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*Canadian War Museum*

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# Prisoners of War as Library Users

Jean Langdon-Ford

One does not usually associate libraries and study classes with amenities provided for internees in Prisoner of War camps in the First World War. It was surprising then for me, as Librarian/Archivist of the Canadian War Museum, to find evidence in our Library/Archives of well-organized libraries in the First World War internment camps in Germany. My introduction to POW library users in this war came about as I was undertaking a preliminary inventory of the rich resources of the Canadian War Museum (CWM) Archives. In the CWM Archives are two files related to libraries in POW camps in Germany. One file (Accession 19800077) holds letters from 2nd Lieutenant Archibald Campbell, a Canadian, sent to his parents from his POW camp in Germany. The other file (Accession 19710056) contains information on officially sanctioned libraries in German POW camps.

These discoveries provoked the initial interest and prompted me to see as an experiment what else could be found to flesh out this theme amongst the resources contained in the CWM's archives and library. The results were sufficiently interesting, not only for demonstrating the potential of our archives/library but in elucidating this hitherto neglected theme in First World War history, as to merit being brought to the attention of the readership of this journal.

Little reference was found in the published literature to the establishment of libraries and study classes on either side of the conflict during the Great War. More information seems available on the situation in German POW Camps than in their British and Canadian counterparts, and indeed few details have come to light on the



organization of libraries in allied POW camps, although it is known that some existed.

According to Jean Laflamme in his book, *Les Camps de Détention au Québec durant la première guerre mondiale*, German and Austrian internees in Canadian camps were

allowed "quelques journaux ou magazines canadiens et américains," but that hardly constituted a functioning library.<sup>1</sup> Old Fort Henry, holding mainly civilian internees, did have educational classes and a library, but it seems to have been the exception rather than the rule.<sup>2</sup> In fact the combined monotony and confinement in Canadian camps was acknowledged to have contributed to the mental breakdown of certain internees.<sup>3</sup>

The serious mental effects of boredom in confined quarters were of concern in the 19th century to British sea captains exploring the Arctic. They began to equip their ships with libraries and established evening study classes below decks.<sup>4</sup> For related reasons, around the same time, the British Army began to establish libraries for its soldiers. "The large network of libraries, recreational centres, soldiers' homes and the like which sprang up in barracks during the latter part of the century through military and private initiative had as one of its goals the prevention of venereal disease in the army."<sup>5</sup>

Probably the Victorian notion that idleness could make work for the devil was still a current idea when the Great War began. With the inevitable Prisoner of War camps being established in Germany, certain British civilians began to take responsibility for the mental as well as the physical well-being of their

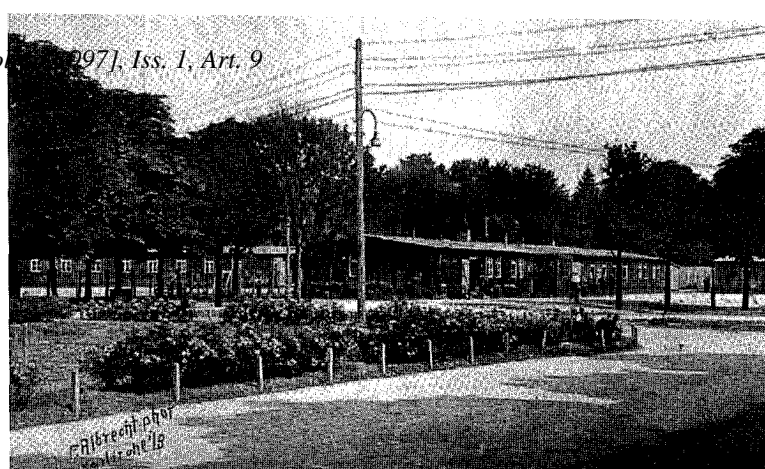


countrymen and allies who were interned in German camps.

The relief effort to provide the POWs with the necessary amenities (their needs as ascertained by neutral camp inspectors and legitimized by the Hague Convention) began almost immediately after hostilities broke out in August 1914.<sup>6</sup> As a consequence, small informal libraries grew inside Prisoner of War Camps once the system for sending parcels using the International Red Cross was developed. Eventually, due to the intervention of the British Censor (Defence of the Realm Regulation 24B), only holders of special permits could forward books, magazines and other printed material. A *Circular to Postmasters* from the Canadian Post Office Department dated November 1917 specifies that the British Defence of the Realm regulations must be followed for printed material sent from Canada to Prisoners of War interned abroad.<sup>7</sup> For works of fiction and other light literature, the special permit holder was the London-based clearing house on Horseferry Road called "The Camps Library." Requests from POWs for fiction were to be addressed to this agency.<sup>8</sup>

### The Camps Library

Established by book donations from the so-called "Camps Library" foundation in Britain, individual Camp Libraries in POW



**Left:** POW 2nd Lieutenant Archibald Campbell at Karlsruhe Internment Camp, Germany. Here he borrowed a mathematics book from the library to help occupy his spare time. (CWM Archives)

**Above:** Karlsruhe Internment Camp, Germany. This is the scene depicted on a post card sent home from the camp by Campbell. On the back he had written: "Cherio, my new home." The camp was comprised of 10 huts, of which Hut 8 was the library and recreational centre. (CWM Archives)

camps began to be well organized with catalogued collections and regular arrivals of new books. As stated in 1918 in the POW newsletter, *The British Prisoner of War: the Monthly Journal of the Central Prisoners of War Committee of the British Red Cross and Order of St. John:*

The aim and ideal of the Library is not only to supply to these unfortunate men a means of recreation and amusement, and to try and cheer a little their hours of imprisonment, but also to try and inculcate or gradually cultivate in many of them a love for good literature, and a taste for wider and more general reading, which may be of pleasure or benefit to them in after life... And when sending to Canadians, Australians, and others from remote parts of the Empire, always when possible we include certain books which deal with their own homeland or are written by their own countrymen and which we believe they are specially glad to get.<sup>9</sup>

Major Peter Anderson, a Canadian officer who was confined in the Bischofswerda Camp in Germany before escaping from it, wrote that "a good many hundred books and magazines" were in his Camp Library in 1915.<sup>10</sup> Desmond Morton mentions a library in the POW camp at Göttingen, a University town, where many of the Canadians who fought at Ypres were sent.<sup>11</sup> A *Report of Visits to English Prisoner-of-War Camps in Germany* of December 1915 states that the POWs' library in Göttingen was comprised of 7,000 books in several languages.<sup>12</sup> However, from much of Desmond Morton's research it appears the ordinary soldier would

not have had the time or energy left to read books after working under severe conditions.<sup>13</sup> Yet, a system of “wandering libraries” existed in connection with the working camps.<sup>14</sup> How much libraries were used as nourishment for the mind by the underfed prisoner labourers cannot be ascertained. Perhaps the idea of physical escape from the camps was more immediate than mental escape into literature.

Indeed use of the Libraries seems more prevalent amongst the officers, who did have time to read. An example is 2nd Lieutenant Archie (Archibald Bruce Duchesnay) Campbell whose letters home are stored in the CWM Archives.<sup>15</sup> Campbell worked at the Bank of Montreal in Alberta before he joined the Royal Flying Corps in May, 1917. A year of service eventually brought him to France, to fly with No. 20 Squadron RAF. By September 1918, Campbell was a Prisoner of War in Germany, having been shot down behind enemy lines.

In Karlsruhe Camp, Germany, Campbell was a limited library user. As an officer, he was not required to spend hours on back-breaking tasks in mines or on other difficult working camp projects. Perhaps out of boredom, or perhaps out of desire to keep up his banking skills, this particular POW found his way to the Camp Library. “So you see we have an awful lot of time to spare. I found an elementary arithmetic in the library & since then have been solving easy problems.”<sup>16</sup> In Campbell’s first letter home (he had earlier been reported missing in action), he asks “Dad please find out that if I return to B of M (likely I will) what salary, position, etc. I will have.”<sup>17</sup> Campbell was thinking ahead to post-war life and possibly used the POW camp library to help sustain his mental activity during his period of captivity. A photograph taken of Karlsruhe library about the time that Campbell was using its facilities shows shelves of catalogued books, several study tables, easy chairs and a notice board.<sup>18</sup>

Organizing the libraries inside some camps was a labour of love for those interested. *The British Prisoner of War* journal referred to above, which was distributed to Canadian POWs by the Canadian Red Cross Society, documents some of librarians’ trials. From Clausthal, a bleak camp in Germany, Lieutenant Alec MacDonald, RAF wrote in 1918 to his parents:

I have spent five complete days...overhauling the library. It had got into a terrible state...So we recalled all the books and had a room-to-room search turning books out, and then added all the new books we had been given and sorted them all out into categories - Novels - Poetry - Biographies - History - etc., etc....We entirely re-numbered and re-catalogued them all.<sup>19</sup>

At Ruhleben, a catalogue of more than 2,000 volumes was issued as early as 1915 and sold for one mark. This library was run by former chartered accountants and they covered the library expenses by issuing fines for overdue books!<sup>20</sup>

Study classes of more than recreational reading material were also organized for prisoners and this initiative came from the second form of library organization available in the camps. This library organization was known by the awkward title of “The British Prisoner of War Book Scheme (Educational).”<sup>21</sup>

### **British Prisoners of War Book Scheme (Educational)**

This sophisticated library and study system supplied books and study material to most of the POW camps where British and Commonwealth POW officers and other ranks were held. From an office in the Victoria and Albert Museum, the British Prisoners of War Book Scheme (Educational) was directed under the auspices of a Committee that included Sir Alfred T. Davies of the London-based Board of Education, Alice, Countess of Bective, a Major David Davies, M.P., Oxford Professor Gilbert Murray, and the Librarian of the London Library, C.T. Hagberg Wright. The object of the Scheme was “To provide British Prisoners of War interned in enemy or neutral countries with books for purposes of study.” Furthermore “Men who pursue a regular course of study, either in class or privately, are recommended to apply for, fill in and obtain authentication of a “Form of Record” of their studies, as this may be of use to them afterwards.”<sup>22</sup>

The following list shows the number of camps in different countries which the program reached:

<p>BRITISH PRISONERS OF WAR BOOK SCHEME (EDUCATIONAL)</p> <p>Founder and Hon. Director: SIR ALFRED T. DAVIES, K.B.E., C.B.</p> <p>VICTORIA &amp; ALBERT MUSEUM, S. KENSINGTON, LONDON, S.W.7.</p>	<p>THIS BOOK, supplied through the agency of the Scheme, is the property, BY PURCHASE OR EXCHANGE, of the undermentioned British Prisoner of War. This or any other volume, if of sufficient value to be worth returning and still in a serviceable condition, may be ultimately returned to the Office of the Book Scheme, should the owner be willing, so as to be made available for others (Returned Prisoners, Wounded Soldiers and Sailors, etc.) who may need such books later.</p>
Name & Rank.....	
Camp Address.....	
Register No.	Date

Please leave this Bookplate intact.

Germany - 142 (and others); Austria-Hungary - 12; Bulgaria - 1; Holland - 8; Turkey - 20; Switzerland - 9 (and others)<sup>23</sup>

Although Campbell's camp, Karlsruhe, is listed as having a library under the War Book Scheme (Educational), it is referred to as temporary camp for officers, and certainly it did not appear to achieve the educational status of some other camps which had good Reference Libraries and study classes in addition to Camp Libraries.<sup>24</sup> An example of the latter was Ruhleben, a large permanent camp holding civilians and military personnel. Here one of its prisoners, the renowned Canadian musician, Ernest MacMillan, worked on his Doctoral thesis in music for Oxford University. Prior to his internment, MacMillan had been a music student studying in Paris and happened to be visiting Bayreuth, Germany when war broke out.<sup>25</sup> At least seven other men interned at Ruhleben passed the London University Matriculation Examination.<sup>26</sup>

The type of study and reference books needed to achieve this standard of higher education were, of course, scarce and expensive. The British Prisoner of War Book Scheme (Educational), as a charity registered under the War Charities Act 1916, made a wide appeal to the British public for books and donations of funds for purchasing books. This generosity of

*Bookplate for books sent by the British Prisoners of War Book Scheme (Educational) to POWs for their study use.* (CWM Archives)

spirit to deplete "their own book-shelves in order that their treasured (or discarded) volumes may minister to the wants of their more needy brethren"<sup>27</sup> resulted in the amassing of a large collection of books to be prepared by volunteers for shipment to POWs in response to their requests. The following short list shows the scope of the applications for books collected by the Committee to send to the camps: Art; Archaeology; Architecture; Agriculture; Commerce and Finance; Chemistry and Physics; Geography; Geology; History; Military History; Natural History; Law; Literature; Logic; Philosophy; Theology; Mathematics; Medicine and Surgery; Music; Navigation; Politics and Sociology; Trade.

As stated by the Committee of the British Prisoners of War Book Scheme (Educational):

Any Prisoner who is now studying, or proposing to study, during captivity with a view to presenting himself for examination by any of these Examining or Professional Bodies, and any Prisoner who is, or proposes to become, a member of these Universities, can be supplied with a Syllabus of Examination of any of the bodies with whom he hopes to have relations, and if satisfied as to his capacity to reach the required standards can enter into direct communication with them.<sup>28</sup>

A much abbreviated list of the Departments, Examining Bodies, and Universities includes: Imperial College of Science and Technology; Royal Society of Art; Royal Institution of British Architects; Royal College of Music; The Institute of Chartered Accountants; Society of Engineers; The Inns of Court; Oxford University; Cambridge University; London University.

Official recognition of the War Book Scheme was given by the British War Office, Home Office and Colonial Office. Since the scheme also helped Colonial prisoners of war, recognition was also granted by the Canadian, New Zealand, Australian and Indian Governments.<sup>29</sup>

The Scheme's statistics for 1917 show the astounding scope of its activity in the camps. A total of 9,650 requests for books were received

from prisoners, and 55,570 educational books sent out to 200 camps.<sup>30</sup> By July 1918, according to the *Notes of the Month*, in the *British Prisoner of War* journal, there was a huge increase in demand for technical and educational books by POWs in camps in Germany. The increased need for this type of material was attributed to the fact that:

the prisoners so largely consist of New Army men. Many of these are young professional men, budding doctors, engineers, lawyers, seamen officers, dentists, and they ask for the newest technical books on their various subjects in order not to waste the time of their captivity. Such books are very expensive and none but the latest editions are of much use.<sup>31</sup>

Eventually, 149 Canadian officers (including 2nd Lieutenant Campbell) and 2,767 other ranks were freed from the camps following the Armistice of 11 November 1918. It would be impossible to know directly the effect of the benefit of the Camp Libraries and the War Book Scheme. Most histories of the First World War do not mention the role of libraries in German POW camps, but the fact that they even existed has to reveal a desire by the prisoners for more than food, clothing and shelter. It also shows the conviction of many British and Canadian volunteers and ordinary citizens that their imprisoned countrymen should be given the books and study materials to combat boredom and prepare for postwar life.

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### Notes

1. Jean Laflamme, *Les Camps de Détention au Québec durant la première guerre mondiale* (Montreal, 1973), p.37.
2. David J. Carter, *Behind Canadian Barbed Wire: Alien Refugee and Prisoner of War Camps in Canada, 1914-1915* (Calgary: Tumbleweed, 1980), p.23.
3. Desmond Morton, "Otter and Internment Operations," *Canadian Historical Review*, Volume LV, Number 1, May 1974, p.56.
4. Elaine Hoag, *Print on Board: Rare Examples of Shipboard Printing in the Arctic*. National Library News, Volume 29, Number 1, January 1997, pp.1-2.
5. A.R. Skelley, *The Victorian Army at Home: The Recruitment and Terms and Conditions of the British Regular, 1859-1899* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1977), p.54. See also page 93 on the recognised value of libraries and their establishment at army barracks.

