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Fighting Spirit

Kampfgruppe Chill and the German recovery
in the West between 4 September and 9 November
1944, a case study

Jack Didden

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Contents	Introduction	5
	The main questions	6
	The time frame	9
	Sources	10
	Outline	11
	Geographical names	12
	Personal names	13
	Nomenclature	13
Part One	The theoretical framework	14
	1.1.1 Strategic, operational and tactical levels, definitions	14
	1.1.2 Bridgehead strategy	18
	1.1.3 Command and Auftragstaktik	19
	1.2 The Wehrmacht in the West, 1944-1945, an overview	22
	1.3.1 Kampfgruppen	34
	1.3.2 Kampfgruppen in the West, 1944-1945	36
Part Two	Crisis and Opportunity	39
	2.1. The Western Front at the end of August 1944	39
	2.2 Allied strategy until 4 September 1944	41
	2.3 German Strategy until 4 September 1944	44
	2.4 Chill and the 85. Infanterie-Division until 4 September 1944	46
	2.5 The picture 4-5 September 1944	53
Part Three	The Fighting	71
	3.1. Albert Canal (6-13 September 1944)	71
	3.2. Geel (7-13 September 1944)	123
	3.3. Ten Aard (13-20 September 1944)	142
	3.4. Market Garden (11-26 September 1944)	155
	3.5. Goirle (27 September – 10 October 1944)	204
	3.6. Woensdrecht (24 September – 19 October 1944)	230
	3.7. Western Brabant (21 October – 9 November 1944)	261
Part Four	The Western Front on 9 November 1944	324
	4.1 The military situation	324
	4.2 The German and Allied strategic positions	325
	4.3 Postscript for Kampfgruppe Chill et al	327
Part Five	Conclusions	330
	5.1 Achievements	330
	5.2 Analysis	334
	5.2.1 The Physical Component	334
	5.2.1.1 Size	334
	5.2.1.2 Armour	335
	5.2.1.3 Elite Troops	336
	5.2.2 The Conceptual Component	339
	5.2.3 The Moral Component	341
	5.2.3.1 Morale	341
	5.2.3.2 Leadership	347
	5.2.3.3 Organisation	349
	5.3. Kampfgruppe Chill as a case study	349
	5.3.1 Kampfgruppe Chill as a Kampfgruppe	350
	5.3.2 Kampfgruppe Chill as a Wehrmacht unit	352
	5.3.3 Final conclusions	354
	5.4 Postscripts	356
	5.4.1 The Royal Air Force	356
	5.4.2 The Kriegsmarine	358
	5.4.3 Communications	359
	5.4.4 War Crimes	360
	5.5 A Final thought	361
Appendix 1:	Structure 85. Infanterie-Division 31.07.44	362
Appendix 2:	Structure Kampfgruppe Chill	363
Appendix 3:	Kampfgruppe Chill, a chronology	364
Appendix 4:	Casualties 5 September – 9 November 1944	365
Samenvatting		366
Acknowledgements		370
Bibliography		371
Maps		388
About the author		394
Index of personal names		395

Introduction

'Der endgültige Zusammenbruch im Westen, ja das Ende des Krieges schien unmittelbar bevorzustehen. Doch es kam anders.'¹

'One reaches the conclusion that these six short weeks saw one of the most successful advances of any British army – indeed of any army ever formed.'²

'The movements of great states are often directed by as slender springs as those of individuals.'³

'Geschichte ist immer das Ergebnis konstruktiver Reflexion.'⁴

One day in the late summer of 1944 the Allied armies were thundering across Northern France and Belgium, sweeping aside all German resistance and leaving dazed enemy units in the wake of their advance, almost literally the next they faced the same dogged defence they had such a tough time cracking in Normandy. It was an amazing feat, because, 'Retreat does not build a strong fighting spirit in a unit...'⁵

This book is the result of seven years' research into a particular *Kampfgruppe* (Battle Group) that played a key role during the final stage of the Second World War in Western Europe. The background is the result of a long time fascination on the author's part with events during the first weeks of September 1944. For a time the Allied troops were surging forward across France and Belgium, seemingly invincible, covering 250 miles in six days, then the situation was back to what it had been in Normandy, a slow, grinding and costly advance. The men at the top certainly believed the end was nigh. The SHAEF (Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces) Intelligence Summary at the end of August stated that, 'the enemy in the West has had it. Two and a half months of bitter fighting have brought the end of the war in Europe within sight, almost within reach.'⁶ Barely two weeks later the Allies were back to the bloody slugging match they had just left behind them in Normandy. What had caused this sudden turn of events? Was it indeed because of a crisis in logistics on the Allied side, or is Van Creveld right and were logistics merely used as an excuse post facto?⁷

This sudden reversal of fortunes is also reflected in the findings of the Joint Intelligence Committee's (JIC) report of 5 September 1944.⁸ It reads 'However, whatever action Hitler may now take it will be too late to affect the issue in the West

¹ Joachim Ludewig, *Der deutsche Rückzug aus Frankreich 1944*, Freiburg 1994, 333.

² Peter Rostron, *The Life and Times of General Sir Miles Dempsey GBE KCB DSO MC, Monty's Army Commander*, Barnsley 2010, 128.

³ David Hume, *History of England*, 427, quoted in Eelco Runia, *De Pathologie van de Veldslag, Geschiedenis en geschiedschrijving in Tolstoj's Oorlog en Vrede*, Rotterdam 1995, 119.

⁴ Andreas Kunz, *Wehrmacht und Niederlage, Die bewaffnete Macht in der Endphase der nationalsozialistischer Herrschaft 1944 bis 1945*, München 2007, 21.

⁵ Robert R. Rush, A Different Perspective: Cohesion, Morale, and Operational Effectiveness in the German Army, Fall 1944, *Armed Forces & Society*, Vol. 25 (1999), No.3, 477-508.

⁶ SHAEF IS 23 and 24, 26.08.44, quoted in Forrest C. Pogue, *The European Theater of Operations, The Supreme Command*, Washington 1954, 244-5.

⁷ Martin Van Creveld, *Supplying War, Logistics from Wallenstein to Patton*, New York 1977, 227.

⁸ Quoted in full in John Ehrman, *Grand Strategy Vol V*, London 1956, 399-401.

where organised German resistance will gradually disintegrate under our attack...’ The JIC felt that ‘Germany has suffered further catastrophic disasters. The process of final military defeat leading to the cessation of organised resistance has begun in the West.’ They were right in concluding that in this theatre of operations ‘the German front (...) virtually ceased to exist’ as between Antwerp and Maastricht there was no continuous front as such. In effect the JIC were predicting the end of the war in the foreseeable future, although –wisely- they did not specify a date. Their German counterparts shared this sentiment in early September and German commanders were amazed that the seemingly inevitable collapse did not happen after all. After the war they told Basil Liddell Hart, the well-known British military theoretician, that ‘das Alliierte Oberkommando eine grosse Gelegenheit versäumt hatte, den Krieg im Herbst 1944 zu beenden.’⁹ In fact, at the time, they considered what happened nothing short of a miracle. For example, *Generalleutnant* Karl Sievers, the commanding officer of the 719. *Infanterie-Division*, who was despatched from the Netherlands to stem the Allied avalanche, afterwards wrote that ‘Das schier Unmoegliche gelang.’¹⁰ Likewise, *Generalleutnant* Siegfried Westphal, *Chef des Generalstabes des Oberbefehlshaber West (OB West)*, named the chapter dealing with this period ‘Das zweite “Wunder am Westwall”.’¹¹ Another historian, Peter Lieb, in his groundbreaking study of the *Wehrmacht* in France, also called this sudden reversal of fortune the ‘Wunder im Westen’.¹² This so-called miracle, this sudden reversal of fortunes, is all the more astonishing since the rout in Normandy was one of the major blows to German morale during the Second World War. A recent study about the German army concluded, ‘die (...) heillose Flucht der Truppen aus Frankreich war psychologisch nach Stalingrad zweifellos der zweite grosse Einschnitt in der Kriegswahrnehmung der deutschen Soldaten. Die Normandie war das Verdun des Zweiten Weltkrieges. Nirgendwo sonst sind mehr Menschen in so kurzer Zeit, nämlich in zwölf Wochen, auf so engen Raum getötet und verwundet worden.’¹³ To bounce back from this was indeed nothing short of miraculous. But how was this possible? Was it indeed just a case of the Allies not seizing the opportunity? Trying to answer this question was the starting point of this study.

The main questions

One of the key players, if not *the* key player, in this sudden revival was *Kampfgruppe Chill*, an improvised battle group under the command of *Generalleutnant* Kurt Chill. On 4 September, the day Antwerp was captured by the British 11th Armoured Division he decided to set up an improvised defence behind the Albert Canal, ignoring instructions from the top to pull back to Germany. The next day it was in place. There is no doubt that this act had major consequences, for through this simple decision, Chill helped close the gap that began to open up in the German

⁹ B.H. Liddell Hart, *Jetzt dürfen sie reden*, (original: *The Other Side of the Hill*), Zürich 1950, 518.

¹⁰ ‘The sheer impossible succeeded.’ Sievers, OCMH MS B-004, 5.

¹¹ Siegfried Westphal, *Heer in Fesseln*, Bonn 1950, 260.

¹² Peter Lieb, *Konventioneller Krieg oder NS-Weltanschauungskrieg? Kriegführung und Partisanenbekämpfung in Frankreich 1943/44*, München 2007, 502.

¹³ Sonke Neitzel and Harald Welzer, *Soldaten, Protokolle vom Kämpfen, Töten und Sterben*, Frankfurt am Main 2011, 263.

front since the Allied armies had crossed the Seine.¹⁴ The *Kampfgruppe* was then responsible for delaying the British advance when it was resumed the following day. During the next stage, operation Market Garden, the *Kampfgruppe* at one stage played an important role in thwarting Allied intentions as well being the only unit to cut the 'Corridor' to Nijmegen and beyond. Soon after, in early October, the *Kampfgruppe* successfully blocked an Allied advance towards Tilburg and Woensdrecht, which in both cases had a serious impact on Allied planning. At the end of October two major operations began to push the German 15. *Armee* back behind the river Maas, thus clearing the Scheldt estuary, and here the *Kampfgruppe* played an important role in delaying the advance.

In other words, this study is concerned with a relatively small group of soldiers in the fighting in the West, who definitely 'punched above their weight'. How was this possible, especially in view of the period during which it took place? An answer would give insight not only into the dynamics of a small battle group, but, more importantly give an understanding of what the keys are to making it an effective fighting unit. It is ultimately about what and who decides the outcome of a military engagement. So far many studies have been devoted to leading generals on both sides. There is a seemingly endless lists of books about the highest echelon, both German and Allied.¹⁵ But was it really the men at the top who decided the outcome of battles, or was it rather the men at the other end of the food chain like Tolstoj for example believed? In 'War and Peace' he wrote about the relationship between great generals and common soldiers, that 'the successful outcome of a military operation does not depend on them [the generals], but on the man in the ranks who shouts: "We are doomed!" or: "Hurra!"'.¹⁶ Analysing what constitute the key ingredients to a successful military unit this study investigates that very issue. By focusing on a military unit, an improvised one at that, which had to operate in circumstances where everything was working against it, a numerical superior enemy, a constantly shifting composition, little armour and few guns, and one which was nevertheless successful in the tasks it was set, we should be able to get a clear picture of what it is that still allowed it to function as well as it did. This study investigates which of the various explanations given during the last seventy years by sociologists, psychologists and historians about the *Wehrmacht* during World War Two are valid in the case of *Kampfgruppe Chill*. Was it political indoctrination, a strong morale, a sense of duty, rigid discipline, fear of reprisal or something else that allowed the *Kampfgruppe* to fight the way it did? By focusing on this one unit, it should be possible to evaluate and prove or disprove these theories about the resilience and performance of the *Wehrmacht*. Precisely because the *Kampfgruppe* was an ad-hoc unit the results of this research should be much more revealing since all kinds of factors that might explain why a regular unit performed well do not apply here. It is

¹⁴ Ludewig, *Der deutsche Rückzug*, 250, Charles B. MacDonald, *The European Theater of Operations, The Siegfried Line Campaign*, Washington 1963, 124.

¹⁵ To name just a few: Gerd R. Ueberschär (Hrsg.), *Hitlers militärische Elite* (Bd. I und II), Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt 1998; Russel F. Weigley, *Eisenhower's Lieutenants*, London 1981; Nigel Hamilton, *Monty, Master of the Battlefield 1942-1944*, Hamish Hamilton, London 1981, and Nigel Hamilton, *Monty, Final Years of the Field-Marshal 1944-1976*, Hamish Hamilton, London 1986; John Keegan, *Churchill's Generals*, New York 1991.

¹⁶ Leo Tolstoj, *Oorlog en Vrede*, Arnhem 1949, 679.

the very core of German military efficiency during the final year of the war that is being investigated here. Therefore, the history of this unit is not only a case study of *Kampfgruppen* in general, and in the West in particular, which has never received serious investigation yet, but is also a case study for the *Wehrmacht* as a whole since it will provide an insight into both the performance and the mindset of German soldiers during the downfall of the Third Reich. In order to do this the motivation, morale, identity and structure of the *Kampfgruppe*, need to be examined.

This study closely examines the engagements that *Kampfgruppe Chill* was involved in between 4 September and 9 November 1944. It aims to describe the peregrinations of the battle group which ranged in size from an understrength regiment to an inflated division, all within three months. The immediate results of the various defensive and offensive actions will be described in some detail. We shall need to explore the origins, actions and dissolution of the battle group. Another question to be investigated is the influence of *Kampfgruppe Chill* on the decision-making process of both the Germans and the Allies. More accurately: this study intends to show that during the time frame discussed here the *Kampfgruppe* had an influence that went far beyond the tactical level. To prove this it is necessary to move the scope outside the action on the battlefield. This way of looking at a unit is in line with modern military history which does not examine the actual battles as if they happened in a kind of vacuum, which was the traditional way, but instead also studies the interaction between what happened on the battlefield and the framework in which the actions took place.¹⁷ This study therefore combines the traditional description of troop movements, battles and engagements, i.e. the tactical level, but it also examines operational and strategic decisions. After having first established to what extent the actions of *Kampfgruppe Chill* influenced the operational (and military strategic) levels the history of the *Kampfgruppe* should also provide the answers to the following four questions:

- Who decide the outcome of engagements, the men at the top, or the men in the ranks?
- What does the history of *Kampfgruppe Chill* suggest about the key ingredient(s) of fighting power?
- To what extent is the *Kampfgruppe* (a)typical for *Kampfgruppen* during the same time frame and in the same theatre of war?
- To what extent is the history of the *Kampfgruppe* (a)typical for similar sized army units during the same time frame and in the same theatre of war and what does this suggest about the resilience of the *Wehrmacht* during the final stage of World War Two?

To find answers to these key issues it is necessary to examine a number of additional questions. What were the origins of the *Kampfgruppe* and where did its constituent parts come from? To what extent were previous experiences relevant for the

¹⁷ Christ Klep and Ben Schoemaker (ed.), *De Bevrijding van Nederland 1944-1945, Oorlog op de Flank*, 's-Gravenhage 1995, 29. Ironically the series *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg* is criticised by some for leaning too much in this direction and not paying enough attention to the purely operational aspects of the war (cf. discussion in Franz Uhle-Wettler, *Höhe- und Wendepunkte deutscher Militärgeschichte, Von Leuthen bis Stalingrad*, Graz 2006, 5-6).

operations of *Kampfgruppe Chill*? What is known about the identity, morale, cohesion and structure of the *Kampfgruppe*? What is known of the personalities of its commanding officers, i.e. *Generalleutnant* Kurt Chill, the *Kommandeur* of the *Kampfgruppe* bearing his name, *Oberstleutnant Freiherr* Friedrich Von der Heydte, the *Kommandeur* of *FJR 6*, *Major* Erich Sattler and *Oberleutnant* Franz Kopka, the two *Kommandeure* of *schwere Heeres Panzer Jäger-Abteilung 559*, *Oberstleutnant* Georg Heinrich Dreyer, *Kommandeur* of *Kampfgruppe Dreyer*, as well as the various battalion commanders, such as *Major* Horst Pohl, *Hauptmann* Ohler, *Hauptmann* Rolf Mager and *Hauptmann* Leopold Von Hütz? What was the reason for the creation of the *Kampfgruppe*? What was its composition? What were the instructions it received? To what extent was *Auftragstaktik* important in this? How effective were logistics, maintenance and repair, and, finally, what happened to the *Kampfgruppe* after the period examined in this study? At the end it should then be possible to give the answers to the key questions. The last element that requires clarification is the time frame, 4 September – 9 November 1944.

The time frame

This story takes us from the zenith of the Allies' march through Northern France and Belgium to the end of the autumn campaign whose main goal was to secure the use of the port of Antwerp. There are a number of reasons for deciding on 4 September as the starting point and 9 November as the final day. The basic reason for deciding on Monday 4 September is that this was the day that *Generalleutnant* Kurt Chill started to set up an improvised battle group, soon to be known as *Kampfgruppe Chill*. In other words the genesis of the subject of this study was on that very day. But there is more. The capture of Antwerp that same day marked the end of the glorious British advance leading the highest military to believe that 'it seemed possible, even probable, that the enemy might surrender within the next few weeks.'¹⁸ In order to achieve this General Eisenhower, who three days before had taken over as commander of the ground forces from Montgomery, now a Field-Marshal, issued a directive that same day telling Twenty-First Army Group to seize the Ruhr, one of Germany's key industrial areas. The reason for the order was that 'enemy resistance on the entire front shows signs of collapse.'¹⁹ Since one of the basic tenets of military thinking is to reinforce success in this way Eisenhower hoped to follow up the rapid advance by knocking the Germans out of the war, something that seemed within reach. This was certainly also the view of the highest German commanders that day. They rated the capture of Antwerp as 'a strategic blow of the greatest importance.'²⁰ That the Allies did not use this opportunity, as we shall see below, is neither here nor there. Monday 4 September was one of the key dates in the struggle along the Western front. That is not the case with the date this study closes with, 9 November, which was simply the day on which Allied troops, more specifically the 1st Polish Armoured Division, cleared the last German bridgehead south of the river Maas (this particular stretch is known as the 'Hollands Diep') thus ending the two-month long autumn campaign against *15. Armee* in the centre and

¹⁸ Erhrman, *Grand Strategy V*, 395.

¹⁹ FWD 13765, 04.09.44.

²⁰ OCMH MS A-862, 13.

western part of the province of North Brabant in which the *Kampfgruppe* played such a vital role.²¹

Sources

For any historian primary sources are his or her bread and butter. Still, beggars cannot be choosers and often primary sources were not available. This study is based on three types of sources.²² First there are the contemporary documents, either Allied or German, which constitute the primary sources. Then there are documents written close after the events, notably studies prepared by German officers for the Historical Division of the US Army and interviews (e.g. by General van Hilten for his book on the war in the Netherlands²³). Finally there are memoirs, histories and interviews (e.g. with members of *FJR 6*) written long after the end of the war. The latter category is, no doubt the most subjective as they could serve to justify certain decisions and actions or use knowledge acquired after the event. The same problems apply to the second category, much of which was based on what the participants still remembered and so the strongest evidence can be found in the contemporary documents. But even these need to be treated carefully and only the so-called Intelligence and Operational Logs are in fact recorded in 'real time'. War diaries, by their very nature, were always written after the event and as a result could and sometimes did gloss things over or simply leave facts out.

With respect to German primary sources, additional problems were encountered. It must be borne in mind that after the war most German records were lost. For this study for example, in addition to the various divisions the *Kriegstagebücher* of *15. Armee*, *1. Fallschirmarmee* and *LXVII. Armeekorps* should have been the main sources. All of them are gone, however, either lost in the big Allied air raid on the *Heeresarchiv* in Potsdam in April 1945 or destroyed just before the end of the war to prevent them from falling into the hands of the Allies.²⁴ Of the *Armeekorps* on the western front only four war diaries have survived, one of them that of *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps*.²⁵ This means that from 5 September, when the *Kampfgruppe* was the responsibility of this Corps there is detailed information, although even here there are gaps, especially during the first few weeks of September when the situation was so fluid that higher commanders often had no idea what was going on. Moreover, because of the German command system, the so-called *Auftragstaktik*, many things were not assigned to paper and unlike with the Allies there are e.g. no detailed plans of attack, usually merely the outcome is mentioned.²⁶ Still, a lot can be deduced from what was written down. However, where *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps* was not in control, which means for the time frame from 5 October until 9 November, when the

²¹ Further east there were still German units left on the left bank of the river (*1. Fallschirm-Armee*) and it was not until 3 December that the last of them was pushed back from the remaining salient around Venlo. Since *Kampfgruppe Chill* was not involved there, that is outside the scope of this study.

²² I have copied this model from Scheil, *Präventivkrieg Barbarossa, Fragen, Fakten, Antworten*, Schnellroda 2011, 32.

²³ D.A. van Hilten, *Van Capitulatie tot Capitulatie*, Leiden 1949.

²⁴ Lieb, *Konventioneller Krieg*, 10.

²⁵ The others are: LXXXI AK, XXV AK and LVIII PzK (Lieb, *Konventioneller Krieg*, 9).

²⁶ A case in point is the attack on Geel on 10 September for which the battle plan could only be reconstructed using British PoW interrogations (cf. 3.2).

Kampfgruppe Chill became the responsibility of *LXVII. Armeekorps*, there was no primary German source at all and other sources needed to provide the necessary information about the various engagements the *Kampfgruppe* was involved in.

Secondary sources, written close after the events like the memoirs and the studies prepared by German officers for the Historical Division of the US Army in the fifties, the so-called OCMH studies, purport to be reliable, but in fact are often notoriously inaccurate and therefore need to be used with the utmost care. This meant that it was often a real challenge to reconstitute the course of the engagements from German sources alone and the answers needed to be found elsewhere. Fortunately the Allied war diaries (some of which offered gold dust while others contained only ... dust) are available and these shed some light on certain engagements, with the emphasis on some. Many war diarists were meticulous, noting down every detail and preserving as many documents as possible, while others clearly could not be bothered.²⁷ In this way at least the Allied side of the story could be told in some detail. But the German side remained largely hidden in obscurity. Fortunately there was more information to be found in Kew, Ottawa and Washington. In addition to the war diaries this study also uses other Allied sources, such as Intelligence Logs, Operational Logs, Intelligence Summaries and Prisoner of War Interrogation Reports. These provided a lot of new information, the Logs because they were in 'real time' and the Intelligence Summaries and Reports because they contained many details about German units hitherto unknown. Apparently many German soldiers were quite willing to talk after being captured. Here, too, answers could be found to the question about the soldiers' morale and motivation in the *Kampfgruppe*. By their very nature, these sources are limited, but, in addition to interviews with veterans of *Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 6* conducted by Johan van Doorn in the nineties, they are the only ones available to give an insight into the story 'from below'. Another source rarely used before are soldier's *Soldbücher* which sometimes provided additional information. By studying sources not used previously, the actions of the *Kampfgruppe* could be reconstructed in more detail, shedding new light on what were until now very murky affairs. Besides these obvious sources other archival material rarely used in books about the land battles such as naval (*Kriegsmarine*) and air (Second Tactical Air Force) records have been included. By using this wide variety of sources new information has come to light, some findings more surprising and relevant than others, but still fairly unique in a study about the fighting on land and leading to some new interpretations of what actually happened.

Outline

This study consists of five parts following the introduction, in which the main questions are formulated. In Part One the theoretical framework is laid out, first by defining the tactical, operational and strategic levels (1.1.1), the so-called bridgehead strategy (1.1.2), and by explaining how the German army delegated command, the so-called *Auftragstaktik* (1.1.3). This theoretical background will help to answer the first question: what was the influence of the *Kampfgruppe* beyond the tactics of the battlefield? The next chapter looks at what several authors have written about the

²⁷ Generally the more technical the unit (e.g. artillery, armour) the better the war diary, but here, too, there are exceptions (e.g. Nottinghamshire Yeomanry).

social and psychological background of the German fighting man in World War Two and, more specifically, about their thoughts and findings about the *Wehrmacht* during the final stages of the war (1.2). Finally the phenomenon of *Kampfgruppen* is examined (1.3). These three paragraphs together are designed to provide the framework for the second question, how did the *Kampfgruppe* achieve what it did, in view of its ad-hoc nature and in order to gauge to what extent the *Kampfgruppe* was representative for the rest of the *Wehrmacht*? It also helps put the battle group in a historical perspective by providing a frame of reference with regards to morale, mentality and organization. Part Two focuses on the broad picture leading up to the time frame to be investigated (2.1). This is followed by a discussion of the Allied and German strategies at the time (2.2 and 2.3) and the history of the *85. Infanterie-Division* is described (2.4). This part ends with an overview of the military situation on 4 September and the creation of the *Kampfgruppe* (2.5). Part Three contains a detailed description of the actual battles fought by *Kampfgruppe Chill*. Here the reader finds the nitty-gritty of the fighting on a tactical level with occasional reference to the operational and strategic levels. This chapter examines in detail the battles that were fought by *Kampfgruppe Chill* from the day it was created until the day the Allied campaign to drive *15. Armee* behind the Hollands Diep river reached its conclusion. It starts with the fighting to hold the Albert Canal which focused on towns like Beringen, Leopoldsburg and Hechtel and the effects on the Allied planning (3.1). Then the focus is on the fighting at Geel which took place at the same time (3.2). Here too, the outcome led to alterations in the Allies' planning. After Geel the Allies tried to break out north of there, leading to another extremely bloody, but neglected, battle at the village of Ten Aard (3.3). The Allied failure here had even more serious implications. The next chapter deals with the involvement of the *Kampfgruppe* during operation Market Garden in which it was the only German unit to interrupt the crucial lifeline to Nijmegen and beyond (3.4). Then the way in which Chill's battle group blocked the second attempt to advance via Tilburg (3.5) and, almost simultaneously, via Woensdrecht (3.6) is described. This time the repercussions were felt as far as the highest Allied command levels. The last chapter (3.7) describes the delaying tactics used before *Kampfgruppe Chill* pulled back north of the river Maas. In Part Four the situation at the end of the autumn campaign is briefly painted (4.1) and the German and Allied operational and strategic positions are discussed (4.2). Part Four concludes with a brief overview of what happened to the *Kampfgruppe* following the period described in this book (4.3). Finally, Part Five answers the main questions by first looking at the overall conclusion concerning the effects of the actions of *Kampfgruppe Chill* on and beyond the battlefield (5.1). Next explanations are given by analyzing the physical (5.2.1), conceptual (5.2.2) and mental (5.2.3) components of the *Kampfgruppe*. In the penultimate paragraphs the *Kampfgruppe* is evaluated as a case study, first for *Kampfgruppen* (5.3.1) and then for the *Wehrmacht* as a whole (5.3.2). Finally various points that fall outside the scope of this study, but still are worth noting, such as the roles of the Royal Air Force (5.4.1), the *Kriegsmarine* (5.4.2), communication problems (5.4.3) and war crimes (5.4.4) are looked into. This study is rounded off with a final thought (5.5).

Geographical names

The names of all towns, villages, hamlets, rivers and geographical features are those used today. So Wuustwezel is used instead of Wuestwesel, Merksem instead of

Merxem, Geel instead of Gheel and so on. Although there is an argument for using the older spelling, which can still be seen on the old ordnance survey maps used in the book, I decided to use the modern versions instead. There are three reasons for this. First of all the reader is, as it were, looking back from today's Merksem, not yesterday's. Second, the Dutch language has seen many spelling changes over the last fifty years and the older spelling will make identifications more difficult for readers unfamiliar with these. Third, for anyone wishing to go on a battlefield tour the new names are essential if he (or she) is to find his (or her) way round using a modern map, digital or otherwise.

Personal names

As far as was humanly possible I have tried to find out all the first names of the main personalities in this book. The conscientious reader will notice where I failed. But there is something else to take into account: some commanding officers were commonly known by their first names, others were not. Thus, the usual notation is Lieutenant-General Sir Brian Horrocks (XXX Corps), Major-General Bobby Ross (53rd Welsh Division), *Generalleutnant* Kurt Chill (*85. Infanterie-Division*), but also Field-Marshal Montgomery (Twenty-First Army Group), Lieutenant-General J.T. Crocker (I Corps), Major-General E.H. Barker (49th West Riding Division) and *Generalleutnant* F. Neumann (*712. Infanterie-Division*). By and large I have followed this (arbitrary) custom.

Nomenclature

The nomenclature in this book is the one most common at the time. This means that all German names are as they were used then and since they are not in English, they are in italics. The names have been given in full when they occur for the first time and when they have not been used for quite a number of pages. Otherwise abbreviations were used as found in the original documents and on the original maps. The following rules applied: a Roman numeral before an Arabic numeral indicated a battalion sized unit, but an Arabic numeral indicated a company or the equivalent. Here are a few examples to illustrate the point: *I./FJR 2* refers to the 1st Battalion of *Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 2* and *II./GR 743* indicates the 2nd Battalion of *Grenadier-Regiment 743* whereas *2./GR 743* is the 2nd Company of *Grenadier-Regiment 743*. Likewise for the artillery, *I./AR 1719* is the 1st *Abteilung* of *Artillerie-Regiment 1719* (*AR 1719* was the divisional artillery of *719. Infanterie-Division* as the number indicates) and *1./AR 1719* is the 1st Battery of *AR 1719*. Another, minor, point is that I have consistently used German spelling when appropriate, also for the plural; thus one *Sturmgeschütz* and three *Sturmgeschütze*, one *Jagdpanther* and three *Jagdpanther*.

As for the British names, here, too, I have followed what was then customary. Thus, the 2nd Devonshire Regiment, or 2nd Devons, but No.2 Squadron, A Company etc. I have also followed the custom of using Arabic numerals for units up to divisional level (53rd Welsh Division), Roman ones for Corps (XII Corps) and full names for Armies and above (Second Army).

PART ONE, THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

‘Ja, was war und wie war die Wehrmacht überhaupt?’²⁸

‘Die Kriegführung ist eine Kunst, eine auf wissenschaftlicher Grundlage beruhende freie, schöpferische Tätigkeit.’²⁹

Before looking into the actions and influence of *Kampfgruppe Chill* it is necessary to lay out the theoretical framework. This chapter consists of four paragraphs, in the first the tactical, operational and strategic levels are defined, in the second the principle of *Auftragstaktik* is explained, in the third an overview is given of the key literature concerning the mindset, motivation and morale of the German soldier on the Western front during the last nine months of the war, and in the final part the phenomenon of *Kampfgruppen* is looked into.

1.1.1 Strategic, operational and tactical levels, definitions

Since it is one of the contentions of this thesis that *Kampfgruppe Chill* had an impact that went beyond that of the battlefield and extended to the operational and possibly the strategic areas as well, it is necessary to define what is meant by the three levels of military decision-making.

The strategic level

Although the boundaries between all three tend to be fluid, strategy is generally defined as the highest level at which decisions are made, it ‘involves the art and science of employing armed forces with the other instruments of national power to secure strategic goals.’³⁰ A German textbook published for the officers of the newly constituted *Bundeswehr* in similar terms defined strategy as ‘alle Machtfaktoren eines modernes Staates, einschliesslich des militärischen’.³¹ Today’s manual for the British armed forces³² distinguishes between the political strategic and military strategic levels. The former, called National Strategy, ‘sets out a path, using the diplomatic, economic and military instruments of power to achieve the national interests.’³³ The latter, called the Military Contribution to Strategy, is ‘the application of military resources to achieve national strategic objectives...’³⁴ A similar definition was given by professor Beatrice Heuser, who was in charge of the research department of the *Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt* from 2003 to 2007, and wrote, ‘Strategie ist Einsatz jeglicher verfügbaren Mittel, vor allem des Mittels der Streitkräfte, zu politischen Zwecken, mit dem Ziel, dem Gegner die eigene Politik und den eigenen

²⁸ Rolf-Dieter Müller und Hans-Erich Volkmann (Her.), *Die Wehrmacht, Mythos und Realität*, München 1999, XI.

