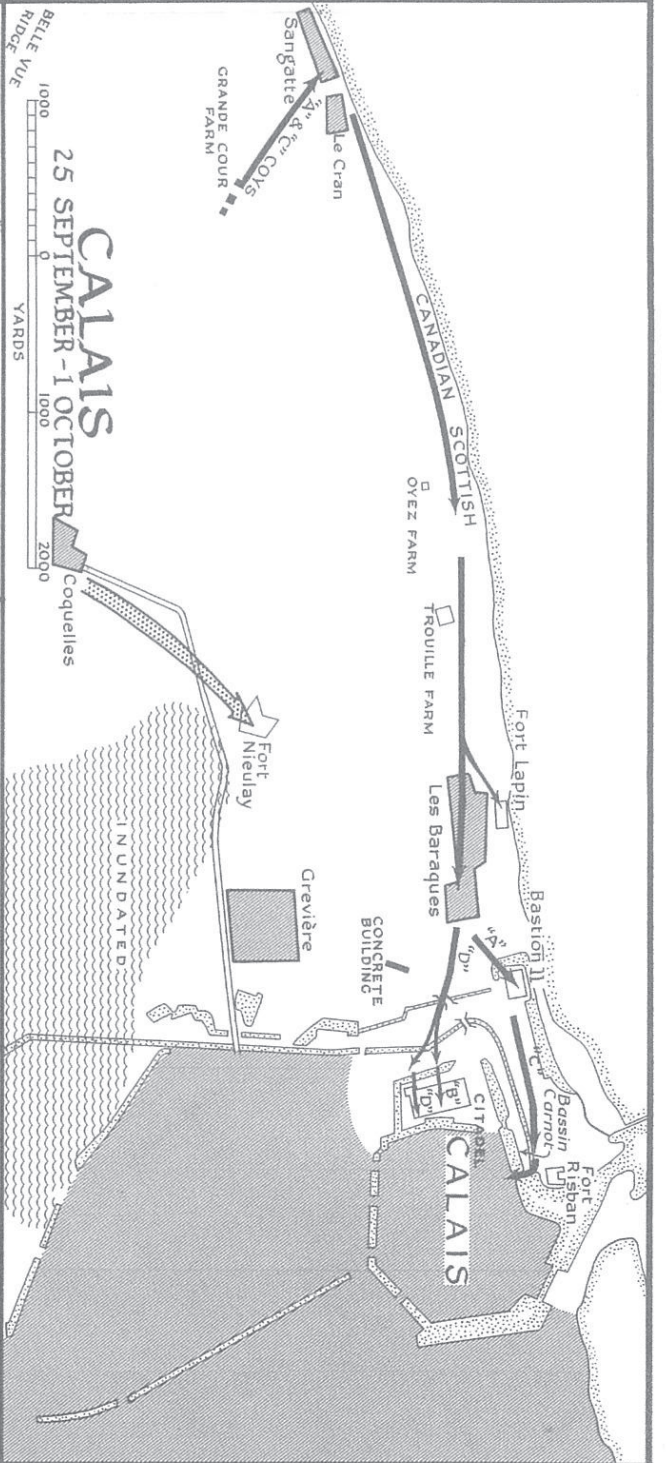
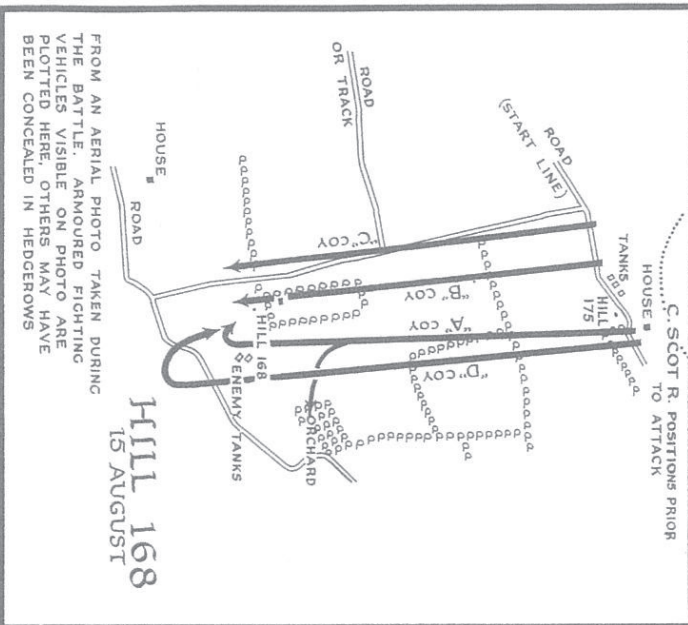
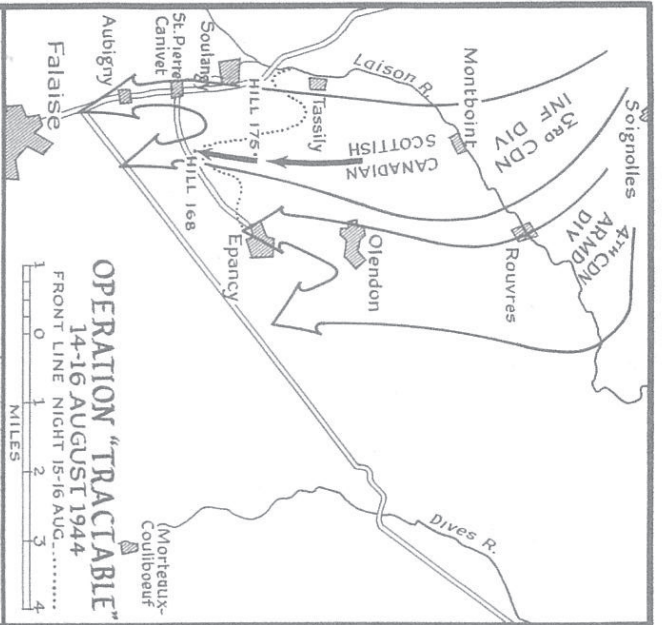
³⁹ Personal narrative, Lt-Col. D. G. Crofton.