6. Jonathan F. Vance, *Objects of Concern: Canadian Prisoners of War Through the Twentieth Century* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1994), p.36.
7. National Archives of Canada (NAC) Record Group (RG) 25 A2, Volume 302 f. POW 90/15.
8. *Handbook to the Work, Constitution, and Rules of the Central Prisoners of War Committee* (London: Charles and Sons, 1917), p.53.
9. *The British Prisoner of War: The Monthly Journal of the Central Prisoners of War Committee of the British Red Cross and Order of St. John* (London, September 1917), p.102.
10. Peter Anderson, *I That's Me: Escape from German Prison Camp and Other Adventures* (Edmonton: Bradburn, 1920), p.87.
11. Desmond Morton, *Silent Battle: Canadian Prisoners of War in Germany, 1914-1919* (Toronto: Lester, 1992), p.42.
12. Ella Scarlett-Syngé, *Report of Visits to English Prisoners of War in Germany* (December 1915).
13. Morton, *Silent Battle*, pp.64-94. See also Desmond Morton, *When Your Number's Up: The Canadian Soldier in the First World War* (Toronto: Random House, 1993), Chapter 9.
14. *The British Prisoner of War*. September 1918, p.102.
15. Canadian War Museum Archives (CWMA), Archival Records, Accession 19800077, File 1.
16. *Ibid.*, Letter, 23 October 1918.
17. *Ibid.*, Letter, 5 October 1918.
18. *The British Prisoner of War*. July 1918, p.77.
19. *The British Prisoner of War*. September 1918, p.120.
20. Joseph Powell and Francis Gribble, *The History of Ruhleben: A Record of British Organization in a Prison Camp in Germany* (London), pp. 190-193.
21. CWMA, Archival Records, Accession 19710056-112. This item is part of the fond of Lt-Col Arthur Philip Sprange.
22. CWMA, Archival Records, Accession 19710056-112. From poster distributed to prison camps.
23. Alfred T. Davies, *Student Captives: No.II, A further account of the Work of the British Prisoners of War Book Scheme (Educational)* (London, 1918), pp.20-23.
24. Mrs. Pope-Hennessy, *Map of the Main Prison Camps in Germany and Austria* (London: Nisbet, 191?), p.2.
25. *The Canadian's Who's Who: A Handbook of Canadian Biography of Living Characters: Volume II, 1936-1937* (Toronto: The Times, 1936), p.693.
26. Davies, p.26
27. *Ibid.*, p.16.
28. CWMA, Archival Records, Accession 19710056-112. From a poster distributed to prison camps.
29. Davies, p.19.
30. *Ibid.*, p.26.
31. *The British Prisoner of War*. July 1918, p.73.

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Obituary

## C. Anthony Law (1916-1996) Official War Artist

Laura Brandon

Commander Anthony Law, DSC, RCN, who died on 15 October 1996 in Halifax, was one of Canada's most notable naval Official War Artists of the Second World War. He was unique in that he was a serving naval officer throughout the conflict and in the period after the war. He retired in 1966. During his long and distinguished career as a naval officer he was also a professional artist.

As a young man in the early war years, he served on a number of Motor Torpedo Boats in the English Channel, and was involved in the action against the German battlecruisers *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau* in 1942. In this period he still found time to paint, usually when ashore during refits. In 1943, for example, he received a temporary assignment which enabled him to record some of Canada's more notable vessels including HMC ships *Haida*, *Chaudière*, *Huron*, and *Restigouche*. Within the art collection of the Canadian War Museum are also to be found some exuberant sketches of his shipmates, the vessels he served on, and the ports he visited during this period.

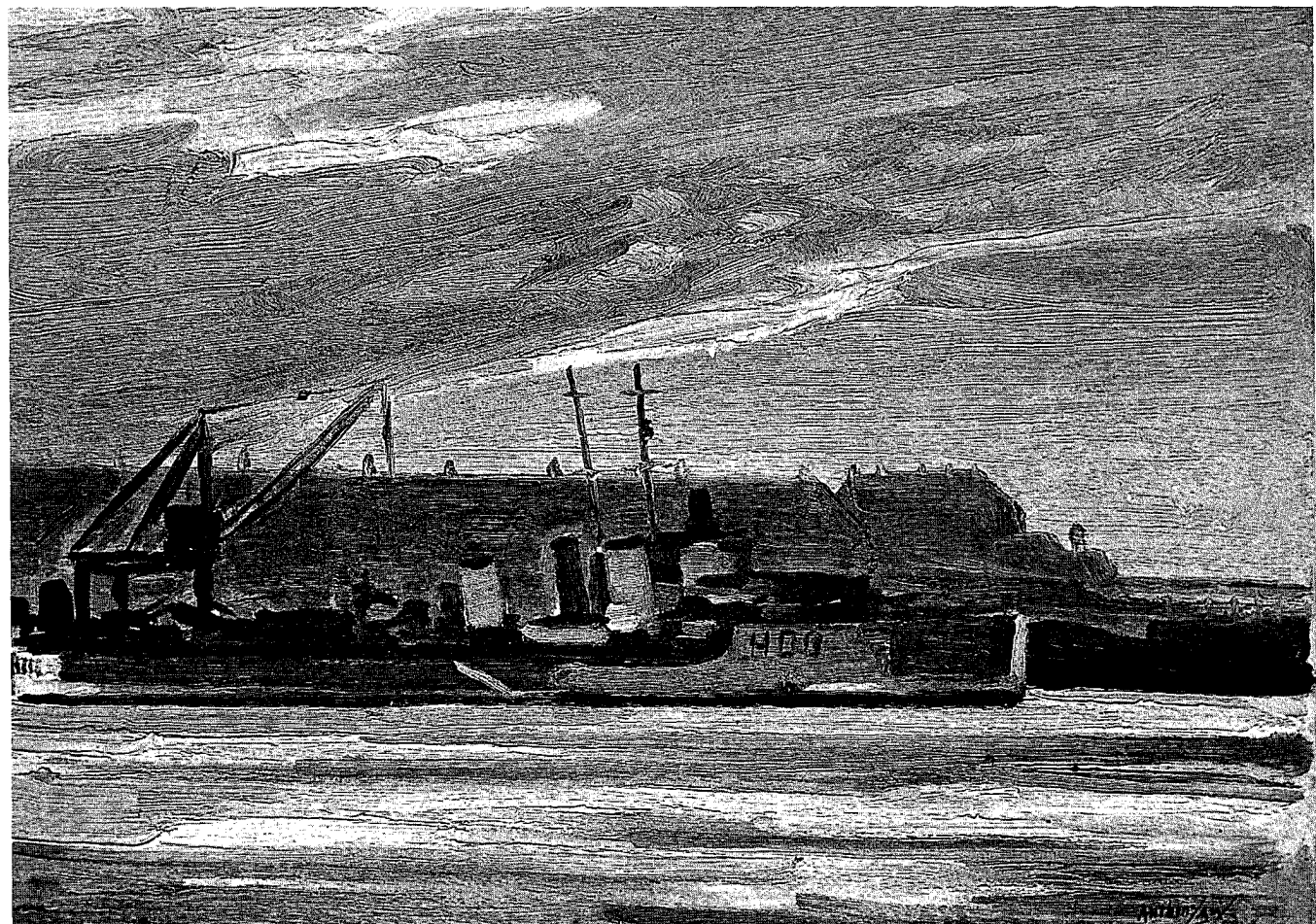
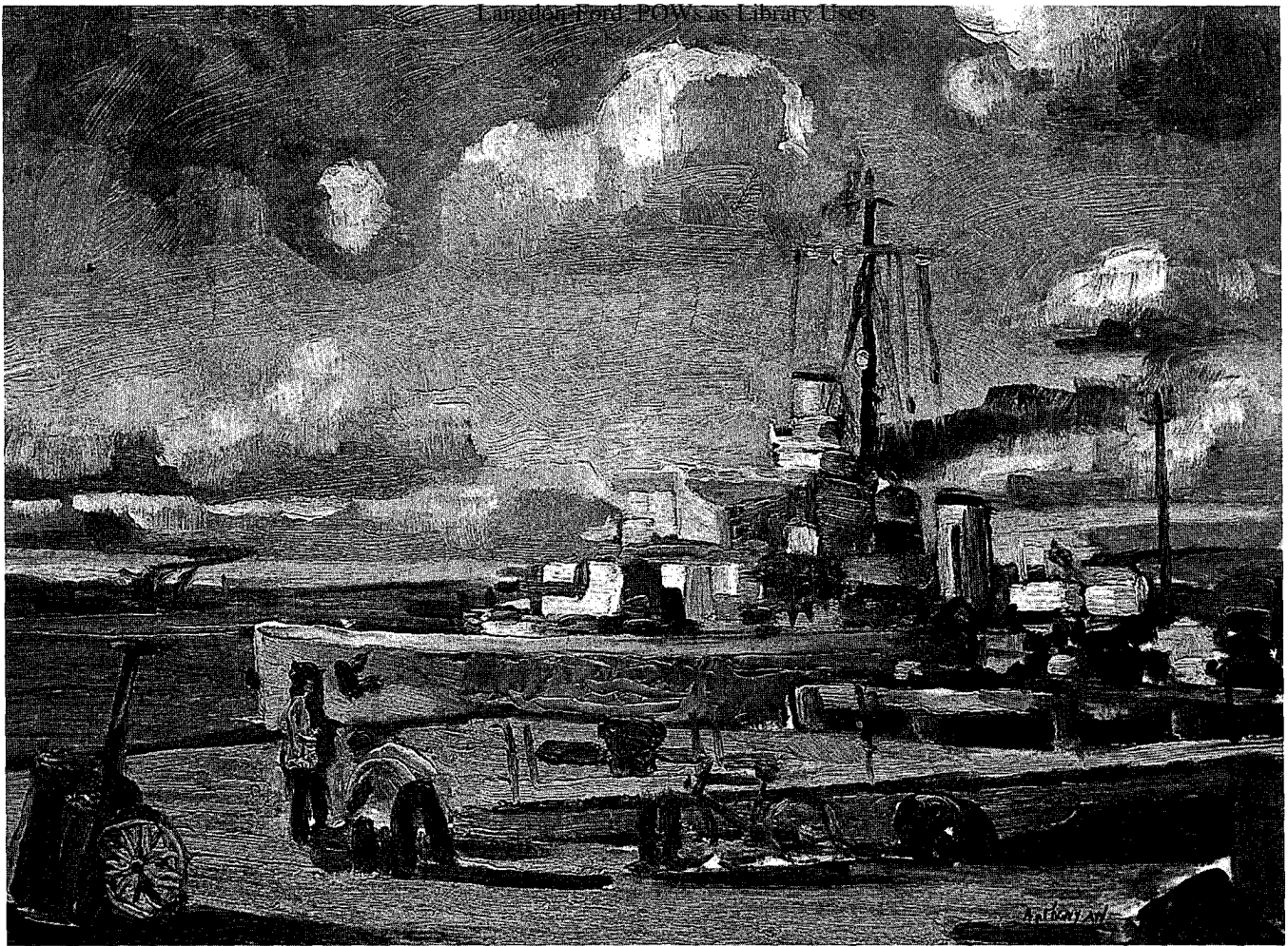
The 1943 assignment most likely came about through the intervention of Vincent Massey, then the Canadian High Commissioner in Great Britain, and one of the most energetic proponents of a war art programme. As early as 1942 he was writing about Law's art to the Director of the National Gallery of Canada, H.O. McCurry: "Although the real scheme for Canadian war artists is still to be organised there are, as you

know, two or three people painting activities among our services here...There is a young officer named Law, who was an art student before the war, who has produced some very striking canvases in the few hours he gets away from his motor torpedo boat in the Channel."<sup>1</sup>

Law's response to how he painted the war at sea was recorded in an interview he gave to the *Quebec Chronicle-Telegraph* in December 1943. When asked how he could recall subjects clearly after periods of heavy action, he responded in some detail:

Certain subjects, phases of battle, for instance, form unforgettable scenes in one's mind. Such as lovely designs of star shells, flak and the horrors of war, ships sinking or on fire. Highlights of action sometimes cannot be forgotten for a long time. I remember a certain night when we met a large enemy convoy heavily escorted. They put twelve star shells into the sky that was looking so beautiful. It was just like the 24th of May. That was the subject of my painting showing our boats in the middle of the night, with all the details shown because of the brilliant light coming from the star shells. And as the battle was progressing, dawn broke east and we could see the enemy convoy ships silhouetted against the horizon. That was a scene that I can still see today in my mind. It was simply unforgettable. And it was easy to reproduce it on the canvas.<sup>2</sup>

The painting described is likely that depicting the action against the *Scharnhorst* and the *Gneisenau* referred to earlier.





**Right:** *Survivors, Normandy, Off Le Havre.*

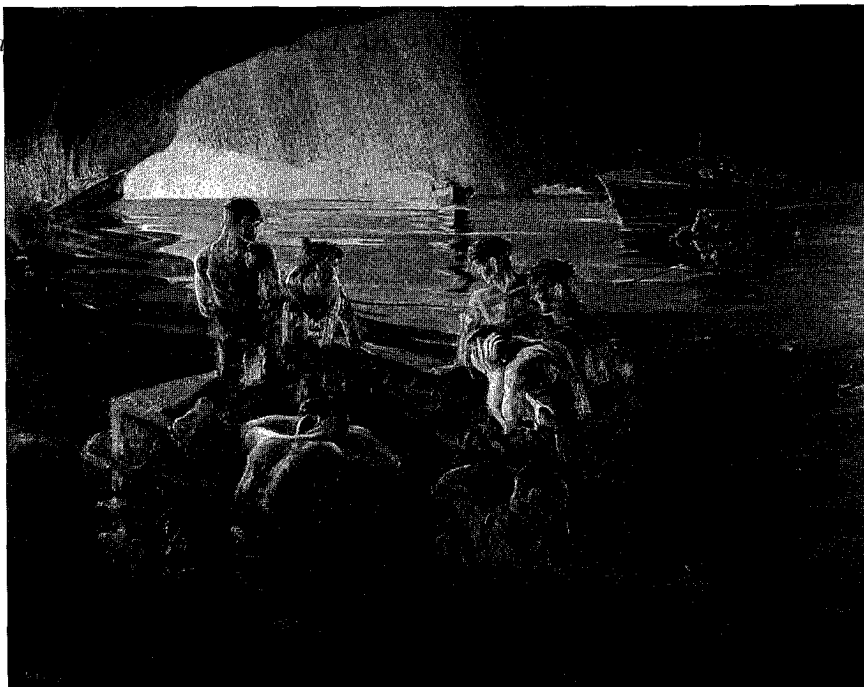
(Canadian War Museum CN 10310)

**Opposite top:** *HMCS Chaudière  
Portsmouth Dockyard.*

(CWM CN 10269)

**Opposite bottom:** *HMCS Restigouche,  
Evening, (On the Tyne).*

(CWM CN 10282)



But the artist's most intensely felt and memorable experiences occurred during the last year of the war. Seven years before he died, Tony Law published an account of the 29th Motor Torpedo Boat Flotilla (which he commanded from 1944-45) entitled *White Plumes Astern*. The story is one of remarkable camaraderie and courage. In the pages of Law's book the dangerous realities of coastal warfare are vividly described, as are the men who experienced it. The writer's great love of the sea and deep affection and respect for the men and ships with whom and in which he served is evident on every page. Their adventures were many and he was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for his service during this time. Nevertheless, the abrupt and sudden demise of the Flotilla was probably the most searing experience of the war for him. As he related in his memoirs:

[Commander Kerr] took me up to his room, poured out a stiff gin, and handed it to me silently. Senior officers do not ordinarily offer drinks to their juniors early in the morning, and my heart began to pound in dreadful apprehension. Quietly and without circumlocution, he gave me the painful tidings. At 1630 on 14 February 1945, the 29th Canadian Motor Torpedo Boat Flotilla had been destroyed by fire in the Ostend harbour. [The Commander's] words fell upon me like a sentence of death. I found myself breathing hard, with every muscle in my body taut, and my throat was choked with the horrible hurt.<sup>3</sup>

Twenty-six lives were lost in what is considered to have been the greatest disaster in the history of Coastal Force. A fire had broken

out in one vessel which had ignited the gasoline and ultimately caused the on-board torpedoes to explode. It is likely that Law's appointment as an Official War Artist shortly after this tragic event was the result of the loss of his ship and flotilla. It is also probable that his sense of loss influenced his choice of subject matter and the mood of his paintings. Certainly he was soon composing pictures that record the decommissioning of Canada's corvette fleet. *Graveyard, Sorel, P.Q.* (10266) (see back cover) is one such example. A special melancholy pervades the picture, enhanced by its dominant colours of purple and yellow, which are symbolic of Easter and of sacrifice.