²⁹ *Truppenführung I. Teil*, Berlin 1936, H.Dv. 300/1, 1.

³⁰ *US Army Field Manual 100-5 Operations*, 1993, 6-1. It should be noted that not until the 20th century was there some kind of consensus about the current definition (Beatrice Heuser, *Den Krieg denken, Die Entwicklung der Strategie seit der Antike*, Paderborn 2010, 53).

³¹ Von Brunn, *Taktische Übungen, von den Grundbegriffen bis zum Kriegsspiel*, Darmstadt 1961, 2.

³² *Army Doctrine Publications 2010*.

³³ *Ibid*, 3-17.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 3-18.

Willen aufzuzwingen bzw. seinem Willen zu widerstehen.³⁵ General Sir Rupert Smith, Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) in his book on war in the modern world likewise distinguishes between the 'political objective' and the 'military strategic objective'.³⁶ The latter is achieved by 'military force', the former 'as a result of military success'.³⁷ Similarly, Karl-Heinz Frieser, a historian at the German *Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt*, notes in 'Blitzkrieg-Legende', his seminal study on the attack on France and the Low Countries in May 1940, 'In der im Zweiten Weltkrieg angewandten Terminologie ist die Trennlinie zwischen »operativ« und »strategisch« fließend, wobei letzterer Begriff noch der rein militärischen Ebene verhaftet blieb'.³⁸ Although strategy is an ambivalent term which can refer both to military decisions and a combination of political and military decisions, in this study I will follow Frieser and strategy will be seen as purely military, in order to avoid digressing too much in the economic, diplomatic, ethical, ideological and psychological aspects which could all be included in the realm of strategy. It is this strategy that Helmuth Graf von Moltke referred to when he wrote, 'Strategy affords tactics the means for fighting and the probability of winning by the direction of armies and their meeting at the place of combat.'³⁹ In this connection the famous British military theoretician, Basil Liddell Hart, gives an interesting definition of the ultimate goal of military strategy when he wrote, 'the true aim is not so much to seek battle as to seek a strategic situation so advantageous that if it does not of itself produce the decision, its continuation by battle is sure to achieve this.'⁴⁰ I shall show that both Allies and Germans were seeking this advantageous situation and the role *Kampfgruppe Chill* played in frustrating the Allied ambitions.

The operational level

The next level is the operational one. Here strategic decisions are translated into military operations. The American Field Manual 100-5 describes it as 'joint and combined operational forces within a theater of operations perform subordinate campaigns and major operations (...) to accomplish the strategic objectives of the unified commander...'⁴¹ The British army handbook gives a similar definition, 'Joint campaigns and operations are constructed and directed at the operational level in fulfilment of national or coalition strategy. At this level, abstract strategic objectives are translated into practical tactical actions and then resourced...'⁴² Frieser defines it succinctly as 'Aufgabe der oberen Führung'.⁴³ As the aforementioned manual for the *Bundeswehr* describes it, operational assignments 'verlangen mehr, nämlich die Schlachtentscheidung und damit grosse Verbände, etwa vom Korps aufwärts'.⁴⁴ During the Second World War for the German *Wehrmacht* this started at the level of an *Armee* and sometimes trickled down to Corps level.

³⁵ Heuser, *Den Krieg denken*, 18. This book also provides an insightful history of the development of the concept of strategy (17-33).

³⁶ Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force, The Art of War in the Modern World*, London 2006, 12.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Frieser, *Blitzkrieg-Legende, Der Westfeldzug 1940*, München 2005, 8.

³⁹ Moltke, *On the Art of War, Selected Writings*, Ed. Daniel J. Hughes, New York 1993, 47.

⁴⁰ Liddell Hart, *Strategy, The Indirect Approach*, London 1954, 365.

⁴¹ US Army FM 100-5, 6-2.

⁴² *Army Doctrine Publications 2010*, 3-19.

⁴³ Frieser, *Blitzkrieg-Legende*, 8.

⁴⁴ Von Brunn, *Taktische Übungen*, 1.

However, for the Allied side there is a problem of terminology here which needs to be clarified. Both in the UK and the USA during World War Two military strategy was felt to be not only the prerogative of the decision makers at the highest level, i.e. the CIGS, Field-Marshal Alan Brooke, his American counterpart General George C. Marshall, and theatre commanders like General Dwight D. Eisenhower, but, and this was different from the German idea, also that of Army Group commanders such as Field-Marshal Bernard L. Montgomery, General Omar Bradley and General Jacob M. Devers, of the Twenty-First, Twelfth US and Sixth US Army Groups respectively.⁴⁵ This thinking only changed in the 1970s under the influence of, among others, the Yom Kippur or October War of 1973.⁴⁶ British and American military theoreticians finally accepted, what the Germans had been saying all along, that between the strategic and tactical there was a third level, the operational one.⁴⁷ Operational decisions, especially those aimed at ending the war before 1945, hugely influenced the events described in this study and modern definitions will therefore be used. The third and final level is that of tactics.

The tactical level

The tactical level is 'where we find battles, engagements and fights',⁴⁸ or as the American Field-Manual puts it 'battles and engagements are planned and executed to accomplish military objectives assigned to tactical units or task forces.'⁴⁹ The British handbook describes it, using nearly the same wording, as 'Battles and engagements are planned and executed at the tactical level to achieve campaign objectives as articulated by the operational commander within the campaign plan, using tactical missions.'⁵⁰ Interestingly it adds that 'Success at the tactical level does not translate automatically into campaign success.'⁵¹ That this is a truism was evident from the capture of Antwerp for example, as will be described in Parts Two and Three. Basically tactics can be defined as deciding how to win the battle in order to fulfil the goals set down at the operational level. That also means that the scale of the tactical level is wide open. These engagements can range from a fire fight between platoons or companies to the Battle of Arnhem. Tactics are the responsibility of battalions, regiments (English: brigades), divisions, but sometimes even Corps or Armies.⁵² Tactics have always been based on four principles: 'being stronger than the enemy, having superior firepower, combining fire and movement, and securing freedom of action'.⁵³ Even if the enemy has more guns, men or materiel all around, it is still

⁴⁵ Liddel Hart in his book on Strategy for example (Chapter XIX) never mentions the operational level and gives examples of strategy (e.g. Guderian's breakthrough at Sedan) that are in fact at the operational level. Also, Brooke for example found fault with Montgomery's 'strategy' on 5 October 1944 (Alanbrooke, 600).

⁴⁶ October 6 -25 1973 between Israel on one side and Syria and Egypt, assisted by other Arab countries, on the other.

⁴⁷ *Army Doctrine Publications 2010*, E-19.

⁴⁸ Smith, *The Utility of Force*, 13.

⁴⁹ US Army FM 100-5, 6-3. In the same section a distinction is made between engagements (small conflicts or skirmishes) and battles (a series of related engagements).

⁵⁰ *Army Doctrine Publications 2010*, 3-19.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Von Brunn, *Taktische Übungen*, 1.

⁵³ O.P. van Wiggen et al, *Tactiek*, Almere 2009, 7.

possible by manoeuvring to be stronger locally and also have more firepower there. In modern warfare then, and this applies to World War Two as well, the essence of sound tactics is 'vuur en beweging (fire and movement)'.⁵⁴ More importantly, 'The successful tactician must be more nimble and move faster relative to his opponent (...). To do this he may well use fire and obstacles, natural and man-made, to delay or suppress the enemy's ability to move'.⁵⁵ It is one of the aims of this study to show that *Generalleutnant* Kurt Chill and his senior officers did just that. They moved quicker and responded faster, thwarting the intentions of their opponents time and again. Because there is a direct link between all three levels, Chill forced higher Allied commanders to rethink their decisions and adjust their operational aims.

There is widespread agreement among military historians that the German army during World War Two excelled in the tactical and operational area and failed in the strategic dimension because that was how it trained its officers.⁵⁶ The pinnacle of a German officer's career was to become an *Oberbefehlshaber* and be in charge of an *Armee* where he could apply the skills he had honed throughout his professional life.⁵⁷ A drawback was that this meant that the leading military in Germany were not involved in political strategic matters. That was Hitler's domain to which they submitted all too willingly. In fact Germany's professional soldiers even before World War Two believed that they could solve all strategic problems through clever operational actions.⁵⁸ The *Wehrmacht* astonished the world by the speed with which it defeated the opposing forces during the first years of the war and in 1940 the German propaganda dug up the pre-war term 'Blitzkrieg' to describe this apparently revolutionary type of warfare.⁵⁹ Even after 1942, when it was clear that it was losing the war, the German army continued to be the equal of other armies and often still operated more skilfully on the tactical level.⁶⁰ But their opponents were on a learning curve. The German superiority on the battlefield was recognized by Field-Marshal Montgomery, one of the key players on the other side. Understanding the disparity between the British and the German armies, he developed the operational doctrine of 'Colossal Cracks' i.e. using firepower as a substitute for superior tactics.⁶¹ Because the British army was 'not very good' and the *Wehrmacht* was recognized as being a formidable and professional foe, Montgomery developed this technique both to bolster morale and to avoid heavy casualties.⁶² Attrition was to be the key to defeating the *Westheer*. The approach turned out to be successful. Where the German soldier fought on, sometimes very fanatically, for a number of reasons, some more obvious than others (see also 1.2 below), the British soldiers, aware that the war was going their way, could not be expected to 'meet the sacrificial, superhuman

⁵⁴ Ibid, 23.

⁵⁵ Smith, *The Utility of Force*, 14.

⁵⁶ Klep and Schoenmaker, *De Bevrijding*, 22-24 about the 'new military historians'; Van Creveld, 'Die deutsche Wehrmacht: eine militärische Beurteilung', in Müller, *Die Wehrmacht*, 334.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 335.

⁵⁸ Karl-Heinz Frieser, *Die deutschen Blitzkriege: Operativer Triumph – strategischer Tragödie*, in Müller, *Die Wehrmacht*, 182.

⁵⁹ Frieser, *Blitzkrieglegende*, 5-7.

⁶⁰ Van Creveld, *Die deutsche Wehrmacht*, 344.

⁶¹ Stephen Ashley Hart, *Colossal Cracks, Montgomery's 21st Army Group in Northwest Europe, 1944-45*, Stackpole Books, Mechanicsburg 2007,6.

⁶² Ibid.

efforts German officers frequently demanded of their troops'.⁶³ In other words, 'The real task facing British and American commanders in Northwest Europe was not to attempt to match the virtuosity of the best German commanders, but eventually to achieve victory by doing what the British army did best: to gradually grind down the enemy...'⁶⁴ Montgomery's operational approach meant that the Allied troops did indeed win the war even though the Germans sometimes had the tactical upper hand and won the occasional battle.

Before concluding the chapter on strategic, operational and tactical levels two aspects, typical for the *Wehrmacht*, need to be looked into. The first is one of the more controversial operational principles, developed on the Eastern Front, the bridgehead strategy, which is extremely relevant for this study.

1.1.2 Bridgehead strategy

Since time immemorial rivers sometimes formed obstructions for advancing armies. It has therefore always been very important for any advancing army to seize and hold bridgeheads from which to develop the attack. The German army had shown this in a spectacular way during *Fall Gelb*, the attack on the West in May 1940 when the various bridgeheads across the river Maas had proved to be the undoing of the French defensive system. Barbarossa, the invasion of the Soviet Union, had been a repeat performance, once again showing that by making fast crossings enemy defences could be outflanked. After 1941 the Red Army did the same to the Germans, proving to be tenacious in the extreme once they had even so much as a platoon across a water barrier. Hitler, however, had stretched this sensible military principle to the extreme. For him bridgeheads were always the logical beginning of a possible future offensive even under circumstances that made any offensive action, whether in the immediate or far future, completely impossible. A few examples to illustrate the point: the pocket at Demyansk, a huge mushroom shape on the maps projecting sixty kilometres into Soviet held territory, was the last foothold of the *Wehrmacht* on the strategically important Valday hills cutting the Leningrad –Moscow railway line and even as late as September 1942 Hitler still felt it could be the starting point of one arm of the encirclement of the Russian troops in the bulge around Toropets.⁶⁵ A future offensive operation was also why Hitler ordered *General Paulus' 6. Armee* to stand fast at Stalingrad after it had been encircled in November 1942.⁶⁶ The net result was the destruction of the German army. Likewise *Heeresgruppe A* two months later, was told to remain in the Kuban bridgehead because Hitler hoped to launch a new offensive on Maikop from there in the summer of 1943.⁶⁷ Well over half a year later, in January 1944, the Germans had been pushed beyond the river Dnjepr, but even there tiny bridgeheads stayed in German hands, Hitler wanted to use the one near Khorsun as the basis of an attack on Kiev

⁶³ Ibid, 26.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 177.

⁶⁵ Paul Carell, *Scorched Earth, Hitler's War on Russia, Volume 2*, London 1970, 249 and Earl F. Ziemke, *Stalingrad to Berlin: The German Defeat in the East*, Washington DC 1984, 102.

⁶⁶ Earl F. Ziemke and Magna E. Bauer, *Moscow to Stalingrad: Decision in the East*, Washington DC 1987, 476.

⁶⁷ *Das Deutsche Reich 8*, 451.

in a pincer movement mimicking those of 1941.⁶⁸ Instead it was the German troops that would be encircled and almost annihilated. Similarly the 'balcony' around Nikopol not only protected the manganese ore deposits in the area but also, at least in theory, offered the potential for an attack to restore the link with the German *17. Armee* in the Crimea peninsula which the Russians had cut off in October 1943.⁶⁹ The most absurd example of Hitler's strategy is no doubt *Heeresgruppe Kurland*. Here, in the Courland peninsula, part of modern Latvia, no fewer than two armies with an average strength of twenty divisions, were tied up from October 1944 until the end of the war because Hitler refused to transfer them to Germany proper to assist in the defence of the *Reich* since he clung to the vain hope that he might use Courland as a bridgehead for a renewed invasion of the Soviet Union one day.⁷⁰ All these examples reveal the two objectives of Hitler's bridgehead strategy: to tie down enemy troops and serve as the starting points of future offensive operations. This principle was also applied during the fighting in the autumn of 1944 south of the river Maas and played a big role in the German decisions as will be evident from Part Three. There is one final point to be made concerning the military decision-making.

1.1.3 Command and Auftragstaktik

In the military system, command has two extremes, High Command and Battle Command.⁷¹ The former refers to the strategic level, the latter to the tactical (also sometimes called technical) level. In between, as we saw, is the operational level. Traditionally in armies orders have always been given at the top which are then translated down. However, the German army, as early as the 1870's and 80's, had come up with an added dimension which we need to consider when assessing the performance of *Kampfgruppe Chill*, the principle of the so-called *Auftragstaktik*. In English this is usually translated as 'mission oriented command system'. It is a system which basically delegates down the chain of command. What it meant in practice was that commanders told their subordinates what to do, but not how to do it. The history of *Auftragstaktik* goes back to the end of the nineteenth century.⁷² The reason for the creation of *Auftragstaktik* was the realisation that the old principles of command, in which every detail was mapped out beforehand by the highest commander, no longer worked in modern warfare with its modern firearms causing the situation on the battlefield to be so fluid and extensive that an instant reaction was often required. Even as early as 1806 the Prussian rules of engagement decreed that 'Weitläufige Dispositionen sind vor eine Bataille nicht zu geben...'⁷³ Similarly the defeat of the French in 1870 by one foreign observer was attributed to 'einer ungeheuren Summe selbständigen Unternehmungen g e i s t [space in original] aller Stellen bis zur untersten herunter...'⁷⁴ Following

⁶⁸ Nikolaus Von Vormann, *Tscherkassy*, Heidelberg 1954, 28.

⁶⁹ Paul Carell, *Scorched Earth*, 382 and *Das Deutsche Reich* 8, 469-478.

⁷⁰ Victor Madej, *Russo-German War No. 35, 25 January to 8 May 1945*, Allentown 1987, 5.

⁷¹ Landmacht, *Militaire Doctrine*, Den Haag 1996, 105.

⁷² This section: Stephan Leistenschneider, 'Die Entwicklung der Auftragstaktik im deutschen Heer und ihre Bedeutung für das deutsche Führungsdenken', in Gross, *Führungsdenken in europäischen und nordamerikanischen Streitkräften im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, Hamburg-Berlin-Bonn 2001, 175-190.

⁷³ Uhle-Wettler, *Höhe- und Wendepunkte*, 339.

⁷⁴ General Woide, *Die Ursachen der Siege und Niederlagen im Kriege 1870*, quoted in Uhle-Wettler, *Höhe- und Wendepunkte*, 340.

the 1870/1871 war against France two trains of thought developed, one was the *Normaltaktik* where the officer in charge had little room for manoeuvre and everything was prescribed, and *Auftragstaktik* which rejected all schematic solutions but favoured letting the officer responsible decide on the best course of action.⁷⁵ The die was cast in favour of the latter in the *Exerzir-Reglement für die Infanterie* of 1888. The concept of *Auftragstaktik* consists of three components and has two basic requirements, which are relevant for this study, since they offer the criteria to determine where Chill stood in this respect. First of all there is the freedom of form. Every situation in battle is unique, requiring unique solutions that can only be decided on by the officer responsible. Next there is the self-responsibility as the leading tactical principle because the officer is allowed to deviate from the assignment, at least within the given framework, the purpose or idea behind the assignment. The third and last principle is that orders should always be given in such a way that the subordinate is clear about the intentions behind the order. The two conditions necessary for *Auftragstaktik* to work are proper training of NCOs and officers, who need to be able to 'read' situations in war quickly and correctly and respond likewise, and active (as opposed to passive) discipline based on mutual trust between superiors and subordinates. The principles of *Auftragstaktik* became gradually integrated in the German army and from World War One were an integral part of its tactics.

In 1936 The concept was further formalised in *Heeres Dienstvorschrift 300, Truppenführung*. Without using the actual word it said in Section II ('Führung'), paragraph 36 that: 'Die Grundlage für die Führung bilden der Auftrag und die Lage. Der Auftrag bezeichnet das zu erreichende Ziel. Der Beauftragte darf ihn nicht aus dem Auge verlieren.'⁷⁶ In other words, it was the mission that came first and foremost for the subordinate. The paragraph also warned that 'Ungewissheit der Lage bildet die Regel.' The next paragraph elaborated on the decision stemming from the mission saying that 'Aus Auftrag und Lage entsteht der Entschluss. Reicht der Auftrag als Grundlage des Handelns nicht mehr aus oder ist er durch die Ereignisse überholt, so muss der Entschluss diesen Verhältnissen Rechnung tragen. Wer einen Auftrag abändert oder nicht ausführt, hat dies zu melden und übernimmt allein die Verantwortung für die Folgen. Stets muss er im Rahmen des Ganzen handeln. (...) In den Wechselfällen des Krieges kann aber starres Festhalten am Entschluss zum Fehler werden. Rechtzeitiges Erkennen der Umstände und der Zeitpunktes die einen neuen Entschluss erfordern, ist Führungskunst. Der Führer muss den Unterführern Freiheit des Handelns lassen...' Several elements here are worth pointing out: a subordinate commander must not follow the instructions he is given blindly, but instead act upon circumstances that will invariably be fluid and so he is allowed to change the decision, always keeping the interests of the whole in mind. Freedom of action is specifically mentioned. No action was always a mistake and an offensive mentality was encouraged.

In the subsection 'Befehlserteilung' the future officer was told how to issue correct orders in order to guarantee his subordinates the aforementioned freedom of action

⁷⁵ Ironically the term *Auftragstaktik* was first coined by its opponents (Leistenschneider, 177-8).

⁷⁶ H.Dv.300/I 1936 edition, 10-11.

and still ensure that the goal is achieved. Among other things it emphasized that 'Befehle dürfen nur so weit binden wie sich die Verhältnisse übersehen lassen. Doch wird die Lage oft verlangen, ins Ungewisse zu befehlen.'⁷⁷ However, as the war progressed and the number of conflicts with the higher military increased, Hitler became more and more insistent that the ultimate decision regarding not only strategic, but also operational moves was his. The crisis came to a head at the end of 1941 when the Eastern Front threatened to collapse altogether under the Soviet onslaught. Hitler's contested '*Haltebefehl*' of 16 December 1941 was a turning point in this respect. Three days later Hitler relieved the *Oberbefehlshaber des Heeres, Generalfeldmarschall* Walter von Brauchitsch, of his command and from then on was in charge of the army himself.⁷⁸ Soon Hitler insisted on receiving daily reports on all troop movements and ordered higher commands (Armies and Army Groups) to take tighter control of their subordinate units and no longer leave them room for their own interpretations or actions, or as the army's chief of staff, *Generaloberst* Franz Halder, put it, 'Die pflicht soldatischen Gehorsams lässt für Empfindlichkeiten untergebener Dienststellen keinen Raum, sie verlangt vielmehr schnellste und beste Ausführung im Sinne des Befehlenden.'⁷⁹ In other words, allowing commanders in the field freedom of action, as laid down in *Heeres Dienstvorschrift 300*, was now ridiculed as 'Empfindlichkeit'. Trusting one's subordinates, their professional ability, training and personality, was now replaced by distrust. The whole tactical concept, based on modern warfare and introduced at the end of the nineteenth century, was thrown overboard. Halder's instruction basically meant the end of the idea of *Auftragstaktik*. However, the problem, of course, was that for the top to be able to make the right decisions in the first place and check and control subordinate units, the reports of the latter had to be truthful and correct. Here was a loophole for commanders who still liked to make up their own minds. Hitler realized this might become an issue as is evident from his first directive as commander-in-chief, the 'Grundsätzlicher Befehl über das Meldewesen' on 26 December 1941. Hitler emphasized that reports had to be submitted in a spirit of 'Wahrheitsliebe' and 'Gewissenhaftigkeit'.⁸⁰ Of course it was precisely here that commanders with their ears to the ground saw an opportunity to continue to use their own initiative. By 'fiddling the books' especially in circumstances with little opportunity for higher commands to check the facts, they often still managed to do whatever they thought was best. Commanders pretended to be out of touch, to have a communication breakdown, not to have received instructions in time and –often correctly- to be unable to pass on instructions since they had no idea where certain units were. In this way, the principle of *Auftragstaktik*, continued to function, to some extent, until the very end of the war. The history of *Kampfgruppe Chill* epitomises this principle.⁸¹

⁷⁷ Ibid, 23.

⁷⁸ *Das Deutsche Reich* 4, 613.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 618.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 619.

⁸¹ Because it suits modern warfare, for which it was developed after all, after the war it was resurrected by the *Bundeswehr* and once again formalized in *Heeresdienstvorschrift 100/100* in which it unequivocally said that 'Auftragstaktik ist oberstes Führungsprinzip im Heer.' (Leistenschneider, 176). Other armies have copied the system where it is called mission command. Even facing drastic cuts, *Luitenant-generaal* Rob Bertholee, commander in chief of the Dutch army, in 2011 stated when pointing out what would definitely be kept, the first thing he mentioned was mission command, which

1.2 The Wehrmacht in the West, 1944-1945, an overview

One of the big questions after the Second World War had ended was, why had the *Wehrmacht* continued to fight for so long, even in the face of imminent defeat? Ever since historians have been mystified by this 'extreme rarity of a country being able and prepared to fight on in war to the point of total destruction.'⁸² This was especially puzzling in the conflict in the West. Whereas on the Eastern front fear of bloody reprisals by the Red Army as well as saving civilians from rape, murder and pillage were obvious motivating factors to carry on the fight to the bitter end, no such incentives existed for the German soldiers facing the British, Canadians, Americans, French and Poles. So why, after the collapse of the front in Normandy, did they still continue to delay the inevitable for another eight months? Ever since the end of the war scholars have looked for answers in all different aspects of society.⁸³ As part of this ongoing research over the years a number of studies have appeared which focus on how the *Wehrmacht* functioned, what its soldiers felt and thought and how they behaved, both as military professionals and as individuals. This paragraph intends to give an overview of the historiography of the *Wehrmacht* 'from below'.⁸⁴ It discusses the articles and books on the subject that are considered the key texts.⁸⁵ They are given in chronological order which helps to see the discourse as it has developed over the last sixty years.

Shils and Janowitz

One of the first to look into the issue were Edward A. Shils and Morris Janowitz in 1948.⁸⁶ These two academics had worked for the Intelligence Section of the Psychological Warfare Division of SHAEF. As such they had interviewed German Prisoners of War and also had them fill in questionnaires. The purpose of their paper is twofold, to analyze the influence of primary and secondary groups on German soldiers and to evaluate the impact of Allied propaganda on the fighting ability of the German army. They do this by interrogating POWs and holding psychological interviews, by studying captured documents, statements of Allied soldiers and reports of combat observers. Shils and Janowitz start by giving five categories of social disintegration in a military unit, ranging from desertion, through active surrender, passive surrender and token resistance to last-ditch resistance. They then use a definition of a primary group as one 'characterized by intimate face-to-face association and cooperation'.⁸⁷ Since most German soldiers were not volunteers, but conscripts, this strong social group was very important. Nevertheless to be militarily effective, such a group needs a 'hard core' which in their findings embrace about ten to fifteen per cent of the enlisted men, but is higher among the NCOs and junior

he called 'het grondbeginsel van de landmacht van de toekomst (the leading principle of the army of the future)' (*Landmacht* No. 14, June 2011, 5).

⁸² Ian Kershaw, *The End, Hitler's Germany, 1944-45*, London 2011, 386.

⁸³ Among the more recent: Max Hastings, *Armageddon* (2004) and Ian Kershaw, *The End* (2011).

⁸⁴ Term coined by Bartov, *The Eastern Front*, xvii.

⁸⁵ E.g. in Thomas Kühne, 'Gruppenkohäsion und Kameradschaftsmythos in der Wehrmacht', in Müller, *Die Wehrmacht*, 535.

⁸⁶ Edward A. Shils and Morris Janowitz, 'Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II', *Public Opinion Quarterly* Vol. 12 (1948), No.2, 280-315.

⁸⁷ From Charles Horton Cooley, *Social Organizations*, New York 1909.

officers (no precise figure is given). They then explain that social cohesion was helped by the German replacement system in which groups were maintained as units as much as possible even if this meant draining them gradually.

Shils and Janowitz then add a caveat. They admit that towards the end of the war improvised battle groups meant a deterioration of group solidarity. They claim that these groups 'so diverse in age composition and background, and especially so mixed in their reactions to becoming infantrymen, could not very quickly become effective fighting units.'⁸⁸ Here they touch upon the heart of this thesis. Next they discuss various factors that either weaken or strengthen group cohesion such as isolation, family ties, physical survival, honour and manliness. The latter qualities were most often found in those fighting until the very end. Shils and Janowitz found that company and battalion grade officers behaved similarly to their superiors. Being a good officer in the German army meant being a model to your men, being the authority, but one that looked after his men's needs. They also found that senior NCOs and junior officers played central roles in the lives of the soldiers, more than battalion, regimental and divisional commanders. The NCOs had a strong sense of duty while the junior officers were generally well selected and educated although as the war progressed there was an increasing shortage of both groups. Shils and Janowitz felt most of the men to be ignorant of bigger issues (strategy), neither was nationalism relevant, but there was a strong devotion to the *Führer*. (As a result Allied propaganda, focused on counter indoctrination was, by and large ineffective.) In their conclusion Shils and Janowitz say that previous assumptions about why the *Wehrmacht* fought on (mainly ideology) were incorrect, rather politics and ethics played a minor role. Instead, the primary group is why the *Landser* continued until the bitter end. The right conditions for this had to be created and depended on spatial proximity, intimate communication, the attitude of the NCOs and junior officers and the gratification of basic needs, both mental and physical.

The value of this seminal study lies in the fact that it is based on primary sources, namely the German soldiers themselves. For this thesis it is especially noteworthy what they conclude about the *Kampfgruppen* (although they do not use the name), the roles of senior and junior officers and the importance of a 'hard core' all of which are relevant for *Kampfgruppe Chill*.

Van Creveld

In 1982 Martin van Creveld, then a historian at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, wrote an aptly named book called 'Fighting Power'.⁸⁹ Van Creveld's starting points were the amazing ability of the *Wehrmacht* to fight on, no matter how unfavourable the circumstances, and the findings of Colonel (ret.) Trevor N. Dupuy, who used a mathematical model to show that the Germans consistently 'outfought the far more numerous Allied armies...'.⁹⁰ Van Creveld set out to examine the question of how this was possible by examining what constitutes fighting power, thus hoping to find 'the

⁸⁸ Shils and Janowitz, *Cohesion and Disintegration*, 288.

⁸⁹ Martin Van Creveld, *Fighting Power, German and US Army Performance 1939-1945*, Westport Connecticut 1982.

⁹⁰ Guy Dupuy, *A Genius for War*, London 1977, 234-5, quoted in Van Creveld, *Fighting Power*, 6.

secret of the German Army's fighting power...⁹¹ He does this by comparing it to the U.S. Army in World War Two. In ten chapters he looks into various aspects i.e. status, doctrine, command principles, organization, administration, maintaining combat efficiency, rewards and punishments, NCOs, and officers and leadership. Van Creveld's conclusion is that lots of elements contributed to the efficiency of the German army, such as the exalted social status of the military and indoctrination with Nazi ideology, but the main factor was the internal organization. The German army, according to Van Creveld, because of economic and material constraints, concentrated on operational efficiency, consistently sending its best men to the front, sometimes to the detriment of administration, management and logistics. As he puts it, 'It went for quality, and quality was what it got.'⁹² This is reflected in the principle of *Auftragstaktik* which offered officers freedom to act. To make this principle work, meant that the officers had to be trained to take responsibility. In contrast, Van Creveld writes, the US Army concentrates not on fighting power, but on fire power, not on the operational aspect only, but on creating a balanced organization. Finally, commenting on the modern trend to equate military organizations to business corporations, he notes that there is one crucial difference between the two, namely that in a military organisation there is 'the mixture, in one combination or another, of discipline and cohesion, morale and initiative, courage and toughness, the willingness to fight and the readiness, if necessary, to die.'⁹³ This seems like a succinct description of the essence of fighting power.

Van Creveld's study is very useful because it adds a lot to what Shils and Janowitz found. Van Creveld lists many other reasons, apart from group cohesion, for the excellence of the German army. However, the drawback of his explanations is that he focuses on regular units with their well-organized training, replacement system and staff work, and does not address the issue of the *Kampfgruppen*. Although he recognizes their existence and admits that their flexibility is one of the 'more outstanding aspects of the German Army's performance' the very fact that they do not meet all the criteria he mentions, leaves the reason for their excellence an open question.⁹⁴

Bartov

The origin of Bartov's book on the mindset of the German army on the Eastern Front was a PhD thesis at Oxford University in 1983. Two years later an amended version was published.⁹⁵ Bartov's hypothesis is that the crimes perpetrated by the *Wehrmacht* on the Eastern front were mainly the result of the conditions at the front, the backgrounds of the junior officers and political indoctrination. In order to prove this he looks at three divisions which he feels to be representative.⁹⁶ In the first chapter he describes the conditions in Russia, the huge number of casualties, the mental and physical suffering and tries to find an answer to the question 'but why

⁹¹ Van Creveld, *Fighting Power*, 11.

⁹² Ibid, 164.

⁹³ Ibid, 170.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 44.

⁹⁵ Omar Bartov, *The Eastern Front, 1941-45, German Troops and the Barbarisation of Warfare* (second edition), Palgrave, Basingstoke and New York 2001.