arrived to escort the Garrison Commander, his staff and his guard back to join the hundreds of prisoners the battalion had already taken at Calais. The city, hard hit by the shelling and bombing, was dotted with fires here and there which were still burning as the 7th and 8th Brigades entered the port from the east and west. Now it was free and for a very short period the liberators, weary after so many days of continual battle, could take it easy.

It had been a strange battle in many ways. To attack towards the coast instead of away from it, to go through the strongest part of the Atlantic Wall using the "side door" instead of a frontal assault, to be so restricted by the sea, the swamps and minefields during the battle, and, in a way, to be so isolated from the remainder of the brigade during the attack—these were but a few of the unusual characteristics of the battle for Calais. For the battalion, the action was marked as a slow, grinding operation where the skill and aggressiveness of the platoons and companies during the attack was called upon as never before. The co-operation between the forward platoons, and the artillery, especially while beating their way up to the citadel, was excellent. The gunners had made extensive and elaborate preparation for artillery support, and a word to the Forward Observation Officer brought down the required fire in a matter of minutes.

The assault on Calais was also noteworthy in that the success of the Canadians had a direct effect on England. For years the Germans had shelled the ports of Kent within range of their guns. The British had replied in kind; in fact a few days prior to the Canadian attack on Boulogne British guns near Dover, with their fire directed by a British Forward Observation Officer within the Canadian lines, had shelled batteries near Calais. The capture of the enemy's cross-channel guns had put an end to this long-range duel. Symbolic of cessation of this fire, and as a very fitting gesture on the part of a Canadian Scottish N.C.O., the Nazi flag which had flown over the citadel in Calais was taken down by Sgt. Barkhouse and sent to the Mayor of Dover.

The battle was over. It was time to move on!



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.

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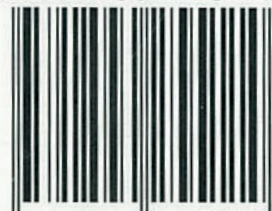
Major D. M. Grubb, CD (Retired), the editor of the additional material for the years 1955-2002, began his service in 1962 through the Canadian Officers' Training Corps at the University of Victoria. His Commanding Officer there was Major R.H. Roy. Thereafter, as an Army Reserve officer he served in The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

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