When one reviews the many other paintings of similar subjects from this period one is struck by the quality of sadness in them, and one is hard pressed not to assign some portion of this element to the tragic end that preceded their composition. While earlier pictures painted before the disaster such as *Windy Day in the British Assault Area* (10314) (see back cover) are filled with *joie de vivre* and a youthful confidence, the later ones featuring Motor Torpedo Boats often focus on adversity, tragedy, and the fickleness of nature. One, *The Gale of Hurricane Force on the Normandy Beach* (10264), details the destruction wrought on landing craft and the Mulberry artificial harbour by a terrible three-day storm which began on D-Day plus 13, June 19. *Survivors, Normandy, off Le Havre* (10310) records the rescue operation after a sister vessel was blown up. The work is characterized by the violent red-gold



*The Gale of Hurricane Force on the Normandy Beach.*

(CWM CN 10264)

flames of the burning ship which reflect off the water and onto the wounded sailors. In total, Law contributed 29 large paintings and 75 oil sketches to the official record of Canada's navy during the Second World War, a collection now housed at the Canadian War Museum.

A distinguished postwar naval career included an appointment as second-in-command of the Arctic patrol ship *Labrador*.<sup>4</sup> The artist's retirement featured active volunteer support for a number of arts organisations including the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia and Saint Mary's University Art Gallery. A series of exhibitions of his paintings, some in partnership with his artist wife, Jane Shaw, rounded out a busy artistic career. All this notwithstanding, Tony Law's chief legacy is to be found in his paintings that record the deeply felt and observed experiences of a life fully lived.

### Notes

1. Vincent Massey to Harry McCurry, 14 August 1942, National Gallery of Canada Archives, Correspondence with War Artists, 5.42.L, copy in Canadian War Museum Artist File, Anthony Law.
2. *Quebec Chronicle-Herald*, 11 December 1943, National Gallery of Canada Archives, Artist Files, Anthony Law, copy on file in Canadian War Museum Artist File, Anthony Law.
3. C. Anthony Law, *White Plumes Astern* (Halifax: Nimbus Publishing Ltd., 1989), p.161.
4. For more information on HMCS *Labrador* see Eric M. Fernberg, "A Tough Little Boat: The Pogo - HMCS *Labrador's* Hydrographic Survey Launch," *Canadian Military History*, Autumn 1996, pp.71-76.

Laura Brandon is the Chief Curator at the Canadian War Museum, Ottawa.

# **The Battle of Moyland Wood**

## **The Regina Rifle Regiment,**

### **16-19 February 1945**

**D. Gordon Brown**

**A**lthough I have written accounts about the AD-Day Landings in Normandy and several costly battles from the beaches to Falaise, I have always been reluctant to write about the tragic events at Moyland Wood in Germany. My reluctance stems from the fact that this operation was the most traumatic for me personally and, I think, for our Commanding Officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Allan Gregory, DSO, during the fighting in Western Europe. I take no pride in telling this story because my own performance in the battle was inadequate. Further, I don't wish to offend anyone by resurrecting memories that might better be forgotten, or to reveal information that does not reflect favourably on anyone. However, battle conditions place intolerable pressures on people, with unpredictable results. A hero today can fail tomorrow. A great leader last week can suffer from battle exhaustion this week. Fortunately, the Regina Rifles still had many heroes at Moyland Wood. Unfortunately, most of them were either killed or wounded. That's why the story must be told.

he situation that prevailed in mid-February of 1945 must be recounted if the story of Moyland Wood is to be adequately told and the heavy casualties explained. The 3rd Canadian Infantry Division had been in combat almost continuously since the invasion of Normandy on 6 June 1944. The casualties in eight months of fighting had been horrendous. Regiments lacked trained and experienced officers and non-commissioned officers, and many soldiers had no battle experience. However, our greatest problem was attitude. It was clear to everyone that the war was almost over in Europe. The Russian and Allied armies were inside the borders of Germany. It was only a matter of time before Victory in Europe would be achieved. Our combat officers and men had lost their earlier

drive and determination, feeling quite naturally that it would be folly to lose one's life with the war's end in sight. Those of us who had been with our units in England and since the invasion were near exhaustion. Some had been wounded once or twice and had returned to battle voluntarily, but they too were sick of the horrors of war. The gung-ho spirit of 1944 had been replaced with caution and apathy. We didn't want to take unnecessary risks or to suffer casualties through errors, either on our part or on the part of higher command. This malaise affected all ranks, at least those on the battlefield and vulnerable to injury or death. The static warfare in Holland from November to February had contributed to our lethargy. When, early in February, the orders came for the attack into Germany, it was with some relief, but with little enthusiasm, that we began the final resolution of the war.

#### **The Operation**

**B**ritish and Canadian Forces were to capture the city of Cleve, just a few miles inside the German border and near the Rhine River. We were to clear the enemy from the area west of the Rhine and strike south to link up with the Americans who were pushing up from the south. An important goal was to find another bridge over the Rhine for access to the northern plains of Germany. Despite the flooded fields and roads, 3rd Canadian Division and a couple of British Divisions captured the battered city and struck south. The 15th Scottish Division advanced down a main road and through the villages of Bedburg and Calcar. Then they ran into strong resistance from a small forest east of the road. This was Moyland Wood. A force of German paratroops, fighting as regular infantry, stopped

the Scots cold. The 7th Canadian Infantry Brigade, like other Canadian units, was understrength, cautious and lethargic, but had a reputation of being highly successful in the heavy going. We were ordered to take over from the 15th Scottish and to clear Moyland Wood, so that the road south would be opened to armoured units pushing south. The Regina Rifles would attack the north end of the wood and the Canadian Scottish would then capture the south end. The Winnipeg Rifles would remain in reserve. The Regina Rifle Regiment, like other 3rd Div units, had suffered very heavy casualties, but was fortunate to have former second-in-command, Lieutenant-Colonel Allan Gregory, in command. He had served well in Normandy, been promoted to command the Queen's Own Camerons of Winnipeg (2nd Division) and had been wounded near the Seine River in France. He had returned to the Johns in October to replace our beloved CO, Foster Matheson. The latter had been given a well deserved rest and a promotion to full Colonel with the task of organizing Canada's Occupation Brigade in England. Allan Gregory, or "Greg," as I knew him, was a competent and hard working officer who took his responsibilities very seriously. We were also fortunate that Regimental Sergeant-Major Wally Edwards was still with us, along with senior NCOs in the Quartermaster jobs. We had fine Administration Support from QM Earl Rouatt, Paymaster Don McDonald, Transport Officer Jim Cameron, and Vassar Hall, Admin. Company chief. We had lost three Medical Officers over the months. Captain Syd Huckvale had been seriously wounded in Caen. Captain Harry Dickson was killed near Falaise and Captain Griffiths transferred after several months of great service. He had been replaced by another capable MO, Captain Frank Olacke. We were still blessed to have Captain Graham Jamieson as our dedicated Padre. What we lacked were confident, competent company and platoon officers, NCOs, and men. There were exceptions of course, and some of the original D-Day veterans were still going well, despite being out once or twice with wounds. We had also benefitted from the return of Majors Bob Orr, 2 i/c, and Len McGurran, officer commanding Baker Company, from Italy. Nonetheless, we had lost hundreds of our best officers and men since D-Day and we were not very happy about continuing a war which seemed all but over.

Brigade Headquarters had decided that the Johns should take a run at the wily and courageous German paratroops at 1330 hours on 16 February. Able and Charlie Companies advanced with Able in the woods on the left and Charlie along the fringe of the forest, on the road to the right. Able Company, under Major Art Gollnick, was stopped by heavy fire in the trees and dug in after some casualties. Major Gordon Baird and Charlie Company advanced a couple of hundred yards or so along the road with no resistance. Surprised at the lack of enemy action, Baird decided to send a platoon of men into the woods on a reconnaissance. To his chagrin, the platoon, commanded by Frank Shaugnessy, disappeared completely without shots being fired. Shortly, however, the balance of the Company was fired upon and Baird, realizing that he had been duped by the clever paratroops, withdrew his remaining troops to the startline and dug in. One of the riflemen from Shaugnessy's Platoon escaped that night and told how the platoon had been surrounded in the trees by German soldiers, who simply ordered them to surrender.

Baker Company, under 2 i/c Captain Doug Howat, was sent forward to enter the wood to the right of Able Company and to advance as far as possible. The Company came under machine gun and rifle fire, suffered several casualties and dug in among the many dead 15th Scottish soldiers scattered throughout the wood. The morale of "A" and "B" Companies sagged badly. During the night my good friend Al Gregory called me to Battalion Headquarters and told me that Dog Company, which I commanded, was to attack through Baker Company and drive the paratroops out. I had been unaware of the extent of the losses suffered by the 15th Scottish, so I prepared for the attack and briefed my Platoon Commanders, feeling that, with the support of Able and Baker Companies, we would be successful. I wondered a bit, however, how Dog Company was supposed to crush a German force which had already stopped units of the 15th Scottish and three Companies of the Regina Rifles. "Ours is not to wonder why; ours is but to do or die."

We went forward in single file with Lieutenant Warren "Buzz" Keating's platoon in the lead. I and my runner-batman, Frenchy Paulin, went with Buzz's platoon. It was a foggy morning but

*“Sunrays” sunning* – The senior officers of the Regina Rifle Regiment enjoy the sun a little over a week after the Regiment’s traumatic battle in Moyland Wood. Gordon Brown writes, “It was not a luxurious holiday in the Reichswald, but we were due for a change, out of range of German shelling, and we could relax in our dug-outs and wear berets in place of the uncomfortable helmets. Someone took a picture of Colonel Gregory, standing, second-in-command Major Bob Orr lying on the ground, Major Len McGurran sitting against a tree, and me, of course, occupying the only chair in sight.”

we must have been under observation, for we were shelled heavily en route. We had a number of casualties before we reached the woods. When we reached Baker Company’s position we came under machine gun, rifle grenade and rifle fire. Our casualties convinced us to hug the ground where we found that we were lying among the dead bodies of the Scottish units and some of our own Baker Company dead. Crawling to Doug Howat’s slit trench, I learned that the enemy controlled a large open space in the woods and simply had everyone pinned down. The problem was, of course, that as in all fighting in heavily-wooded areas, the defender has all the advantages. He is dug in and camouflaged, while the attacker is vulnerable every time he moves. A determined force of 200 defenders, in heavy woods, can hold off hundreds of attackers who simply cannot see their enemy. Just ask veterans of the Vietnam war about this problem.

Buzz Keating had managed to get his platoon dug in and I asked the other two platoons to take cover wherever they could. Morale had been shattered by the sight of so many dead. I was appalled by the situation. I tried to advise Al Gregory of our plight but, as often happened, our radio (wireless) didn’t work very well. I sent Frenchy Paulin the mile or so back to Battalion Headquarters. The little French-Canadian from Temiskaming, Ontario carried a written message outlining the situation and asking for direction.

Readers of this account will be wondering why we didn’t have any tank support and what sort of covering fire and artillery plans were used. It’s too long a story to tell here, but our tank units had been badly battered in Normandy and anywhere that the Germans had their powerful anti-tank guns. The famed 88 mm anti-aircraft and anti-tank weapon had been especially devastating. Further, it was practically



impossible for tanks to operate in a heavily-treed area like Moyland Wood. Three tanks had been assigned to fire their machine guns and cannons into the wood from hull-down positions near where we had entered the trees. The tank crews could not see the enemy positions and could only fire wildly in the general direction of the enemy. The trees absorbed most of the lead.

An artillery fire plan had been used in support of D Company’s attack but, without adequate forward observation, the fire was inaccurate and shells often exploded against the tops of trees, raining shrapnel down on us more often than not. With good observation and direction the artillery fire could have been devastating to the Germans in the wood. However, our Forward Observation Officer could not be found.

As I waited in a shallow slit trench for a message from Colonel Gregory, I thought about those well trained paratroops who kept peppering us with bullets. They were probably the best troops we had faced, and they were now fighting in defence of their homeland. They were not wild-eyed nazis like the SS back in France, but brighter and just as dedicated. They had been



*Infantry of the Regina Rifles awaiting the signal to attack Moyland Wood.*

*(Photo by Colin McDougall, NAC PA 177577)*

selected to block our drive south and in particular to control the road. Relatively safe from tanks and artillery, they could toy with vehicles trying to use the road and they could destroy large numbers of infantry attacking blindly into the forest. They probably did not have more than seven or eight hundred men in the entire wood, which extended for several hundred yards. We were perhaps confronted by about 400 soldiers in the northern half of the forest, but they had all the tactical advantages, were well dug in and could stop a brigade attack. They had proved it by destroying some 15th Scottish units. There was a natural killing ground in the trees; a large open area of triangular shape directly in front of us. They had placed machine guns along their two sides of the triangle, while we were pinned down among the dead on our side. We were being invited out into the open where we could go nowhere but into hell. How could we deal with the situation, I wondered? I devised a plan which I felt might work. In the late afternoon I was asked to see Al Gregory at Battalion Headquarters.

I walked several hundred yards and found my trusty young jeep driver, Arnold Dahlen, who drove me the rest of the way. Greg met me with a friendly smile and took me into a separate room. He said that he had just received further

direction from the Brigadier, and that Dog Company should attack without delay. I was very upset, of course, and tried to explain the futility of frittering away one company after another while achieving little or nothing. I sounded the Colonel out about my alternative plan. We poured over the detailed map of the area for a very long time, well into the evening, tugging at our mustaches the whole time.

My plan was to make use of tanks on either side of the wood, followed by two companies of the Johns on one side and two companies from the Winnipeg Rifles on the other side. Under cover of darkness we could create panic by entering the wood well behind the triangular killing ground and perhaps split the paratroop force in two. They would have to withdraw or face annihilation. The tanks would not be vulnerable in the darkness and the sound of their motors might frighten the enemy. There were no enemy tanks in the area and few, if any, anti-tank guns. It was a rare opportunity for the armour to play an effective role. Our troops would feel better too about doing a joint tank-infantry operation, rather than moving alone against an enemy that held all the cards.

After explaining the plan, I calmly told Greg that I would refuse to order the men of Dog

Company to attack across that killing ground, but that if a better plan were adopted, along the lines of my proposal, Dog Company would be involved. Greg warned me strongly about refusing to carry out the plan that had been devised by Brigade HQ. He asked me if I knew that I could be court-martialled for refusing a lawful order. I said that I was well aware of that possibility, but that I would rather face a court-martial than order my officers and men into a hopeless attack. Greg shook his head and smiled grimly. "OK, Gord, you've convinced me that we must have a new plan, along with an artillery barrage or an aerial bombardment. I don't know how the Brigadier will take to the idea, but I'll let you know. Wish me luck."

Back at the Dog and Baker positions we were still being hammered by rifle grenades, machine gun and rifle fire. Able Company was on a higher piece of ground about 70 yards to the left, so I called Buck Gollnick on the wireless and asked him if his boys could fire down on the Germans. He explained that Able Company didn't really control all of the high ground and that they could not help us. It was not a healthy place, Moyland Wood! At about midnight the Company Commanders were called to an "O" group (meeting) at Battalion HQ. Greg took me into a separate room before the meeting began. He told me in grave tones that both he and I were in serious trouble for taking such strong stands against the Brigade plan. Greg had argued strongly in favour of a new plan but had only been able to work out a compromise, better than the old plan, but not what we had hoped for. Three Companies of the Rifles would be involved in an attack at first light, supported by our own flame-throwing Bren gun carriers. We would withdraw quietly from our present positions throughout the night, in groups of 3 or 4 men, in order to conceal our change of plan. Baker Company would filter out first, followed by Dog and then Able. Under cover of darkness and the morning fog we would get into the open fields and farms to the right of the road as Charlie had done two days earlier. In order to achieve surprise no preparatory barrage would be fired, although shelling behind the German positions would continue. At first light Baker would attack into the woods and seize 40 or 50 yards of ground. Dog Company would then pass through Baker and attack the ridge about 100 yards further in. Able Company would enter the wood

and attack the enemy still covering the killing ground, hopefully from behind, of course. There would be no tanks involved but our Bren gun carriers would provide machine gun and flame support. There was to be no deviation from the plan and following the attack, Greg and I were to meet with the Major-General (Divisional Commander) and the Brigadier to straighten out our differences.