⁹⁶ Namely the 12. Infanterie-Division, the 18. Panzer-Division and the Gross Deutschland Division.

did the soldiers show such resilience?’ He admits that the explanation given by Shils and Janowitz (see above) may be part of the answer, but no more than part, since often there was no stable primary group in view of the casualties. There was such a high turnover in officers and NCOs in particular that Bartov thinks group loyalty cannot offer a sufficient explanation. Another factor for the tenacity was the fear of the Russians, but Bartov points to another contributory factor, the enthusiasm of the (junior) officers which he investigates in the second chapter. He shows that among the various age groups the majority were from middle-class backgrounds, a third of them members of the Nazi party, most of these being from the upper middle class. This made them representative of the social groups that supported Hitler. He also found that the bulk of the junior officers (up to the rank of Captain) were young (nearly half were younger than thirty-one) which means that they grew up during the Great Depression and witnessed the triumph of the Third Reich. These men, who formed the backbone of the army, were thus most likely to be influenced by the propaganda and indoctrination at school, university or in the various youth and labour organisations. In the third chapter Bartov focuses on the beliefs of the German soldiers which, he admits, are hard to measure. Still, he concludes that until the end of the war German soldiers had a continued belief in the *Führer*, which cannot be put into hard figures, but is evident from their behaviour. This strong influence from the Nazi *Weltanschauung*, which was almost like a religious belief, both stiffened German soldiers’ determination and legitimised the crimes against the Russian *Untermensch* even though the majority of the soldiers were not Nazis themselves. The last chapter details the atrocities committed by the German troops in the East. In his conclusion Bartov states that, even though not all soldiers were Nazis ‘many, if not most of them, were greatly influenced by the Nazi *Weltanschauung* and its implications regarding their conduct in the East.’⁹⁷

The relevance of Bartov’s book for this study is twofold. First, he wanted to write a history ‘from below’ specifically looking at the junior officers. Since there is no reason to think that the officers in *Kampfgruppe Chill* came from a different background his findings should apply here as well. Secondly, as many of the officers, especially the senior ones, had served on the Eastern front before 1944, the mindset of the soldiers is one that they took along with them to the Western front. A weakness in Bartov’s study is that he only looked at a limited number of units and one of his main sources was a book by a single veteran, Guy Sajer.⁹⁸

Fritz

In 1995 Dr. Stephen G. Fritz, a historian at Tennessee State University, published his book about the ordinary *Landser*, with the aim of trying to understand the ‘nature of man at war.’⁹⁹ In his conclusions he reflects on and at times questions the findings of Shils and Janowitz, Van Creveld and Bartov. He bases his findings on letters, documents and autobiographies, two prominent ones being Siegfried Knappe and –

⁹⁷ Bartov, *The Eastern Front*, 153.

⁹⁸ Namely Guy Sajer, *Forgotten Soldier*, New York, 1967 (for example where the the enthusiasm of junior officers is concerned; Sajer, 38-9). Also, the accuracy of the book has been hotly contested since it was published.

⁹⁹ Stephen G. Fritz, *Frontsoldaten, The German Soldier in World War II*, Kentucky 1995, vii.

again- Guy Sajer.¹⁰⁰ The book has ten chapters, including the introduction, dealing with various aspects of an ordinary soldier's life. In the second chapter Fritz discusses the harsh basic training one of the elements which contributed to group cohesion. The next chapter deals with the soldiers' baptism of fire, their first experience of combat which was usually so overwhelming that soldiers shut down and focused only on those things necessary to survive. In chapter four he tries to answer the question, how do men endure this? He comes up with a variety of answers such as humour, music, rumours, mail and resignation. He concludes that having mixed feelings and a whole range of emotions was the norm rather than the exception. If a man still broke down, the last resort was harsh discipline which in the Third Reich could and often did mean the death penalty. The next chapter deals with the effects of the terrain on the soldiers. Chapter six discusses what war did to the senses of the *Landser*. The following chapter looks at the influence of comrades which Fritz claims was a transformation of the Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft* into a *Frontgemeinschaft*, both promoting a sense of egalitarianism. This spirit of equality was strengthened by the principle of *Auftragstaktik* which after all encouraged independent, tactical initiative. The *Frontgemeinschaft* became a kind of surrogate family and so it made sense that for many German soldiers it was important to earn and keep the respect of one's peers, sometimes even taking pride in the little band of men they were a part of. In chapter eight the motivation of soldiers is looked into. Fritz states that from the experiences in World War One in Germany a picture was created of the typically modern warrior, a merger of technology and flesh, tough, pitiless and relentless. Even those who could not or would not meet this idea still displayed a stubborn resilience, doing their duty until the final consequence. This sense of duty was imbued with anti-semitism and anti-communism, but, unlike Bartov, Fritz does not believe that such negative ideals explain the ordinary German's resilience, rather it was the celebration of the social side of National-Socialism, the positive ideal of the *Volksgemeinschaft*, a new society without class, a new mankind even. Chapter nine deals with the period after the war and then in the next and final chapter Fritz draws some conclusions. The main motivator for the *Landser*, he feels, was the idea of being part of a *Frontgemeinschaft*. This led to greater trust in the NCOs and junior officers even in trying circumstances. It also explains the lasting popularity of Hitler among many of the soldiers as well as the conviction that things might still take a turn for the better.

By quoting extensively from all kinds of sources Fritz succeeds in painting a vivid picture of what life at the front was like for the average German soldier. For this thesis his insistence on the importance of the idea of *Volks-* and *Frontgemeinschaft* needs to be taken into account, as a possible contributory factor to the resilience of *Kampfgruppe Chill*.

Rush

In 1999 Robert S. Rush, a Sergeant-Major in the US Army and military historian who later got his PhD on the fighting in the Hürtgenwald,¹⁰¹ wrote an article in which he

¹⁰⁰ Siegfried Knappe & Ted Brusaw, *Soldat, Reflections of a German Soldier, 1936-1949*, Orion Books, New York 1992.

¹⁰¹ Robert S. Rush, *Hell in Hürtgen Forest, The Ordeal and Triumph of an American Infantry Regiment*, Kansas 2001.

examined morale, unit cohesion and operational effectiveness in the *Wehrmacht* through a case study of *LXXIV. Armeekorps* during the period September to November 1944.¹⁰² This article tries to correct the picture painted about the *Wehrmacht* in books so far, but Rush in particular addresses the studies by Shils and Janowitz, Van Creveld and Bartov. However, Rush does not just focus on group cohesion, he also investigates organizational structure and organizational cohesion. The former is defined as the formal organization of a unit, the latter as 'the unit's officers and enlisted leadership (...) and the individual soldier's identification with the organization.'¹⁰³ At the start of the period which Rush covers in his article, the German army was on the way back from France and generally morale was very low which was not helped by the attitude of some officers against the newly minted infantry, ex-sailors and airmen. Rush then goes on to describe the various battles fought by *LXXIV. Armeekorps* and its constituent divisions from September through November 1944. He comments on the time spent on training for German infantry. Rush then rejects Van Creveld's claims about the excellent German replacement system since that no longer applied during the autumn of 1944. Many German soldiers no longer knew what regiment they belonged to or who commanded them. This meant, according to Rush, that as there was no primary group, the group cohesion Shils and Janowitz saw as the determining factor for the resilience of the *Wehrmacht*, was no longer there. Other negative influences (stressors) he found were that many officers were not up to scratch, there was a shortage of food and clothing, the weapons were inadequate, there was a lack of medical treatment and poor hygiene as well as miserable conditions at the front (wet, cold). Still, the *Landser* kept on fighting, often displaying a kind of fatalism instead of the ideological fervour found by Bartov. Rush also believes that the German soldier was caught between a rock and a hard place, between fear of the enemy and fear of retribution from the Nazi regime. He does add, however, that although below divisional level there was no real organisational cohesion, from divisions upwards there was a very strong one, because the staffs stayed together even during the retreat from France. His final conclusion is that since there was no primary group cohesion, no organizational structure or ideological fervour, the deciding factor for the ordinary German soldier to fight on must have been intimidation by the high command, fear of being executed or sent to a penal battalion.

The relevance of Rush' article for this thesis is potentially great since Rush looked at the same theatre of war, concentrated on the same period, examined units that were either seriously disorganized or under strength and included the (lack of) organizational structure and cohesion, something which this study also looks at. Whether his explanations also apply to *Kampfgruppe Chill* needs to be examined of course.

Kunz

In 2007 the *Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt (MGFA)* published a study about

¹⁰² Rush, 'A Different Perspective', 477-508.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 479.

the *Wehrmacht* and the last days of the Third *Reich*.¹⁰⁴ This book was a (slightly) rewritten Ph D thesis. The author, Andreas Kunz, a historian at the University of Potsdam, wanted to test the generally accepted theory that the *Wehrmacht* had literally fought until 'fünf nach zwölf'.¹⁰⁵ In order to do this he first looks at the political and social structure of the Third *Reich*, then he examines the personal, material and organizational effects of the war on the *Wehrmacht* and finally he paints a picture of the mindset of the *Landser* along a scale from ideological fervour on one end to fear of reprisals on the other. His sources range from official documents from the top (*OKH*, *OKW* etc.), to 'petit histoire' in the forms of letters and autobiographies. Since not all of Kunz' findings are relevant for this study, I am going to focus on those that are. Like previous authors Kunz notes the disastrous end of the Normandy campaign which meant that in September the German army in the West had lost 516,000 men since D-Day.¹⁰⁶ Overall it had lost 1.1 million men in August and September and only received 510,000 replacements.¹⁰⁷ Especially officers were hit hard. In this respect September 1944 was the worst month of the war so far, as 317 officers a day were lost (on all theatres of war).¹⁰⁸ Almost inevitably this led to a decline in quality, especially among company and battalion commanders.¹⁰⁹ The same could be said for more than 400,000 *Luftwaffe* men who were transferred to the army or the *Fallschirm* units. Because the German army was now heavily outnumbered and the war was effectively lost, Germany should have ended the war. However, as that was not an option, mainly because of Hitler, both leader of the state and the army, from now on it could only carry on fighting for as long as it could. For the military this meant that all they could concentrate on the operational aspect.¹¹⁰ Next Kunz flies in the face of all those who believe in the myth of the *Wehrmacht* as superior to the Allies. Noting the poor material situation where some soldiers did not even have a rifle and units from the *Ersatz Heer* had to fight with outdated weapons. This plus the lack of proper training and the abolishment of the principle of *Auftragstaktik*, lead Kunz to conclude that the picture of the *Wehrmacht* as a superior fighting force must be false; it is simply part of the rhetorics of a nation that has lost the war and tries to find a reason it can live with. Referring to Shils and Janowitz on the one hand and Bartov on the other, Kunz feels that the idea of primary group cohesion has become too much of a dogma in books about the *Wehrmacht*. He refers, somewhat scathingly, to it as 'gebetsmühlenartig'.¹¹¹ On the other hand, he admits that even the huge losses do not necessarily mean that individual soldiers did not look for practical and emotional support in their comrades. Kunz opens the final chapter by making an important caveat to his findings, namely that the *Wehrmacht* was not a uniform concept. He is of the opinion that all we can state with certainty today is that millions of men in uniform risked life and limb under the same banner. In every other respect it was a

¹⁰⁴ Kunz, *Wehrmacht und Niederlage. Die bewaffnete Macht in der Endphase der nationalsozialistischer Herrschaft 1944 bis 1945*, München 2007.

¹⁰⁵ Kunz, *Wehrmacht und Niederlage*, 327.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 62.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 153.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 177.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 179.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 63.

¹¹¹ Ibid, 256.

multitude of individual and varied experiences. He then arrives at five (sometimes startling) conclusions. Still, he concludes that, a) the German leadership had no idea how to end the war, even long before the collapse in France, b) the military were subject to the political leaders, c) for the political leadership the endgame was 'total war' without any moral or other restrictions, d) the *Wehrmacht* was not superior in view of its personnel and material inferiority and e) stating that *the Wehrmacht* fought until the end, fails to do justice to the complexity of the historical facts. Most men fought on, because what else could they do?

The book by Kunz is groundbreaking because, unlike the authors mentioned above, he is the first to point out that giving monocausal explanations does not do justice to what really happened in 1944 and 1945. This should be borne in mind when setting off the actions of *Kampfgruppe Chill* and comparing them to other units, be it other *Kampfgruppen* or regular units. It is also interesting to note that he both accepts and refutes primary group cohesion as an explanation. Finally, Kunz' rather bold claim that the *Wehrmacht* was not a superior fighting force will need to be examined in the light of what is found about Chill's battle group.

Lieb

In the same year the *MGFA* published another book on a different but related subject.¹¹² Peter Lieb, Senior Lecturer at the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst, wrote a PhD thesis in which he wanted to answer the question whether the war in France had developed into an ideological conflict like in Russia or whether it was a conventional war after all? Some of his findings, especially in his last Chapter, 'Rückzug: Der Kampf in der Defensive' are relevant for this study.¹¹³ He finds that although the Allied superiority, especially in the air, was very depressing, morale did not begin to suffer until the collapse of the Normandy front. Lieb also concludes in his study that, after *Waffen-SS* and armoured units, the *Fallschirmjäger* provided the most reliable fighting units. In addition, as long as there were reliable leaders and the group stayed intact, soldiers not only kept on fighting, but consistently showed tactical and operational superiority. Even after the retreat from Normandy began, morale rose a little as the soldiers neared Germany in September and the Allied advance was once more blocked. Lieb attributes this to a number of factors: fear of reprisals after the number of court martials had risen dramatically and at least one third of the soldiers, mainly *SS* and younger soldiers still believing in a final victory for Germany. As long as there were good NCOs and officers even those weary of the war fought on. Another reason for fighting on Lieb found in the primary group which was partly reconstituted as many who had been wounded in Normandy returned to their former units. Finally, the idea that Germany was now with its back against the wall, must have been a contributory factor to the will to resist.

A number of the elements mentioned by Lieb could certainly apply to *Kampfgruppe Chill*, since, he (partly) studies the same period covered in this book. To what extent

¹¹² Peter Lieb, *Konventioneller Krieg oder NS-Weltanschauungskrieg? Kriegführung und Partisanenbekämpfung in Frankreich 1943/44*, München 2007.

¹¹³ Lieb, *Konventioneller Krieg*, 417-504.

ideology, fear of reprisals and primary group cohesion were determining factors for Chill's battle group will need to be looked into.

Zimmermann

Another book about the *Wehrmacht* during the last stage of the war, another PhD thesis and also a publication by the *MGFA* came out in 2009.¹¹⁴ Some of the findings agreed with Kunz', others differed. This study by John Zimmermann, an *Oberstleutnant (Fallschirmjäger)* in the *Bundeswehr*, is based on official documents, but also on diaries, letters and autobiographies. It is divided into four parts and a conclusion. The first three chapters are the introduction, the framework of the last year of the war, the composition of the troops, the opponents and the German high command. Chapter four which deals with the motivation (and 'Motive') is most relevant to this study.¹¹⁵ Zimmermann first of all notes that although getting divisional staffs back from France intact was an important contributing factor to the sustained resistance, most of these units were devastated which caused serious problems for a while. Also the constant personnel changes, caused by the huge losses inflicted, meant that the influence of the primary group as posited by Shils and Janowitz was no longer there. Morale among the German soldiers really plummeted after the failure of the Ardennes offensive, but still most soldiers were more neutral than negative, as is evident from their letters. Most soldiers during this final stage of the war were rather 'going through the motions' than actually fighting, it was all about survival for them. Only a minority surrendered prematurely. One of the reasons most men fought on was for fear of reprisals, being court-martialled. The *Wehrmacht* carried out an extremely high number of death penalties, namely 19,600 as compared to 48 during World War One.¹¹⁶ Still, that was only part of the explanation. The most important motive, according to Zimmermann, was simply the desire to do one's duty in order to survive. Going through the motions was therefore more or less the 'normal' thing in Germany, for military and non-military alike. On the other hand, an added reason for commanding officers to fight on was because the chances of a rapid promotion or decorations. In addition the junior officers had grown up believing in the Third Reich and the *Führer*. Many ordinary Germans were attracted by the Nazi state after the Weimar Republic. Also a lot of the junior and senior officers were already thinking of the post-war period thinking of themselves as a *Funktionselite*. So they wanted to avoid a repeat of 1918 at all costs. In fact, by fighting on they saw an opportunity to shape the end and turn it into a heroic demise, thereby creating a myth which would benefit them. They unscrupulously asked the young and the old, and in the end even women, to die for this idea. Hence it was also business as usual by and large for military institutions. Zimmermann's final conclusion is that this should not come as a surprise, since it was what the German military leaders had been doing since early 1943 when it became clear to those at the top that the war could not be won. Eventually post-war events proved them right, both because the two armies in the two Germanies owed a lot to the

¹¹⁴ John Zimmermann, *Pflicht zum Untergang, Die deutsche Kriegführung im Westen des Reiches 1944/1945*, Paderborn 2009.

¹¹⁵ Zimmermann, *Pflicht zum Untergang*, 389-463.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, 154.

Wehrmacht and this 'Durchhalten und Weitermachen um jeden Preis' earned them a kind of grudging admiration even from their erstwhile opponents.¹¹⁷

Zimmermann's study, like the ones mentioned above, throws light on the motives of why the military, both high and low, fought on for as long as they did and offers explanations that do not depend on the organizational aspect, making it very useful for this study of an ad-hoc unit. Still, it does not explain the military effectiveness of *Kampfgruppe Chill*.

Neitzel and Welzer

Most recently Sönke Neitzel and Harald Welzer, the former a historian, the latter a socio-psychologist, both at the *Kulturwissenschaftlichen Institut* in Essen, Germany, published a book based on 150,000 protocols of discussions of German POWs overheard by the Allies and now in possession of The National Archives (TNA) in Kew, England, and the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) in Washington, USA.¹¹⁸ Their goal was to investigate the mentality of German soldiers during World War Two. They did not focus specifically on the questions the abovementioned authors looked into, but nevertheless, like Fritz, by focusing on all aspects of a soldier's life, they did throw some light on some of the issues discussed earlier which are also of interest to this study. In particular they look at the belief in the final victory (*Siegesglaube*), the belief in Adolf Hitler (*Führerglaube*), and they compare and contrast the war and the Third Reich as frames of reference. Their final chapter answers the question, how national-socialist was the German army during the war? Their conclusion is that any war for those who have to fight it is never one of ideology. This applies as much to the *Landser* in World War Two as it does to the American G.I. fighting in Vietnam in the sixties or a NATO soldier engaged in Afghanistan today. Even aspects that have different values today, such as honour, toughness and willingness to die, do not distinguish the German soldier in World War Two from one in World War One or the Weimar era. The most important explanation for the willingness to kill and be killed, Neitzel and Welzer see in the transition from civilian life to war, because in war people commit acts they would never commit in other circumstances. Both killing Jews and defending your country are consequences of this shift of paradigm. For them ideology is not and cannot be the key factor which is why they call upon all of those studying the *Wehrmacht* 'mit der Überwertung des Ideologischen aufzuhören.'¹¹⁹ The way people behave in war is banal, as banal as any other business, even though this may lead to millions of deaths. Relevant for this thesis is the chapter about 'Militärische Werte', defined as bravery, obedience, and doing one's duty. Here they discuss under the heading 'Bis zur letzte Patrone' the question why the German soldiers fought to the bitter end.¹²⁰ For the higher military it was simple, according to Neitzel and Welzer, the worse the situation became the more they demanded a 'fight to the bitter end', so much so, that it became a central motif during the final stage of the war. For the rest of the army the behaviour of the group determined the behaviour of the individual soldier,

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 470.

¹¹⁸ Sönke Neitzel and Harald Welzer, *Soldaten, Protokolle vom Kämpfen, Töten und Sterben*, Frankfurt am Main 2011.

¹¹⁹ Neitzel and Welzer, *Soldaten*, 394.

¹²⁰ Ibid, 307-323.

soldiers fought together and surrendered or died together. The behaviour of the group, personal dispositions and situational factors were decisive. A complicating factor was that the higher the rank, the more hurdles there were for a person to shake off the values incorporated in the military framework. Their final conclusion is in line with what Zimmermann had found: fighting was the norm, even just going through the motions still meant a person could feel that he was a good soldier. Doing one's job to the best of one's ability was the core value of all seventeen million who served in the *Wehrmacht*, whatever their function or rank.

This lapidary explanation may help us understand why the men in *Kampfgruppe Chill* continued to fight, but it does not help us understand why they fought so well.

Analysis

It should be noted that the above list does not include the most recent study about the death throes of the Third Reich, *The End*, by noted historian and Hitler biographer Ian Kershaw.¹²¹ The reason for this is that Kershaw does not add to the various explanations given above for why the military fought on instead focusing on the 'quadrumvirate' around Hitler (Goebbels, Himmler, Speer and Bormann), thus filling a gap in the existing literature. However, for this study that aspect of Nazi Germany is not really relevant which is why Kershaw's book is not included here.

Soon after World War Two, in 1948, Edward A. Shils and Morris Janowitz were the first to look into the reasons why German soldiers fought on for as long as they did. They concluded that the main ground for this was primary group cohesion, loyalty to one's comrades. The problem is that this does not explain why ad-hoc units like *Kampfgruppen* also fought to the end. In 1982 Martin Van Creveld wrote a book in which he tried to explain the superiority of the German army, in victory as well as in defeat. To the findings of Shils and Janowitz he added organizational elements, such as training, replacements and the system of *Auftragstaktik*. This might help explain why *Kampfgruppe Chill* fought so well, but again, like Shils and Janowitz, Van Creveld mainly focused on regular units. The following year another seminal study appeared, by Omar Bartov. He rejected the explanation given by Shils and Janowitz because he feels that the high turn-over in NCOs and junior officers makes a strong group cohesion highly unlikely. Instead he posited ideology and a continued belief in the *Führer*, as the main motivators for German soldiers during World War Two. In 1995 Stephen G. Fritz, tried to emulate Bartov and basically agreed with him. He dismissed all explanations bar one, that of ideology. German soldiers fought because they believed in the *Frontgemeinschaft*, a natural extension of the *Volksgemeinschaft* in which they grew up. This is such a general explanation that Robert R. Rush four years later looking at units operating in the same theatre during roughly the same period as this study, gave a completely different explanation: fear of reprisals, not an ideological belief was what drove the *Landser*. However, as Thomas Kühne noticed in 1999, ideology and fear of reprisals need not be mutually exclusive, rather, he adds 'Zeitnahe Zeugnisse legen eher die Vermutung nahe, dass sich beides gegenseitig verstärkt hat.'¹²² Moreover, he objected to the monocausal interpretations offered so

¹²¹ Ian Kershaw, *The End, Hitler's Germany 1944-45*, London 2011.

¹²² Müller and Volkmann, *Die Wehrmacht*, 535-6.

far. His prayers for a more balanced explanation were answered by the two studies published by the *MGFA* in 2007 in which Peter Lieb and Andreas Kunz independently arrived at the conclusion that there was not just *one Wehrmacht*, rather in 1944 was a collection of four million individuals who fought under the same banner. Nevertheless, Lieb felt that a combination of being close to the Fatherland, ideology, group cohesion and fear of reprisals go a long way to explain the tenacity of the German soldier. Kunz was ambivalent about group cohesion, but noted that the *Wehrmacht* fought on because the Nazi leadership was in charge and they had no other option or idea what else to do. In his book he questioned the superiority of the *Wehrmacht*, taken for granted by all previous authors. Two years later, in another groundbreaking study, John Zimmermann distinguished between various levels, senior and middle-ranking officers fought because they were already planning for the post-war period, junior officers to further their careers and get medals, lower ranks sometimes for fear of reprisals, but mostly because they simply wanted to do their duty, because that is what you did. This somewhat banal explanation also needs to be seriously examined here. Finally, in 2011 Sonke Neitzel and Harald Welzer took the discussion full circle so far by dismissing all claims of ideology as irrelevant. For them the group behaviour determined –and still determines- how soldiers behave, how and if they fight, irrespective of war, country or time. Which means that over sixty years of discussion have taken us as back to square one, Shils and Janowitz.

The big question is, how to create some kind of synthesis out of these, sometimes contradictory, findings? All of them are based on authentic primary and secondary sources. A few things seem clear: a monocausal explanation can never suffice, since reality is always more complex, made up of more parameters than just one or two. Also, there was no such thing as *the* German soldier in World War Two (just like there never was *the* GI, *the* Tommy etc.). Here, too, individual responses to situations can vary so much that only trends can be described, such as the fact that more Germans fought on than gave up prematurely. This multicausality ties in with what Kunz, Zimmermann, Lieb and Neitzel and Welzer have found. Since Bartov focused on the atrocities on the Eastern Front and tried to explain these, I feel that he put too much emphasis on the ideological aspect. On the other hand, the complete rejection by Neitzel and Welzer does not seem to do sufficient justice to the differences between the NCOs and junior officers on the German side and those on the Allied side. Granted, only a minority of the Germans were Nazi's (in 1933 before Hitler came to power 43.9 % voted for the *NSDAP*), but a recent study on the Third Reich said 'there was no mistaking the pride and satisfaction of the great majority of Germans (...) at Hitler's achievement in throwing off the universally hated yoke of Versailles'.¹²³ For most Germans this had been the work of one man, Adolf Hitler, which helps to explain the sustained belief in the *Führer* until the end. In a similar vein, Fritz certainly has a point with his emphasis on the fear of reprisals, but like Bartov's his explanation seems to be too oversimplified. It is my contention that we shall find a combination of explanations of why the men in *Kampfgruppe Chill* fought on, which will certainly include group cohesion whether it is called that, or *Frontgemeinschaft* or 'band of brothers'.¹²⁴ Other findings that a number of authors

¹²³ Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich in Power*, London 2005, 711.

¹²⁴ William Shakespeare, *Henry V*, Act IV, scene iii.

agree on are the tremendous influence and importance of competent leaders and the relevance of the fact that even after the long retreat from France most divisional staffs were still intact. The relevance of this also needs to be looked into. There is one last point to make. Van Creveld, although he does focus on regular units, rightly points out some of the excellent organizational qualities of the German army. Since Zimmermann also emphasizes the 'business as usual' aspect in this respect, suggesting that the organizational element of the *Wehrmacht* was still in force, it is worthwhile examining to what extent these qualities applied to Chill's battle group. In this study I intend to focus on the mindset, unit cohesion, and organizational and operational effectiveness of *Kampfgruppe Chill* and see to what extent they confirm or contradict the findings mentioned above. As noted earlier, the problem is that many of these studies look at the *Wehrmacht* as it was set up, as it was supposed to function, not in a situation where much of the system had broken down, so, to what extent were *Kampfgruppen* different from regular units?

1.3.1 Kampfgruppen

Before zooming in on the battlefields of France, Belgium and the Netherlands and describing how the subject of this study, *Kampfgruppe Chill*, was created we should have a look at the phenomenon of *Kampfgruppen* and what exactly is meant by the term. The directory prepared by Allied Intelligence on the eve of the Invasion in June 1944, defines a *Kampfgruppe* or battle group as 'a temporary ad-hoc organisation (...) normally identified by its commander's name'.¹²⁵ It should be noted that there were no official rules for this. If a commanding officer decided he was in charge of a battle group then the information was passed on and it was named after him or after the unit that formed the staff or the core. In our case, for example, *Kampfgruppe Chill* was also referred to as '*Kampfgruppe 85. I.D.*' The directory added that a *Kampfgruppe* was 'the most fluid in the entire German army, since it consists simply of a variety of troops temporarily grouped together for a specific mission'.¹²⁶ In other words, size did not come into it. This is not always understood. David Bennett in his recent book about Market Garden for example puts it that a battalion was 'upgraded' to a *Kampfgruppe*.¹²⁷ This is nonsense, up- or downgrading has nothing to do with calling a unit a *Kampfgruppe*. The *Kampfgruppen* could and did vary in size from as small as an outsize platoon to roughly the equivalent of a division.¹²⁸ To make matters even more complicated one *Kampfgruppe* could control another. For example, *Kampfgruppe Dreyer* was part of *Kampfgruppe Chill*. But this is not the whole story.

¹²⁵ *German Order of Battle 1944, The Directory prepared by Allied Intelligence, of Regiments, Formations and Units of the German Armed Forces*, London 1994, C19.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ David Bennett, *A magnificent disaster, the Failure of Market Garden, the Arnhem Operation, September 1944*, Newbury 2008, 100.

¹²⁸ When improvised units of divisional level were required in Russia in 1943 they were called *Korpsabteilung* and given the letters A through F (Cf. Wolfgang Lange, *Korpsabteilung C, vom Dnjepr bis nach Polen (November 1943 bis Juli 1944), Kampf einer Infanterie-Division auf breiter Front gegen Grosse Übermacht – Kampf im Kessel und Ausbruch*, Neckargemünd 1961).

Originally the term *Kampfgruppen* was (and still is) used, to indicate composite task forces assembled for a specific mission. As the editors of Command Magazine put it in their book on the German forces, 'One of the outstanding characteristics of the German military during World War Two was its adherence to the principle of unity of command. At the battle group level this manifested itself in a practice that put all units engaged in a single mission under one commander (...). This principle was so deeply ingrained in practice that battle groups were usually identified by the name of their commander'.¹²⁹ Usually this meant combining several arms, e.g. infantry, armour and artillery according to what was necessary to achieve the objective. A good example early in the war is a *Kampfgruppe* of the *2. Panzer-Division* under (then) *Oberst* Hermann Balck who successfully ordered a combined group of *I./Panzer-Regiment 3*, *II./Grenadier-Regiment 304* and an engineer company to outflank the Greek defences on Mount Olympos on 16 April 1941.¹³⁰ Another example of a much smaller one is *Kampfgruppe Baumgart* which consisted of a tank company, a motorcycle company, an infantry company and two 8.8 cm *Flak* guns under the command of *Oberleutnant* Baumgart which captured a bridgehead on the Molodilnja river on 20 November 1941 as part of the attack on Tula.¹³¹ Rommel, too, in Africa formed many a *Kampfgruppe* if the occasion called for it. During the attack on the British Gazala line in the spring of 1942 *Kampfgruppen Hecker* and *Baade* for instance both played important roles in the breakthrough towards Tobruk.¹³² A late example, finally, from early 1943 were the four mixed armour-infantry battle groups of the *1. Panzergrenadier Division Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler (SS-Obergruppenführer* Sepp Dietrich) during the attack to recapture Kharkov on 11 March.¹³³ Even though such *Kampfgruppen* were being created until the end of the war,¹³⁴ from the second half of 1943 the *Wehrmacht* was forced on the defensive and even by 1944 the term had by and large become a euphemism for remnants of units.¹³⁵ Heavy losses on the Eastern Front had led to the creation of more and more of the new kind of *Kampfgruppen* as the Soviet pressure on the German army mounted. The order of battle of *Heeresgruppe Mitte* for example, listed four armies with a total of forty-six divisions at the start of Barbarossa in June 1941.¹³⁶ Just over two years later, at the end of 1943, it still boasted four armies plus troops serving under *Wehrmachtbefehlshaber Ostland*, but this time, besides regular divisions as well as divisions temporarily lumped together into battle groups, it officially numbered no fewer than eight *Kampfgruppen* (including the so-called *Korpsabteilungen D* and *E*

¹²⁹ Hitler's Army, 29-30.

¹³⁰ E.W. Von Mellenthin, *Panzer Battles, A Study of the Employment of Armour in the Second World War*, London 1977, 41-3.

¹³¹ Werner Haupt, *Die Schlachten der Heeresgruppe Mitte 1941-1944, Aus der Sicht der Divisionen*, Friedberg 1983, 112.

¹³² *Das Deutsche Reich* 6, 613-623.

¹³³ Karel Margry, *Kharkov, After The Battle 112* (2001), 3-45, 20-25; *Kampfgruppen* Witt, Hansen, Kraas and Sandig.

¹³⁴ A case in point being *Kampfgruppe Peiper* during the Ardennes offensive.

¹³⁵ Report No. 71, Historical Section (G.S.), Para 55.