Greg asked me to accept the new plan, as a compromise, and promised all the support possible. The problem, from my point of view, was that in attacking down only one side of the Wood, we would permit the enemy to concentrate on stopping Baker Company's entry into the trees and to do the same with the subsequent attacks by Dog and Able Companies. If the paratroops were forced to look after both flanks and their rear, we could put them in an untenable position. I also felt that it was wrong to assume that three tired, dispirited and understrength Companies could dislodge a determined force of well dug-in Germans, in a heavily wooded area. We had already suffered a lot of dead and wounded and lost a platoon taken prisoner; while the Germans were fighting on their home ground. I expressed these concerns to the Colonel but agreed that the plan was much better than the old one. I said that I hoped that I would be able to accompany him, after the attack, to the meeting with the Brigadier and the Divisional Commander.

### **The Attack**

**W**e withdrew from our positions as planned and, I think, we did not reveal to the enemy that we were pulling out. There was quite a heavy fog that morning and we made our way along the right of the highway for 300 yards or more to some farm buildings which were to be our startline. Baker Company launched its attack as planned and penetrated the woods for about 40 yards before being stopped. They dug in. The enemy reacted quickly as we knew they would and, although taken by surprise, they met Dog Company with heavy resistance. The two forward platoons, under Lieutenant Warren Keating and Sergeant Hunt Taylor, charged through "B" Company's position and toward the ridge in the forest, about one hundred yards into the enemy's positions. I went in with our third platoon,



**Far left:** Lieutenant Warren "Buzz" Keating, "D" Company, Regina Rifles, somewhere near Nijmegen, Holland, December 1944. Keating was awarded the Military Cross for his actions during the Moyland Wood battle.

**Top right:** Lieutenant-Colonel A.S. Gregory, DSO, commanding officer of the Regina Rifles.

**Bottom right:** Sergeant Hunt Taylor, Company Sergeant-Major, Regina Rifle Regiment. He was awarded the Belgian Croix de Guerre at the Leopold Canal and received a Commander-in-Chief's Certificate for his role as a platoon commander at Moyland Wood.

planning to stay directly behind the two forward platoons and consolidating on the ridge with them. However, we lost sight of them in the darkness of the woods and veered left toward the paratroops covering the killing ground. The crafty Germans had sensed what was happening and had turned their machine guns around 180 degrees to fire at us as we came in behind them. Our reserve platoon was the least experienced of the three, and we came under a hail of bullets and grenades. Several of our young soldiers fell, some killed, some wounded. The rest of us dived to the ground and, under cover of the trees, we withdrew almost to B Company's forward slit trenches. There was a lot of firing going on and chaos reigned supreme. The flame-throwing carriers tried to enter the fray but only one actually got beyond Baker Company, where the rough going caused it to throw a track. Sergeant Milton Adolph, in charge of the carrier, jumped out and grabbed a German paratrooper who was behind a large tree, punched him and took his rifle. The poor fellow ran right into me and became our first prisoner.

I could not determine exactly where our two forward platoons had gone. There was a lot of noise up on the ridge so my runner and I, along with Captain Howat of "B" Company, tried to go forward. We were met by grenades and bullets, escaping death only by crawling on our stomachs. It was pointless. Able Company must enter the wood as planned and neutralize the enemy on the left or the whole thing might fail. We didn't know if Buzz Keating and Hunt Taylor and their heroic troops were still alive and we could not go forward to find out, so Frenchy Paulin and I returned to the farm across the road, running the gamut of machine gun fire coming down the road from the left. We found Able Company unable to get across the startline because of the heavy fire coming down the road from the left. The paratroops defending along the killing ground had decided to stop anyone from crossing the highway.

Knowing Keating and Taylor as I did, I could not believe that they had been taken prisoner or that they had not reached their objective. I ran across the road, diving between two German bodies to avoid machine gun fire, and checked



with Doug Howat and Baker Company. There was still no sign of my missing platoons, but things had quietened up at the ridge. Was that a good sign or a bad one? I returned across the road, found my runner and together we decided to go back into the trees and try to find the platoons. We dashed across the road once more, advanced beyond "B" Company and, under fire, dived into a small enemy trench under a tree. A shell hit the tree above us and we received a heavy blast. I felt some blood trickling down my forehead and raised my hand to wipe it off. Frenchy Paulin thought that I must be badly hurt and jumped out to charge forward himself. I grabbed him by the ankle and pulled him back. A tiny piece of shrapnel had gone through my steel helmet and stopped on my forehead. I was able to pick it off, but I was exhausted and badly shaken.

In Normandy we had learned that it was unwise to have both the company commanders and their 2 i/c's in action together. If they became casualties at the same time, the company would be leaderless. The same was true for platoon commanders and their sergeants. So a system was devised under which either the commander or his 2 i/c remained out of battle, so that the other could come in as a replacement, if necessary. When Francis Paulin and I reached Battalion HQ I briefed Al Gregory and recommended that the officers who had been left out of battle from "A," "B" and "D" Companies be brought in to relieve their buddies. That would mean that Captain Dick Roberts would replace me, Major Len McGurran would replace Doug Howat in "B," and Captain Bill Jansen would replace Major Art Gollnick in "A." Platoon Sergeants and Lieutenants would replace their counterparts. Charlie Company, under Major Gordon Baird, was still in reserve.

I apologized to a very concerned Colonel Gregory and asked my buddy, Dick Roberts, to get Buzz and Hunt out as soon as possible, assuming that they were still functioning. Frenchy and I went to "A" Echelon to rest. The next morning, who walked into my quarters but "Buzz" Keating. I threw my arms around him. His platoon and that of Hunt Taylor had suffered heavy casualties but had driven the Germans off the ridge and had beaten off the counterattacks. The paratroop position had weakened when Bill Jansen took "A" Company

in and neutralized the Germans on the left. Baker Company had helped Dick Roberts to get through to our two platoons. A clean up process had begun.

The north end of Moyland Wood was in our hands, but the south end was still controlled by the paratroops. The Canadian Scottish had attacked the south end during the night but had lost one full company and had not been successful. They had suffered very heavily. Al Gregory called to tell me that he had decided to assume full responsibility for what had transpired and that I would not attend the meeting with the Divisional Commander. Although I had not been looking forward to the meeting, I was a little disappointed at not being there to support Greg. I felt that we were justified in refusing to attack unless a major change could be made in the plan, and I was convinced that subsequent events had simply reinforced that belief. In any case, by not attending, it gave me time to do something that I felt obliged to do. I managed to get through to the headquarters of the 15th Scottish Division by phone. A Staff Officer answered and I wasted no time in telling him what I thought about them leaving their dead on the battlefield so long. He acknowledged that something should have been done before then, but explained that they had lost so many men that they didn't have the resources to get the job done. He promised to do as much as he could to arrange for burial of the dead soon.

## Conclusion

The Regina Rifle book written shortly after the war points out that on 19 February, Lieutenant-Colonel Gregory "was called to act as Brigade Commander, as the Brigadier was leaving." That was, of course, the outcome of Greg's meeting with the Divisional and Brigade Commanders. We had been vindicated in our position that Brigade HQ had underestimated the strength of the enemy in Moyland Wood. I knew the Brigadier well, having met him first in Normandy. I had sat with him on a Court Martial case in December 1944. He had served with distinction on D-Day and in the Normandy campaign, and had commanded the Brigade since August. He was, no doubt, tired and like our Colonel Matheson, earlier, entitled to a well deserved rest after months of tension and strain.

Major Bob Orr moved up from second-in-command to act as battalion commander. Colonel Al Gregory, acting as Brigade Commander organized an entirely new plan of attack to be carried out by the Winnipeg Rifles, to capture the area of the wood still occupied by the enemy. He arranged a blistering fire plan in support of the Winnipegs, including heavy artillery, anti-tank guns, tanks and aerial bombardment. The Winnipegs, with the loss of about 105 killed and wounded, were able to dislodge the paratroopers and drive them out. Our early Regina Rifle history (1946) states that the Regina Rifle Scout Platoon, entering Moyland Village brought back one prisoner of war who claimed that the balance of enemy troops had withdrawn on the night of 20-21 February.

Lieutenant Buzz Keating and I visited the scene of our struggle in the north end of the woods and found many enemy dead. We also confirmed that the enemy had indeed controlled the killing ground, i.e., the open area in the trees. The machine gun sites and slit trenches had clearly been set up to encircle any intruders into Moyland Wood.

I returned to command Dog Company in the advance to the Hochwald and Üdem. Then Greg arranged a nice gift for me - a trip to Arras and Cambrai in France to spend a week with an RAF Mosquito Fighter Squadron. The squadron was based at a former German fighter field near Arras and was flying in direct support of the Army, doing night bombing and other raids designed to aid us in advancing into Germany. I was to provide the airmen with information about the infantry and the nature of the battle on the ground, and to learn of some of the problems faced by the pilots. I had a wonderful week and flew with one of the hottest pilots in the squadron on a fly-over of the Vimy Ridge Memorial, hedge-hopping in France and an upside down view above Brussels. I returned to action east of the Rhine where the Johns had just captured the German city of Emmerich.

Moyland Wood had caused the Regina Rifle Regiment more than 220 men killed or wounded in 3 days, ahead of the one-day number of 211 at the Ancient Abbey of Ardenne in Normandy. The Leopold Canal battle resulted in the highest casualties suffered by the Reginas in Western Europe, about 300 in six days. Thus, Moyland

Wood holds second place in our experience from a casualty point of view, and ahead of D-Day, Bretteville-l'Orgueilleuse, Caen, Falaise, The Seine, The Channel Ports, Nijmegen, North Holland and Germany. Moyland Wood is, of course, one of our battle honours. It was a victory for the Regina Rifles, but a very expensive one, under very trying circumstances. Among those receiving awards for bravery were Lieutenant Keating, a Military Cross and Sergeant Hunt Taylor, a Commander-in-Chief's certificate. There were others who also deserved awards, of course, but as with life, war can never be considered entirely fair.

Buzz Keating and Hunt Taylor deserved their recognition. Buzz lives in BC and Hunt in Ontario. They have enjoyed meeting each other again at reunions. For them, the topic of conversation sometimes centres on Moyland Wood! Ironically, about two months after the Moyland Wood affair, as a result of command changes at the divisional and brigade level, Al Gregory found himself in command of 7th Brigade and I was commanding the Reginas in the absence of Major Bob Orr, 2 i/c, who was away on assignment. We were to fight our last battle of the war at Leer in Germany on 29/30 April 1945. Greg was pushing me to get on with the attack, but I reminded him about too much haste at Moyland Wood and we shook hands on that. We had gone through a lot together since 6 June 1944 and had become fast friends.

Unfortunately, Allan Gregory died of a brain tumour in 1955 at the age of 39. He had married after the war and had established himself in a law firm in Vancouver. He had returned to Europe to visit the battlefields in July 1955. I received a card from him from Caen, Normandy and I have kept it ever since.

Gordon Brown landed with the Regina Rifles in Normandy on the morning of D-Day. On 8 June he was promoted to command Dog Company. He remained with the regiment for the entire campaign in Northwest Europe except for two short periods when he was wounded. He retired at the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel and now lives in Red Deer, AB with his wife, Jean.

# Escape of the German Army across the Westerscheldt, September 1944

S.J. de Groot

The writing of this article was made possible by Mr. K. Schacht (Steinkirchen), former officer of the *Bundesmarine*, who gave me the unpublished script of Mr. F. Roher.<sup>1</sup> Mr. Roher belonged to the *Kriegsmarine* and took part in operations in the Dutch waters in 1944. He put together a captivating document. Some additional research had to be done to put it in a clear and complete perspective. The fact that a specially formed unit of the *Kriegsmarine* was able, in 15 days, to ferry across the Westerscheldt 100,000 men, 6,000 vehicles, 6,000 horse-drawn wagons and 750 pieces of artillery, undoubtably lengthened the war and the occupation of a large part of the Netherlands. The evacuation across the Wester-Scheldt surely can be found in literature. The role of the *Kriegsmarine*, however, forms a forgotten chapter, even more so because the event was overshadowed by the long battle for the mouth of the Scheldt. Now, 50 years after the event, through examination of the facts gathered by Mr. Roher, we will have to admit this was a remarkable logistical operation that was perfectly executed under the most difficult conditions.

## Background

The Allied landings in Normandy on D-Day were followed by months of bitter fighting. Slowly but surely the German forces were driven out of France, and the German 15th Army was pushed from the area where it had been stationed for the invasion, namely north of the Seine, and into Belgium. This army belonged to Army Group B (Model). Because the retiring Germans nestled themselves stubbornly in the Channel ports and

could not easily be driven out of them, the advancing Allied armies were getting into problems with their logistics. At this point in the war, and in fact up until the end of November when the large port facilities at Antwerp were finally opened, the bulk of Allied units and supplies were still being landed over the D-Day beaches. The few captured Channel ports did not have the capacity to take over this function. It was essential to get the port of Antwerp into operation to ease the logistical situation. On 4 September, Antwerp, with its harbour installations intact, was taken practically without a blow. However, until the banks of the Scheldt estuary could be cleared, the British Army had to be supplied along the road from Bayeux, a distance of 375 km. The American Army had the famous "Red Ball Express" that brought daily 7,000 tons of supplies for Bradley's Army.<sup>2</sup>

It is still a point of contention why the British and Canadian troops after the fall of Antwerp hesitated so long to push northward. Not until 2 October, nearly a month after the capture of Antwerp, did they begin the clearance operations. A very important factor, beside the logistic problems, was the tenacious resistance given by the 15th Army. Their new commander, General G. von Zangen, realised that the largest part of his army was threatened to be trapped between the Scheldt and North Sea on the one side and the liberated part of the Netherlands on the other. Beside the strategically important object of keeping the mouth of the Scheldt closed off as long as possible and therefore preventing the use of the harbour by the Allies, there was now the need to save as many units as possible from the danger of the threatening encirclement. Only via the Breskens-Vlissingen and Terneuzen-



*The short distance across the Westerscheldt is clearly illustrated in this photo taken from Breskens looking across to Vlissingen.*

*(Photo by Donald I. Grant, NAC PA 142253)*

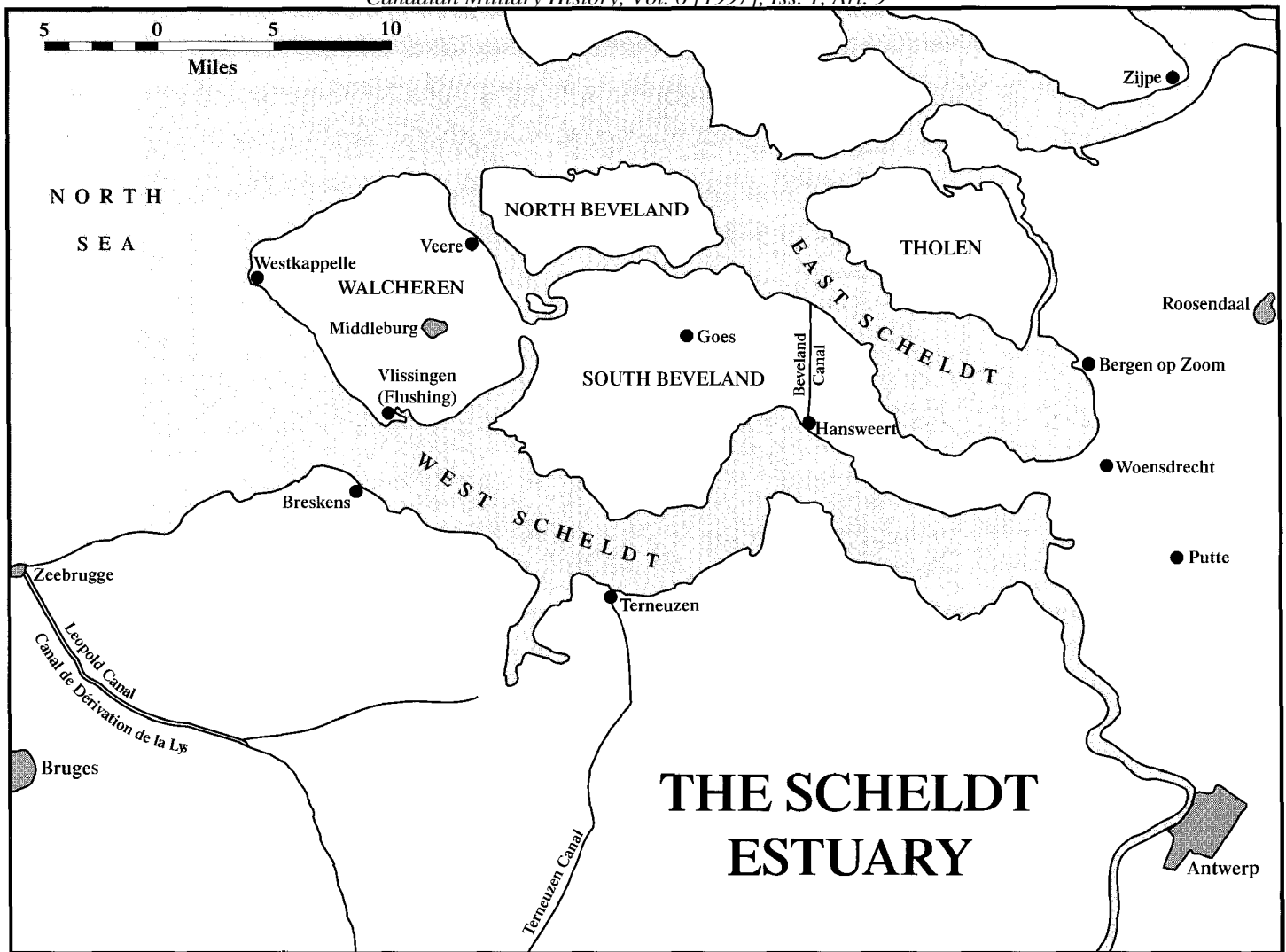
Hansweert crossings of the Scheldt, and from there across Walcheren and South Beveland, could they reach North Brabant. This made defence of the strip of land just north of Antwerp near Woensdrecht vitally important. This was the only route to the mainland for German troops who had been evacuated across the Westerscheldt.<sup>3</sup> Von Zangen requested the help of the German Navy in the Netherlands to ferry his troops across the Westerscheldt. It is at this point that Rohrer's account starts.