¹³⁶ Orders of Battle: Haupt, *Die Schlachten*, 297-300. *Panzergruppen* 2 and 3, armies in all but name, would be renamed *Panzerarmee* in October 1941; in addition to the divisions there was also the *Grossdeutschland* Regiment.

made up by combining the remains of three infantry divisions into a division-sized battle group).¹³⁷

Unfortunately, so far, no serious study has been published about the phenomenon of the *Kampfgruppen*. The only book published on the subject is 'Battle Group!' by James Lucas.¹³⁸ However this book has a number of flaws. First of all, in addition to factual errors,¹³⁹ it only looks at a random number of *Kampfgruppen* (seventeen) without explaining why this number, this particular choice and whether or not, or to what extent, they are representative of the phenomenon as a whole. Secondly, Lucas does not distinguish between the two different uses of the word '*Kampfgruppe*' in the German army. That is a serious flaw, since the two were very distinct. The original use of the term, as mentioned above, was to indicate a battle group assembled for a purpose, along the lines of the American Combat Commands and the British combined tank-infantry groups, the second referred to a hastily assembled, ad-hoc formation created through circumstance rather than as a result of deliberate planning. The first, original kind of *Kampfgruppen* resurfaced in the *Bundeswehr*. Any task force composed for a mission was labelled *Kampfgruppe* (according to its composition it could be called *Panzerkampfgruppe*, *Grenadier-Kampfgruppe* or plain *Kampfgruppe*).¹⁴⁰ To make matters worse, in this book the emphasis is on this kind of *Kampfgruppe* and Lucas gives only five examples of the kind of improvised battle group like *Kampfgruppe Chill*, almost suggesting that these were the exceptions, which during the second half of World War Two certainly was not the case. Finally he calls units *Kampfgruppen* when in fact they were not.¹⁴¹ For want of useful secondary sources offering a theoretical framework, one had to be created. Fortunately, there were some primary sources available that makes it possible to form a picture of *Kampfgruppen* in the Western theatre of operations.

1.3.2 Kampfgruppen in the West, 1944-1945

Since there is no textbook about the *Kampfgruppen*, for the purpose of this study it is necessary to look first at some data from primary sources. An analysis by SHAEF at the end of October 1944 of 140 *Kampfgruppen* encountered since D-Day concluded that so far 14% of the *Kampfgruppen* encountered were company sized, 52% were battalion sized and 34% were larger than the average battalion.¹⁴² There is another document which provides some insight into the composition and size of *Kampfgruppen*. The Interrogation Reports based on the interviews conducted with POWs of the First Canadian Army between 29 August 1944 – 30 April 1945 also looked at the phenomenon of *Kampfgruppen*. The results match those of SHAEF half a year earlier in one respect. Out of a total of sixty-nine just one *Kampfgruppe*

¹³⁷ Lange, *Korpsabteilung C*, 9.

¹³⁸ James Lucas, *Battlegroup! German Kampfgruppen Action of World War II*, Cassell, London 1993.

¹³⁹ He reports that Finzel commanded the second battalion, whereas it was, in fact I./FJR 2 (Lucas, *Battlegroup!*, 158).

¹⁴⁰ Eike Middeldorf, *Taktische Aufgaben im Bataillons- und Kampfgruppen-Verband für Gefechts- und Planübungen sowie Geländebesprechungen 1-10*, Frankfurt am Main 1957, 12, 37, 83

¹⁴¹ An example is I./FJR 2 (Finzel), a unit which is extensively discussed in Chapter Three, which had simply lost a lot of men; that in itself did not make it a *Kampfgruppe*.

¹⁴² SHAEF Int Notes 31, in: I Corps, IS 83, 21.10.44. In the Wehrmacht a battalion was considered average if it had between 200 and 300 infantry (KTB 88 AK, B 262, 08.09.44).

(1.4%) was the size of a platoon, twenty-four (34.7%) were company-sized, thirty-four (49.2%) were the size of a weak (two company) or strong (three to five company) battalion and ten *Kampfgruppen* (14.5%) were substantially bigger than the average battalion. Again the majority, about half, were the size of a battalion, but interestingly this time the higher and lower figures have traded places, the majority of the *Kampfgruppen* being not bigger, but smaller than a battalion. This reversal may just have been caused by the fact that the Canadians looked at fewer battle groups. But there is further evidence that the figures noted in the second report are more correct for the period focused on in this study. In a similar analysis to the Canadian one the British Second Army made an inventory of no fewer than thirty-five *Kampfgruppen* encountered during Market Garden, most of whom are mentioned in the narrative below (Part Three).¹⁴³ A rough analysis concluded that nine were 'over battalion size' and twenty-six were 'under battalion size'. However, before drawing conclusions, two *Kampfgruppen* need to be deleted from the equation since they were either a regular regiment (*Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 21, Oberstleutnant Rolf Löytved-Hardegg*) or a division (*7. Fallschirmjäger-Division, Generalleutnant Wolfgang Erdmann*) and five cannot be taken into account since no information is given about their sizes. This leaves twenty-eight. A more accurate breakdown of these along the lines of the two previous analyses reveals that ten (35%) were company-sized, fifteen (54%) battalion-sized and three (11%) were larger than the average battalion. This tally is very similar to the one found by the Canadians at the end of the war. An explanation for the disparity between the first analysis and the other two may lie in the time frame. Many of the battle groups looked at by SHAEF had fought in Normandy where there had been very few *Kampfgruppen* until the very end of the campaign in August. Then, during the last stage of the fighting, many units had completely disintegrated and were broken up into a large number of small sub-units all basically running for their lives. This could explain why there were more smaller units than in the other two analyses. Overall we can say that for the period described in this study, applying an average of the analyses by Second Army and Canadian First Army, 51% of the *Kampfgruppen* were battalion-sized, 36% were smaller and 13% were bigger. We shall see where *Kampfgruppe Chill* stands in relation to this.

The intelligence officers at SHAEF also had interesting comments about the composition of the *Kampfgruppen*. They concluded that of the battalion-sized and larger battle groups, about 65% were 'formed from the remnants of badly mauled divisions and lost personnel', 20% were 'formed from replacement battalions, committed before they could get to their divisions', 10% were 'formed from security formations previously used as line of communication troops' and the rest was 'made up of school personnel, convalescents, recruits etc.'¹⁴⁴ As to the armament, the study concluded that these units were, naturally, lacking in many weapons, as well as having an extreme variety, but also that the emphasis was on anti-tank weapons, ranging from *7.5 cm Pak* anti-tank guns to hand-held *Panzerfäuste*. Of the larger battle groups 15% were found to have some artillery as well. Analyzing the *Kampfgruppen* in the Interrogation Reports of the First Canadian Army concerning

¹⁴³ Second Army IS 120, 02.10.44.

¹⁴⁴ SHAEF Int notes 31, in: I Corps, IS 83, 21.10.44.

their armament the following was found: of eleven battalion-sized *Kampfgruppen* no information was available; of the other twenty-three, just three (13%) had mortars, one had *Pak* guns, and all the others (83%) were only equipped with rifles, light machine-guns (both *MG 34*, *MG 42* and Czech ones) and *Panzerfäuste*.¹⁴⁵ In other words, they never had any heavy weapons such as artillery and very few had mortar and anti-tank guns. For the larger *Kampfgruppen* the figures were quite different. No information was found for one (*Kampfgruppe Fuchs*, February 1945) and very limited for another (*Kampfgruppe Oldenburg*, April 1945). The breakdown for the other eight shows that in addition to the standard equipment of rifles, machine-guns, mortars and *Panzerfäuste*, three had *Pak*-guns, three had some artillery and two had a few light (2 cm) *Flak*-guns. It is clear that even the bigger battle groups were seriously lacking in guns of all categories. Nevertheless, even though they were often without any serious hardware, the SHAEF report quoted earlier concluded that 'The battle group system, in spite of its many defects, has been a relatively successful expedient, particularly in the early stages of the German attempt at stabilization.'¹⁴⁶ The truth of this conclusion needs to be verified in the accounts in Part Three.

More generally, this study needs to examine how *Chill* compares to the *Kampfgruppen* mentioned above to determine how typical or atypical it was. One problem is that the composition and size of *Kampfgruppe Chill* fluctuated wildly. This means that the answer to this question will vary according to the moment in time. In other words, a comparison will have to be made after every engagement described in Part Three. The results then need to be collated and only then can we arrive at a more general conclusion both about the size and the composition of *Kampfgruppe Chill* as compared to the other *Kampfgruppen* in the West. One thing many experts agree on is that, regardless of their size, these improvised battle groups played a very important role for the Germans in the fighting during the second half of World War Two and 'often showed resilience and flexibility that remain among the more outstanding aspects of the German Army's performance.'¹⁴⁷ In fact one might say that *Kampfgruppen* epitomise the German military culture steeped in the principle of *Auftragstaktik*, leaving the initiative to the commander on the ground.

¹⁴⁵ One (*Kampfgruppe Wahl*, formed from *Marsch Kompanien* for 17. SS. Pz Gr Div) was said to have bazookas, it is not clear whether *Panzerfäuste* or *Ofenrohr* are meant.

¹⁴⁶ SHAEF Int notes 31, in: I Corps, IS 83, 21.10.44.

¹⁴⁷ Van Creveld, *Fighting Power*, 44.

PART TWO CRISIS AND OPPORTUNITY

'Der OB west musste der dramatischen Verschlechterung der Lage am 4. September weitgehend tatenlos zusehen.'¹⁴⁸

"Dear Horrocks – You will capture (a) Antwerp (b) Brussels. Signed M.C. Dempsey."¹⁴⁹

"It is difficult to understand why no serious effort was made to open the port (...) while the momentum of their headlong retreat still lasted..."¹⁵⁰

To understand the circumstances surrounding the creation of *Kampfgruppe Chill* on 4 September 1944, it is necessary first to describe the events following the battles in Normandy which would lead to what on the German side was called the 'Höhepunkt der Krise im Westen',¹⁵¹ the point where the German *Westheer* was teetering on the brink of defeat. In order to do that one needs to go back to 20 August when the Falaise pocket was closed.

2.1. The Western Front at the end of August 1944

After the Allied troops had landed in Normandy on D-Day, 6 June 1944, it took them well over two months to wrestle themselves free of the deadly grip in which the German armies held them. Operation Cobra launched by the American VII Corps (Major-General J. Lawton Collins) on 25 July was the turning point.¹⁵² After an initial hesitant start the tide turned and two days later a jubilant Major-General Leland S. Hobbs (30th US Infantry Division) could report that 'This thing has busted wide open.'¹⁵³ And wide open the gaping hole in the German frontline indeed was as armour and infantry raced south. Instead of pulling gradually back as urged by his generals, Hitler ordered a counterattack to seal the gap. This meant the German armour put its head even further into the noose. The Allies used this opportunity and while General Omar N. Bradley's Twelfth Army Group bore down on the Germans from the south Montgomery's Twenty-First Army Group pounded its way south. The Allied breakout and the encirclement of *7. Armee* (*SS-Obergruppenführer und General der Waffen-SS Paul Hausser*) inside the pocket near Falaise, which was closed on 20 August, resulted in the destruction of nearly half of the German troops. About 50,000 men were taken prisoner and about 10,000 dead were found on the battlefield. In addition at least 400 armoured vehicles, 700 artillery pieces and 5,000 transport vehicles were left behind.¹⁵⁴ Still, almost 40%, about 40,000 men, escaped, among them the army staff, four *Generalkommandos* (i.e. Corps staffs) and nearly fourteen divisional staffs.¹⁵⁵ An attempt to trap those troops below the Seine

¹⁴⁸ Ludewig, *Der deutsche Rückzug*, 228.

¹⁴⁹ Quoted in D'Este, *Decision in Normandy*, New York 1994, 353.

¹⁵⁰ Ralph Bennett, *Ultra in the West, The Normandy Campaign of 1944-45*, London 1979, 143.

¹⁵¹ Ludewig, *Der deutsche Rückzug*, 219.

¹⁵² Martin Blumenson, *The European Theater of Operations, Breakout and Pursuit*, Washington 1984, 240-281.

¹⁵³ Ibid, 251.

¹⁵⁴ Blumenson, *Breakout and Pursuit*, 557-8.

¹⁵⁵ Ludewig, *Der deutsche Rückzug*, 116.

also only partly succeeded. Another 304 armoured vehicles, 166 artillery pieces and 3,178 transport vehicles remained on the left bank of the lower Seine, about 25-30% of the equipment.¹⁵⁶ Again the staffs got away, but an attempt to set up a new defensive line could not be carried out as the divisions on average now had just 3,000 men.¹⁵⁷ The next opportunity might be offered by the rivers Somme, Marne and Saône, the so-called Kitzinger line, about a hundred kilometres further north.¹⁵⁸ For the moment there was little that the new commander of *Heeresgruppe B* and *Oberbefehlshaber West (OB West)*, *Generalfeldmarschall* Walter Model, who had taken over from *Generalfeldmarschall* Hans von Kluge on 17 August, could do except call for more troops and try to gain time. The two functions were combined since 17 July when Von Kluge, *OB West* since 3 July, also had to take over *Heeresgruppe B* from *Generalfeldmarschall* Erwin Rommel who was wounded on the 17th in an attack by Spitfires from 602 Squadron near Vimoutiers.¹⁵⁹ Holding these two jobs at the same time was a tough chore, even for a man of Model's calibre. Meanwhile, his opponents had other things to worry about.

Montgomery was content that Eisenhower had given his Twenty-First Army Group priority by telling the Twelfth Army group that their principal offensive mission was to assist its drive in the north-east (see next chapter).¹⁶⁰ In the evening of 25 August, the day on which Paris was liberated, XXX Corps (Lieutenant-General Brian Horrocks) crossed the Seine. Speed was now of the essence. By later afternoon of that day the first bridge was in position and vehicles of the 43rd (Wessex) Division (Major-General G.I. Thomas) began to cross. Stiff fighting ensued, but counterattacks were beaten off. On 28 August the 43rd Division established a large perimeter east of the Seine. Other formations in XXX Corps now began to cross. Meanwhile XII Corps (Lieutenant-General Neil Ritchie), to the left, had also won bridgeheads a day before. There the 15th (Scottish) Division (Major-General C.M. Barber) had established the first bridgeheads. The 53rd (Welsh) Division (Major-General R.K. Ross) and the 4th Armoured Brigade were going to pass through. To enable the advance to be continued at this pace VIII Corps (Lieutenant-General Richard O'Connor) was grounded temporarily. The units of the First Canadian Army (Lieutenant-General H.D.G. Crerar) crossed further north as well. Now that the Seine was crossed the pace began to quicken. British armour finally came into its own as armoured cars and tanks raced north. On 30 August Beauvais was cleared. Horrocks told the 11th Armoured Division to carry on throughout the night and try and capture Amiens. East of Paris the American First Army (Lieutenant-General Courtney H. Hodges) raced ahead just as fast, protecting the right flank of Montgomery's Army Group. As August

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, 187 and *Das Deutsche Reich*, Bd 7, 562.

¹⁵⁷ Ludewig, *Der deutsche Rückzug*, 187.

¹⁵⁸ Named after General der Flieger Kitzinger who in early August had been ordered to construct a line there (Ludewig, *Der deutsche Rückzug*, 147).

¹⁵⁹ It happened here, in *After The Battle*, Number 8, 1975, 42-5.

¹⁶⁰ This section: L.F. Ellis, *Victory in the West, Volume I, The Battle of Normandy*, London 1962, 439-476; L.F. Ellis, *Victory in the West, Volume II, The Defeat of Germany*, London 1968, 1-7; Blumenson, *Breakout and Pursuit*, 657-702; C.P. Stacey, *Official History of the Canadian Army in the Second World War, The Victory Campaign, Volume III, The Operations in North-west Europe 1944-1945*, Ottawa 1960, 296-303, 324.

drew to a close it became a question of who would be fastest, the Germans pulling back or the Allies advancing?¹⁶¹

For the time being the Allies were ahead in the race, in fact their pace quickened as the new month dawned. On 1 September the leading units of XXX Corps crossed the Somme, captured Arras and the high ground north of the town and nearly reached Lens. The next day Montgomery ordered XXX Corps to halt at the Carvin-Douai area since the First Allied Airborne Army was to drop four divisions in the Courtrai-Lille-Ypres area (Operation Linnet). However, unfavourable weather was predicted. Montgomery quickly cancelled the operation and XXX Corps was allowed to advance the next day. Meanwhile American armour reached Tournai that night. On 3 September the Guards Armoured Division (Major-General A.H.S. Adair) speeded ahead along two routes and by the end of the day they had liberated the Belgian capital, Brussels. The same day the 11th Armoured Division (Major-General G.P.B. 'Pip' Roberts) closed in on Antwerp while XII Corps passed Courtrai and Lille approaching Gent. During the same period the Canadians had not been idle either. While I Corps (Lieutenant-General J.T. Crocker) turned left after crossing the Seine to secure Le Havre, II Canadian Corps (Lieutenant-General G.G. Simonds) in vain tried to keep up with the leading units of Second Army on its right, pushing back the still largely intact forces of *15. Armee*. On 1 September the 4th Canadian Armoured Division (Major-General H. Foster) set off for Abbeville which it reached in the early hours of the following day. Opposite them the Germans were still holding the other bank of the Somme. Engineers set out to construct a bridge while infantry crossed the river a few miles east of Abbeville to cover the operation. On 3 September the Canadian tanks continued their pursuit, soon followed by the tanks of the 1st Polish Armoured Division (Major-General Stanislaw Maczek). That day, on which the citizens of Brussels were celebrating their newly found freedom, Montgomery, Dempsey, Bradley and Hodges, met to discuss future strategy, continuing a debate that had been going on since the middle of August.¹⁶²

2.2 The Allied Strategy until 4 September 1944

The end of the fighting in Normandy and the catastrophic losses suffered by the German *Westheer*, meant that the Allies needed to rethink their strategy.¹⁶³ Soon a heated debate developed between Montgomery, still in charge of the ground forces when the Falaise pocket was closed, and Eisenhower, the Supreme Commander, who was to take over as ground commander on 1 September. As August pulled to a close the increasingly euphemistic reports from the Intelligence Officers predicted a German collapse and an end to the war in the foreseeable future, although these sentiments were not shared by everybody. After the destruction of the German *7. Armee* inside the pocket, the Allies could field thirty-eight divisions while another eight were being landed in the South of France. The Germans were clearly outnumbered as well as outgunned, so how best to exploit that situation? Even

¹⁶¹ Blumenson, *Breakout and Pursuit*, 678.

¹⁶² Crerar should also have been there, but because of a misunderstanding arrived too late to attend leading to a temporary falling out with Montgomery (Stacey, *Official History*, 303-6).

¹⁶³ This section, unless otherwise specified: Pogue, *The Supreme Command*, 244-260, and John Ehrman, *Grand Strategy Volume V*, London 1956, 379-382.

before D-Day the planners at SHAEF had made it clear that the strategic task given Eisenhower ordering him to aim 'at the heart of Germany and the destruction of her armed forces' was best achieved by capturing the Ruhr area because of its economic importance.¹⁶⁴ An advance from the Seine towards the Ruhr was the favoured route. However, considering it risky to attack along a single route, the planners advised a 'broad front both north and south of the Ardennes' forcing the Germans to extend their forces to meet both threats. Eisenhower at the end of August decided to fall back on that plan. Immediately a controversy broke out. Bradley and Patton wanted to concentrate on a push east in the direction of the Rhine near Mannheim, while Montgomery insisted on the main drive being north, largely in line with the original SHAEF plan. After weighing the various proposals on 22 August Eisenhower told his subordinate commanders that Montgomery's Twenty-First Army Group was to proceed north of the Ardennes while Bradley's Twelfth Army Group was to strike south of there. To aid the British army group he assigned the First Allied Airborne Army (Lieutenant-General Lewis H. Brereton) to Montgomery. Also the bulk of the petrol for Bradley's army group would go to the First US Army which supported Montgomery's drive. Bradley and Patton were, understandably, annoyed. But Montgomery had problems to take into account which the Americans did not share.

One aspect he needed to consider in his strategy was the civilian population back in England still suffering from attacks by V-1 flying bombs launched from northwest France.¹⁶⁵ On 26 August, still as commander of the ground forces, Montgomery issued his next directive, M 520.¹⁶⁶ In the introduction he, correctly, said 'The enemy forces are very stretched and disorganised: they are in no fit condition to stand and fight us.' He stated the Intention of his directive to be 'To destroy all enemy forces in the PAS DE CALAIS and FLANDERS and to capture ANTWERP [capitals in original].' Only then would the Twenty-First Army Group 'advance eastwards on the Ruhr.' First Canadian Army was to clear the coast, the First Allied Airborne Army to drop in the Pas de Calais area, while the Second Army was to cross the Seine and 'drive forward through the industrial area of N.E. France and into BELGIUM.' The line of advance of Hodges' First US Army was shifted slightly northward and it was now ordered to advance towards 'the general area BRUSSELS – MAASTRICHT – LIEGE – NAMUR – CHARLEROI.' Montgomery impressed the need for 'Speed of action,' which he described as 'vital'. At the end of the directive, in paragraph 24, Montgomery added that 'The proper tactics now are for strong armoured and mobile columns to by-pass enemy centres of resistance and to push boldly ahead...' The twofold purpose of the directive was not only to destroy German forces in North-East France and Belgium, thus creating the basis for the advance on the Ruhr area, but also to eliminate the threat posed by the V-1's by capturing the launch sites. Three days later Eisenhower confirmed the strategy when he wrote to his two army group commanders that the Allies 'must seize the opportunity by acting swiftly (...) and by accepting risks. The Northern Group of Armies will cross the Seine and (...) destroy enemy forces south of the Somme. It will then advance rapidly across the Somme, and be prepared to

¹⁶⁴ This and the next quote are from Planning Document SHAEF SGS 381, cited in Pogue, *The Supreme Command*, 249.

¹⁶⁵ Soon, from 8 September joined by the V-2 rockets (Unternehmen Pinguin); Fritz Hahn, *Waffen und Geheimwaffen des deutschen Heeres 1933-1945*, Dörfler n.d., 174-5.

¹⁶⁶ Details: M 520, 26.08.44.

continue the advance to the north and north-east in order to seize the Pas de Calais area, the airfields in Belgium, and secure a base at Antwerp.¹⁶⁷

Montgomery's next directive, M 522, dated the same day as Eisenhower's letter, only entailed a shift of boundaries between the various armies as a result of the decision (not carried out eventually) to drop airborne forces in the Tournai area on 3 September.¹⁶⁸ On 1 September Eisenhower assumed direct command of the ground forces. Montgomery was promoted to Field-Marshal. By then the situation had changed dramatically because of the capture of Brussels and the impending capture of Antwerp. Although Eisenhower warned of the growing logistical problems a day earlier, Montgomery still believed that 'one really powerful and full-blooded thrust (...) is likely to get there and thus end the German war.'¹⁶⁹ Montgomery's directive M 523, dated 3 September, radiated this optimism.¹⁷⁰ In this short document, it consisted of just two pages, he described two bold aims: 'To advance eastwards and destroy all enemy forces encountered.' and 'To occupy the RUHR [capitals in original], and get astride the communications leading from it into Germany and the sea ports.' In detail Montgomery instructed Second Army to advance eastwards, starting on 6 September, towards the Rhine anywhere between Arnhem and Wesel, meanwhile threatening the area around Düsseldorf south of there. Also, one division, if necessary a Corps was directed towards Rotterdam and Amsterdam. The accompanying map shows one bold red arrow going nearly due north from the area of Turnhout and ending just south of Amsterdam. This may sound overly optimistic, but the idea that an advance as far as the capital of The Netherlands was likely at that time was shared by the German High Command. They believed that their troops would be unable to halt the Allies and therefore *General der Flieger* Friedrich Christiansen, *Wehrmachtbefehlshaber in der Niederlanden*, asked *Oberbefehlshaber West* for urgent permission to destroy the docks there because he did not have enough troops to turn them into fortresses.¹⁷¹ A document drawn up by the planners at the Twenty-First Army Group a day earlier was almost equally sanguine, with the following suggestion for the Canadian First Army, following the capture of Antwerp, 'Up to two divisions of Canadian Corps would follow through to mop up Northwest HOLLAND as far as the mouth of the RHINE, and the islands containing CD batteries likely to interfere with the opening of ROTTERDAM and ANTWERP [capitals in original].'¹⁷² In the third and final stage the Canadian Corps 'crosses the Rhine and deals with the AMSTERDAM-HAGUE area of HOLLAND.'¹⁷³ In addition Montgomery gave instructions for Second Army, once it had crossed the Rhine, to head for the area of Osnabrück – Hamm- Münster. Clearly the expectations at the highest level were that the next few days would be a piece of cake, even after a two-day break to rest and refit before continuing on Wednesday 6 September.

¹⁶⁷ Ellis, *Victory I*, 475.

¹⁶⁸ Interestingly not all consecutive numbers were used, this is evident from two sources: TNA WO 106/4356 and 4357 which contain the 21st A Gp directives M 516-559 and TNA WO 205/5G containing directives M 502-574. The LAC shadow files do not offer more numbers either. For the period covered in this study the numbers are: M 520, 522, 523, 525, 527, 528, 529, 530, 532 and 534.

¹⁶⁹ Pogue, *The Supreme Command*, 253.

¹⁷⁰ Details: M 523, 03.09.44.

¹⁷¹ KTB H.Gr. B, 06.09.44, 23.50 hours.

¹⁷² 21st A Gp, Planning.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

2.3 The German Strategy until 4 September 1944

At the highest levels German commanders had no idea how to deal with the Allied advance since the failure to halt the invasion. All that the *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (OKW)* could tell its generals was 'auf Zeitgewinn abstellen. Wenige Monate können jetzt einfach entscheidend sein für Rettung des Vaterlands. (...) Daher Forderung Kämpfen, Verteidigen, Halten, Truppe und Führung seelisch stärken.'¹⁷⁴ This directive, desperate, almost desperate in tone, was of little use to the commanders on the ground. While Montgomery ordered his troops to conquer the rest of France and Belgium, *Generalfeldmarschall* Model was trying to think of a way in which to stem the tide.¹⁷⁵ In his *Lagebeurteilung* on 24 August, the first since being appointed as *OB West* a week earlier, Model simply reported to the *OKW* that his own troops were 'burnt up' and that there was no prospect of receiving any reinforcements before the end of the month. He feared that by that time the Allies could have reached the line of the Somme. All Model could suggest was trying to gain as much time as possible until then without losing cohesion. This could be done by pulling back to consecutive lines of the resistance, the next one being behind the Somme and Marne rivers. Hopefully it would hold. Model realized that everything would depend on the Allies not advancing too quickly. At the end of his report he made a somewhat bold statement, telling Hitler that, just as on the Eastern Front 'müssen (...) weitere rückwärtige Stellungen bis einschl. Westwall (...) vorbereitet werden.' By and large Hitler accepted Model's analysis, admitting for once that the forces required to hold the present line were not there. A few hours later he ordered the fortifications of the *Westwall* to be reoccupied and extended. The same day Model was asked if he would be prepared to accept *Generalfeldmarschall* Gerd von Rundstedt's return as *OB West*. Model agreed and eventually on 5 September Von Rundstedt took up his old position.¹⁷⁶ However, that was still some time in the future and in the meantime the Allies did not hold back, but instead unleashed their armour, dashing Model's hopes of a quick recovery. As leading British units crossed the Somme on 30 August it was clear that the Germans withdrawing north were losing the race from the pursuing Allies.

This meant that a gradual withdrawal behind the Somme, to which Hitler consented the following morning, was no longer a viable option.¹⁷⁷ To the surprise of the Germans the British armour (XXX Corps) did not let up and continued the advance upsetting Model's strategy of stopping them at the Somme-Marne line. Model had intended to insert the headquarters of *7. Armee (General der Panzertruppen* Erich Brandenberger) to the east of *15. Armee (General der Infanterie* Gustav-Adolf von Zangen). It was to take over from *5. Panzerarmee (Oberstgruppenführer der Waffen-SS* Josef Dietrich) which was to be relieved so that it could prepare for a counterattack against the right flank of the Allied advance.¹⁷⁸ But now the Kitzingerline had been pierced and the troops of *Heeresgruppe B* were not given a moment's reprieve. What should have been a systematic withdrawal was slowly, but surely

¹⁷⁴ Lagebeurteilung OKW/WFSt (Jodl), 05.07.44, in Kunz, *Wehrmacht und Niederlage*, 61.

¹⁷⁵ This section, unless otherwise specified, Ludewig, *Der deutsche Rückzug*, 175-7.

¹⁷⁶ Chef WFSt 773067/44 and H Gr B 757/44, cited in LAC, Report No. 77, 8.

¹⁷⁷ This section, unless otherwise specified, Ludewig, *Der deutsche Rückzug*, 194-9.

¹⁷⁸ OCMH MS B-730, 1.

turning into a rout. On 31 August Model concluded that he was at the end of his tether as he no longer had any forces to put against what the Germans called the 'örtlich-operativen' or local operational breakthrough of the Allies which had smashed the centre of *Heeresgruppe B*.¹⁷⁹ This crisis began on 25 August and lasted until 4 September.¹⁸⁰ While Von Zangen's *15. Armee* was pulling back along the Channel coast as fast as it could, to maintain its integrity, the remnants of *5. Panzerarmee* were being overtaken left right and centre by speeding Allied armoured units. In view of this the only option Model saw for *Heeresgruppe B* was to try and reach the *Westwall* before it was utterly destroyed. Once more Model urged the *OKW* to occupy the *Weststellung*, as it was also referred to, without further delay. The next day, 1 September, the crisis reached its culmination point for the German High Command.

A wedge had now definitely been driven between *15. Armee* and *5. Panzerarmee* by the British leading troops who were in the outskirts of Lille.¹⁸¹ The celerity of the advance surprised the Germans and Hitler in impotent fury described it as 'eine Frechheit'.¹⁸² Model intended to close this gap and he ordered *7. Armee* to set up a security line between Louvain and Namur. But it was too late. Communications had broken down all along the line and there were not enough anti-tank weapons to halt the Allied armour. Near Mons the remnants of six German divisions were encircled and after a brief battle 25,000 soldiers were taken prisoner. This was the end of *5. Panzerarmee* as a fighting force. There was no longer a cohesive frontline between Lille and Charleroi. Full panic now set in among the troops and all fled east. What had been a hasty, but still orderly withdrawal now turned into total chaos. In an effort to stem the tide, Model made a public address to the soldiers under his command in the shape of a pamphlet 'An die Soldaten des Westheeres!'¹⁸³ He told them that the army had lost a battle, but not the war, stating (in capitals), 'WIR WERDEN DIESEN KRIEG DOCH GEWINNEN!' He appealed to their sense of honour and, betraying just how deep the crisis was, asked the soldiers if necessary to take the initiative themselves if their commanders were lost, 'Überlegt selbst mit, was in dieser Lage das Beste und Richtigste ist [underlined in original].' The situation was a test of manhood, 'Dieser Augenblick will und soll die Waschlappen von den Männern scheiden.' Model told the soldiers that the key thing now was 'Zeitzugewinnen, die der Führer braucht, um neue Truppen und neue Waffen zum Einsatz zu bringen.' He ended his pamphlet by saying, 'Soldaten, wir müssen dem Führer diese Zeit schaffen!' However, when he made the appeal, the race had already been lost. German operational instructions were reduced to 'verbissen in hinhaltenden Kampf jeden Fussbreit streitig (...) machen'.¹⁸⁴ At last, the *OKW* and Hitler also realized that the situation had fundamentally altered.

On 2 September the *OKW* issued new instructions for the fighting in the West. The idea of impeding the Allied advance by successive lines of defence was finally

¹⁷⁹ OCMH MS D-327, 1.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, 1-2.

¹⁸¹ This section, unless otherwise specified, Ludwig, *Der deutsche Rückzug*, 219-240.

¹⁸² Helmut Heiber, *Lagebesprechungen im Führerhauptquartier*, Stuttgart 1962, 648.

¹⁸³ Full text, KTB 88 AK, 11.09.44, A 226.

¹⁸⁴ Wehrmachtführungsstab, 02.09.44, quoted in Kunz, *Wehrmacht und Niederlage*, 62.

abandoned, instead *Heeresgruppe B* was to fight a delaying action from now on.¹⁸⁵ Model replied that he was hoping to hold the line Antwerp-Maas-Sedan-Metz-Moselle, but that he had his doubts whether this could be done.¹⁸⁶ The *OKW* instruction was confirmed by Hitler the next day.¹⁸⁷ Since this directive affected the actions during the next few weeks, and explains the relative lack of interference from Hitler, it is worth quoting it in full. In paragraph one, in which the general outline was given, it said 'Die stark verbrauchten eigenen Kräfte und die Unmöglichkeit, rasch ausreichende Verstärkungen zuzuführen, lassen es nicht zu, schon jetzt eine Linie zu bestimmen, die gehalten werden muss und sicher gehalten werden kann. Es kommt darauf an, möglichst lange Zeit für Aufstellung und Heranführen neuer Verbände und für den Ausbau der West-Stellung zu gewinnen und durch teilschläge Feindkräfte zu vernichten.' To achieve this Hitler ordered the right and the centre 'in verbissenem, hinhaltendem Kampf dem Feind jeden Fussbreit Bodens streitig zu machen. Örtliche Einbrüche müssen in Kauf genommen werden.' The emphasis in the new strategy was on gaining time and losing no more troops. Allied and German commanders at the highest level agreed on one thing: the door to Germany seemed to be wide open during those first few days of September. For Montgomery it was an opportunity, for Model a grave threat. As the directives for the future strategy were issued, there was still a yawning gap between *15. and 7. Armee* and through it the Guards rushed capturing Brussels. Meanwhile remnants of German divisions continued to flood back east. One of the many shattered divisions on its way back to the *Heimat* was the *85. Infanterie-Division* commanded by *Generalleutnant* Kurt Chill.

2.4 Chill and the 85. Infanterie-Division until 4 September 1944

The origins of the unit which was to play a pivotal role in the autumn fighting could not have been any less auspicious.¹⁸⁸ The *85. Infanterie-Division* under *Generalleutnant* Kurt Erich Chill, was one of six divisions raised in the *25. Welle* (wave or mobilisation drive) on 10 February 1944.¹⁸⁹ These were given the available numbers below 100. Until 1943 the core of German infantry divisions consisted of three regiments with a total of nine infantry battalions. An ever increasing manpower shortage required a drastic rethinking. From October 1943 these divisions were organized along new guidelines. From now on they were to have only six rifle battalions instead of nine.¹⁹⁰ The so-called 1944 type infantry divisions compensated

¹⁸⁵ Percy Schramm, *Kriegstagebuch des Oberkommandos der Wehrmacht*, München 1982, 7/I, 365.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Walther Hubatsch, *Hitlers Weisungen für die Kriegführung 1939-1945, Dokumente des Oberkommandos der Wehrmacht (2. Auflage)*, Koblenz 1983, 286-8.

¹⁸⁸ Unless otherwise specified, this section, Schuster MS B-846, 4-32.

¹⁸⁹ II Cdn Corps, IS 54, 16.09.44. The others were the 77., 84., 89., 91. and 92. ID.

¹⁹⁰ There is considerable confusion as to the size of an average German rifle battalion at that time. Based on the average company strength in 85. I.D. which was 80-90 (II Cdn Corps IS 33, 13.08.44 and First Cdn Army K 208-11, 16.08.44) it should number about 350-400 men (four rifle companies plus the staff company). This estimate is confirmed by KTB 88 AK, 08.09.44, B 262, which describes a 'mittelstarkes' Btl as 300-400. But then there is another strength figure, 689, given in II Cdn Corps IS 52 Part II, 07.09.44, based on unspecified captured German documents; also the official German company strength is given as 142 all ranks (*Kriegsstärkenachweisungen*, Band 2, Infanterie, 1943/44 (NARA RG 242, T 87, Roll 391, 168-170) which would add up to a battalion strength of 600-700. An explanation for the difference could be that the latter two documents give the theoretical number (Sollstärke), whereas the others are based on the actual figure (Iststärke).

for this reduction in battalions by getting a *Füsilier-Bataillon* instead of the old reconnaissance unit and by increasing the number of automatic weapons.¹⁹¹ The new divisions also had two regiments instead of three. Those in the *85. ID.* were *Grenadier-Regiment 1053* and *1054*. As usual in the German army all other units in the division were numbered by putting a 1 in front of the divisional number. Hence: *Füsilier-Bataillon 185*, *Artillerie-Regiment 185* etcetera (see Appendix 1). Total strength was 8,725 all ranks.¹⁹² The new division was to be formed around *Grenadier-Regiment 1024* which itself had been raised only four months earlier on 20 November 1943. As was the customary in the German army the new division was activated by a *Wehrkreis* (military district), in this case XII (Wiesbaden) which took care of the drafting and training. However, in view of the impending Allied invasion the division was not to be trained in Germany, but in the Crecy area in northwest France where it was subordinated first to *LXXXII. Armeekorps* and then *LXVII. Armeekorps*.

The personnel of the *85. I.D.* were generally new call-ups from *Wehrkreis XII*, but additional replacements later came from *Oberbefehlshaber West* and even included Russians (so-called *Hilfswillige* or *Hiwi's*), Poles and Czechs.¹⁹³ The officers were mostly veterans. The divisional staff consisted of *Oberstleutnant i.G.* Kurt Schuster, Ia (Operations), *Major i.G.* Weber, Ib (Supply and Administration) and *Oberleutnant* Zörkler, Ic (Intelligence).¹⁹⁴ The two infantry regiments were commanded by *Major* (from 1 September *Oberstleutnant*) Georg Heinrich Dreyer (*GR 1053*) and *Oberst* De La Chaux (*GR 1054*). The division had only a limited number of vehicles, but since it was to be part of the strategic reserve some kind of mobility was essential. This was resolved by procuring large numbers of bicycles. The deadline for equipping the *85. I.D.* was 15 May, but this was not met and the division had a thirty per cent deficiency in equipment. This issue was not resolved until the end of July, but it was not a problem as Chill's division was initially given a reprieve. Following the invasion of Normandy on 6 June 1944 the *85. I.D.* was ordered to assemble north of the Somme in the Abbeville area. It was to be ready for march within twelve hours. In view of the heavy fighting going on in Normandy, everybody in the division expected the order with tension and impatience. But the Allied deception plan 'Fortitude', intended to fool the German High Command into believing a second landing would be made in the Pas de Calais area, worked beyond expectation and nearly two months passed before the *15. Armee* was finally allowed to release units into Normandy.¹⁹⁵ On 31 July Chill at last received orders from the *15. Armee* that his division was to assemble north of the Seine at Rouen ready to cross the river at a moment's notice. The *85. I.D.* was finally to receive its baptism of fire. Before briefly describing the battles in France we need to consider for a moment its commanding

¹⁹¹ *Kriegsstärkenachweisungen*, Band 2a, Infanterie, 1944 (NARA RG 242, T 87, Roll 391).

¹⁹² Brian A. Reid, *No Holding Back, Operation Totalize, Normandy, August 1944*, Toronto 2005, 392.

¹⁹³ K 208-11, 16.08.44, PAJVD.

¹⁹⁴ Special Interrogation Report (SIR) 918, TNA WO 208/5336. Other staff officers were *Oberleutnant* Sprenger (OI, assistant to Ia), *Major* Klimm (IIa, Adjudant), *Hauptmann* Witte (III, Legal Adviser), *Oberstabsintendant* Hoffmann (IVa, Accounts and administrative) and *Oberstabsarzt* Dr Meyer Hellbrecht (IVb, doctor).

¹⁹⁵ Pogue, *The Supreme Command*, 193-4.

officer, Kurt Chill, who was later to give his name to the *Kampfgruppe*, the subject of this study.

Chill

Kurt Erich Chill was born in West Prussia in the Prussian town of Thorn (today Torun in Poland) on 1 May 1895.¹⁹⁶ After signing up as a one-year volunteer with *Infanterie-Regiment 21*, Chill fought in the First World War, initially in *Infanterie-Regiment 61* which fought at the Somme, and from 1916 as an observer in the *Fliegertruppe* (Flying Corps) in Flanders. He ended the war with the *Eisernes Kreuz II. Klasse* and the *deutsches Ordenschild*. After the war Chill, by then a *Leutnant*, briefly served in his old regiment before leaving the army and joining the police in 1919. He entered service as an *Oberleutnant* for the *Sicherheitspolizei* and rose through the ranks, becoming a *Hauptmann* in 1924 and a *Major* with the *Landespolizei* in Merseburg in 1935. The same year he was trained at the *Offizier Schule* where he received the qualification 'voll befriedigend'. He then decided to go back to the army. This decision was no doubt influenced by Hitler's declaration on 16 March that the army was to be expanded from 21 to 36 divisions and that general conscription would be introduced at the end of the year.¹⁹⁷ Chill was not the only one to take this step, in fact, the rapid expansion was only possible because the army took over 56,000 men from the *Landespolizei*.¹⁹⁸ On 1 July 1935 Chill once more found himself back in army uniform.

Chill first served as a *Major* with *Infanterie-Regiment 65*, then in 1937 was put in charge of *1. Bataillon of Infanterie-Regiment 1 (1. Infanterie-Division)*. It was in this role that he entered the war, now an *Oberstleutnant*. The *1. I.D.* under *Generalleutnant* Joachim von Kortzfleisch, took part in the attack on Poland in the northern attack group (*3. Armee*). Rather surprisingly, considering what was to come, Chill did not do particularly well as a battalion commander. In the first assessment in Chill's personnel file, dated 18 February 1941, Kortzfleisch is quoted as saying that Chill was very diligent, an excellent comrade and a good instructor, however he added, 'Dagegen kann ich seine Gefechtsführung im Polenfeldzug weder als geschickt noch als erfolgreich ansprechen'. Obviously he had not made much of an impression on his superiors. Maybe that is one of the reasons Chill was sent to Halle in February 1940 where he served as a tactics teacher. There he did very well, according to the same assessment. Still, in December he found himself in charge of a regiment, *Infanterie-Regiment 45 (21. Infanterie-Division)*. He was promoted to *Oberst*, but even so his divisional commander, *Generalmajor* Otto Sponheimer, felt that Chill was not yet ready for the next step, or as the official phrase was 'zur nächst höheren Verwendung noch nicht [geeignet]'. All that was to change dramatically over the next three years.

Just one year later Sponheimer, by then a *Generalleutnant*, was full of praise for Chill. The *21. Infanterie-Division* fought as part of *Heeresgruppe Nord* and advanced

¹⁹⁶ This section, Personalakten Chill (NARA RG 242) unless otherwise specified.

¹⁹⁷ *Das Deutsche Reich*, Band 1, 416.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 419.

as far as the town of Volkhov.¹⁹⁹ Then the tables were gradually turned on the Germans and the division eventually ended up southeast of Leningrad.²⁰⁰ There it was engaged in extremely fierce fighting as part of *I. Armeekorps* (*General der Kavallerie* Phillip Kleffel) which the Russians were trying to cut off. Instead, the Russian Second Shock Army (*General Leytenant* Andrei Vlassov) was surrounded and eventually destroyed after some hard and bloody fighting.²⁰¹ Apparently the experiences in Russia had changed Chill for the better as a soldier as he was now increasingly praised for his performance. Sponheimer's assessment is worth quoting in full as it gives the first inking of the new Chill. Sponheimer wrote on 8 April 1942, 'Charaktervolle, klare Persönlichkeit, seine Einsatzbereitschaft in schwierigen Lagen verdient Hervorhebung. Durch sein persönliches Beispiel reisst er mit. Durch seine schwungvolle und wendige Führung seines Rgt. Erzielt er stets gute Erfolge im Kampf, dabei auf das Wohl der Truppe bedacht. Taktisch gut beanlagt, sicher im Entschluss, gründlich in der Befehlsgebung. Bisher im Kriege (Ostfeldzug wiederholt mit der Führung eines verst.Rgt. sowie stellv. Mit der Führung der Division beauftragt), zeigt er Geschick und Befähigung für die Führung grössere Verbände. Zum Div. Kommandeur voll geeignet.' Nevertheless, Chill would still have to wait another six months before finally being assigned his own division.

Chill was originally supposed to command the *126. Infanterie-Division* because its commanding officer, *Generalleutnant* Laux, was taking over as commander of an improvised Corps. However, before setting off Laux persuaded his superiors to nominate *Oberst* Harrie Hoppe (the hero of Schlüsselburg) who had been with the division from its inception.²⁰² So Chill was assigned the *122. Infanterie-Division* instead. In December 1942 he was promoted to *Generalmajor*. Chill did not rest on his laurels, but kept carving out a name for himself, so much so that half a year later, on 1 June 1943, he was promoted to *Generalleutnant*. That this promotion was well deserved Chill proved by leading a successful attack of his division near the hot spot of Nevel. On 15 October 1943 he was awarded the coveted *Ritterkreuz*, further proof that in Russia he had really honed his skills. His division was part of the successful effort to block the expansion of a Russian breakthrough at Nevel which had surprised the Germans.²⁰³ He performed so well that he was even mentioned in the *Wehrmachtsbericht*, the daily broadcast by the German armed forces, and all of Germany could hear over the radio that 'Südlich Nevel scheiterten in harten Kämpfen alle Durchbruchsversuche des Feindes. (...) In diesen Kämpfen haben sich die norddeutsche 290. Infanteriedivision unter Führung des Generalleutnants Heinrichs und die pommersche 122. Infanteriedivision unter Führung des Generalleutnants Chill besonders bewährt.'²⁰⁴ The battle at Nevel dragged on for another three months, but the front north of Vitebsk held until the spring of the following year. By then Chill had left his division. In March 1944 he was ordered to set up the new *85. Infanterie-Division*. His subordinates would have been reassured

¹⁹⁹ Victor Madej, *Russo-German War No. 27, Autumn 1942: Defeat of Barbarossa*, Allentown 1988, 14-5.

²⁰⁰ *Das Deutsche Reich* Band 4, Beiheft, Skizze 1, 18, 19, 25.

²⁰¹ Ziemke and Bauer, *Moscow to Stalingrad*, 190-8.

²⁰² Lose, 126. ID, 113.

²⁰³ Madej, *Russo-German War No. 31, Summer-Autumn 1943*, Allentown 1987, 13-5.

²⁰⁴ *Die Wehrmachtsberichte 1939-1945*, Band 2, Köln 1989, 629.

to know that their new commanding officer, in addition to being a veteran, was 'sicher, ruhig und umsichtig'.²⁰⁵ Chill would need all these qualities in the coming battles.

Baptism of fire

After receiving the order to move to the invasion front on 31 July the division set up three march groups centred around *Grenadier-Regiment 1053*, *1054* and *Artillerie-Regiment 185* respectively.²⁰⁶ Progress was slow because most of the movement took place during the night as the Allied air forces ruled the skies. The Seine was crossed on 7 August and Chill learned that his division was to come under *I. SS. Panzerkorps* (*SS Brigadeführer Fritz Krämer*).²⁰⁷ There the division was to take over from the *12. SS. Panzer-Division Hitlerjugend* (*SS-Oberführer Kurt Meyer*) which was being bled white fighting the Canadians. Although the SS-men were clinging on for dear life and desperate for relief they were asked to stay one more day so as to give Chill's *Grenadiere*, most of whom had had to cycle for a week, some time to rest. Finally, on the evening of 9 August *GR 1053* and *III./AR 185* were the first units to occupy their new positions northeast of Falaise along the line of the Laison river.²⁰⁸ Getting there had not been easy as the troops 'had all suffered from air attacks' and 'had had to march a great part of the way on paths parallel to the road and this cross-country marching was very tiring'.²⁰⁹ The following days the other units arrived and *GR 1054* took up position to the left of its sister regiment. The *Grenadiere* would get only a few days' respite before the balloon went up.

On 14 August First Canadian Army launched Operation Tractable. The goal was to envelop Falaise and seal the 'bag' around the German troops in Normandy from the north. To assist the ground troops saturation bombing was asked for. The results were devastating for the German troops facing the onslaught and the *85. Infanterie-Division* together with its sister division, the *89. Infanterie-Division*, took the brunt of the bombing.²¹⁰ The number of those killed or wounded is unknown, but the Intelligence officers of II Canadian Corps noted drily that 'casualties were heavy' and that '85 has probably not more than two battalions left'.²¹¹ The commanding officer of the SS-division put it more graphically when he bluntly stated about the effects of the Allied bombing, 'verwandeln die Stellungen der 85. Infanteriedivision in einen Friedhof'.²¹² In fact Chill himself reported the following day that he had only a battalion and a half of infantry and two guns left.²¹³ During the first stage of the

²⁰⁵ Assesment 11.01.44 in Personalakten.

²⁰⁶ This section, unless otherwise noted, Schuster, 11-33.

²⁰⁷ Not as Schuster (13) erroneously states *II. SS. Panzerkorps* (Cf. Ellis, *Victory Volume 1*, map page 432) and Blumenson, *Breakout and Pursuit*, Map IX.

²⁰⁸ II Cdn Corps, IS 30, 10.08.44. Reid (*No Holding Back*, 354) has 85. ID's first contact with the Canadians early on the 9th at Point 132 northeast of Potigny.

²⁰⁹ James Lucas and James Barker, *The Killing Ground, The Battle of the Falaise Gap, August 1944*, London 1978, 112. They erroneously give the number as GR 1055, but that was part of the 89. ID which had been in action south of Caen since 6 August (Blumenson, *Breakout and Pursuit*, 462).

²¹⁰ Man, map on page 124.

²¹¹ II Cdn Corps, IS 34, 15.08.44.

²¹² Panzermeyer, *Grenadiere*, München-Lochhausen, 1965, 299.

²¹³ Blumenson, *Breakout and Pursuit*, 531.

operation 1,010 of Chill's men were taken prisoner.²¹⁴ As yet *Füsilier-Bataillon 185* and the divisional artillery, south of the Laison river were unaffected.²¹⁵ However, during the second stage 171 prisoners were made from *Füsilier-Bataillon 185* meaning that, adding the wounded and killed, the battalion basically ceased to exist as a fighting force.²¹⁶ In total, during the week that followed, 1,527 men were captured by the Canadians, a number which had increased to 1,834 by early September.²¹⁷ The divisional losses were so huge that by the time it arrived in Belgium it was reduced to just 1,534 all ranks.²¹⁸ This basically meant that Chill's division was no longer a fighting force in any sense of the word.

It was during this struggle that *Hauptmann* Leopold von Hütz, in charge of *II./GR 1054*, whom we shall meet later on, won the *Ritterkreuz* for his bravery leading the remnants of his battalion near Potigny.²¹⁹ Because all *Flak* regiments had been moved out of the area Chill only had three 8.8 cm *Pak 43* guns left to fight the Polish tanks.²²⁰ The result was a foregone conclusion and at the end of the day all guns were destroyed and no more than two battalions of *Grenadiere* were left. Hitler purportedly said that the 15 August was the worst day of his life.²²¹ Whether this report is apocryphal or not, that day was indeed the beginning of the end for the German army in Normandy. The following day *Oberstleutnant* Dreyer, commanding *GR 1053*, gathered what little infantry was left in his regiment, thus denying the Poles further progress for the moment. For this he, too, was awarded the *Ritterkreuz*. On 17 August the *85. Infanterie-Division* was no longer holding a cohesive front and it was barely capable of offering determined resistance.²²² The division was by then reduced to just one regiment, *Grenadier-Regiment 1053*, in which all the infantry was gathered, together with some artillery and smaller divisional troops.²²³ It had been a gruelling three days for Chill and he complained that he 'had never known such tiredness. It caused hallucinations and a complete sense of non-being. (...) We craved for sleep and slept like the dead; we could have slept for days.'²²⁴ Still, the division had not disintegrated and looking back after the war Chill's *Ia*, *Oberstleutnant* Schuster, felt that the division had performed as best it

²¹⁴ Stacey, *Official History*, 248. The First Canadian Army as a whole captured 1,299 Germans that day

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ First figure: Terry Copp, *Fields of Fire, The Canadians in Normandy*, Toronto 2008, 280; quoted in Lieb, *Konventioneller Krieg*, 441. Second figure: II Cdn Corps, IS 50, 07.09.44. The sister division of the 85., the 89. (Generalleutnant Conrad-Oskar Heinrichs) suffered equally badly losing 1,566 men as POWs to the Canadians.

²¹⁸ KTB 88 AK, 14.09.44, A 265. This is completely at odds with Zetterling (*Normandy 1944, German Military Organization, Combat Power and Organizational Effectiveness*, Manitoba 2000, 235-6) who claims that the 85. ID 'only' lost 3,000 men and still had 5,000 men left at the end of August. The evidence for this is a document by the OKH Org. Abt. from 16.10.44 about the situation on 1 September. Oddly enough this document shows a loss of at least 5,000 men, but this is dismissed by Zetterling as 'overly pessimistic' without providing evidence for why this would be the case.

²¹⁹ Didier Lodieu, *La Massue, Les Soldats Polonais dans la Bataille de Normandie*, Louviers 2004, 84 and 91.

²²⁰ Ibid, 110.

²²¹ Ellis, *Victory I*, 431.

²²² Lucas and Barker, *The Killing Ground*, 123.

²²³ Schuster (MS B-846), organisational table.

²²⁴ Lucas and Barker, *The Killing Ground*, 122. Unfortunately they do not give the source of this quote.

could under the circumstances during its first serious battle and that at least it had held together.²²⁵ Luckily for Chill and his men they had been pushed eastwards and northwards, in effect, out of the pocket which was slowly forming.²²⁶ Now the retreat, that most difficult of all military manoeuvres, began.

One of the major problem for Chill was trying to maintain cohesion while pulling back. To make matters worse for the time being Dreyers *Kampfgruppe* was subordinated to the *21. Panzer-Division* (*Generalleutnant* Edgar Feuchtinger) and took part in the fighting south of the Seine where it was the last unit to cross at Rouen. Here a third soldier in the *85. I.D.* won a *Ritterkreuz*, *Oberleutnant* Adolf Vogt, originally in charge of *12./GR 1054*. Asked by his comrades of the *21. Panzer-Division* to hold out for two more days so they could ferry their armoured vehicles across the river he and his men managed the impossible. Vogt was severely wounded and transferred back to the *Reich* where he recuperated until the end of 1944. The fact that within the space of two weeks Chill's division had earned three *Ritterkreuze* is testimony to the ferocity of the fighting. One thing Chill did was keep officers who had become superfluous for the moment in a so-called divisional reserve, so that he could make use of their services whenever and wherever this was needed.²²⁷ This measure would soon stand him in good stead. On 29 August the non-fighting elements of the division were back in the area where they had originally trained, around Abbeville on the river Somme. Here it received reinforcements in the form of an 880-men strong so-called *Marschbataillon*²²⁸ which had only one rifle for every five men and three machine-guns in total. The same day Chill was ordered by *7. Armee* to form a *Kampfgruppe* together with the remnants of the *84.* and *89. Infanterie-Division* to guard the Somme crossings on both sides of Péronne. The new *Kampfgruppe* was to be commanded by *Generalleutnant* Chill.²²⁹ Here we find the kernel of the subject of this study.

However, the seed would not germinate yet, for a number of reasons. First of all the division had no troops fit for combat, it could not reach the designated area before 1 September, the connection with the *89. I.D.* had been lost since 18 August and the *84. I.D.* consisted only of a regimental staff.²³⁰ The order was moot anyway since, as we have seen, the Allied pursuit caught up with the retreating Germans before they could form a solid line behind the Somme. The division was therefore allowed to pull back to Brussels to be reorganized there. It arrived in Rixensart, southeast of the Belgian capital on 1 September. The following day it was ordered to reform in the *Reich*. In the meantime *Kampfgruppe Dreyer*, after having crossed the Seine was ordered to rejoin its parent unit.²³¹ On 3 September the divisional staff reached

²²⁵ Ibid, 24.

²²⁶ Meyer (304) somewhat scathingly notes that the 85. ID was being pulled out 'um Verkehrsaufgaben zu lösen.' There is no documentary evidence for this.

²²⁷ Schuster, B-424, 24.

²²⁸ Originally set up by the Wehrkreise to conduct draftees to the zone of operations, later they became replacement pools for the Feldersatzbataillone, the first line reinforcement battalions (*German Order of Battle*, B9-10).

²²⁹ Order 7. Armee, quoted in full in II Cdn Corps, IS 48, 05.09.44.

²³⁰ Schuster, B-244, 28, 29 and 31.

²³¹ Schuster, B-244, (27) states that it was temporarily attached to the 33. ID. That is impossible since that division was disbanded in 1940.

Turnhout, ready to move on. Dreyer and what was left of his battle group –about a hundred men- arrived there the following day. Then things took an unexpected turn.

2.5 The picture on 4-5 September 1944

Antwerp at last

Monday 4 September marked the day that the crisis for the retreating *Wehrmacht* came to a head as Antwerp was liberated and the door to Germany was wide open. The Allies had reached what Clausewitz called the 'culmination point' where the defenders might finally halt the attackers provided they had enough troops left.²³² It was a day that would turn out to be of crucial importance for the rest of the war. Little did any of the participants involved realize this at the time.²³³

The previous day, Sunday 3 September, Major-General G.P.B. 'Pip' Roberts' 11th Armoured Division had stopped just twenty-five kilometres from Antwerp. The main body of the 29th Armoured Brigade had laagered for the night in and around Aalst, while the 23rd Hussars had gone as far as Wolvertem. Roberts had decided not to push ahead because he 'did not want to try getting into Antwerp in the dark – the possibility of chaos was much too great...'²³⁴ He was right to be cautious, because, at least on paper, the Germans still had sizeable forces in the town. Since 5 June the defence for the bigger Antwerp area had been the responsibility of *Divisionsstab zur besondere Verwendung 136* under *Generalmajor* Christoph *Graf* Stolberg zu Stolberg. Stolberg's was not a proper division, but only an administrative divisional headquarters without any troops. He was told to make use of the units in and around Antwerp and by the end of August Stolberg commanded no less than six battalions plus various other troops, probably as many as 10,000 men.²³⁵ On the other hand, these were all security forces, not front-line troops and they had only few anti-tank weapons except for the *Flak* in the outer rings which could double as such. Moreover, Stolberg's troops not only needed to defend the town, but also cover the dock area. These troops clearly were no match for the advancing 11th Armoured Division. Still, in such a large urban area they could create a lot of trouble. But would they?

Attack

On 4 September the leading British troops set off as soon as they could. Roberts ordered an advance along the two roads leading into Antwerp from Brussels. The 23rd Hussars and H Company 8th Rifle Brigade (RB) -infantry in halftracks- were to operate on the right hand side and take the road through Malines (Dutch: Mechelen),

²³² Clausewitz, Book Seven, Chapter 5.

²³³ The story of the battle for Antwerp is based on Stolberg (MS B-170), Patrick Delaforce, *The Black Bull, From Normandy to the Baltic with the 11th Armoured Division*, Stroud 1993, 126-135, Frank Stappaerts, *Kolonel Harry*, Berchem 1997, 95-105, *Royal Engineers Battlefield Tour, The Seine to the Rhine*, 1947, 58-60, and Peter Taghon, *België 44, De Bevrijding*, Tielt 1993, 62-63.

²³⁴ Quoted in Delaforce, *The Black Bull*, 126.

²³⁵ Broken down: Ostbataillon 600, Krankenbataillone MI and MII/136, Sicherungs-Regiment 16 (2 battalions), 1 bataillon Vlaamse Wacht, Feldkommandantur 520, Kriegsmarine and Flak-units. Stolberg himself in the 1946 report (3) estimated the size of his forces at 15,000 - 17,000. This seems a little excessive, but could be based on the number of troops at his disposal in early June before most of the Luftwaffe troops left.

and the 3rd Royal Tank Regiment (RTR) plus G Company 8th RB, were to take the road through Boom, on the left. The group on the right started off nearest their objective and should be able to reach Antwerp first. The 23rd Hussars had spent the night in Wolvertem, a few miles north of Brussels. To get to their designated route they first drove as far as Vilvoorde, then turned left and took the main road to Antwerp. In Malines the main bridge across the Dijle was intact and the advance continued. The next bridge, across the Nete, was also intact and the group, racing through Kontich, was fast approaching Antwerp. It was now early afternoon. Then the leading tanks got into trouble. Just as they saw the outskirts of the town 8.8 cm *Flak* guns opened fire on them. Although the dug-in *Flak* site was fired at by Sextons from the 13th Royal Horse Artillery, the Germans would not budge and the advance came to a complete standstill. As dusk began to fall, the British troops decided to double back to Kontich where they spent 'a very comfortable night'.²³⁶

The second group fared better. Because they had a greater distance to cover they left Aalst when it was still dark. The advance was uneventful initially. The column stopped in Dendermonde to rest for a few hours and then the tanks and halftracks raced on to Willebroek to enter the main road into Antwerp. They faced two possible obstacles there, which might delay the advance, the bridges over the Willebroek Canal, and five hundred metres further up the road, over the river Rupel. Ahead of the advancing tanks was one of the division's engineers, Lieutenant C.B. Ratcliffe (13th Field Squadron) on a recce mission. Ratcliffe saw that the canal bridge was wired for demolition. As he carefully tried to remove the wire and mines he was spotted by German sentries on the north end of the bridge. Soon after, at 08.30 hours, the bridge was blown, thus blocking the route into Antwerp. Ratcliffe wired back a request for a Bailey bridge, but he knew that could be a while in coming. Meanwhile the leading column, C Squadron 3rd Royal Tank Regiment (RTR) under Major John Dunlop, had reached the crossroads at Fort Breendonck, about 1,500 metres down the road.

Suddenly an agitated Belgian, Robert Vekemans, himself a lieutenant and engineer in the Belgian army, appeared. The first tanks rumbled by, ignoring him, but he managed to stop the fourth one. Vekemans made it clear to Dunlop that he could show them a diversion which would keep them out of sight of the Germans at the bridges and get them across both the canal and the river. Dunlop received permission from his commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel David N.H. Silvertop, and asked Vekemans to show them the way. The Belgian, in a Humber staff car, led the way across the canal at Willebroek, then turned north and crossed the Rupel over the old Enschoedt bridge and from there into Boom. The German troops tried to blow up the main road bridge but disappeared as soon as the Sherman tanks opened fire. Vekemans ran forward and disconnected the fuses.²³⁷ The bridge was safe. The tanks swept on towards Antwerp, the Russian troops responsible for the section between Assche and Duffel (*II./Ostbatallion 600*), ran for their lives.²³⁸

²³⁶ Delaforce, *The Black Bull*, 133.

²³⁷ He was later awarded the Military Cross.

²³⁸ The 63 survivors and their commander Major Brandauer reported at the headquarters of 719. ID. three days later (KT 88 AK, 07.09.44, A 155).