### **Sonderstab Knuth**

It was on 4 September 1944 that the Commander-in-Chief of the German Navy, Vice-Admiral G. Kleikamp, warned the staff of Army Group B that Antwerp could only be held for another five days.<sup>4</sup> But on the same day as this warning British troops took the city. It was not clear to the German High Command where the 15th Army was; it was presumably pushed up against the coast between Nieuwpoort and Breskens. On 6 September the Commander-in-Chief West, Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt,

warned Admiral Kleikamp, to take care of the ferrying of the 15th Army across the Scheldt. The 1st *Sicherungsdivision* of the *Kriegsmarine*, with headquarters in Utrecht, received the order to execute this task with the greatest haste. There were no plans ready for an evacuation of about 120,000 men with all their equipment, vehicles and artillery. The day before, the order had been given to destroy all harbours, harbour installations, locks and canals. This order was rescinded and the commander of the 1st *Sicherungsdivision*, *Kapitän zur See* Knuth, was charged with the evacuation operation.

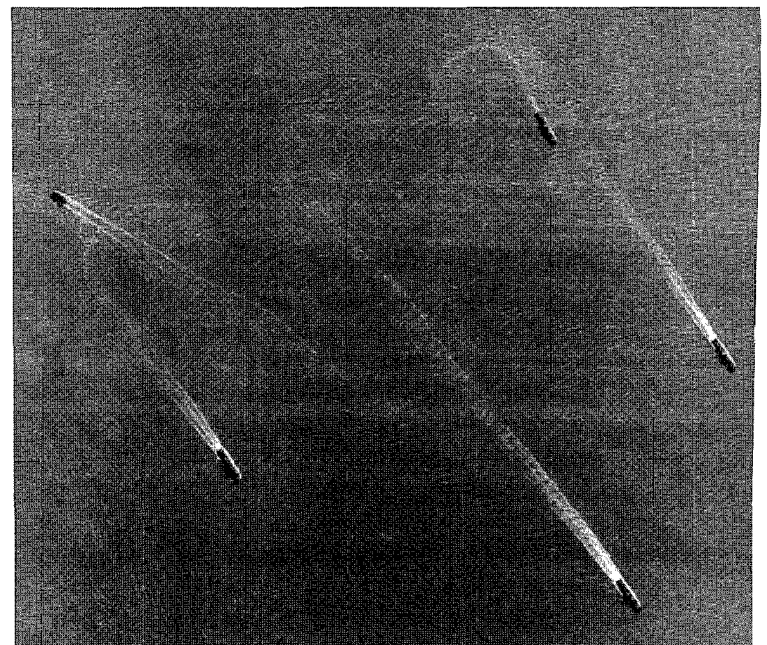
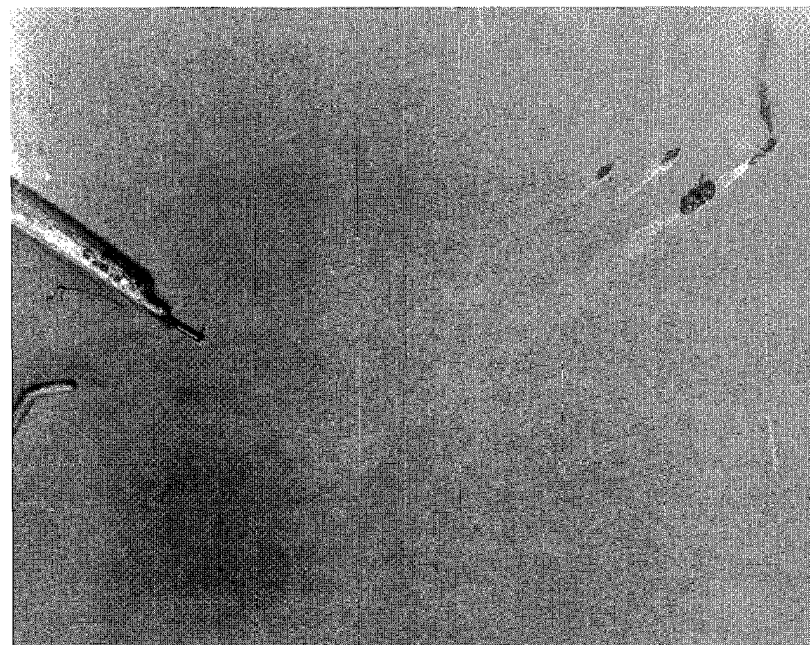
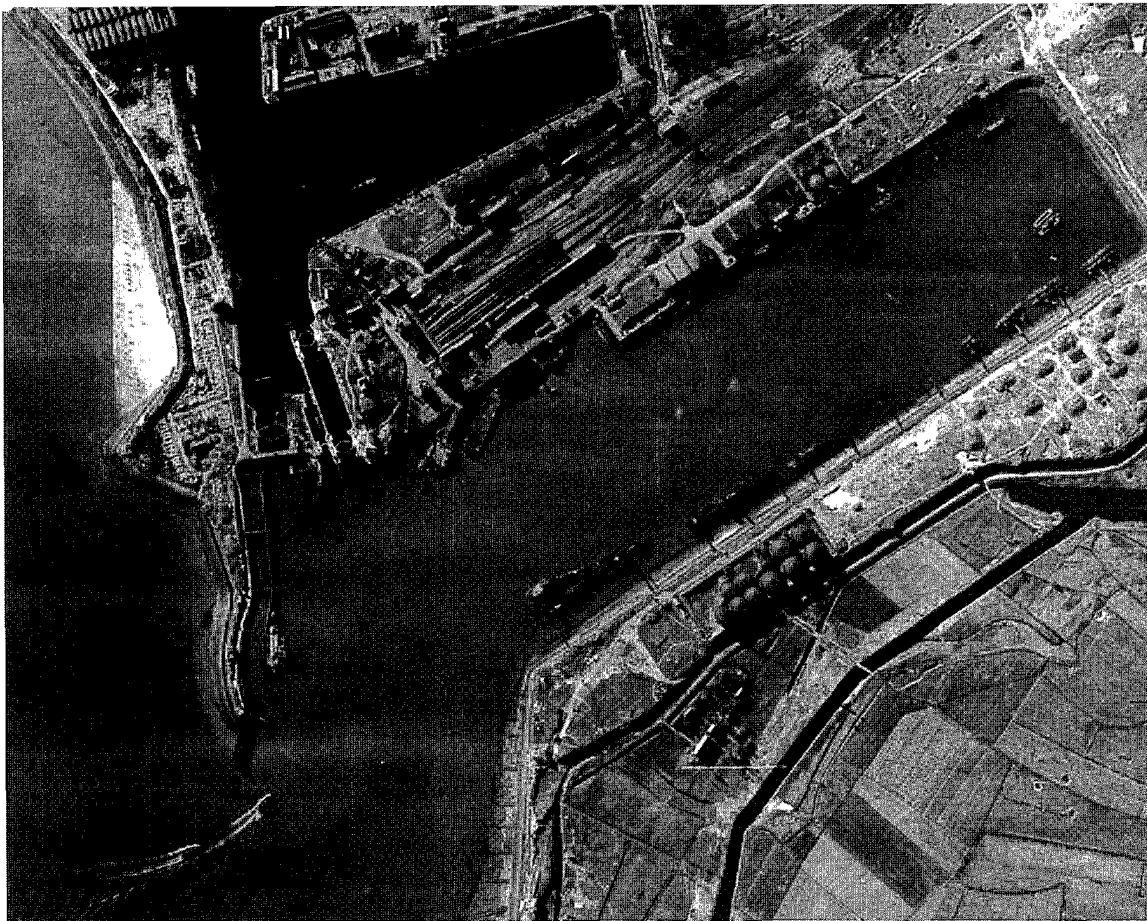
Knuth had only been the commander for a few months. Right away the order was given to direct all surface ships via Dordrecht to the Scheldt. Part of the River Flotilla (*Kapitän zur See* H. Engel) was already on the Scheldt.<sup>5</sup> Engel requisitioned rescue material on a large scale. Knuth formed the "Sonderstab Knuth," consisting of himself, *Kapitänleutnant der Reserve* R.W. Peters and *Oberleutnant zur See der Reserve* G. Kramps. He was ready to move to the theatre of operations on 6 September at 2300 hours. Together with his chauffeur he made



the 250 kilometre long drive to Middelburg during the night. It was a difficult trip through dark streets, with many detours because of blown up bridges and danger from the air. They reached Middelburg 0500 hours the next morning. The local commander supplied them with an escort and they went ahead to the headquarters of General von Zanger in the village bunker. The commander of the 15th Army Corps had arrived there the night before. The 15th Army itself was situated between Zeebrugge, Terneuzen and Breskens. The troops would be gradually withdrawn with Breskens as the last bridgehead. This bridgehead had to be held as long as possible in order to deny the Allies access to the Scheldt. Von Zanger insisted in principle on bringing across as many men as possible. Knuth and his staff went to Vlissingen where the 32nd Minesweeper Flotilla (consisting of transformed fishing boats) and the Outpost Boatgroup "Windhuk" were to be stationed. In

Vlissingen they formed the staff responsible for the evacuation. The staff was soon joined by the ships from "Windhuk," the *Vp 2004*, *Vp 2007* and *Vp 2011*, and two *Artillerietrager* of the 1st *Artillerietrager* Flotilla.<sup>6</sup> Shortly, Knuth and his staff were joined by the commanding officer of the 32nd Flotilla, *Korvettenkapitän* Jacobi, the commander of the Sea Defence Southern Netherlands, *Kapitän zur See* F. Aschmann, and the Vlissingen harbour commander, *Korvettenkapitän der Reserve* R. Wurdeman.

It was evident that in the preceding days, more or less chaotic, some scattered units and their arms were brought across the Scheldt. This had taken place using the ferries *Queen Wilhelmina* and *Queen Emma*, requisitioned Dutch fishing boats and the *Kriegfischkutters* (KFKs) of the 32nd Flotilla. Troops were ferried across at two locations, Breskens-Vlissingen and Terneuzen-Hansweert. It was estimated that, up



**Allied photo-reconnaissance clearly revealed the extent of German movements during the month of September.**

**Top:** Two German vessels race into the harbour at Vlissingen after completing the crossing from Breskens on 11 September. Numerous other vessels are visible tied up in the main harbour. At this stage there is little bomb damage evident in the port. (WLU Air Photo Collection 164/3045)

**Above left:** A convoy of vessels clears the harbour at Breskens, just visible on the left, 11 September 1944. (WLU Air Photo Collection 159/3237)

**Above right:** The ships making the passage between Breskens and Vlissingen made ideal targets for air attack due to the clear weather and their highly visible wakes. (WLU Air Photo Collection 159/4239)

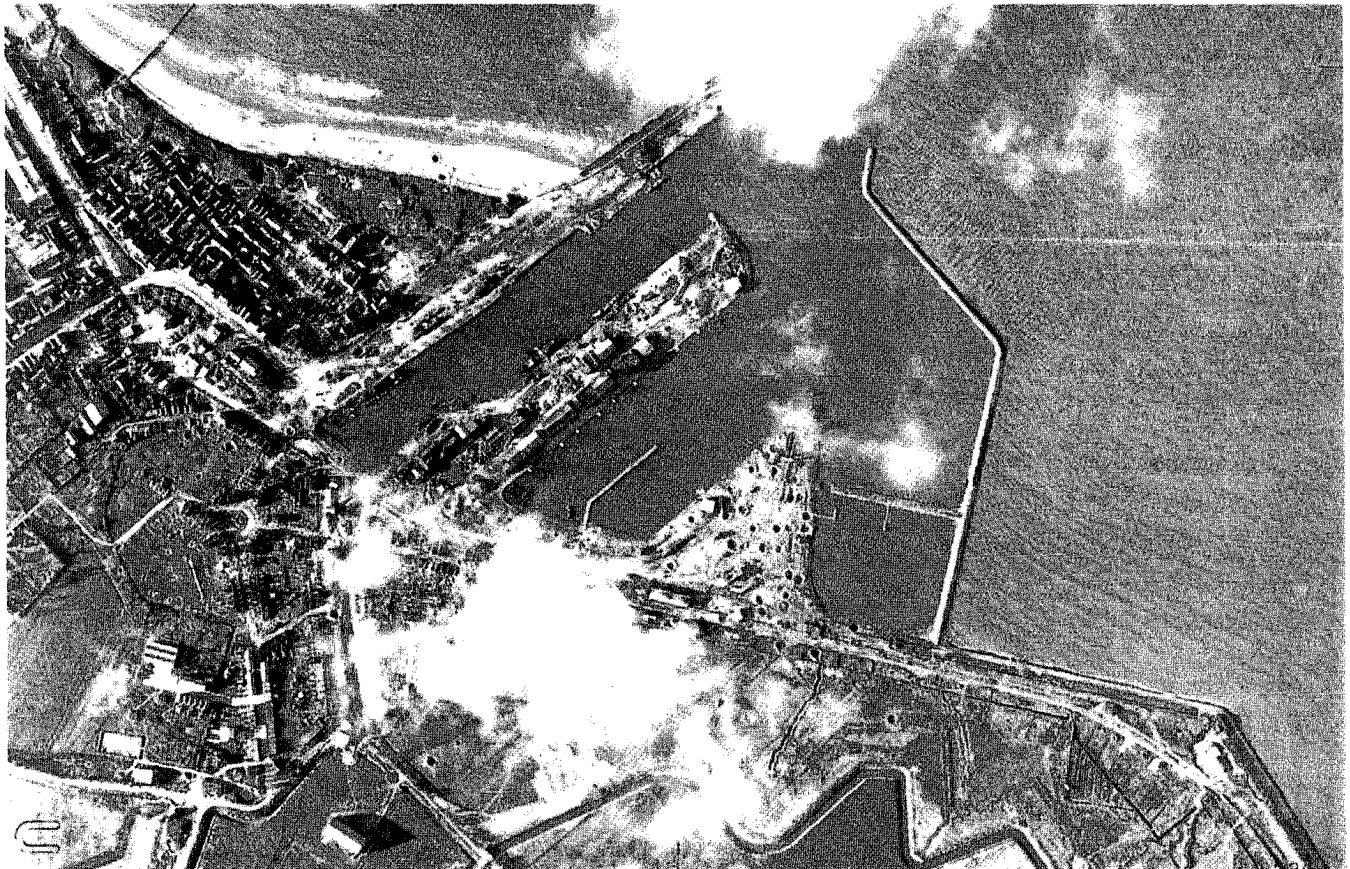


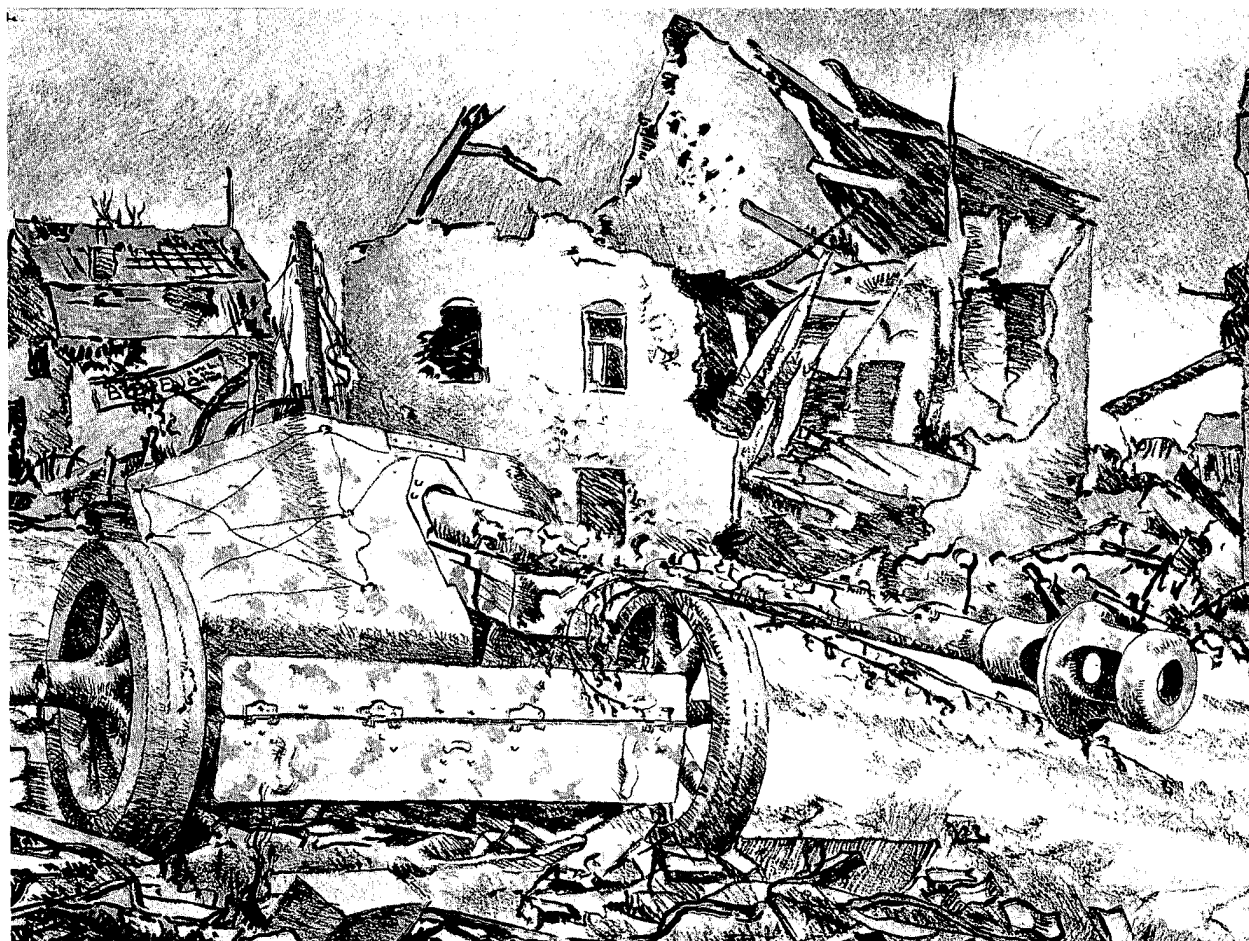
**Above:** The outer harbour of Ternuezen filled with shipping on 13 September.

(WLU Air Photo Collection 174/4001)

**Below:** Towards the end of the evacuation, heavy bomb damage is visible in Breskens. In spite of this, Allied air power did little to hinder the German retreat.

(WLU Air Photo Collection 192/4002)





"Scheldt Crossing" by D.A. Colville

(Canadian War Museum CN 12205)

to 7 September, 25,000 men were ferried across. This left 100,000 men still on the south side of the Scheldt. The operation began with 60 ships but this was quickly increased to 75. As well, the original Dutch crews were replaced with German personnel. There was doubt about the full cooperation of the Dutch, and the fact that the vessels would be in service around the clock.<sup>7</sup>

Because the situation at the embarkation points threatened to get out of hand, Knuth asked Kleikamp to take the necessary steps to ferry the constant stream of soldiers as effectively as possible and transport them to the east. Assembly points, road commanders and interception units had to be installed. Two officers of the 32nd Flotilla's staff were used to regulate the boarding, *Oberleutnant zur See der Reserve* Lessing in Breskens and an adjutant-boatsman at Terneuzen. At the opposite shore

these functions were performed by the Vlissingen harbour commander and officers of the 32nd Flotilla, and at Hansweert by *Korvettenkapitän* Stein.

As order was brought to the operation, the 15th Army started to select essential material for the crossing. Also, the motor vehicles were repacked so as to make the most efficient use of space. A defensive line was created between Breskens and Terneuzen (Nieuwvliet, Oostburg, Ijzendijke, Boekhoute, Assenede, Sas van Gent, Axel). Assembly points and dressing stations were arranged. The transportation of the wounded, first on ordinary ships, was continued on hospital ships.

*Sonderstab* Knuth took as their headquarters the commando-bunker of the Vlissingen Navy Commander. In the meantime,



the communication material arrived from Utrecht under the command of *Kapitänleutnant* N. Godehart. In addition to providing communications between the ships and the staff on shore and higher echelons, this unit of the 1st *Sicherungsdivision* also took care of the battle information (B. Dienst). To lessen the risk of air attacks, the communication vehicles were set up in Veere.<sup>8</sup>

The work of the staff charged with the crossing entailed, however, much more. It was essential to bring the units across with all their vehicles, so that these units could be on the road to the east to escape the threatened closure of South Beveland. Much heavy material, namely heavy trucks and artillery, were moved by ship directly to their temporary end position. Preparations had to be made for the installation of mines and obstructions near Doel. Besides this, they had to regularly sweep for mines at the crossing locations. To the south of the Scheldt they formed a special group from the 344th Infantry Division to make order and keep it. Unofficial crossings were stopped.

## The Day-by-Day Story

### 7 and 8 September

The bad weather made the crossing much tougher and the organisation of the *Sonderstab* was not yet felt.

### 9 September

The need for the larger ferries was quite clear. Besides vehicles and other material, these ships could take 300 to 400 men across per trip from Breskens to Vlissingen. Units of the 36th Minesweeper Flotilla also took part in the evacuation. Anti-aircraft defences had to be improved. The ferries were equipped with 2 cm anti-aircraft guns (the *Queen Wilhelmina* with four guns and the *Queen Emma* with two). The *Artillerietrager*s travelling with the ferries were responsible for their air defences. In principle they sailed day and night when there was no danger from the air. It was here that the B Dienst in Veere played a very important role. This day they took across heavy motorized artillery (17 cm). This took place on the route Terneuzen-

Hansweert. There were eight to ten KFKs and six motorboats of the Rhine flotilla active here, also a *Siebel-fahre* (a type of landing ship vehicle transport) and five or six navy lighters (*Marine-Fahrprahme*). This route was much longer than the Breskens-Vlissingen route, so there were only two crossing a night possible (and often only one). The inner harbour of Terneuzen proved to be an ideal place for the loading of heavy railway artillery (21 cm). The fact that this material, once loaded, could be shipped directly through the South Beveland canal northwards, made this loading point very valuable. The improvement of order among the troops around Terneuzen was charged to the 17th Luftwaffe Field Division.

### 10 September

The weather improved and 5,000 soldiers were taken across. The outpost boats could transport 300 soldiers or 15 cars a ship, while the anti-aircraft guns could be fully used. New reinforcements arrived in Vlissingen – namely eight KFKs of the 36th Minesweeper Flotilla.

### 11 September

More soldiers than the day before could be ferried across. Two *Raumboote* (fast shallow-water minesweepers), the *R-83* and *R-85*, took part in the operation from this day. The first heavy air attacks took place on Breskens. The air defences were constantly strengthened, supplied from the material of the 15th Army. The air attacks caused 120 dead and wounded, beside a heavy loss of materials. The place of embarkation, Breskens, was out of commission for ten hours. But thanks to building materials from the destroyed houses in the area, the boardings were not delayed any longer.

### 12 September

At 0400 hours the crossing was again in full swing. More and more dug-outs for the men were built. In Breskens they took care that the 800-metre-long street leading to the boarding place was not packed full with vehicles when there were no ships to take them aboard. Slowly the front line around Breskens and Terneuzen was shortening. The largest number of ships – 75 – was now available for the evacuation. The 2nd *Artillerietrager* Flotilla (*Kapitänleutnant* von

Haxhausen) joined the ships on the Scheldt. They were placed as floating batteries. It was also the first time that 10,000 men with their equipment were ferried across in a single day.

On this day it was Terneuzen's turn to be bombarded. Because the telephone connection was put out of commission, *Kapitänleutnant der Reserve* W. Peters received the order to go and check. With the *R-83* they left the harbour of Vlissingen and found that Terneuzen was afire. The loading dock in the outer harbour was destroyed and three lighters sunk. The much more valuable inner harbour was still intact. Personal losses were small, but it took 24 hours before everything was functional again. The units left on the south side of the Scheldt started to worry whether they would be able to reach the other side and leave South Beveland. The possible loss of Woensdrecht was the cause of this fear. The ferry *Queen Emma* received a direct hit on the rear deck. The number of air attacks on the retiring troops was increasing constantly.

#### 14 September

The B-Dienst at Veere was successful in the interception of messages regarding impending air attacks. The early warnings allowed ships to leave the harbours. This day more than 10,000 men were ferried across. A new route came into use, Ellewoutsdijk-Hansweert. It was along this route that most of the infantry was brought across.

#### 15 September

While the crossing was in full swing a heavy air attack took place on Vlissingen. However, due to the earlier precautions, the attack had minimal effect. The number of casualties among the troops was small.

#### 16 September

The dead of the previous day's attack, among them the Navy Officer who coordinated the technical supplies, *Leutnant* Ubben, were buried without the interference of air attack. More than 10,000 men were brought across Terneuzen and this again got the attention of the Allied air forces, but the ferrying carried on.

#### 17 September

This day the dykes of the isle of Walcheren were bombed to let in the sea water. Terneuzen came under fire by Allied artillery. Preparations were made for the laying of a mine barricade near Doel.

#### 18 September

Only the 64th Infantry Division was still on the south side of the Scheldt. This Division would stay behind to hold Breskens as long as possible. It was not until October that these units were ferried to Walcheren, but by then the Island was encircled. At Terneuzen only one demolition group stayed behind, all other men were ferried to Hansweert.

The hospital ships with clear Red Cross markings did their work without much ado. Doctors did their best to save the wounded from the fate of prisoners of war. They were transported along the Dutch inland waterways to Wesel and Emden. There were two hospital ships attacked by fighter-bombers, one was sunk between Veere and Dordrecht and the other was set afire and grounded near Zijpe.

#### 19 September

*R-83* and *R-85* sailed under the protection of darkness to Terneuzen to pick up the demolition group. Early in the morning they were taken aboard under enemy fire and sailed back to Vlissingen. Troops continued to be ferried across from Breskens to Vlissingen. These combat troops displayed good discipline.

The completion of the mine barricade at Doel suffered delay because the rubber closure rings of the mines had to be replaced, for there was leakage. It took two days for this to occur, after which the mines were set.

#### 20 September

The crossing of the 15th Army was completed and reported to Vice-Admiral Kleikamp. He gave the order for *Sonderstab* Knuth to return to Utrecht.

## 21 September

Knuth and his people began the return trip. They made a short stop at the staff of the 15th Army in Dordrecht and the 1st *Artillerietrager* Flotilla after which they reached Utrecht at 2315 hours. A small welcome party was held and the *Sonderstab* was eliminated without any fanfare. In retrospect, Knuth could look back on a very successful operation. Thanks to his activity, 100,000 men, 6,000 vehicles, 6,000 horse-drawn wagons and 750 artillery pieces (from 2 cm cannon to 21 cm railway guns) were ferried across to fight again. In total, nine divisions were brought across – the 59th, 70th, 245th, 331st, 344th, 346th, 711th and 712nd Infantry Divisions and the 17th Luftwaffe Field Division.

## 24 September

The officers who took part in the operation were decorated. In recognition for his efforts, Knuth received the *Ritterkreuz des Eisernen Kreuzes*.

## Concluding Remarks

On the same day that *Sonderstab* Knuth completed its task, 21 September, the Royal Navy, formed Force "T" at Brugge to ferry Allied troops across the Westerscheldt. The long awaited closure of South Beveland finally took place with the breakthrough of the Canadian troops at Woensdrecht on 4 October. This closed off the only land escape route. There still followed a bitter battle for the Breskens pocket and the isles of Walcheren and South Beveland before the channel to Antwerp could be opened for shipping. The 15th Army stayed in the Netherlands for a few more months and was then set in for the defence of the Rhine. In December they took positions around Koblenz. This could have been avoided if the Allies had pushed on to Woensdrecht right away and cut off the escape route of the Germans.

## Notes

This article was originally published in *Mars et Historia*, 29th year, number 2, April/June 1995. It was translated from Dutch by William Jeronimus.

1. A complete text of Franz Rohrer's study, titled "Hilfskriegsschiffe und Kleinbootsverbände der Kriegsmarine im Kampf um die Ruckführung einer Armee. Eine nach Augenzeugenberichten zusammenfassende Schilderung über die Ruckführungsoperation der Deutschen 15 Armee über die Schelde im September 1944," (Hamburg, April 1970) is deposited in the library of the Institute for Maritime History at The Hague.
2. Chester Wilmot, *The Struggle for Europe* (London, 1952).
3. R.W. Thompson, *The Eighty-Five Days: The Story of the Battle of the Scheldt* (London, 1957); S.W. Roskill, *The War at Sea, 1939-1945, Volume 3 - The Offensive, Part II* (London, 1961), pp.142-154.
4. J. den Hollander en H. Sakkers, *Walcheren een fotografsch document. Duitse oorlogsfotografie 1940-1944* (Middleburg, 1991), pp.176-177.
5. For an impression of what ships were used, see Hollander en Sakkers, pp.225, 227-232.
6. *Artillerietrager* were auxiliary anti-aircraft ships loaded with a maximum number of cannons.
7. Composition of ships on 7 September 1944:
  - Ferries *Queen Wilhelmina* and *Queen Emma*
  - 6 small ships of the harbour-security flotilla Vlissingen (supplied with light artillery)
  - 5 ships of the Rhine flotilla
  - 5 ships of the River minesweeper flotilla, all supplied with light anti-aircraft guns
  - 3 small harbour ferries
  - 35 ships of the 32nd Minesweeper Flotilla.
8. For additional information on the communications and intelligence services of the German Navy (B-Dienst), see H. Bonatz, *Die Deutsche Marin-Funkaufklärung, 1914-1945* (1970), pp.99-106.

S.J. de Groot was born in Amsterdam and did his National Service in the Field Artillery, 1956-58. He is the senior scientist at the Netherlands Institute for Fisheries Research, Ijmuiden and has written many articles dealing with his profession as well as naval and military history.

### **"Stick to the Guns!"**

A Short History of the 10th Field Battery, Royal Regiment of Canadian Artillery, St. Catherines, Ontario. Softcover, 150 pages, 13 illustrations, 19 maps. Author Colin K. Duquemin, 56 Highland Avenue, St. Catherines, ON, L2R 4J1. \$17.45 total cost.

# **“Failure is Not Acceptable” The Recollections of a Canadian in the French Foreign Legion**

**William Mitchell**

I remember that day very well, a cold Tuesday in January 1989, and Pearson International Airport was bustling with travellers. I was amongst them, an inconspicuous 18-year-old middle-class Canadian boarding the plane as if it was a frequent occurrence. A seven-day vacation in France, that was the plan. I often wonder if I had known then what I do now – would I have boarded that plane? The trip lasted five years and it was no vacation, for within 24 hours of boarding the plane, I had become a member of the infamous French Foreign Legion. Life would never be the same again.