Inside the town

B Squadron 3rd RTR now took the lead while A Squadron turned left to enter Antwerp from the southwest, via Hoboken, along the river Scheldt. B Squadron had to fight their way into town, but after a two-hour battle the defenders were swept aside and at around three p.m. the leading Shermans entered Antwerp proper. It was a madhouse, Brussels all over. While the British tanks were being cheered by crowds of enthusiastic civilians and they were overwhelmed by flowers, bottles and kisses, the fighting was still going on. Every now and again a hand grenade would be thrown or a gun opened up. Especially from the left bank of the Scheldt the tankers came under fire and they crouched in their turrets as bullets pinged about while they were being waved at by pretty girls pointing out enemy positions.²³⁹

The 159th Infantry Brigade, following the tanks, met with even stiffer opposition. The 4th King's Shropshire Light Infantry (KSLI) supported by tanks from C Squadron 2nd Fife and Forfar Yeomanry (FFY) advanced on the Central Park, the heart of Stolberg's defence, which they reached at four p.m. The Germans there proved a tough nut to crack. Three bunkers with underground tunnels linking them sheltered the German headquarters. The lake was an obstacle and snipers formed an additional problem. Fortunately for the attackers, the Russian defenders did not much like giving up their lives at the last moment and at 20.30 hours Stolberg was forced to surrender.

The last battle of the day was between D Company 4th KSLI under Major R. Thornburn and the *Feldgendarmarie* at the *Feldkommandatur* on the Meir where the fighting went on until 10 p.m. when a fire forced the German defenders to give up. About 6,000 Germans were taken prisoner, many of them locked up for the night in Antwerp Zoo –the animals had long since gone- to protect them from the mob. This meant that at least 3,000 had escaped. Many of them accompanied *Kampfkommandant Generalmajor* R. Gohtsche, who that afternoon at 14.30 hours had been ordered by Stolberg to collect stragglers and pull back behind the Albert Canal and set up a defence there.²⁴⁰ Others joined a *Kampfgruppe* under *Oberstleutnant* Ludolf Von Alvensleben just north of the docks.²⁴¹ Von Alvensleben had been in command of the vital dock sector since February 1944. The *Hafenkommandant*, *Fregattenkapitän* Joseph Paul Joachim Szyskowitz, was severely wounded. He later died in a British hospital.²⁴² The battle for the town itself was now basically over and the 4th KSLI could at last join in the party and celebrate. But only briefly, as they would discover the following day.

Meanwhile the 3rd Monmouthshires also arrived in Antwerp. They were told to clear the docks. It was an impossible task for a single infantry battalion. It was nigh impossible to advance rapidly because of the milling crowds and the soldiers were exhausted after the long march when they reached the dock area. The first attempt failed miserably. A Company managed to form a bridgehead near the sluice gates,

²³⁹ Bill Close, 3 RTR, quoted in Delaforce, *The Black Bull*, 131.

²⁴⁰ Stolberg, 10. After serving with 1. F. Armee Gohtsche in 1945 commanded Feldkommandatur 591; he was executed on 22 April because he was accused of 'Wehrkraftzersetzung' (Die Generale des Heeres, Bd 4, Biblio Verlag).

²⁴¹ First mention of the KGr Alvensleben is made in KTB 88 AK, 05.09.44, 18.20 hours.

²⁴² PAJVD. Van Cauwenbergh, *Ze zijn d'ér! September 1944 bevrijding van Antwerpen*, Brugge 1984, 70, erroneously gives his name as Kapitän-zur-See Mär.

but that was it. Eugene Colson, alias Colonel Harry, who was in command of the dock area resistance, was deeply disappointed. He made it clear to British officers that he and his men had seized two bridges across the Albert Canal as well as an important lock and that the road to Merksem was still open. It was a waste of time. He was told that they had "no orders to proceed any further".²⁴³

A new army

On the same day that Antwerp was captured by the 11th Armoured Division the gap between the *15. Armee* and the *7. Armee* had widened to no less than one hundred kilometres. Desperate times call for desperate measures and Hitler decided to recall an old warhorse, 69-year old *Generalfeldmarschall* Gerd von Rundstedt, to take over as *OB West*, correctly judging that holding two jobs (*OB West* as well as commanding *Heeresgruppe B*) was too much even for Model, who could now concentrate on the latter. Von Rundstedt was to take over on the following day. The fall of Antwerp on 4 September was a real shock to German commanders. In fact after the war *General der Infanterie* von Zangen, in charge of the *15. Armee*, confessed that when retreating from the Seine he 'had no fear that Antwerp would be taken since it was far behind the front line (...) When I heard on 4 September that it had been captured it came as a stunning surprise.'²⁴⁴ Early that morning Model had ordered a security screen to be set up behind the Albert Canal and the *15. Armee* to pull back to a line from Gent to Brussels and Namur. The fall of Antwerp meant that the *15. Armee* was now cut off and might be lost for good. He sent a cry for help to Hitler's headquarters at Rastenburg requesting fresh divisions.²⁴⁵ Unless he received five Panzer and ten infantry divisions the door to the *Reich* would stand wide open, he suggested. His telegram jolted the German High Command into action. Both *OKW* and Hitler realised that *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps* (*General der Infanterie* Hans Wolfgang Reinhard) with its single division plus a few battalions could never plug the gap on its own. They would have to put in more troops, in fact a whole new army. But where to find one?

That afternoon a phone call went out to *Generaloberst* Kurt Student, *Oberbefehlshaber der Fallschirmtruppen* in Berlin-Wannsee.²⁴⁶ He was ordered to form a defence behind the Albert Canal from Antwerp to Maastricht with a new army, to be called *1. Fallschirmarmee*. A bridgehead at Hasselt was to be maintained in order to allow units of the *15. Armee* to fall back. For the same reason the Woensdrecht area was to be defended. The new army was to come under *Heeresgruppe B*. *Flak* support was to be provided by the *18. Flakbrigade* which was on the run from France plus thirty heavy and ten mixed *Flak* batteries from *Luftgaue VI* and *XI*.²⁴⁷ The idea was an extension of the *Weststellung* from Aachen along the Albert Canal to Antwerp.²⁴⁸ This stretch was called the *Brabantstellung*.²⁴⁹ This now

²⁴³ Quoted in Stappaerts, *Kolonel Harry*, 97.

²⁴⁴ Interview Von Zangen 1946, quoted in Shulman, *Defeat in the West*, London 1968, 232.

²⁴⁵ KTB H Gr B, 04.09.44, I a 6944/44.

²⁴⁶ Details this section Student, article in *Der deutsche Fallschirmjäger*, issue 9, 1964, 3-4.

²⁴⁷ KTB 88 AK, 05.09.44, C 210, and KTB H Gr B, 05.09.44, Ia 7006/44.

²⁴⁸ Hubatsch, *Hitlers Weisungen*, 272-4.

²⁴⁹ Klep and Schoenmaker, *De Bevrijding*, 87. The name refers to the old dukedom of Brabant on the western edge of the Holy Roman Empire, covering the current Dutch province of Noord Brabant and much of central Belgium.

became Student's responsibility. He is one of the more famous German generals and much has already been written of his exploits, such as the airborne operations in May 1940 and the seizure of Crete in May 1941. What is less well-known is that among his peers in the higher echelons of the *Wehrmacht*, Student was not without his detractors. The main reason for this seems to be some kind of speech defect. His opponents accused him of being dim-witted and occasionally Goering was asked if he had an idiot running the *Fallschirmjäger*.²⁵⁰ Still, what mattered to Hitler and Goering was that while Student may have looked slow and certainly was not a military genius, he was known to be a 'Steher', a tough commander in defence, which was what they needed at this stage of the war.²⁵¹ In addition to *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps*, Student was assigned an impressive array of troops, at least on paper. Still, one of the divisions was a static one (the *719. Infanterie-Division*), one was composed of convalescents (the *176. Division zur besondere Verwendung*) and the paratroop units were spread all over Germany and would need a few days to reach the battlefield. So time was not on his side. But he was in for a pleasant surprise.

Countermeasures

Since the end of August Reinhard had not been idle. While the Allies were swanning into Northern France he had ordered the *719. Infanterie-Division* to pack up, leave its positions along the Holland and Zeeland coast and proceed in the direction of Brussels.²⁵² Only the so-called Turkish battalions (*Turkestan Infanterie-Bataillone*), the newly formed *Sicherheitsregiment 26* for guard and security duties and *Luftwaffe* and (large numbers of) *Kriegsmarine* units were left behind to guard the Dutch coast. Altogether the troops did not equal one division.²⁵³ During August an attempt had been made to make the *719 I.D.* more mobile by issuing it with large numbers of horses. The division was in the middle of this transition when the order came to head south.

Because the *719 I.D.* had little transport of its own on 4 September Reinhard decided to commandeered all buses, trains and private means of transport that his troops could lay their hands on. Public transport in the west of the Netherlands became virtually non-existent. The whole undertaking was hasty and improvised. A Corporal in *4./Grenadier-Regiment 743* gives a vivid impression of the chaos in his diary, "Receive my *Panzerfäuste* in very bad condition at the harbour of Schiedam. Proceed to the railway station. Held up by air activity. To Rosendaal by train. From there further progress by rail is impossible. Wild flight along the rail and roads, *Luftwaffe* and *Marine*! Thousands of officers are trying to save their lives. March to Antwerp. Complete disorder. We have to protect the retreat of these cowardly bastards. (...) Many casualties in *12. Kompanie*." ²⁵⁴ That same morning Reinhard inspected the defences at the southern part of the Moerdijk bridges. Driving back he was called to the phone.²⁵⁵ His Chief of Staff, *Oberst* Curt von Eichert-Wiersdorff told him to get back to his own headquarters in Bilthoven without delay. There he learned that,

²⁵⁰ Heiber, *Lagebesprechungen*, 854.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² Details about the movement of 719 ID from Sievers, 1-4.

²⁵³ Van Hilten 76-78, Klep and Schoenmaker, *De Bevrijding*, 92.

²⁵⁴ First Canadian Army, IS 99, 07.10.44.

²⁵⁵ Details from Reinhard, 1-2.

because Brussels had been lost, *Heeresgruppe B* instructed him to send *Generalleutnant Sievers' 719. Infanterie-Division* to Antwerp instead.²⁵⁶ The division Ia, Major Jahnke, informed the *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps* that only *III./Grenadier-Regiment 743* (Major Otto Neubauer) and *2./Artillerie-Regiment 1719* could reach Antwerp that day because they were already in Steenberg, no more than about forty kilometres away. The rest of the units on the march were not expected to arrive there before 5 September. To make matters worse, none of the bridges over the Albert Canal had been blown yet and nobody knew whether the *Pioniere* (combat engineers) would make it in time. Then Sievers had a stroke of luck.²⁵⁷ At Kapellen, fifteen kilometres north of Antwerp seven trains carrying artillery detachments, infantry and combat engineers from the *347. Infanterie-Division* had been stopped.²⁵⁸ The bulk of the *347. I.D.* (*Generalleutnant* Wolf Trierenberg) was already in Namur, thirty kilometres southwest of Liege, where it was virtually rubbed out in two days' fighting against the 3rd US Armored Division.²⁵⁹ The extra troops were a Godsend. Sievers immediately ordered them to debark and he sent the engineers to the Albert Canal, hoping that they could blow up the bridges in time.

Reinhard received orders from *General* Christiansen (*Wehrmachtbefehlshaber in der Nederlanden*) to set up a defensive screen behind the Albert Canal between Antwerp and Hasselt. He would receive reinforcements in the form of *schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559* which was to be sent to the front as soon as it could be unloaded plus a battalion of Dutch SS-men, *I./SS-Grenadier-Regiment Landstorm Nederland*.²⁶⁰ Reinhard was aghast. He was delighted to get *559*, although it would not arrive until the following day, but manning a line of eighty kilometres with just six battalions of infantry was sheer madness. Every company (about 140 men) would have to cover over three kilometres. Then again he had no choice. He decided to send the Dutch SS-battalion to his left flank at Hasselt because they could get their soonest, the *719 I.D.* would have to take care of the rest. Every second counted and Reinhard as yet had no idea what the situation was like at the canal. He decided to find out without further delay.

He also received a phone-call from Stolberg in Antwerp around three p.m. asking for orders now that he had been assigned to *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps*. After a few minutes Stolberg informed Reinhard that he could hear enemy armour approaching his headquarters. Reinhard told him to defend himself to the utmost when the connection was suddenly severed. Reinhard could only guess what had happened. But there was no time to be lost and he decided to proceed to the Albert Canal forthwith. He would never get there. All the main roads were jam-packed with troops streaming back towards the *Heimat*. It took him over two hours to reach 's-Hertogenbosch and the road between that town and Tilburg was completely blocked by three columns that had got intermingled somehow. Reinhard could not get one

²⁵⁶ KTB 88 AK, 04.09.44, 09.30 hours.

²⁵⁷ Sievers, 4, mentions only one train, but KTB 88 AK 04.09.44, 10.45 hours, mentions 7-8 from Brussels diverted to Kapellen.

²⁵⁸ Among units of the *347. I.D.* that were still in the Netherlands and hence would be employed north of Antwerp were Stab Schlottke (commander Art. Rgt. 347), Stab II/Art. Rgt. 347, FEB 347 (two grenadier companies), 1 Sani. (medical) company, Combat engineer Staff and 1./Pi. Btl. 347 (KTB 88 AK, Anlage B 243 and B 248).

²⁵⁹ Ludewig, *Der deutsche Rückzug*, 259 and Tachon, *België 44*, 134-5.

²⁶⁰ KTB 88 AK, 04.09.44, 09.15 hours.

sensible word out of these soldiers and in frustration he had to give up the attempt to travel further south. He turned round and was back at his headquarters by eleven p.m. He decided to try again the following morning.

Good news for Reinhard

Reinhard only slept for a few hours and early on 5 September he drove to his new advanced headquarters in Moergestel (near Tilburg) where he arrived around eight a.m. While his staff was settling in, he travelled on to the Albert Canal some forty kilometres further south. There was only one question on his mind: would his troops arrive in time or would the Allies win the race? As he neared the front-line Reinhard came across small groups of soldiers aimlessly hanging about. Angrily he told officers to assemble them into ad-hoc units. By accident he also stopped a *Hauptmann* who turned out to be the signals officer of the *85. Infanterie-Division*. The officer had totally unexpected, but wonderful news for Reinhard.²⁶¹

He told Reinhard that his commanding officer, *Generalleutnant* Kurt Chill, had already set up blocking positions behind the Albert Canal, roughly between Herenthals and Hasselt. Chill was an energetic and experienced officer. In one of his last assessments, looking back on the fighting in Belgium and the Netherlands, his superiors described him as 'Eine in zahlreichen schweren Kämpfen im belgisch-holländischen Raum in der Zeit vom 5.9.-11.10.1944 bewährte Führernatur, entschlossen- und verantwortungsfreudig, zuversichtlich, tatkräftig und geschickt im Organisieren von Verbänden. Persönlich einsatzbereit und tapfer. (...) über Durchschnitt.'²⁶² He was indeed to prove the right person in the right place at the right time. Chill had just arrived in Turnhout when he learned of the fall of Brussels. As he had found in France that orders from higher up were often slow, he decided, on his own initiative, to dragoon groups of stragglers and set up an improvised defence. One document, carried by the officers collecting the troops stated that if the officer in question was not obeyed the culprit would be court-martialled; it also suggested that Chill rallied the troops on the orders of the *Wehrmachtbefehlshaber für Belgien und Nordfrankreich* (*General der Infanterie* Martin Grase).²⁶³ It is unclear whether that was really the case.²⁶⁴ What Chill did was collect all the units of *Luftwaffe* and other personnel in Turnhout, have a staff, set up specifically for this purpose, assess their fighting ability and then divide them into groups which were sent either those sectors of the Albert Canal where Chill did not expect the Allies to cross, or keep them further back as back-stop units.²⁶⁵ At noon on 5 September the new battle group was mentioned for the first time.²⁶⁶

There are no documents stating the exact composition of Chill's unit until four days later, but from a map and references in the *Kriegstagebuch* of *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps*

²⁶¹ Story of Chill's actions, Schuster (MS B-846), 40-2.

²⁶² Personalakten Chill, Beurteilung 18.10.44, NARA RG 242.

²⁶³ Document 04.09.44, PAJVD.

²⁶⁴ Whether he was really acting on orders from a higher authority or whether Chill merely used this as a pretext for an initiative of his own could not be verified. The KTB of H Gr B which was ultimately responsible does not contain any reference which means at least that, like Reinhard, they were not informed.

²⁶⁵ Schuster, B 424, 42.

²⁶⁶ KTB 88 AK, 05.09.44, A 106, and KTB H Gr B, 05.09.44, 12:00 hours.

and Allied sources we can deduce that the following units were included at the beginning: *Fallschirmjäger-Artillerie Regiment 2*, *Marine Ersatz Abteilung Wilhemshaven*, 6., 16., and 21. *Schiffstamm-Abteilung*, *Marine Artillerie Versuchskommando*, *Marine Flak Schule (Hauptmann Jahn)*, *Landeschützenbataillon (Bahn) 484*, *Wachbataillon 737*, *Sicherungsbataillon 772*, *Marschbataillon z.bV. 301*. Many of them were put under *Hauptmann Oswald Pohl (Füsilier-Bataillon 85)*. In addition there were five *Fliegerhorst Kommandature* (airfield security detachments) in France and Belgium.²⁶⁷ No figures exist about the strength, but we know that *Dreyer (Grenadier Regiment 1053)* had only about a hundred men left, that *Pohl* was in charge of a small *Kampfgruppe* of 330 men, that *Oberst Buchholz (Sicherungs-Regiment 35)* commanded 1,100 soldiers, while the airfield security detachments totalled 900 men. All in all *Chill* could muster about 2,400 men to hold the new line, roughly equivalent to six line battalions of medium strength. This was an impressive figure. However, there were hardly any machine-guns and some of the men had been issued Italian rifles. Moreover *Chill* had no artillery, no anti-tank weapons and no *Flak*. And then there was the dubious quality of the men, none of whom had been trained as infantry.

They certainly formed a motley crew, these companies of air force, security and naval personnel among them some older *Landeschützen* who had been guarding German VIPs in Paris until very recently. We have some idea of how the process of gathering them went. Ten days later when some of the men were taken prisoner near *Geel*, they told their interrogators that they were all on the way back to the *Reich*. They got as far as *Turnhout* where they were marshalled by officers into barracks and – to their indignation and dismay- actually locked in.²⁶⁸ Subsequently they were sent off to join the various battle groups where they did as they were told even though they did not like it much. *Chill* and his staff organized three main *Kampfgruppen*, named *Buchholz*, *Seidel* and *Dreyer* after their commanding officers.²⁶⁹ *Reinhard* was delighted with these unexpected reinforcements and told the officer to go back, find *Chill* and inform him that from now on his division was subordinate to *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps* and also to ask *Chill* to report as soon as possible. *Kampfgruppe Chill* was born.

Still, *Reinhard's* worries were not over by a long shot. But he had another stroke of good luck that day, as he learned from *Sievers*. Thanks to the timely appearance of *1./Pionier-Bataillon* of the *347. Infanterie-Division* under *Major Dieringer*, the previous day, all important bridges across the *Albert Canal* had been blown up.²⁷⁰

²⁶⁷ War Diary 50 (N) Division, IS 64 (09.09.44) and First Cdn Army, SIR 17.09.44. The *Fliegerhorst Kommandanture* were: *Montdidier*, *Conneilles*, *Amy*, *Rosieres* and *St.Denis* (KTB 88 AK, B 265, 09.09.44 and B 271, 13.09.44).

²⁶⁸ First Cdn Army, SIR 17.09.44.

²⁶⁹ *Oberst Buchholz* commanded *Sicherungs-Regiment 35* (map 88 AK NARA file T 314 R1626 63289/5) but his background is unknown, *Oberstltnt Georg Dreyer* commanded GR 1053, *Oberst Paul Seidel* commanded a *Sperrgruppe* in 352. ID. near Paris, *Kampfabchnitt Versailles* (2nd Army IS 102, 14.09.44 and *Ziegelmann*, 10). *Oberst Stein* (Fl. Rgt. 51) took over from *Seidel* on 14 September in all likelihood because *Seidel* was called back to Germany where 352. ID was being reconstituted as 352. VGD in *Flensburg* starting on 21.09.44 (*Andris J. Kursietis, The Wehrmacht at War 1939-1945, The Units and Commanders of the German Ground Forces during World War II*, Soesterberg 1999, 192, *Ziegelmann*, 16).

²⁷⁰ Name is mentioned in KTB 88 AK, 09.09.44, A 193.

More amazing and as yet unknown to Reinhard, the Allies had, inadvertently, also come to his aid by giving him precisely what he needed most, time.

A lost opportunity

Monday 4 September was the day that, in hindsight, would turn out to be one of the turning points of the war. It was the day of desperate German measures to plug the gap and man the Albert Canal line, the day that Antwerp was captured, the apogee of operation Overlord, and also the day that one of the major opportunities of the war was lost.

Now that Antwerp had fallen, one of the Germans' greatest fears was that the Allies would continue their advance as far as Bath on the Beveland isthmus, in effect cutting off Von Zangen's *15. Armee* which was still running for its life. It was also what local people, like Colson in Antwerp urged the Allies to do. Instead, a halt was called. The order came from Second Army, from Lieutenant-General Sir Miles C. Dempsey himself.²⁷¹ It may have to do with a conference the previous evening where Montgomery, Dempsey and their American counterparts, Bradley and Hodges, had mapped out the future strategy.²⁷² All eyes were now fixed firmly on the Rhine. If the Allies could cross the river the war might be ended before winter set in. Montgomery wanted Second Army to push forwards in the gap between *15.* and *7. Armee* at the pace they had maintained since crossing the Seine. They were to seize bridges over the Rhine between Wesel and Arnhem before the *Wehrmacht* could establish a firm front. The same evening Montgomery had asked First Allied Airborne Army (Major-General Lewis Brereton) to plan an operation to secure a crossing of the river Rhine.²⁷³ On 4 September Montgomery's staff selected Arnhem as the crossing point. The Airborne Army began to plan the operation which was christened 'Comet'. It was to be launched on 7 September. Montgomery wanted to go for one big, last push. But such a major offensive required bringing up supplies and regrouping the units, all of which took time.

As related above (Chapter 2.2), Montgomery ordered his troops to renew the attack east (to the Ruhr) on 6 September.²⁷⁴ By doing so he took a calculated risk which he and his staff were very much aware of because on the day the advance was resumed they concluded that, 'The Albert Canal and the 15th Army are our immediate concern.'²⁷⁵ Three days later the intelligence staff unequivocally stated that, 'Meantime 15th Army continues to extricate itself over the Scheldt to provide reinforcements for other parts of the front.'²⁷⁶ Dempsey told his army to halt for twenty-four hours because the troops were outstripping their administrative (logistic) resources. After the failure to close the Falaise Gap initially, it was the second big operational, or even strategic, error by Montgomery during the campaign. The vehicles of XXX Corps still had about a hundred litres of petrol each and could easily have advanced for another day. In all likelihood the 11th Armoured Division could

²⁷¹Brian Horrocks, *Corps Commander*, London 1977, 80.

²⁷² Details Ellis, *Victory II*, 7.

²⁷³ Details Comet, Karel Margry, *Operation Market Garden Then and Now*, London 2002, 22.

²⁷⁴ Quoted in full in John A. Adams, *The Battle for Western Europe Fall 1944, An Operational Assessment*, Bloomington 2010, 105.

²⁷⁵ Second Army, IS 94, 06.09.44.

²⁷⁶ Second Army, IS 97, 09.09.44.

have crossed the Albert Canal (especially as most of the bridges had not been mined yet and some had been seized by the Belgian resistance). From Antwerp one straight road leads to Woensdrecht and Bergen op Zoom. Possession of those towns meant that there would be no way out for *15. Armee*. If the Allies had acted exactly as the Germans feared they would cut off the Beveland isthmus and Von Zangen's army would have been completely trapped against the coast. If Horrocks had ordered Roberts to bypass Antwerp instead of telling him to take the town this manoeuvre could have been executed the day before.²⁷⁷ But even as things stood, the operation might still have succeeded on 5 September. As Von Rundstedt's Chief-of-staff, Westphal, wrote in his memoirs, 'Die Trümmer der Heeresgruppe B reichten nicht mehr aus, eine zusammenhängende Widerstandslinie aufzubauen.'²⁷⁸ The results of continued Allied pressure would have been devastating. Von Zangen's divisions would have been trapped and could only have been rescued by sea in a kind of German Dunkirk operation. They would certainly have been too late to interfere in operation Market Garden (or other operations in September). Also, pushing on might have secured the banks of the upper Scheldt much more quickly, providing the Allies with a harbour large enough to sustain the drive towards Germany. The Allies might indeed have been across the Rhine before autumn set in and have ended the war in 1944. It was not to be, however.

But it would be unfair to blame only Dempsey even though the operational level was his responsibility. Part of the blame certainly lies with his superiors, Montgomery and Eisenhower, who after all had to keep their eye on the strategy. To make matters worse, through Enigma decrypts Montgomery and Dempsey were being kept very well informed of the situation on the German end. On 5 September they learned that German reinforcements were trying to set up a new defensive line behind the Albert Canal with the *719.* and *347. I.D.*²⁷⁹ Still, they did not act on this news. As Dempsey's biographer points out, it is not really fair to point the finger at Dempsey's subordinate, Horrocks, either because he was concerned with the tactical battle.²⁸⁰ Be that as it may, no Allied commander was aware of the opportunity that they let slip through their fingers.²⁸¹ Heady with excitement it would take the men responsible some time before they came to realise that something fundamental had changed and that the days of the bloody, grinding battles were back. The Americans made the very same mistake a few days later west of Aachen. There the 'doorway' to Aachen and Cologne was wide open and both Model and Von Rundstedt were certain the Americans would smash through the *Westwall*. But General Hodges (First US Army) regrouped and paused for three days, again quoting logistics as the reason, before resuming the attack. Here, too, much bloodshed (Hürtgenwald) could have been avoided had he pushed his troops on for a few more days.²⁸² In Antwerp Roberts himself would soon realize the error. But while the Allies took a break the Germans had not been idle. They understood the danger to *15. Armee* and an urgent

²⁷⁷ As Horrocks himself admitted afterwards (Horrocks, *Corps Commander*, 81).

²⁷⁸ Westphal, *Heer in Fesseln*, 261.

²⁷⁹ Hans Sackers, *Enigma en de Strijd om de Westerscheldt, Het falen van de geallieerde opmars in september 1944*, Soesterberg 2011, 46.

²⁸⁰ Rostron, *General Sir Miles Dempsey*, 132.

²⁸¹ With the exception of Admiral Sir Bertram Ramsay, Eisenhower's Naval C-in-C, who had sent a signal to Eisenhower on 4 September warning him about that very issue.

²⁸² Ludewig, *Der deutsche Rückzug*, 266-7.

message from *Heeresgruppe B* read, "Landenge bei Bergen op Zoom wird offen gehalten. Auf Durchführung gefassten Entschluss sei nunmehr mit äusserster Tatkraft alles konzentrieren."²⁸³

A madhouse

Tuesday 5 September is a day that will always be remembered in Dutch history as 'Dolle Dinsdag' (Mad Tuesday). The whole country was in a festive mood. Schools and factories were all closed, people hung around in the streets which were already festooned with bunting and the Dutch national flag, convinced as people were that the liberating Allied armies could arrive any minute. Collaborators boarded trains, running for their lives and depots, ammunition dumps and airfields in the south of the country were being blown up. The confusion was partly caused by a fateful Dutch language BBC broadcast from London on Monday evening. The Dutch prime minister in exile, P.S. Gerbrandy, proudly announced that "Geallieerde strijdkrachten zijn Nederland binnengetrokken! (Allied armies have crossed the Dutch border!)"²⁸⁴ He was wrong, but hardly anybody was in a position to check the facts and consequently people went mad with joy. It was in this madhouse that *schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559*, soon to become the armoured component of *Kampfgruppe Chill*, arrived at the three stations where it was to unload its vehicles, 's-Hertogenbosch, Tilburg and Baarle-Nassau.²⁸⁵ The *Abteilung* was the second to be equipped with the new heavy tank hunter, the *Sd.Kfz.173 Jagdpanther*.²⁸⁶ Originally all three companies were to have been equipped with the *Jagdpanther*. However, as production could not meet the demand, partly as a result of Allied bombing (MIAG alone was bombed no less than ten times in 1944), it was decided to equip the next *Abteilungen* with only one company of *Jagdpanther*, and to equip the other two companies with either *Sturmgeschütze* or *Jagdpanzer IV*. This solution was officially confirmed by Hitler himself on 11 September 1944.²⁸⁷ In all *schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559* had a total of sixteen *Jagdpanther* and twenty-eight *Sturmgeschütze* when they received the order to travel west from the training grounds at Mielau (currently: Mława in Poland). On 1 September the deployment of *schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559* had come up at the *Lagebesprechung*, the daily conference, at the *Wolfschanze*, Hitler's headquarters in East Prussia. When informed by *General-Major* Wolfgang Thomale, Guderian's successor as *Generalinspekteur der Panzertruppen*, that *schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559* would not be ready until the 5th, an irate Hitler responded, 'Sofort hierher!.'²⁸⁸ By noon the unloading of the *Jagdpanther* and at least one of the *Sd.Kfz.7/1 Flak* half tracks in Tilburg was finished.²⁸⁹ At 12.30 hours the whole column assembled at a big local square, the Korvelplein, and then headed south for Goirle. From there it drove to Merksplas. Around four p.m. the *Sturmgeschütze* from the two trains which

²⁸³ KTB OB West, 05.09.44, Funkspruch Ia Nr.6975/44.

²⁸⁴ L. De Jong, *Het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden in de Tweede Wereldoorlog, 10a Het laatste Jaar*, 's-Gravenhage 1980, 173.

²⁸⁵ KTB H.Gr.D., 05.09.44 Abendmeldung.

²⁸⁶ It was preceded by *schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 654* whose *Jagdpanther* first saw combat in Normandy.

²⁸⁷ Walther Spielberger et al., *Schwere Jagdpanzer, Entwicklung-Fertigung-Einsatz*, Stuttgart 1993, 49.

²⁸⁸ Heiber, *Lagebesprechungen*, 644.

²⁸⁹ Runge in Franz Kopka, *Missbraucht und Gebeutelt 1939-1945*, Köln 1995, 127.

had unloaded in Baarle-Nassau were also ready for departure and set off for the same village. After all of the fighting vehicles had arrived in Merksplas 559 left off for Antwerp, now just over thirty kilometres away, while the unloading went on throughout the night and the following day.

In Antwerp the unreal atmosphere of the previous day continued even in the dock area where the main action took place, the 3rd Monmouths advancing there carried flowers in one hand and their firearms in the other.²⁹⁰ They did not meet any real opposition, just occasional shelling from across the Scheldt and the Albert Canal. At the same time the 1st Herefordshire Regiment were mopping up the eastern part of the town. The other British units in and around Antwerp, having been told to halt, spent the day cleaning and repairing equipment. The festive mood was not everybody's cup of tea and the CO of the 4th KSLI, Lieutenant-Colonel Ivor L. Reeves, in fact had his command post surrounded with barbed wire so he could think straight.²⁹¹ In the absence of adequate maps, Reeves sent patrols to locate the Albert Canal and see if any of the bridges were still intact. There were six road bridges plus one railway bridge. The northern two, the Albert bridge and the Straatsburg bridge in the dock area, were controlled by the resistance, Colson's men. The next one, from left to right, were the Noorder bridge, the IJzer bridge, the Schijnpoot bridge and the Deurne bridge. All of these had already been blown up, on 4 September, or they were demolished that day. In fact the Schijnpoot bridge was blown up at the end of the afternoon just as C company 3rd Monmouths was ordered to rush it, much to the relief of its CO, Major J. Hardy, as he had considered the order doomed to fail.²⁹²

As soon as he learned that the bridges across the Albert Canal had been blown, Roberts realised that he 'had made a great error in not going into the town the evening before. I had thought that the canal went through the centre of the town and therefore would have been included in the battle for the main garrison (...) we could have taken that bridge with the greatest of ease that first night. Had I braved the crowds and gone into the town myself I would have realised the situation. This was, I think, the worst mistake I made in the campaign'.²⁹³ But it got worse, although this time it was not Roberts who made the mistake. That afternoon Horrocks visited Antwerp and he told Roberts that he was going to have to 'go through the tulip fields, get across the canal and get up north towards 's-Hertogenbosch'.²⁹⁴ The light-hearted tone betrayed the optimistic estimate behind the order.

The first crossing

Roberts passed the order on to Brigadier J. Churcher of the 159th Infantry Brigade.²⁹⁵ Churcher did not like the idea of making a crossing without proper reconnaissance and at least a day's planning. But orders were orders and just as

²⁹⁰ Delaforce, *The Black Bull*, 135.

²⁹¹ Thornburn, *First into Antwerp*, Shrewsbury 1987, 32.

²⁹² Ibid.

²⁹³ Roberts, *From the Desert to the Baltic*, London 1987, 209.

²⁹⁴ Stappaerts, *Kolonel Harry*, 117.

²⁹⁵ This section, Thornburn, *First*, 33-34.

Lieutenant-Colonel Ivor Reeves was considering sampling some of the local wine, he received the order to form a bridgehead covering the Schijnpoort and Merksem bridges. He did not like the idea either, particularly as night would soon fall and the operation had to be carried out at once.²⁹⁶ The crossing needed to be made under cover of darkness, but some of the companies had six miles to cover before they got to the canal. Unfortunately not carrying out proper reconnaissance would turn out to be costly mistake. Reeves decided to cross at two points. He would take Companies A, B and C with him and cross near the Schijnpoort bridge while D Company would try to cross further upstream at the Deurne bridge. By the end of the night the three companies were all across and had established themselves in various buildings, while D Company's attack was stopped by heavy machine-gun fire.

At 19.50 hours on 5 September *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps* received a report that the "enemy, aided by Partisans" had established a bridgehead in the Merksem area an hour and half earlier.²⁹⁷ Reinhard immediately ordered *III./Grenadier-Regiment 743*, supported by *1./schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559* to counterattack. The automatic, almost reflex-like counterattack was part of the principles taught German officers. Following an enemy breakthrough, 'so muss das erste Bestreben sein, den eingebrochenen Gegner durch Feuer zu vernichten. Andernfalls haben die in der Nähe der Einbruchsstelle befindlichen Teile der Infanterie und Unterstützungen den Feind durch sofort einsetzende kurze Gegenstöße zurückzuwerfen, ehe er in de, gewonnenen Gelände Fuss gefasst und sich eingerichtet hat.'²⁹⁸ This phenomenon of a hasty '*Gegenstoss*' will come back time and again. (A hasty, immediate *Gegenstoss* should not be confused with a *Gegenangriff*, which was deliberate and planned beforehand.²⁹⁹ Examples of the latter will also be found in the next chapters.) The infantry sealed off the bridgehead, as far as possible in the dark, but a counterattack would have to wait until *559* had arrived later that evening. Sievers reported to Reinhard that fighting was especially difficult 'durch Wohnblocks mit Elektrizitätswerk und Beteiligung von Terroristen'.³⁰⁰ Still, as dawn broke on 6 September, his troops finally spotted the positions of the 4th KSLI and all hell broke loose for the British.

Because of the nature of the battleground the original order, to employ the *Jagdpanther* of *Oberleutnant Zoske's 1./559* was changed. The heavy vehicles could not come into their own in this built-up area with its tall factories, alleyways, narrow

²⁹⁶ There is confusion as to the time Reeves received the order. In a letter, quoted among others in Delaforce, *The Black Bull* (136) and Moulton (*The Battle for Antwerp*, Shepperton 1978, 42), Reeves says he received the order at 8 p.m. Yet, 88 AK reports the bridgehead as early as 19.50 hours (KTB 05.09.44) and says it was established at 18.20 hours! As sunset was at 20.20 hours local time (*Wie Wat Waar? Jaarboek 1944 van het Rotterdamsch Nieuwsblad*, Leiden 1943, 60), more than two hours later, this means the first crossing was definitely not made under cover of darkness. Also: Sergeant Jones (A Coy) remembers being told of the crossing late in the afternoon (Thornburn, *First*, 34). I tend to favour the report of 88 AK over Reeves' memories, concluding that the first crossing took place when it was still light but that later crossings took place during the night. But if the initial crossing was not made in darkness that leaves the question, why did Reeves make the crucial error of crossing too far west?

²⁹⁷ KTB 88 AK, 05.09.44.

²⁹⁸ Heeres Dienstvorschrift 300/1, § 463, 192-3.

²⁹⁹ Condell and Zabecki, *On the German Art of War, Truppenführung, German Army Manual for unit Commanders in World War II*, Mechanicsburg 2001, 129.

³⁰⁰ KTB 88 AK, 05.09.44, 23.55 hours.

streets and factory walls.³⁰¹ They would be far too vulnerable and so it was decided to use *Oberleutnant* Edmund Haile's 2./559 with its *Sturmgeschütze* to support the attack of the *Grenadiere*.³⁰² The five *Sturmgeschütze* drove up and down the Carrettestraat covering the British positions and firing at anything that moved.³⁰³ Movement within the bridgehead became nigh impossible and a breakout was completely out of the question. For the British soldiers it was a nightmare, being unable to move while the SPs rumbled by outside and put shells into the buildings. All day the fighting raged. The *Grenadiere* could not force the British out and neither could 4th KSLI enlarge the bridgehead. The British infantry gave as good as they got. The end result was a stalemate, even though *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps* received a report at the end of the day that only a few 'Engländer und Partisanen' were left inside the factories.³⁰⁴ The troops inside the bridgehead began to run out of food and water and by nightfall they were utterly exhausted. From the after-action reports it is clear that it was the presence of the *Sturmgeschütze* that gave the German troops the edge. Despite being able to prevent the enemy from annihilating the bridgehead, Reeves realised that it was only a matter of time before he would have to abandon it. Losses were mounting and reinforcements, in the form of tanks or otherwise, could not be brought up as it was completely impossible for the engineers to construct a bridge.

But Brigadier Churcher refused the 4th KSLI permission to withdraw.³⁰⁵ Instead he would try to get supplies across under cover of darkness. Churcher decided to make one, final effort. He ordered the 3rd Monmouths, under Lieutenant-Colonel H.G. Orr, to cross at the Albert bridge where the Albert Canal flowed into the dock area and then turn right (east) to relieve the pressure on the 4th KSLI. The infantry were supported by two troops of A Squadron 23rd Hussars. At eight p.m. B Company advanced eastwards from the docks while C Company advanced along the railway embankment. The two companies were to meet and advance into Merksem. Enemy opposition prevented the move. Orr then decided that only a night attack by his whole battalion would do the trick. A and D Companies were to join B while C would try to continue to inch its way forward along the embankment. As two of the Hussars tanks became bogged down the whole of A Squadron spent a very anxious night surrounded by an unknown number of Germans including many snipers.³⁰⁶

At around three a.m. on 7 September A and D Companies of the Monmouths were lined up ready to advance.³⁰⁷ The moment the attack went off heavy rain started to fall and the men stumbled forward in pitch blackness towards the railway embankment. As they approached the embankment 3rd Monmouths were greeted by a hail of fire. Soon they were engaged in heavy hand-to-hand fighting. The *Grenadiere* from *III./GR 743* reinforced by various companies of the *347. Infanterie-Division* (7./GR 860, 5./GR 861, 6./GR 861) and *13.(Pak)/743* plus some security

³⁰¹ Kopka claims that one Jagdpanther was lost that day (*Missbraucht und Gebeutelt*, 128). This claim is unsubstantiated.

³⁰² KTB 88 AK, 06.09.44, Tagesmeldung

³⁰³ Invariably described as tanks. Thornburn, *First*, 37.

³⁰⁴ KTB 88 AK, 06.09.44, Tagesmeldung.

³⁰⁵ WO 171/456, War Diary Headquarters 11th Arm.Div. 06.09.44 (p.70).

³⁰⁶ The two tanks were IC and IIA (Signal Log in War Diary 23rd H).

³⁰⁷ Details relief action, 3 Mons, 68-70.

forces that had escaped from Antwerp during the fighting there, put up a stiff fight.³⁰⁸ On the opposite side C Company of the Monmouths finally managed to join the other three but all movement had now come to a standstill.

Stalemate

Any further advance was clearly impossible. There was nothing for it but to pull back the 4th KSLI. The decision was eventually taken by Horrocks himself. In the morning the Commander of XXX Corps decided to see for himself what the situation was like.³⁰⁹ The Sportpaleis, an indoor cycling track, overlooked the canal and Horrocks was taken up to the roof by Max Robinson, the battalion's second in command, to get a bird's eye view of Merksem and the factories. The roof was already being used by artillery observers. Brigadier Churcher and Robinson pointed out the positions across the canal which were all clearly visible. Then they stepped back. Horrocks leaned over the balcony and studied the grounds for perhaps ninety seconds. He turned around and said in a quiet, but urgent tone 'you must get them back.' This was a momentous decision that so far has been ignored by historians. It meant that for the time being the British would continue to ignore Antwerp and instead concentrate their efforts further east, a decision that would eventually come back to haunt them. The Germans had retaken Merksem and although the confrontation had been short the loss of life was disproportionately high. The 4th KSLI suffered 150 casualties including 29 killed, the Germans casualties were 35 killed, and an unknown number of wounded.³¹⁰ The civilian population had also suffered and in a particularly tragic event that can only be described as a war crime, German troops executed 22 employees of the Merksem power station on 6 September. The rumours about 'Terrorister' attacking them from the rear were widespread by then.³¹¹ In addition 33 other civilians in Merksem lost their lives because of the fighting.³¹²

Oddly enough it was precisely at the moment of triumph that the *Kommandeur* of *Grenadier-Regiment 743*, *Oberst* Bosselmann, was accused by a somewhat panicky *Generalleutnant* Heinz-Helmuth von Wühlisch (*Chef des Generalstabes WBN*) of having given up his positions at Merksem.³¹³ It was the proverbial storm in a teacup and Sievers managed to convince Von Wühlisch that he was completely mistaken. The accusation probably came from a deep seated fear that the British might still attack north and cut off *15. Armee*. Even after the 4th KSLI had pulled back and the attack by the 3rd Monmouths and the 23rd Hussars was repulsed, there was still a lot of anxiety about British intentions. Even the new bridgehead at Beringen (next chapter) could not lull the German suspicions. Reinhard in fact suspected that even that might be linked to an attack northwards from Antwerp.³¹⁴

³⁰⁸ KTB 88 AK, 06.09.44, Tagesmeldung. Kommandeure: 7./860 Leutnant Meyerhof (or Mayerhof), 5./861 unknown, 6./861 Leutnant Windte (First Cdn Army IR PoW 347 ID).

³⁰⁹ Incident described in Ned Thornburn, *After Antwerp, The Long Haul to Victory*, Shrewsbury 1993, 3.

³¹⁰ PAJVD.

³¹¹ For example the corporal, mentioned earlier, of 719 ID notes in his diary that 'on our side terrorists are active' on 8 September (First Canadian Army, IS 99, 07.10.44.).

³¹² PAJVD.

³¹³ KTB 88 AK, 07.09.44, 10.05 hours.

³¹⁴ KTB 88 AK, 07.09.44, A 151.

What the German commanders did not know and could not know, was that they were completely wrong. Montgomery's attention had already shifted further east. Aware of the gap between Antwerp and the Ardennes he ordered Second Army to advance towards the Rhine using two roads, one through Eindhoven to Arnhem and one through Tilburg and Zaltbommel to Renkum (west of Arnhem).³¹⁵ Antwerp was forgotten for the moment. XXX Corps headed east looking for a point to cross the Albert Canal. The new eye of the storm would now be around Beringen. Soon all of *Kampfgruppe Chill* was to join the fight there.

Strategies

While the Twenty-First Army Group rested and refitted until 6 September in accordance with Montgomery's directive M 523 (see above, Chapter 2.2), the Germans were still struggling to find a solution to the new situation which they faced.³¹⁶ The capture of Antwerp on 4 September had taken them by surprise. While British troops were entering the city, the *719. Infanterie-Division* was still on its way. The impact was huge and Von Zangen's *15. Armee* was effectively cut off. Unlike the Allies, the German commanders recognized the importance and they described it as an 'operatives Ereignis ersten Ranges.' Hitler immediately ordered measures to be taken to ensure that the port could not be used by the enemy for as long as possible. He also rescinded an earlier order for *15. Armee* to break out by attacking towards Diest, instead telling Von Zangen to establish a bridgehead south of the Scheldt.³¹⁷ To make matters worse, there yawned a gap from Antwerp to Namur and there were still no reserves. Von Wühlisch reported that day that no troops could be in place before 6 September. The recruits of the *1. Flieger-Ausbildungs-Division* (whom we shall meet later on) who were on their way, were a mere drop in the ocean. Quickly measures were taken to catch stragglers before they crossed the border into Germany and both National-Socialist party officials and Himmler became involved in this. Fanaticism was to substitute for troops and materiel.

Model, once again, reiterated that the *Westwall* had to be occupied immediately as Allied armour might cross the German border where *7. Armee* took over from *5. Panzerarmee*.³¹⁸ To hold the new line, along the Albert Canal to the *Westwall*, Model said, he urgently needed at least twenty-five fresh divisions and a reserve of five to six armoured divisions.³¹⁹ These were not available, but the *OKW* promptly issued new instructions. *Generaloberst* Student's *1. Fallschirm-Armee* was to be responsible for the defence of the Albert-Canal for which, in addition to *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps*, it received units from *Fallschirmjäger-Divisionen 3., 5., and 6.* The army was further to be reinforced by ten battalions and forty *Flak* batteries.³²⁰ *General der Infanterie* Günther Blumentritt, *Chef des Generalstabes OB West*, did not hold very high expectations of these measures and he thought that it was impossible at the moment to close the door on the Rhineland. *General der Infanterie* Hans Krebs, *Chef des*

³¹⁵ Ellis, *Victory II*, 7.

³¹⁶ This section, unless otherwise specified, Ludwig, *Der deutsche Rückzug*, 228-231 and 242-4.

³¹⁷ Schramm, *Kriegstagebuch 7/I*, 367.

³¹⁸ Kurt Mehner, *Die geheimen Tagesberichte der deutschen Wehrmachtführung im Zweiten Weltkrieg*, Band 11, Osnabrück 1984, 9.

³¹⁹ Schramm, *Kriegstagebuch, 7/I*, 366.

³²⁰ *Ibid.*

Generalstabes Heeresgruppe B, concurred and he, too, felt that the current line-up of troops behind the Albert Canal was in no way enough.

The following day *Generalfeldmarschall* Gerd von Rundstedt arrived at the new headquarters near Koblenz and resumed command as *OB West*.³²¹ He appointed *Generalleutnant* Siegfried Westphal as his new *Chef des Generalstabes*.³²² What he found was staggering: the *Westheer* consisted of just sixteen divisions that were deemed combat worthy, while the other fifty-five were either weak, burnt-out, destroyed or being reconstituted. Eisenhower on the other hand, now controlled thirty-nine divisions with another eight about to join them. Apart from nine so-called *Festungsbataillone*, comprised of soldiers that were no longer fully fit for combat duty, new reserves would not arrive before the middle of September. Meanwhile *Generaloberst* Student and his staff arrived. After flying out of Berlin early on the 5th, Student first saw Model at his headquarters near Verviers.³²³ Model told him that *15. Armee* would have to fight its way eastwards along the south bank of the Albert Canal, which might provide protection for Student's troops while they were taking up position. Next he travelled on to Moergestel, near Tilburg, to meet Reinhard, who told him the relatively good news about what Chill had done. Still, Student was aware that the Allies held the initiative and much would depend on where and when they would resume the attack.

Conclusion

The twenty-four hour break after the capture of Antwerp meant that the Allies gave the German army just what it needed most, time. By turning back from Turnhout and setting up an improvised battle group and not continuing on his way to Germany, Chill had done exactly what was expected of a German officer worth his salt. Instead of obeying the order to carry on the retreat towards the *Reich*, he had made the decision to stay put in order to prevent the collapse of the defensive line that was being constructed behind the Albert-Canal. He had done exactly what was expected of a German officer at his best. As the *Truppenführung*, the manual for the German army put it 'Verantwortungsfreudigkeit ist die vornehmste Führeigenschaft', adding, 'Selbsttätigkeit, die sich in richtigen Grenzen geltend macht, ist (...) die Grundlage grosser Erfolge.'³²⁴ Even though a lot of the sailors, air force and security personnel that his officers had rounded up at Turnhout were disgruntled at the way they were treated, they still did what was expected of them and in this way Chill managed to create a defensive position north of the canal.³²⁵ This was no doubt Chill's biggest contribution to the defence of the *Reich*. In an analysis three years after the events, almost to the day, *Generalleutnant* Bodo Zimmermann when reflecting on the Allies breaking through towards the Ruhr while simultaneously cutting off *15. Armee*, wrote that 'in my opinion, which is shared by the then Chief of the General Staff, OB West (Gen. Blumentritt), both moments (...) together would

³²¹ This section, unless otherwise specified, Ludewig, *Der deutsche Rückzug*, 244-7.

³²² Westphal, *Heer in Fesseln*, 260.

³²³ This part, Student, *Der deutsche Fallschirmjäger*, 4-5.

³²⁴ *Truppenführung*, 2-3.

³²⁵ First Cdn Army, SIR, 17.09.44.

have caused the final German military collapse as early as the fall of 1944.³²⁶ For the time being, as a result of Chill's actions, this danger had been averted and there was a more or less coherent defence behind the Albert Canal. The door to Germany was still partially open, but it was gradually closing. This single action by Chill had a huge impact on the conflict in the West, since, as Kershaw correctly states, 'The Allies never fully regained their momentum (...) until March 1945.'³²⁷ Nevertheless, the Germans were not out of the woods yet and the subsequent battles and engagements were not foregone conclusions. The German screen behind the Albert Canal was extremely thinly held and neither Model nor Von Rundstedt, the new *OB West*, was confident it would hold. Two days later Von Rundstedt reported to the *OKW* and Hitler. He did not mince words and made it clear that all his forces were not only committed to battle, but also badly depleted ('angeschlagen') if not completely smashed ('ausgebrannt'), that he had only one hundred tanks and needed at least five, preferably ten divisions with *Sturmgeschütz* units and anti-tank weapons.³²⁸ For the moment the fate of the *Westheer* still hung in the balance and it was clear to both the Allied and the German commanders that the first week of September could be decisive. *Kampfgruppe Chill* itself had not been engaged in action yet. That would finally be the case on 6 September.

³²⁶ Letter dated 10 September 1947, OCMH MS D-0327, 3. At the time Zimmermann was Ia to OB West.

³²⁷ Kershaw, *The End*, 388.

³²⁸ Schramm, *Kriegstagebuch*, 7/I, 368-9.

PART THREE THE FIGHTING

This part is devoted to minutiae of the various engagements that *Kampfgruppe Chill* was involved in. The narrative opens with the initial struggle to hold the canal line to the successful defence and even recapture of the Belgian town of Geel. Although there were initial doubts about the efficacy of the *Kampfgruppe*, its achievements soon exceeded all expectations and it subsequently became the *Eingreifreserve* first for *1. Fallschirm-Armee* and from 23 September for *15. Armee* being shifted from one endangered sector to the other in order to plug the gaps that threatened to open up. Chill's battle group was so successful in this that in the end it enabled Von Zangen to pull back his army in an orderly fashion behind the river Maas and even forced Montgomery to rethink his strategy to defeat Germany.

3.1. Albert Canal (6 – 13 September 1944)

"Es ist wichtig zur Beurteilung der Gefechte von Panzerkräften beider Seiten zu wissen, dass das Gelände zwischen ALBERTKANAL und ZUID-WILLEMSVAART abseits befestigter Strassen, Eisenbahnlinien etc. etc. fast durchgehend versumpft war."³²⁹

The failed attempt by the 11th Armoured Division to cross the Albert Canal at Merksem was the first indication that things had changed since the capture of Antwerp. If clearer signals were needed they would soon be coming after the resumption of the Allied advance. Here *Kampfgruppe Chill* would undergo its baptism of fire.

On Tuesday 6 September, after having halted for 24 hours, XXX Corps resumed its advance. The situation had now changed dramatically as the leading troops were soon to find out. The fighting over the next ten days would take place in an area between two major canals, the Albert Canal and the Maas-Scheldt Canal. This area forms a kind of convoluted triangle between Herentals, Lanaken and Neerpelt. Here the British would face the first serious resistance since the end of the fighting in Normandy. It is the battles in this 'bloody triangle' that form the subject of the next two chapters. The Albert Canal would first be crossed near Beringen on 6 September. This chapter will therefore focus on the fighting around Beringen and the resulting battles in Hechtel. The next chapter will be devoted to the battle for Geel which started one day later. But first one needs to go back to 5 September, the day the population of the Netherlands went wild with joy.

The overall situation

While Dempsey's Second Army was told to stand down for twenty-four hours, quite a lot happened on the German side of the Albert Canal. At 04.05 hours *Generaloberst Student*, the new commander responsible for the front between Antwerp and Maastricht, had arrived at the advanced headquarters of *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps* in Moergestel (east of Tilburg) to see for himself how the situation was developing.³³⁰ The previous day he had spoken to *Generalfeldmarschall Model*, *Heeresgruppe B*,

³²⁹ Kopka, *Missbraucht und Gebeutelt*, 130. Capitals in original.

³³⁰ KTB 88 AK, 05.09.44, 04.05 hours; details visit, Student, *Der deutsche Fallschirmjäger*, 6.

who had informed him that *15. Armee* would fight its way east along the southern bank of the Albert Canal, thus giving Student some time to form his front. The capture of Antwerp completely upset this appellation, however. And there was more bad news for Student. When inspecting the canal himself, he saw that it had not been prepared for defence at all. Moreover, in some places the south bank dominated the northern one.

Things looked grim, very grim indeed and everything depended on where the British would strike next. Student must have spent an anxious day. No doubt his mood lifted as he found that, apart from the crossing by the 4th KSLI in Antwerp, the Allied advance had come to a complete standstill. Time was of the essence to him. In addition to *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps* he was assigned ten battalions from *Wehrkreis VI*, thirty heavy and ten light *Flak* batteries and, of course, the core of his new army, the *Fallschirmjäger*.³³¹ Student must have been extremely relieved by the halt as the majority of his troops were still a long way away from the front. In fact most had not reached the Netherlands yet. One of the key units for example, Von der Heydte's *Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 6*, had only that morning left Hamburg.³³² It was not until the following morning (6 September) that most of the troops began to arrive at the various stations where they would detrain. The Regiment had a long history. On 13 February 1943 the *2. Fallschirmjäger-Division* had been established and *FJR 6* was one of its three regiments, the others being *FJR 2* and *FJR 7*. It fought in Italy and Russia until January 1944 when it assembled in Köln-Wahn to be rebuilt under its new commander, then *Major* Friedrich August *Freiherr* von der Heydte. In May it was moved to Normandy where it would engage in severe battles with its American counterparts of the US 101st Airborne Division. The defence of Carentan against the US 101st Airborne Division had earned them the sobriquet of '*Die Löwen von Carentan*' (The Lions of Carentan).³³³ As testimony to the ferocity of the battle, losses had been so severe that *Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 6* had shrunk to just a core around which it was to be rebuilt.³³⁴ The regiment was sent to Güstrow to be reconstituted. After the war Von der Heydte wrote that he felt that the battle strength of his new regiment was poor. The new recruits, who made up 75% of the new *Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 6* were hardly trained and some of them had never fired a gun in anger.³³⁵

Nevertheless Von der Heydte tried to make the best of a bad job. He demanded his men do their utmost and he tried to instil them with a sense of belonging to an elite unit. In an order he demanded from every soldier 'the renunciation of all personal wishes. Whoever swears on the Prussian flag, has no right to personal possessions. From the moment he enlists in the Fallschirmjäger and joins my regiment every soldier enters the new order of humanity and gives up everything which he possessed before and which is outside the new order. There is only one law for him

³³¹ Ultra message XL 9248 dated 06.09.44, quoted in Jeffson, *Operation Market-Garden: Ultra intelligence ignored*, Kansas 2002, 63.

³³² KTB 88 AK, 05.09.44, Abendmeldung.

³³³ This name was given to them by Generalleutnant Choltitz (CO LXXXIV. AK), Volker Griesser, *Die Löwen von Carentan, Das Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 6 1943-1945*, Herne 2007, 134.

³³⁴ Griesser, *Die Löwen von Carentan*, 170-172, says that it was reduced from 4600 to a mere 1007 men, Von der Heydte himself thought he had just 450 men left (interview with Johan van Doorn).

³³⁵ Friedrich Von der Heydte, "*Muss ich sterben, will ich fallen...*", Berg 1987, 1.

henceforth – the law of our unit.’ Von der Heydte added that ‘this struggle is a struggle for the existence of the entire German nation...’ Therefore he required every soldier in his regiment to ‘become as fanatical in his belief as men were at the time of the Crusaders of the Knightly orders.’³³⁶ Time would tell whether his exhortations had fallen on deaf ears or whether they would bear fruit.

That evening Student had a conference with Reinhard, again at the advanced headquarters in Moergestel.³³⁷ Reinhard told him that some of his troops were still in transit. Of the two regiments of the *719. Infanterie-Division*, most of *GR 743*, reinforced by *schwere Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559*, were now established north of Antwerp where it was engaged in battle. The other regiment, *GR 723*, was setting up positions further east behind the Albert Canal. Finally, at Hasselt, *I./SS-Grenadier-Regiment Landstorm Nederland* with six 7.5 cm *Pak 40*, had also reached its positions and dug in. In addition *II./Landstorm Nederland* was on its way and the leading units were expected to reach Antwerp the following day.³³⁸ On the plus side was the news that *Generalleutnant* Kurt Chill had single-handedly organised the defence of part of the new frontline and that Reinhard had got some reinforcements he had not counted on. Not only was he able to use the units from the *347. Infanterie-Division* that were either held up while in transit to Brussels (see previous chapter) or on the way back, he also received a *Flak* company, *3. (Flak)/Panzerjäger-abteilung 344*, which was equipped with eight 2 cm *Flak* guns. The company was sent to Mol to reinforce *GR 723*. All bridges had at last been mined, if not blown. As *Heeresgruppe B* reported, ‘ein Notdürftiger Abwehrfront’ was now in place along the Albert Canal.³³⁹ The initiative still lay with the Allies. All Student and Reinhard could do was direct troops as they arrived and wait and see where the British would strike next and act accordingly. They would not have to wait very long.

A nice day's run

Instructed by Field-Marshal Montgomery (Twenty-First Army Group) to push ahead in the perceived gap in the German front, Major-General A.H.S. Adair (Guards Armoured Division) sent his division northeast towards the Netherlands on 6 September.³⁴⁰ The first stop was to be at the Albert Canal where crossing were to be seized. These were to be the start line (SL) for the advance to the river Rhine that was planned for the following day.³⁴¹ Starting from Brussels, Adair ordered the 32nd Guards Brigade to go to Beringen via Diest, while on the left the 5th Guards Armoured Brigade would travel to Geel via Aarschot. The first major obstacle was the Albert Canal. As usual the armoured cars of the Household Cavalry led the advance, A Squadron on the right was followed by the Welsh Guards Group and D Squadron

³³⁶ War Diary 30 Corps, IS 507, 24.09.44.

³³⁷ KTB 88 AK, 21.30 hours.

³³⁸ KTB 88 AK, 05.09.44, Abendmeldung.

³³⁹ KTB 88 AK, 05.09.44, Tagesmeldung Abt, Ia H.Gr.B.

³⁴⁰ This section unless otherwise specified: Roden Orde, *The Household Cavalry at War: Second Household Cavalry Regiment*, Aldershot 1953, 276-282; D.J.L. Fitzgerald M.C., *History of the Irish Guards in the Second World War*, Aldershot 1949, 461-2; Erskine, *The Scots Guards*, 569-571; L.F. Ellis, *Welsh Guards*, Aldershot 1946, 16-9.

³⁴¹ War Diary 1st Gren Gds, 05.09.44.

on the left was followed by the Grenadier Guards Group.³⁴² Intelligence had assured the commanders that it would be a 'nice day's run' and that there would be slight opposition and that only at canals and bridges.³⁴³ The troops were in for a shock.

The Guards were sad to leave Brussels but they got a drink to cheer them up, 'one for the road'. A champagne point had been opened in the Belgian capital and the civic authorities had handed over a warehouse full of drink. Even after the Guards had taken their share, huge stocks remained which were later seized by Second Army and the NAAFI.³⁴⁴ The men set off in a buoyant mood which lasted for quite a while. In Leuven, Diest and Aarschot they were met by the cheering crowds they had become used to in the last two weeks. However, the crowds gradually thinned out as the troops neared the Albert Canal.

D Squadron Household Cavalry, under Major E.J.S. Ward, leading the northern (left) column had advanced with speed to the five bridges south of Geel, between Olen en Meerhout. All were blown up in their faces. They came nearest to success at Eindhout where they caught the German defenders by surprise. The *Grenadiere* had been sunbathing on the near side of the bridge as the British drove up. The group scrambled to safety as Bren guns opened fire on them. Although the British kept on firing, the Germans were just too fast and the bridge went up with a roar, like all the others. At Kwaadmechelen, where the first armoured cars arrived at 14.10 hours, the Household Cavalry were informed by a Belgian resistance fighter, Jozef Noels, that the railway bridge was still passable on foot.³⁴⁵ It was a job for the infantry, in other words. So the news was passed on to the commander of the 1st (Motor) Grenadier Guards, Lieutenant-Colonel E.H. Goulburn who ordered No.2 Company to make the crossing as soon as possible.³⁴⁶ The Grenadiers got ready for the assault. It was now around five p.m. Then, only twenty minutes before the operation was to start, it was called off. Brigade had been informed that the Welsh Guards had already crossed the canal.

Surprise

Around one p.m. the leading armoured cars of A Squadron Household Cavalry under Major D. Bowes Daly reached the bridge at Beringen only to find it being blown up.³⁴⁷ However, although the wooden bridge (erected by the Germans in 1940 after the stone bridge had been blown up by the Belgians) was destroyed, the stone abutments of the original were still standing. Maybe a new bridge could be built there and the infantry could use the wreckage to cross? The Cavalrymen reported this to the Welsh Guards Group who arrived en masse about two hours later. A

³⁴² The Guards operated in groups combining armour and infantry, hence the Irish Guards group consisted of 2nd (Armoured) Irish Guards plus 3rd Irish Guards, The Coldstream Guards group of 1st (Armoured) Coldstream Guards plus 5th Coldstream Guards, the Grenadier Guards group of 1st (Motor) Grenadier Guards plus 2nd (Armoured) Grenadier Guards and the Welsh Guards group which consisted of 1st Welsh Guards plus 2nd (Armoured recce) Welsh Guards, usually reinforced by X Company Scots Guards.

³⁴³ Fitzgerald, *The Irish Guards*, 461.

³⁴⁴ NAAFI = Navy, Army and Air Force Institute which provided basic comforts and canteen services to the troops; Fitzgerald, *The Irish Guards*, 461.

³⁴⁵ Rijmen, 48.

³⁴⁶ The CO was Captain the Duke of Ruthland.

³⁴⁷ *Royal Engineers Battlefield Tour*, 80.

crossing would not be a piece of cake, however. When Lieutenant-Colonel J.C. Gresham, CO of the 1st Welsh Guards, tried to inspect the bridge *Spandau* MG's and mortars opened fire. It looked as if the defenders, *II./GR 723* under *Major Berenheide*, were not going to take things lying down. Plans were made for an assault crossing in boats, covered by tanks from No.3 Troop. Starting at 15.40 hours the Shermans laid down suppressive fire on the houses and positions on the other side as well as laying down a smoke screen. In addition guns from the 55th Field Regiment RA, which had just arrived near Paal, also opened fire. Shells hit the northern ramp and embankment for almost an hour, while smoke obscured the canal.