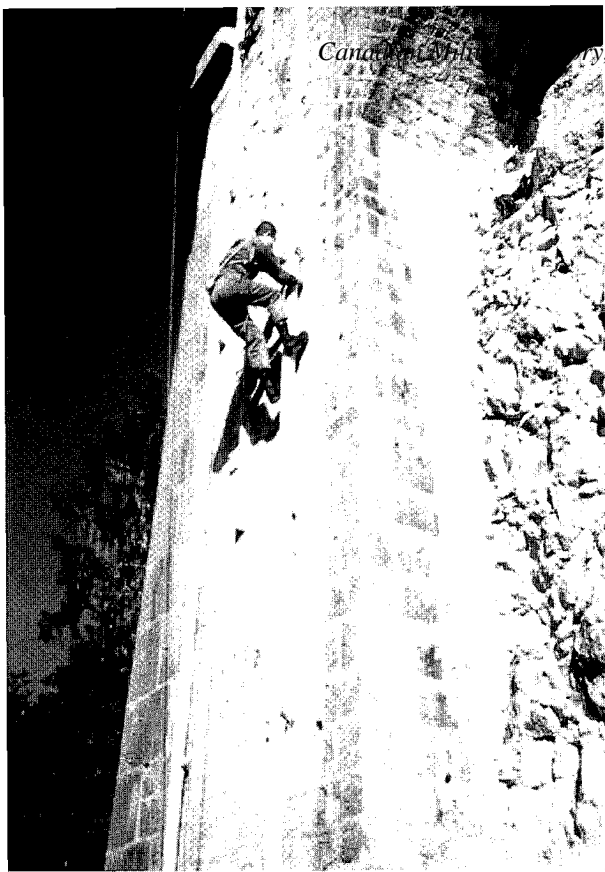
Somewhere in Paris, speaking only a few words in French, I decided to check into the address that I had so innocently found in a library book at high school – a recruiting centre for the French Foreign Legion. I had not believed it existed outside of movies such as *March or Die* or *Laurel and Hardy*. However, the old fort was quite real, the soldier in a 'white hat' who slid the peek-slit open was real, and the slamming of the huge wooden door behind me was certainly real. In a few hours, my belongings were confiscated, my passport was taken away and I was given a regimental track suit and some washing kit. I was not the only one there, people from all over the world, including places as far away as New Zealand, were being interviewed. There were some tests conducted here over the next few days, but the real testing would begin down in Aubagne – a town just outside Marseilles in southern France – where I would spend a month with hundreds of other possible recruits. I would not start basic training until April when those who were accepted were shipped to Castelnaudary (south central France between the Black mountains and the Pyrenees) – a place I

would hate for a very long time. My upbringing would have to be thrown out, my Canadian middle-class perspectives quashed, and my ethics stowed for the duration. It would take a long time before I could say Castelnaudary without shuddering.

We were divided up into sections roughly the same size as a Canadian platoon. In my section there were 47 candidates. Over the next four months we would be trained in all aspects of military life in the Legion. It was not what we learned that was particularly difficult, rather it was how we learned it that broke many. The discipline in the Legion can be described at best as being ferocious. Examples are numerous, you are starved – yet not to death. Hunger is used to teach night topography – as you will only eat when you can read and find map coordinates. At the 'farm' – a small isolated farmhouse somewhere in the Black or Pyrenees mountains – the eating room for our meals had only one entrance – via a ten-foot rope.

Fatigue – the Legion taught me the sanctity of sleep. It became a precious commodity, which at Castelnaudary came second to building seven-foot rock pyramids at three in the morning, singing, and the occasional special event like an unexpected full-dress funeral for a cigarette butt at dawn. These events were outside of the regular day schedule which began at 0400 hours and ended – on paper – at 2200 hours. Two weeks into instruction, we had our first deserter.

Violence was continuous – almost a fight every day – tension was ever-present and personal vendettas were always a diversion from the day's activities. Respect was the commodity



*The author undergoing training at Castelnaudary. At left he climbs the "eavesdrop" in an exercise designed to simulate the infiltration of a building or fort. At right he takes leaps from the "paratower" during his jump training.*

most sought after by everybody. To be respected by other candidates, and the Corporals in charge of us, made life so much easier. Two months into instruction the physical strain took effect. Some were released for physical damage, others for mental damage. To watch a man slowly change and finally break was something of which I took special note. Suicides are common at Castelnaudary and if you fail you get 30 days in jail. Graduation could not come too soon and for many of us, the training would continue at the Regiment.

## **Snapshots of Operations**

### **French Guyana - 1989**

The patrols in the equatorial forest would last ten to 20 days; patrolling was an extremely laborious job. In a good day, between 0600 hours and 1800 hours, we would be able to cover 6-7 kilometres but normally we would manage only 3-4 kilometres because of river crossings or map inaccuracies. Topography in the equatorial forest was also a slow and tedious job if there were to be any accuracy at all. Drug runners from

Surinam were our responsibility. They were running cocaine into French Guyana to pay for Ronny Brunswick's anti-Communist war. By the time the cocaine arrived on the European market, it would be cut again and again, and the price would jump making it very profitable for every kilo that made it through. The average drug runner was not the *Miami Vice* stereotype but rather a poor farmer without shoes carrying a home-made shotgun. It would be easiest if we caught them loading a *pirogue* - a large hollowed tree trunk - because they would not stand their ground. However, stumbling onto them in the jungle could prove to be quite dangerous.

Another job in Guyana, which was seen as a chance to relax, was guarding the European Space Centre. This included the radar, communications, and launching equipment. It became bothersome, however, when constant delays forced us to stay out in the bush more than necessary. There was a launch approximately every four months, as the rocket itself was shipped in sections from France and assembled on site. Security was especially tight when the rocket was moved from the building site to the actual launch pad by rail, and as it



*The author presents his section.*

sat exposed there for the launch. It was a very tense hour or two for many people.

As it turned out, getting used to the equatorial forest itself was very stressful. There were many sorts of animals which could be dangerous, including neuro-toxic frogs and poisonous snakes. However, the most difficult aspect of the equatorial forest was the insects. I was sure that the whole country of Guyana was built on an ant hill. If you sat down on the ground for any extended period of time (30 seconds) you would most likely be bitten by a variety of ants. If you stayed out after sunset, you risked losing your nose or ear to a parasite-carrying mosquito. A few days on the somewhat tropical Devils' Island helped us to relax before heading out into the jungle once again.

### **The Gulf War – 1990-1991**

I remember being on leave somewhere in Paris when I received the order to return. Despite having to cut short my leave, I was still quite excited about going, and quickly bought some last minute things at Orly airport before returning to the south of France. I had no idea

then that I would spend almost five months in the desert before any action started and when it did, in the space of three days, I would come to within a three-hour drive of Baghdad before they called the cease-fire. The rush I had been in to return to southern France would turn into long days of waiting under the Saudi sun.

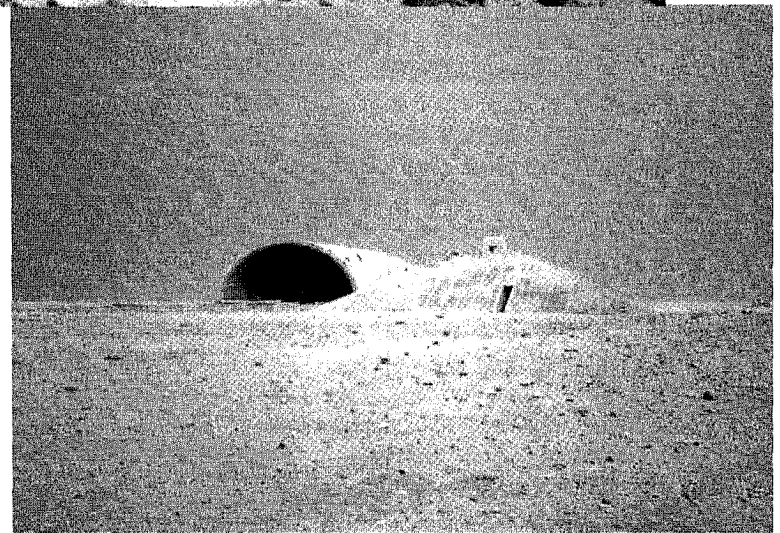
The long lead up to the actual invasion was the toughest. There were continuous rumours about what was going to happen when the war actually began. We passed the time in Saudi Arabia preparing equipment and replacing older stocks of gear and ammunition. There were also several exercises which were used to determine which tactics were best suited for the terrain. Differing from the other forces in Saudi Arabia, we did not go into town or live within walking distance of any civilization. The Legion spent six months at various campsites throughout the Saudi Desert.

When the war started with prep bombing and shelling, things were very tense amongst the allies. We did not trust the Egyptians or the Syrians in our zone. (It would not take long for us not to trust the Americans either as they seemed to be just a little too eager to shoot.



**Above:** Three hours from Bagdad.  
**Right:** Al-Salamin airport

Speaking French at night check-points in the 82nd Airborne zone was a big risk – apparently they found French and Arabic quite similar.) Everyone seemed anxious to fire their artillery, rockets, and missiles at the Iraqis. One night on the Saudi-Iraqi border, about 13 kilometres from an Iraqi outpost, we had just gone to sleep in a reconnaissance bivouac, with nobody between the Iraqis and us except our forward observation post (FOP) fifty metres in front. At about 0300 hours, a convoy of French trucks and artillery encountered our FOP and exchanged the right codes and continued to pass between our FOP and our bivouac. The legionnaire at the FOP had no idea what they were doing but correctly followed the set procedure and let them pass. At around 0330 hours, I awoke from my sleep in a panic as the ground shook and my ears rang – I ran for my hole outside my tent thinking we were being shelled. To my surprise, just 20 metres from my tent was a battery of French 105 mm guns blasting away at the Iraqi outpost. After a heated yelling match with the artillery officer, they very quickly packed up and disappeared. We also had to leave quickly because of the danger of a



counter-battery attack on the cannon flashes which could easily be seen from the Iraqi ridge. I was not very happy the next morning and briefly considered accidentally giving the wrong ID codes to the FOPs for the next few nights.

War came and we raced into Iraq. I was on the front of the Al-Salamin airport assault, and because of the extremely open terrain, was able to see the huge divisional attack develop as we waited for the final assault orders. Flights of Gazelle helicopters hit bunkers with missiles and rockets, two American A-10s tore up the heavier

armament, and the French artillery (105 mm cannons and 120 mm mortars) finished off. The AMX-10 tanks then rushed the barrier firing at specific targets. We could trace the shooting accuracy by the shell tracer and would cheer as it found its mark. Then it was our turn. We closed to within 50 metres of the first bunkers and slit trenches, then rushed them under the cover of .50 calibre machine gun fire and a hail of 7.62 and 5.56 mm bullets. That day was unforgettable. The depths of the sky were black from the Kuwaiti oil rigs set ablaze hundreds of kilometres away to the east. It was like a storm that continuously threatened, but never arrived.

### **The Republic of Central Africa**

There had been riots every day that week, and there was tension throughout the city. Every day we would try and push a convoy through to the airport three kilometres away and every time we would be forced to turn back. Across the street from the Bungui base was a football pitch which was being used for a landing and unloading zone for Puma helicopters running supplies from the airport. There was one day in particular which I will remember for a very long time, when a Puma had landed to unload supplies. A mass of people, mostly young adults, had surrounded the helicopter and began pummelling the helicopter with rocks and bricks. The situation was deteriorating quickly when one of our intervention squads was called in. Since manpower was simply unavailable, the squad had six muzzled and leashed German Shepherds which were very effective in crowd control. Usually, just the arrival of the dogs was enough to break-up a crowd, but this day was different. Despite the dogs being unmuzzled, the crowd continued to press on the helicopter in the field. This was probably due to the youth of many in the crowd. Normally Legion security forces were far more respected by the local population due to the fact that disputes between civilians and their government in this country were not interfered with. To that day, the Legion had refused to support government troops in their oppressive tactics – which included the offensive use of grenades and bullets – and was more content to explain to local leaders that if they did not interfere with the operations of the Legion, this would continue. However, the situation was nearing critical and possible

shooting would soon ensue to assure the safety of the pilots and the helicopter. In a last attempt to avoid opening fire, the dogs were let go. Immediately the crowd broke up in a tremendous confusion, and the netless frames of the soccer goals became covered with dangling bodies trying to avoid the huge dogs.

A perimeter was eventually established and the helicopter was unloaded, taking off immediately for the airport. As a Legionnaire, the politics have long been put aside, and as far as I was concerned the minor injuries inflicted by the dogs were preferable to spending another four months with a population upon which we had opened fire. The injured were collected and treated by the same supplies which were shipped in, the local leaders were convinced of the gravity of the situation and further clashes were avoided. However in the weeks following, government troops clashed with the oppressed population many times, killing 37 people and injuring many more.

### **Kinshasa, Zaire**

It was not clear which military unit was supporting which politician. What was clear was that the French-trained Zairois paras had not been paid in over a year, and they had decided to collect. In a confusing chain of events, the Foreign Legion found itself in charge of Kinshasa and the international airport, which was a dangerous 27 kilometres outside of the city. In another surprising turn of events, I found myself assigned to protect two civilians carrying a briefcase to the airport for the last plane out. It was no ordinary escort, there was just myself and one other Legionnaire riding in a tiny civilian Peugeot 4L. Literally armed to the teeth, we took with us hand grenades, rifle grenades, our 5.56 FAMASs, and a reserve 9 mm automatic. We then set out in the late evening for the four-lane parkway to the airport through a fire-lit city gone mad.

It was a highly tense but uneventful trip to the airport. At the airport, mass confusion reigned as civilians of all nationalities attempted to get out of the country. Brandishing our weapons we were given a wide berth all the way to the plane. ( I knew the airport very well because of a very confusing exchange of gunfire



with local troops two nights earlier.) I fought hard the urge to stop and talk to people wearing or carrying Canadian flags. I just wanted to return to the section HQ and the security of a complete military unit. We started out for the return trip to the city. The trip back was not uneventful. About 15 kilometres outside of the city, we saw what appeared to be a roadblock on our two lanes. At that second I made the decision to run it. There was absolutely no way that I would even let the civilian driver slow down. The night before a roadblock had resulted in the death of three civilians and a stolen Mercedes, so I warned the driver not to stop, and emphasized the point with my FAMAS. As we closed to about 500 metres, I prepared a AC-59 (Anti-Tank) rifle grenade on the end of my FAMAS. Ghram, the Legionnaire behind me, loaded a clip of tracer and rolled down the side window. The tension was extreme and I worried about the driver. I had no plan...maybe blow a hole through the roadblock...or just get killed quickly...we continued the approach. I soon made out a variety of Zarois uniforms around the truck which confirmed my decision not to stop. As we got closer, I pulled the safety pin off the nose of the rifle grenade and prepared to lean out of the car. At that moment however, I saw the situation more clearly and ordered the driver to slow down but not to stop. Apparently a tractor trailer had jack-knifed across the two lanes, but there was enough space to pass on the outside curb of the parkway. I told Ghram to take off his beret and keep the guns down – but ready. We approached at a slower speed...time slowed to a stand still...and then we were thankfully waved through by some lightly armed soldiers...I guess driving a Peugeot 4L rather than a Mercedes has its advantages. We passed the scene smoothly and breathed a sigh of relief.

There were some repercussions from the incident. The civilian voiced his distraught over my orders (and methods of emphasizing them) to my very concerned-looking commanding officer. However, once the civilian had calmed down and left, my CO broke into a laugh and slapped me hard on the shoulder.

In those September days of confusion, some 2000 people were killed or injured, Kinshasa was wrecked, and Seto Moboutu remained in power.

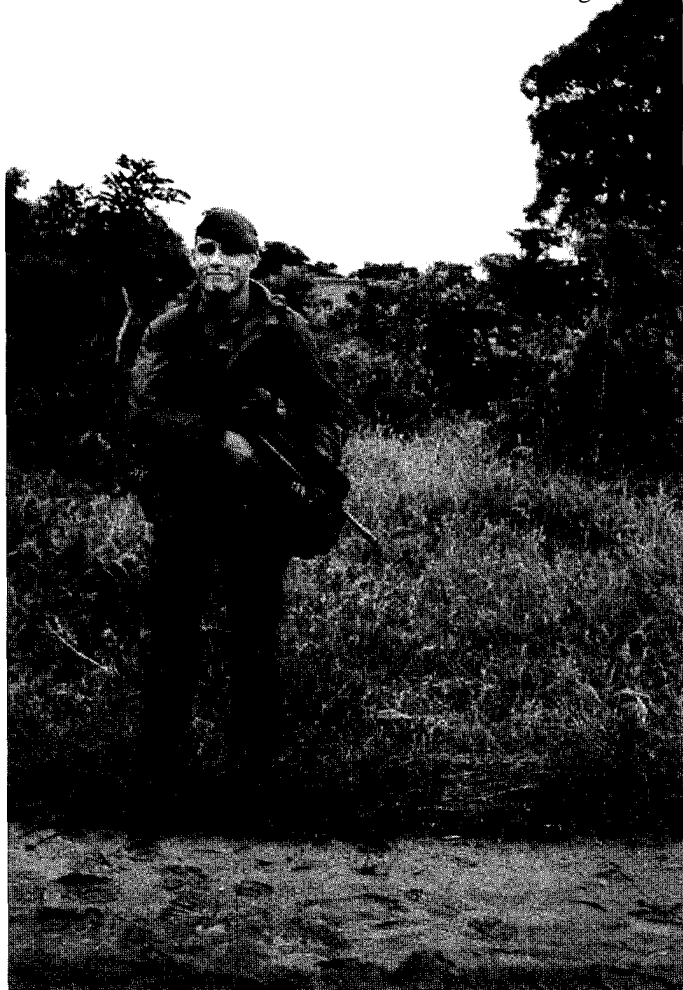
## Chad

It had been a long patrol, over two weeks long, and most of us were quite sick of being bounced around in the back of the lorries on the raised dirt roads. We were 30 kilometres out from N'Djemena and excited about the prospect of mattresses, hot showers, and real food. However, it was not to be so simple. During our trip, events in N'Djemena had come to a head, and the army had split. The Zagawa (a large Chadian ethnic group) had taken 40 Toyotas, some with fixed 14.5 mm heavy machine guns, and made a run for the Southeast.

Unfortunately, the command centre in the capital was unaware of our patrol's return and did not inform us of the split, so our lead VLR lorry ran into the tail end of the rebel column. The following events occurred, pieced together after the fact, as I did not see the initial contact. As the Legion VLR approached the Toyota pick-up, which was packed with eight soldiers, one of the panicking soldiers in the back decided to place the RPG launcher on top of the Toyota cab and let go a rocket at our lead VLR. The action caused complete carnage – not only did the rocket force our VLR into a crashing roll off the side of the road – sending people and equipment in all directions, but the backwash from the launcher ripped apart the shooter's comrades behind him in the pick-up. The action ended as quickly as it had begun, and for the next three hours many of us worked very hard to save lives. When the last injured were taken out, we had lost a full combat group – three dead, the rest injured, while the rebels had fared worse; five of their own men had been killed by their own inexperience and two others severely burnt. Only one RPG rocket had been fired – incompetently – resulting in a very high cost for everyone. Over the next week a chase developed, followed by negotiations, and a solution. This would settle things until the next dry season.

## Coming Home

My return to Aubagne after five years of service was extraordinarily emotional. They offered various scenarios for rank and good postings – making the choice more difficult – yet



*Scenes from Chad.*

I dreamed of returning home and being amongst friends and family. The memories of people, places, and situations so recently experienced were etched into my brain forever. There were many times when I regretted ever joining, but there were also times I wouldn't want to have missed. I chose to come home because of one main factor – at 23 years of age I believed I could chalk the five years up to experience and build upon it. If I stayed, I ran the risk of closing in on eight years of service, when the pension at 15 years becomes enticing, and I would consider staying in until I was over 30. The pension option compared to other pensions sounded good, but during my five-year contract I never met a Legionnaire who was able to leave the Legion cleanly (no permanent mental or physical damage) after 15 years. I walked out past the

security gates for the last time – as indistinguishable as when I first came in – hailed a taxi and within three days arrived home in Toronto where the whole thing began five years earlier.

Upon leaving the Foreign Legion in 1993, William Mitchell enrolled in Political Science at Memorial University in Newfoundland. He fills his spare time playing on the Provincial Rugby team and has won awards for his poetry. He has been accepted into the MA/PhD International Conflict Analysis program at the University of Kent at Canterbury in the United Kingdom commencing this fall.

Review Essay

# “Donkeys” or “Lions”? Re-examining Great War Stereotypes

Jonathan F. Vance

- Duff Crerar, *Padres in No Man's Land: Canadian Chaplains and the Great War* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995), \$39.95, 424 pages, ISBN 0-7735-1230-6.
- David French, *The Strategy of the Lloyd George Coalition, 1916-1918*. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1995), \$108.00, 332 pages, ISBN 0-19-820559-7.
- J.P. Harris, *Men, Ideas and Tanks: British Military Thought and Armoured Forces, 1903-39* (Manchester: Manchester University Press (distributed in Canada by UBC Press), 1995), \$34.95 paper, 342 pages, ISBN 0-7190-4814-1.
- Jeffrey A. Keshen, *Propaganda and Censorship During Canada's Great War* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1996), \$29.95 paper, 333 pages, ISBN 0-88864-279-2.
- Edward H. Wigney, *The C.E.F. Roll of Honour: Members and Former Members of the Canadian Expeditionary Force who Died as a Result of Service in the Great War, 1914-1919* (Privately published (available from Eugene G. Ursual, P.O. Box 8096, Ottawa, Ontario, K1G 3H6), 1996), \$135.00, 867 pages, ISBN 0-9698857-3-3.

When the Theatre Workshop's production of "Oh! What a Lovely War" opened in London in 1963, it came in the middle of a wave of revived interest in the First World War. As much about the 1960s as it was about 1914-1918, the production made another splash in 1969 when it was transformed into an equally arresting film by Richard Attenborough. In short order, the film became the most visual aspect of what Alex Danchev has nicely characterized as the "bunking" and debunking" of the First World War.<sup>1</sup>

"Oh! What a Lovely War" fleshed out the icons which, since the late 1950s, had adorned popularized histories of the war. Among the most memorable characters of the film were John Mills as Sir Douglas Haig, a plodding dullard with the imagination of a turnip, and Laurence Olivier as Sir John French, garrulous and a tad randy. At the other end of the spectrum were the "lions," to use the metaphor adopted by Alan Clark (from a probably apocryphal remark attributed to Falkenhayn) as the basis for his 1961 best-seller *The Donkeys*: the much-tried

and much-misused infantrymen who deserved better than to be driven to their deaths by moronic generals.

To these stereotypes we might add a few more, created by generations of poets, novelists, and historians since the 1920s. There is the yammering and jingoistic propagandist viciously lampooned by Siegfried Sassoon in poems like "The Effect," "Editorial Impressions," and "Fight to a Finish."<sup>2</sup> There is the chaplain, also a favourite target of Sassoon (the Bishop of Byegumb in his poem "Vicarious Christ" is another brutal caricature), who exhorted men into the furnace but was careful not to stray too close to the fire himself. And finally there were the politicians, the "old men of Europe," who, like Nero, fiddled as their world burned.

By the 1970s, these were the central figures in the conventional wisdom regarding the First World War. It was a war in which witless generals (the "donkeys") threw their troops against barbed wire and machine guns like lambs to the slaughter, for the simple reason that blinkered

tactical thinking and limited imagination prevented them from pursuing any other course. These “brass hats” fought the enemy in front of them, but also the enemy behind, the “frock coats” who spent their days bickering over how to prosecute the war. The victims of their almost criminal insanity (the “lions”) fought gamely but inevitably came to despise the generals and politicians for their callousness, and to discard their idealism, which seemed completely irrelevant amongst the supreme futility and pointlessness of the Western Front. Equally loathed by the troops were the bibulous churchmen who supposedly ministered to souls but whose energies were really directed towards ensuring that the soldiers were refrained from drinking, gambling, womanizing, and the other simple pleasures that were open to them. And on the home front, dishonest journalists and fat propagandists ensured that the “stay-at-homes” continued to believe that the war was a gallant affair of redcoats and happy warriors.

Sketched in such exaggerated terms, these characters approach the ridiculous. Nevertheless, they have had remarkable staying power. Fed by such classics as Paul Fussell’s *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), the conventional wisdom, with its requisite doses of pathos and tragedy, has provided ample fodder for popularizers, documentary producers, and countless undergraduate history and literature courses. Not until the late 1980s did it come under any serious challenge and even then the lions/donkeys theme, and all of the related stereotypes, stubbornly refused to be unseated. Fussell now draws strong criticism for a cavalier disregard of facts, but the caricatures he helped create retain their appeal.

Debunking the debunkers, to use Danchev’s terms, has become something of a growth industry, and Crerar, French, Harris, and Keshen all offer further attempts at revising decades-old caricatures. David French’s book amounts to a re-examination of the legendary disputes between generals and politicians, which he dismisses as postwar finger-pointing engaged in by men who were desperately trying to shift blame for tactical disasters onto someone else. Instead, he argues persuasively that the frock coats and brass hats were in fact united in the view that, for Britain, winning the peace was as

important as winning the war. In this reading, the Battle of Passchendaele becomes an entirely logical operation, in a strategic if not a tactical sense: in the context of the time, with the collapse of Russia, the possible collapse of France, the success of Germany’s submarine offensive, and the slowness of the American build up, there was no other option for British policy-makers than to launch a major offensive in Flanders.

French then asks us to reconsider wartime rhetoric about British war aims that stressed the need to stem the threat of German aggression and ensure the security of the British Empire. Derided by later observers as an attempt to divert attention from the fact that the war’s causes lay in tawdry economics, French insists that those aims were right and just and, despite the immense human and economic cost of the war to Britain, were largely realized. Britain, concludes French, emerged from the war with immeasurably greater international prestige, even if the British were unable to recognize it. As he puts it, “the willingness of British policy-makers to sacrifice almost three-quarters of a million men to defeat the Central Powers made a profound impression on the minds of its former enemies” (296), an impression that persisted until it was destroyed by the appeasers.

J.P. Harris, too, is rather kinder to British policy-makers than some recent historians. He declines to view the generals as being “blind to the opportunities afforded by such new technologies” as the tank (315), arguing instead that most army commanders were more than willing to consider the tank on its own merits when the idea was first presented to them. Even Haig, usually stereotyped as a general who refused to allow any new ideas to enter his mind after 1904, was “as positive as could reasonably have been expected given their limited combat power” (315). In short, Harris puts J.F.C. Fuller in his place, reminding us to treat warily anything Fuller said that was later proven correct by the experience of the Second World War. In the context of 1916, the tank was a poor solution to the tactical problems posed by the stalemate on the Western Front. The wonder is not that GHQ failed to express more faith in the weapon, but that they gave it any consideration at all. Just as the battle of the memoirs was a postwar attempt at scapegoating, so too was the idolatry of Fuller

and the tank in the interwar period: if only Haig had given the tank a chance, so much slaughter could have been avoided.

Duff Crerar takes on an equally well entrenched stereotype, the well meaning but widely despised (at least by the troops) padre, although this attempt at revisionism is less successful. It is largely an administrative history, focusing on the struggle to create an efficient and effective chaplain service that was free of favouritism and denominational jealousies. In this regard it is an excellent study, and an admirable record of John Almond's tireless efforts to bring order to the chaos into which the chaplain service had degenerated under the tender ministrations of Sam Hughes and his cronies. Crerar is less convincing when discussing the impact of chaplains on the soldiers. He dismisses the traditional view, that soldier had little respect for chaplains because few of them were willing to share their dangers and discomforts, but introduces little fresh evidence for any contrary view. He also has relatively little to say about the message conveyed by chaplains to their charges and does not venture into an examination of the religion of the trenches, a curious blend of salvationist fundamentalism and superstition. He does, however, present a convincing variation of an argument made by other historians: postwar disillusionment among ex-chaplains did not grow out of the horrors they had witnessed on the battlefields, but out of their frustration with a peacetime society that seemed to betray the ideals for which the fallen had died. Also worth mentioning is the book's excessive referencing. Fully 140 pages of notes for 231 pages of text is completely uncalled for, and should have been ruthlessly pruned by an editor.

In light of this prevailing revisionism, it is perhaps ironic that the portrait of Ernest J. Chambers, Canada's chief censor, in Keshen's book is in itself stereotypical. He is shown in the uniform of Gentleman Usher of the Black Rod, and appears every bit as true-to-type as if he had been rendered by Sassoon: pompous, self-important, humourless, and severe, this Chambers would have been a perfect subject for Sassoon's acerbic pen. And yet, as Keshen makes clear, Chambers was quite different than this one-dimensional caricature. He may well have been over-zealous, particularly when

suppressing the ethnic press, but he was also diligent (often making himself available at any hour of the night or day), selfless (he declined a salary for his work, insisting that the honorarium he received as Gentleman Usher was sufficient for his needs), and tactful (preferring to use personal diplomacy rather than edicts to achieve the desired goals). Whatever long-term consequences Chambers' work may have had for ethnic minorities and for the schism between veterans and stay-at-homes, in the short term he was successful in ensuring that Canadians remained committed to the ideals and goals of the cause. On another level, Keshen also has some interesting things to say about the publicity campaigns created for recruiting and fund-raising purposes. He provides valuable evidence for an argument which has long been inferred, that the ultimate failure of volunteerism in Canada was as much a failure of marketing and public relations as anything: if the recruitment campaigns had been managed as capably as the Victory Loan drives, conscription might not have been necessary.

With all of the old stereotypes coming under reconsideration, one is left to wonder if there are any foundations left upon which to build a new conventional wisdom. In a curious way, the soundest base is provided by the names which fill over 800 pages of Wigney's book. In what can only be described as a labour of love, he has sifted through the records of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and the Department of Militia and Defence, Canada's Book of Remembrance, and countless regimental histories and memorial volumes to compile a register of the 67,000 men and women who died in uniform from the beginning of the war to the final demobilization of the Canadian Expeditionary Force in 1921. The entries are necessarily brief, confining themselves to name (including aliases), rank, number, unit, date of death, place of burial, and any remarks that could be included in the space available, but they are sufficient to make the book an invaluable reference tool. The Roll of Honour also calls into the reader's mind endless questions about the thousands of lives cut short. Was Private Deligny Lambert of the 22nd Battalion celebrating the Armistice when he died of wood alcohol poisoning on 17 November 1918? What drove Corporal Watson Jamieson of the 7th Canadian

Railway Troops to slit his own throat on 21 January 1918 near Poperinghe? And what of Private Herbert Jones of the 26th Battalion, who was only sixteen years old when he went missing in action on the first day of the Battle of Vimy Ridge? What experiences had he packed into those few years of life?

In compiling this record, Wigney is in fact responding to an impulse felt by Canadians who lived through the First World War. The Armistice was followed in this country by an unprecedented wave of memorialization as communities, business, churches, and schools felt impelled to record the names of their fallen in stone or bronze. They believed fervently that the names had to be preserved for posterity because, once the names were forgotten, the ideals for which lives were lost would disappear as well. They may well have been right. The ideals for which the First World War was fought (not to mention the mentalities with which it was fought) seem, to many people in the 1990s, strange and incomprehensible. It is easy to descend into hand-wringing and tut-tutting, and to fasten blame for the horrors of the Western Front on a few broadly drawn caricatures. It is much more difficult to make the psychic leap back to 1914-

1918 and see things with contemporary eyes: how bizarre an idea the tank must have seemed, how the strategic situation of 1917 made an attack at Passchendaele seem sensible, or how passionately people were moved by God, King, and Empire.

**Notes**

1. Alex Danchev, "'Bunking' and Debunking: The Controversies of the 1960s," in Brian Bond, ed., *The First World War and British Military History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), pp.263-88.
2. See Siegfried Sassoon, *The War Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1988).

Jonathan F. Vance is the editor for the Spring 1997 issue of *Canadian Military History*. His book *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning and the First World War* was recently published by UBC Press. Dr. Vance begins a tenure track appointment at the University of Western Ontario this fall.

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