Just as the Welsh Guards were about to drag their boats down to the canal they spotted a civilian clambering over the wreckage of the bridge waving a white handkerchief. It was Remie Vaneerdewegh, who had a very pleasant surprise for the Guardsmen: the German defenders were withdrawing. They had obviously panicked.³⁴⁸ Not a second was lost and one after the other the Carrier platoon, the Prince of Wales and No.3 and 4 Companies went across, using the wreckage of the bridge. They ran after the retreating Germans, killing about a dozen and capturing twenty. They also shot up a halftrack and a lorry full of ammunition. Then they took up positions covering the ramp. Still, the bridgehead was only about two hundred metres wide. Would that be enough? Everything now depended on how fast a bridge could be constructed to bring tanks across. Without them the bridgehead would suffer the same fate as the one at Merksem which had to be abandoned that very afternoon.

The German response

As mentioned above, on the morning of 6 September, as the Guards set off from Brussels, Student's *Fallschirmjäger* finally began to arrive. The three regiments that would make up Erdmann's division (*FJR 20, 21 and 24*) were unloading at Roermond. Von der Heydte's *FJR 6* and *I./FJR 2* (*Hauptmann Oswald Finzel*) had stopped at Tilburg. Meanwhile the training units (*Fallschirmjäger Ersatz und Ausbildungs Battalion*) arrived in 's-Hertogenbosch.³⁴⁹

During the afternoon, from four to five p.m., there was a conference at the headquarters of *LXXVIII. Armeekorps* in Moergestel at which Reinhard, Student and Model were all present.³⁵⁰ During the meeting it was decided to change the previous arrangements for the defence of the Albert Canal. Reinhard assigned the sector between Antwerp and Herentals to Sievers (*719. I.D.*) and he made Chill responsible for the sector from Herentals to Hasselt. This meant that Chill took over *Grenadier-Regiment 723*.³⁵¹ Halfway during the meeting news arrived that British forces had attacked at Beringen and Kwaadmechelen. Not yet aware that the British had crossed the Albert Canal at Beringen, but anxious lest they had, Model ordered Chill to seal off any bridgehead and annihilate it without delay.

³⁴⁸ To this day it is unclear exactly why they ran away, probably it was the combination of indirect (artillery) and direct (tanks) fire that made them lose heart.

³⁴⁹ Student, *Der deutsche Fallschirmjäger*, 7 and KTB 88 AK, 06.09.44, A 137.

³⁵⁰ KTB 88 AK, 06.09.44, 16.00 hours.

³⁵¹ KTB 88 AK, 06.09.44, Tagesmeldung.

Chill would also receive reinforcements. He was assigned *Feld Ersatz und Ausbildungs Bataillon (FEB) 347* and during the meeting a phone call went to *schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559* telling its *Kommandeur, Major Sattler*, immediately to send one company to Turnhout where Chill had his headquarters.³⁵² There they would receive further instructions.³⁵³ Soon *Oberleutnant Kopka's 3./559* was on its way. It was the start of a cooperation between *559* and Chill that would last on and off for nearly two months. *Kopka's Sturmgeschütze* were instructed to support the infantry of *FEB 347*, especially along any roads leading to Eindhoven.³⁵⁴ One look at the map had told Reinhard that that was where the Guards must be heading. His educated guess was spot on. In addition Chill was assigned *3. (Flak)/Panzerjäger-Abteilung 347* with six 2 cm *Selbstfahrlafetten* and one drawn 2 cm, as well as *I./FJR 2 (Finzel)* as soon as it arrived. Before the day was out *2. and 1./559*, the *Jagdpanther Kompanie*, plus headquarters were also ordered to Turnhout.³⁵⁵ They would follow close on the heels of *Kopka* and his men. These troops would have to suffice.³⁵⁶

The sudden withdrawal by *II./GR 723* from the bridge was of course an unmitigated disaster and the blame fell squarely on *Oberst Vehrenkamp*, commanding officer of *Grenadier-regiment 723*. In fact, the following morning when they met, Reinhard did not mince words and told *Vehrenkamp* to wipe out the bridgehead in order to restore the honour of *GR 723*.³⁵⁷ Not only Reinhard was furious, *Vehrenkamp's* colleague, *SS-Sturmbannführer M. Gebhardt*, commanding *I./Landstorm Nederland* near Hasselt, also had a bone to pick with the *Oberst*.³⁵⁸ Two days before, on 4 September, *Gebhardt* had lent *Vehrenkamp* two of his precious 7.5 cm *Pak* which he now wanted back. When he sent one of his subordinates, *Hauptsturmführer Gerdes*, to fetch them he could not get through to *Beringen* as *II./GR 723* had already withdrawn without informing *I./Landstorm Nederland*, whose whole right flank was now dangling in the air. While Chill began to assemble his forces and draw up a plan of action, *Vehrenkamp* had already ordered his troops to prepare for the counterattack. But others had beaten him to it.

Confusion in the night

Soon after the Welsh Guards had dug in, it began to grow dark. If they had hoped for a quiet night, the Guardsmen were in for a nasty surprise. That afternoon *Generalleutnant Georg Bertram*, responsible for guarding the Albert canal at its most

³⁵² A *Feld Ersatz Bataillon* or *FEB* was a first-line reinforcement battalion, stationed behind the line, which received the reinforcements from the *Marschbataillone (q.v.)* and held them until required by the division it was assigned to (in this case the *347. Infanterie-Division*). Often, if casualties were heavy or in case of an emergency, the *FEB's* were put into the line as fighting units (*German Order of Battle*, London 1994, B10).

³⁵³ KTB 88 AK, 06.09.44, 16.35.

³⁵⁴ KTB 88 AK, 06.09.44, A 141.

³⁵⁵ KTB 88 AK, 06.09.44, 18.00 hour.

³⁵⁶ Interestingly it was the second time Chill had received reinforcements in the form of *Jagdpanther*. The first time had been on 17th August, three weeks earlier, when some *Jagdpanther* from *3./s.Pz.Jg.Abt. 654* had been attached to the *85. I.D.* near *Livarot, Normandy (Lodieu, La Massue, 124)*.

³⁵⁷ KTB 88 AK, 07.09.44, 10.00 hour.

³⁵⁸ KTB 88 AK, 06.09.44, A 139.

eastern end with the two battalions of *Flieger-Regiment 22*,³⁵⁹ learned of the British breakthrough at Beringen just as he was to hand over this sector to the *176. Division zbV* under *Generalleutnant* Berthold Stumm.³⁶⁰ He immediately despatched the *Kommandeur* of *FLR 22*, *Oberst* Hans Borcherd, to investigate and, if possible, drive off the British. In the village of Helchteren Borcherd came across *2./FJR 21* under *Hauptmann* Arthur Jäger.

After detraining at Roermond, Jäger's young *Fallschirmjäger* had received their *Panzerfäuste* while being transported to Helchteren. During the drive they were told how to use the weapons. They were on their way to Beringen. Their attack, coming from the direction of Heusden, east of Beringen was to coincide with an attack from the north-west, carried out by *1. and 2. Kompanie* of *I./FJR 2* (the other two were still on their way) under *Hauptmann* Oswald Finzel.³⁶¹ Even though this battalion had also arrived through Roermond there was a complete lack of communication between the two battalions. That and the fact that the soldiers were exhausted, having come straight from Germany, meant that the attack was doomed to fail. Even though some *Fallschirmjäger* got to within a hundred metres of the bridge the Welsh Guards, wet, hungry and equally weary, would not give an inch. Jäger pulled back to Helchteren, Finzel to Beverlo to get some rest.

559 on the move

Kopka and his men did not get much rest that night either.³⁶² While the *Fallschirmjäger* were attacking the bridgehead *3./559* was on the move. Kopka had gone ahead in his *Kfz. 15 Horch* staff car to receive instructions in Turnhout. There, *Oberstleutnant* Kurt Schuster, *Ia* of the *85. Infanterie-Division*, advised Kopka to travel to Beringen via Leopoldsburg, Heppen and Beverlo, probably unaware there was a much shorter route that ran through Olmen and Oostham. Kopka was also told to pick up the infantry, *FEB 347* and the remainder of *II./GR 723*, in Beverlo. The company had to cover about ninety kilometres and although the *Sturmgeschütze* had a road speed of up to forty kilometres per hour, because of the darkness and occasional showers they were forced to take it slowly. In this way it took them nearly all night to arrive at their destination. In addition they had to stop in order to refuel at the railway station in Mol. Two *Sturmgeschütze* caught fire when petrol dripped on to the hot exhaust pipes. Fortunately for the crews the torrential rain quickly put the fires out. Kopka drove on towards Beverlo. There he fell asleep in his car, overcome

³⁵⁹ Flieger-Ausbildungs-Regiment (Aircrew Training Regiment)22 was formed 01.04.1939 in Neustadt-Glewe. On 16.08.42 it was redesignated Flieger-Regiment 22 and in June 1944 it was renamed Luftgau-Feld-Regiment Belgien-Nordfrankreich (mot) 22 with two battalions (companies 1-12) and a staff. Like all other regiments of this nature it had a twofold task: provide basic military training for Luftwaffe personnel and guard airfields. During September 1944, after the retreat from the Albert Canal it was disbanded and absorbed by the Fallschirmtruppe (Holm).

³⁶⁰ Details this paragraph Marius Louche, *De Bevrijding van Heppen en Leopoldsburg (8-12 september 1944)*, Heppen 2004, 70-5 and J. Bussels, *De Slag om Hechtel, Bevrijdingsgevechten 6-12 september 1944*, Hechtel 1972, 29-30.

³⁶¹ First Cdn Army, IR PoW Battle Groups Infantry Units, 18.10.44. Louche (*Heppen en Leopoldsburg*, 71) also has I/FJR 6 involved, but that is clearly wrong as FJR 6 did not arrive in Tilburg until 8 September (KTB 88 AK, 12.36 hours).

³⁶² Details this paragraph Kopka, *Missbraucht und Gebeutelt*, 129-130, and Louche, *Heppen en Leopoldsburg*, 77-8.

by exhaustion. A few hours later his *3. Kompanie* arrived. It was now almost six a.m. and it would soon get light. The attack was about to begin.

Building a bridge

Construction of the bridge at Beringen, vital for the survival of the bridgehead, was no mean feat.³⁶³ The problems were that most of the bridging equipment was still a long way away and one of the piers was damaged while the other was completely demolished. A gap of no less than thirty metres would have to be covered by the British engineers.³⁶⁴ The work started just before it got dark and went on throughout the night. Work was made more difficult as it rained most of the time and there was no moon. In addition German mortars, machine-guns and 8.8 cm guns³⁶⁵ opened fire on the site of the bridge, some of the fire in aid of the counterattack put up that night mentioned earlier.

To help out, some two hundred metres north of the bridge Belgian civilians had begun to collect some barges and make a footbridge over them.³⁶⁶ Fortunately for the British troops working on the bridge (and the German POWs forced to assist them) this served as a decoy and soon the barges drew most of the German fire. At 04.15 hours on 7 September the Class 40 bridge was ready. However, the next morning, when the engineers saw in daylight what they had put up that night, they were horrified. The bridge looked decidedly shaky and it was quickly shored up. However, looks can be deceptive and it survived for many more months. But just in case it would not, a barge Bailey bridge was constructed just south of the bridge.

Fifteen minutes after the bridge was ready, the waiting Welsh Guards rushed across. At the same time the Irish Guards Group were ordered to board their tanks and trucks and wait for the order to follow the Welsh Guards. As soon as the latter had taken Beringen the Irish Guards were to advance on Beverlo. They would have to spend many uncomfortable hours inside their vehicles before they could be sent across. In fact, it would not be until noon that they were finally on their way, because the Welsh Guards had run into some serious trouble in Beringen.

Autumn Gale

The morning of 7 September was meant to be the turning point for the Germans. *Generalfeldmarschall* Wilhelm Keitel, *Chef des Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (OKW)* had ordered a reorganisation along the Western Front and a halt to the retreat. The codeword was *Herbststurm* (Autumn Gale).³⁶⁷ The reorganisation was to take effect from 7 September. For *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps* Reinhard issued an additional order. *Herbststurm* would be implemented as soon as the situation at

³⁶³ Details bridge, *Royal Engineers Battlefield Tour*, 80-1.

³⁶⁴ 615 Field Squadron, *Royal Engineers Battlefield Tour*, 80.

³⁶⁵ Possibly 3. schw. Battr. Flak-Rgt. 95 (KTB 88 AK 07.09.44, Tagesmeldung). There was no heavy artillery in the area (KTB 88 AK, 07.09.44, Lagekarte), certainly not SS-Artillerie Ersatz und Ausbildungs Battalion 17 and 18 as Louche writes (*Heppen en Leopoldsburg*, 70) since these did not arrive until 8 September (KTB 88 AK, 08.09.44, Mittagsmeldung) and on 7 September were still at De Kolonie.

³⁶⁶ Louche, *Heppen en Leopoldsburg*, 63, wrongly has south, but the source he quotes (Horrocks, *Corps Commander*, 85) also gives north.

³⁶⁷ KTB 88 AK, 07.09.44, C 211.

Beringen was restored.³⁶⁸ He would be in for a long wait. The first tanks of the Welsh Guards had just entered the centre of Beringen as Reinhard's order went out. The Welsh Guards immediately ran into some very strong opposition.

During the night *Kampfgruppe Vehrenkamp* (mainly *II./GR 723*, *I./FJR 2* plus *3. (Flak)/Panzer-Jäger-Abteilung 344*) had formed a semicircle around the bridgehead, whose chief aim was to prevent Allied troops from leaving Beringen via one of the main roads. Four *Pak* (three 7.5 cm and one 5 cm) were positioned north of the centre where the main thrust was suspected and one 7.5 cm plus the 2 cm guns of the *Flak* platoon covered all the other exits. When dawn broke it was nearly seven p.m. and all hell burst loose in and around Beringen.³⁶⁹ When positioning these guns the German defenders had made a rather curious mistake, either because they were new to the game or because it was simply too dark to see (it was raining heavily), or both. What was the problem?

The heart of Beringen, the market square, is on a small hill which rises about ten metres above the surrounding countryside. The road, towards Beringen-Mijn, where four of the *Pak*-guns were positioned, first dips down very steeply and then, between Beringen and Beringen-Mijn the ground slowly rises again. This meant that once the Welsh Guards reached the market square, they would look down upon the German gun positions. To counterbalance this obvious disadvantage for the defenders, after 1,600 metres on the east side of the road leading into Beringen-Mijn rose a slag-heap, taller even than the centre of Beringen. From there German observers could see straight into the Allied bridgehead to direct fire. All in all, the two high points would play major roles in the battle, although not at first.

It was still dark when the Welsh Guards Group crossed the Bailey bridge and entered Beringen at four a.m.³⁷⁰ An hour later, as the leading tanks of No.1 Squadron, under Major N.T.L. Fisher, and the infantry of No.3 Company, under Captain P.M. Beckwith-Smith, were just entering the town, *Kampfgruppe Vehrenkamp* launched a counterattack.³⁷¹ With them they had a *Pioneer Kompanie* of *1. Panzergrenadier Division Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler*. The SS-men carried just enough explosives to blow up the bridges once the *Grenadiere* had reached them. But they got no further than two hundred metres from the bridge. The Welsh Guards kept pushing tanks and infantry across and without the support of armour the German infantry could never break through. They pulled back to the Zwarte Beek, a stream just outside Beringen. Where was Kopka with his *Sturmgeschütze* while the counterattack was under way?

Sturmgeschütze to the rescue

Oberleutnant Franz Kopka had only taken a short nap when all fourteen *Sturmgeschütze* of *3./559* finally arrived in Beverlo around sunrise. It was now almost six a.m. on Thursday 7 September.³⁷² Most of *Feld Ersatz Battalion (FEB) 347* under *Hauptmann* Sick joined *559* there. While the *Grenadiere* climbed aboard the vehicles, Kopka informed the commanders of the vehicles about his plans for the

³⁶⁸ KTB 88 AK, 07.09.44, C 212.

³⁶⁹ Jaarboek 1944, 60.

³⁷⁰ This section, Louche, *Heppen en Leopoldsburg*, 93-4; Ellis, *Welsh Guards*, 217-9.

³⁷¹ KTB 88 AK, 07.09.44, A 143.

³⁷² Details this section, unless otherwise specified, Kopka, *Missbraucht und Gebeutelt*, 130.

attack on the bridgehead. Kopka, whose main job as we have seen was to support the attacking infantry had decided to split his forces in order to be able to cover all directions. Kopka ordered four *Sturmgeschütze* to cover the main roads from Beringen to Beverlo, via Beringen-Mijn, and attack the Allied bridgehead from the north side in support of *I./FJR 2* and *II./GR 723*. He himself would lead the main force of ten *Sturmgeschütze* in a clockwise movement round Beringen to reach the south side. The *Grenadiere* of *FEB 347* would ride along on top of the vehicles. In this way the Guards would be attacked from two sides simultaneously. It was an ingenious plan. As time was not on the Germans' side, since every hour more reinforcements poured into Beringen, there was no time for a proper reconnaissance. So, immediately after receiving instructions, the fourteen *Sturmgeschütze* set off. Kopka's company would receive its baptism of fire.

The four *Sturmgeschütze* that advanced via the road from the north, the Koolmijnlaan, soon reached the German lines and took up positions.³⁷³ One turned right and stopped close to the Albert Canal, about 350 metres from the bridge, the next one stopped behind a pub on the Koolmijnlaan. The third *Sturmgeschütz* proceeded for another two hundred metres and then stopped along the same road and the fourth took up position right behind the 7.5 cm *Pak* at the beginning of the Koolmijnlaan.

Meanwhile the group of ten *Sturmgeschütze* headed south. As there were no roads in this direction, the vehicles rumbled towards Beringen along the railway tracks. An hour after assembling in Beverlo they reached the outskirts of the town. There, at the railway station they picked up the remainder of *FEB 347*. It was now 7 a.m. The attack was about to begin. Unable to see the bridgehead from their current position, the attackers now began to turn west. In front of them was open terrain, the northernmost part was called De Mot, the rest Muizenheide.³⁷⁴ It looked promising, but unknown to Kopka this was in fact extremely swampy ground. Soon a number of *Sturmgeschütze* became bogged down. (Later in the day most would be recovered.) The others pushed on and just then they ran into Cromwell tanks heading east.³⁷⁵ It was the lead squadron of the 2nd Welsh Guards which had just left Beringen.

The Welsh Guards break out

Just before the encounter with Kopka's *Sturmgeschütze*, the Welsh Guards Group had slugged it out in the centre of town. Once they had reached the market square, on top of the hill, the combined tank-infantry group, No.1 Squadron and No.3 Company, wanted to turn right in order to reach the Hasseltsesteenweg, the road leading towards Heusden and Helchteren and thence northwards to Hechtel and eventually, the Dutch border.³⁷⁶ One of the tanks of No.1 Squadron was knocked out

³⁷³ Details regarding positions Louche, *Heppen en Leopoldsburg*, 95-6.

³⁷⁴ Literally: Mouse heath.

³⁷⁵ While most armoured regiments were equipped with Sherman tanks, Cromwells equipped the 22nd Armoured Brigade of the 7th Armoured Division and five armoured reconnaissance regiments in the Twenty-First Army Group. Churchill tanks equipped 31st Tank (later Armoured) Brigade, 34th Tank Brigade and 6th Guards Tank Brigade (Duncan Crow, *British and Commonwealth Armoured Formations (1919-46)*, Windsor 1971, 83 and 88).

³⁷⁶ Louche (*Heppen en Leopoldsburg*, 96) writes No.3 squadron, but that does not make any sense as it came second (Ellis, *Welsh Guards*, 219).

by one of the two 7.5 cm *Pak 40* positioned down the road to Beringen-Mijn. After being hit the Cromwell tank caught fire. It then slowly rolled down the hill, towards the German guns, finally coming to a stop when it crashed into a house less than fifty metres from the *Pak* which had knocked it out. The house burnt down completely.³⁷⁷ Two other tanks managed to cross the square unharmed. In turn the Cromwells knocked out one of the *Pak 40* guarding the eastern exit, the Koerselsesteenweg. The tanks could now leave the houses of Beringen behind them, which they did. They took the Hasseltsesteenweg, leading straight to Helchteren. Just as they entered this road, they came face to face with Kopka's *Sturmgeschütze*.

As soon as the opposing vehicles spotted each other a fire fight broke out between No.1 Squadron Welsh Guards and 3./559.³⁷⁸ Eight *Sturmgeschütze*³⁷⁹ slogged it out with fifteen Cromwells. The Germans were heavily outnumbered and the outcome was a foregone conclusion. Two *Sturmgeschütze* were knocked out, one by sergeant H.L. Williams in the lead tank, and one by dismounted infantry using a PIAT, and Kopka ordered his company to pull back to Beringen railway station. Kopka lost another *Sturmgeschütz*, between Koersel and Beringen.³⁸⁰

The Welsh Guards Group then proceeded at high speed towards their next destination. Between Beringen and Heusden they ran into the next roadblock, put up by the *Fallschirmjäger* of I./FJR 21, under *Hauptmann* Hoffmann.³⁸¹ However, the Germans were heavily outnumbered and outgunned. The Welsh Guards quickly brushed them aside and moved on only to run into the next obstacle, *Aufklärungs-Abteilung 176*.³⁸² This was one of three battalions which *Oberst* Borcherd had received as reinforcement for the attack on Beringen from the east; the others being 2./*Flieger Regiment 22* and a *Landeschützen Bataillon*.³⁸³ Again, the lightly armed German troops were quickly dealt with and the column moved on. Soon they were just a few kilometres from Helchteren. New German opposition, the *Landeschützen Bataillon* under *Hauptmann* Dietrich, had just left this village. *Oberst* Borcherd in his staff car was just behind them. Seeing tanks rapidly approaching them, the Germans, who had no serious anti-tank weapons, decided to take cover and let the tanks roll by before firing on the following infantry. However, Belgian civilians pointed out the Germans to the Allied troops and the result was a massacre. Scores of Germans were killed and Borcherd, seriously wounded himself, ordered the battalion to give up the unequal fight. About 150 Germans were taken prisoner.³⁸⁴ The Welsh Guards Group

³⁷⁷ The hit was reported to 88 AK (07.09.44, Mittagsmeldung).

³⁷⁸ Details this action, Kopka, *Missbraucht und Gebeutelt*, 130 and Ellis, *Welsh Guards*, 217.

³⁷⁹ We discount at least two who got bogged down, as an immobile StuG III, not having a turret, was basically useless.

³⁸⁰ Louche (*Heppen en Leopoldsburg*, 114), following Kopka, dates this loss on the 8th, but his figures do not add up as Kopka had eight StuGs left in the evening of the 7th (KTB 88 AK, 07.09.44, Tagesmeldung). Furthermore Kopka erroneously remembers –and Louche quotes this– as it being knocked out by a P-47 Thunderbolt that was then shot down. The only P-47, however, that came down near Koersel, bellylanded one day earlier, 6 September at 15.30hrs. It was a P-47D, number 42-76512, HL-T (83FS). The pilot was 2nd Lt Bingham Percy, who evaded capture (J. Heij via P. Pouwels).

³⁸¹ Bussels, *De Slag om Hechtel*, 35 and Gerard Wuyts, *Herfststorm over Hechtel, 6-12 september 1944*, Hechtel 2004, 311.

³⁸² Bussels, *De Slag om Hechtel*, 36.

³⁸³ Troops only trained in guard duties.

³⁸⁴ Ellis, *Welsh Guards*, 218.

was then shot at by a *Pak* from *I./SS-Landstorm Nederland*, with no discernable effect, and was ordered to turn left and proceed to Hechtel.

Initially the advance continued as before, but *FJR 20* under *Major* Franz Grassmel, had occupied the village the day before and they had set a trap for the approaching Guards. Just as the Welsh Guards entered Hechtel two Cromwells in quick succession were knocked out. As dusk was now beginning to fall, the Welsh Guards Group decided to pull back. This turned out to be easier said than done. South of the village soldiers from *FJR 24* (*Major* Friedrich Hübner) appeared and the Welsh lost another Cromwell and two trucks before they reached the relative safety of Helchteren. Welsh losses were six killed or missing in action.

Another counterattack

Meanwhile, back at Beringen, after the fight with the Cromwell tanks, Kopka had assembled his company around the railway station of Beringen. From this position he could not see the bridgehead, but he did have a view of the other side of the canal, where more columns of the Welsh Guards were getting ready to cross the bridge. The *Sturmgeschütze* opened fire, but could not really influence the outcome of the battle for the town as they were too far away. In addition the accompanying infantry of *FEB 347* began to suffer heavy casualties when Allied artillery returned fire on Kopka's group. Slowly the men and the vehicles disengaged and started to pull back north in the direction of Beringen-Mijn.

During the struggle to retake Beringen, at ten a.m. Reinhard had met Chill at his headquarters in Oud-Turnhout.³⁸⁵ It was there that Reinhard told Vehrenkamp (*Grenadier Regiment 723*) to restore the honour of his regiment by eliminating the bridgehead. Soon after, Chill himself proceeded to Beringen-Mijn to oversee the new counterattacks and perhaps urge the troops on.³⁸⁶ All the efforts to wipe out the Beringen bridgehead, however, would falter in the face of tough opposition.

The new German attacks, just after the lead column of the Welsh Guards had gone through Beringen, led to prolonged fighting in the town. There the Welsh Guards, now reinforced by X Company Scots Guards, had their hands full pushing the Germans out of it. The Scots Guards tried to stalk the *Sturmgeschütze* at the bottom of the road (Koolmijnlaan) with a PIAT but every time they got close their quarry moved out of range.³⁸⁷ The Scots Guards got their own back when they set up an O.P. in an upper window and the two company snipers shot three of the German crew.³⁸⁸ By midday most of Beringen had been cleared and the Irish Guards took over. The Welsh and Scots Guards were able to disengage in order to continue their advance.

While the bitter fighting in Beringen was going on, the lone *Sturmgeschütz* which had taken up position nearest the Albert Canal, spotted B Squadron Household Cavalry following the Welsh Guards Group into Beringen.³⁸⁹ As the commander of the *Sturmgeschütz* spotted the rear of the column crossing the Bailey bridge, he opened

³⁸⁵ KTB 88 AK, 07.09.44, 10.00 hours and Mittagsmeldung which uses the phrase 'vorwärtszubringen'.

³⁸⁶ KTB 88 AK, 07.09.44, Mittagsmeldung.

³⁸⁷ Details Erskine, *Scots Guards*, 369-371.

³⁸⁸ Possibly killing Gural, Wondre (cf. Roll of Honour).

³⁸⁹ Orde, *The Household Cavalry*, 282-283.

fire on the Support Troop. Two White scout cars were knocked out in quick succession. All the armoured cars had already passed out of sight and were unable to help. One soldier was killed and two others severely wounded. The *Sturmgeschütz* remained in close observation until the medical officer, Captain R.U.F. Kynaston, appeared to tend to the wounded. It then withdrew, having refrained from firing again when it could see the badly wounded lying helplessly in the road. It was a rare act of compassion, like earlier at Merksem.

Around noon *Major* Erich Sattler, the *Kommandeur* of 559, received orders from Chill to hunt for enemy tanks which were said to be in the area of Leopoldsborg and Hechtel.³⁹⁰ Sattler had only just arrived in Turnhout to rest a few hours and it took his *Jagdpanther* several hours to reach their destination. In fact, 1. and 2./559 did not reach Leopoldsborg until late in the afternoon of 7 September, too late anyway to influence the fighting further south.³⁹¹ Also by this time no British tanks had reached the area of Leopoldsborg or Hechtel. Sattler set up his headquarters in Leopoldsborg, in the Sacred Heart Convent.³⁹² His companies would go into action the following day.

The Irish Guards take over

Meanwhile the Guards Division had sent another group into the fray. As mentioned above, at three a.m. the Irish Guards Group had been ordered to follow the Welsh Guards as soon as the latter had taken Beringen. This took longer than expected and only after waiting for what must have seemed like an eternity inside their vehicles and trucks, could the Irish Guards finally cross the bridge into Beringen around midday.³⁹³ In the lead was the 3rd Battalion, followed by the 2nd (Armoured) Battalion. The Irish Guards, like the Welsh Guards concentrated their troops in four mixed infantry-tank sub-groups covering the entire perimeter. They soon discovered that the edge of the town had not been cleared and they also spotted four *Sturmgeschütze*, three of them along the Koolmijnlaan road leading to Beringen-Mijn, moving up and down and shooting into the streets. The Irish Guards suffered their first fatalities since leaving Normandy. Soon No.1 Squadron lost its first tank to the *Sturmgeschütze* of 3./559. In addition other high-velocity guns contributed to the shelling.³⁹⁴ Lieutenant-Colonel J.O.E. Vandeleur, commanding the Irish Guards Group, suspected that the fire was being directed from the towering slag-heap at Beringen-Mijn. As more Guards were hit, many of them officers walking around on reconnaissance trips, Colonel Joe, as his troops called him, became fed up. Major Eames, Gunner battery commander, had found an ideal O.P. in the St. Jozefcollege before he, too, was wounded, and Lieutenant-Colonel Vandeleur went up to have a look for himself. By mid-afternoon he decided to do some shelling himself before launching the attack, in the hope of getting some direct hits on the *Sturmgeschütze*. He was not to be disappointed and soon two of Kopka's *Sturmgeschütze* went up in sheets of flame. The other two pulled back. Vandeleur then ordered No.3 Company, under Major M. Dudley, and No.3 Squadron, under Major D.S. Fitzgerald, to attack

³⁹⁰ KTB 88 AK, 07.09.44, A 147.

³⁹¹ KTB 88 AK, 07.09.44, Abendmeldung, reports 2/559 in Mol.

³⁹² Het Heilig Hart klooster, Louche, *Heppen en Leopoldsborg*, 150.

³⁹³ This section, unless otherwise specified, Fitzgerald, *The Irish Guard*, 462-467.

³⁹⁴ See note 364.

around the left flank. The problem was that they would have to cross the Zwarte Stroom, the stream just north of Beringen. The only crossing Major Dudley saw was a small wooden bridge. He decided to try anyway. After a smoke screen had been laid the tanks advanced, but the wooden bridge collapsed under the first Sherman. There was a delay as the tanks looked for another crossing-place. At last they found an old, disused railway bridge and at six p.m. the attack went in again. The leading tank was knocked out by the *Sturmgeschütz* nearest the Albert Canal. But the others got across safely and joined the infantry who had waded through the stream. Meanwhile the two other squadrons had concentrated their fire on the *Sturmgeschütz* which was put out of action. In retaliation the one remaining *Sturmgeschütz* knocked out one of No.3 squadron's Shermans. Still, the attack was a success. Although the Irish Guards had not enough men to clear the large mine area completely, taking the slag-hap meant that at last the shelling diminished. At the end of the afternoon they had pushed back the German infantry from behind the Zwarte Stroom and consolidated their gains.³⁹⁵ All in all, the German attempts to wipe out the Beringen bridgehead on 7 September had come to nothing. Vehrenkamp's men had failed dismally. At least twenty-five *Grenadiere* had been killed, many more must have been wounded.³⁹⁶

Oberleutnant Franz Kopka cannot have been very happy either. Six of his *Sturmgeschütze* had been put out of action that day while his company had knocked out only five Shermans and a few scout cars.³⁹⁷ Basically, he had lost almost half his complement. This did not bode well for the future. As dusk fell he assembled the remaining eight vehicles around the railway bridge in Beringen-Mijn.³⁹⁸ The perimeter was secured by fifteen *Fallschirmjäger* from I./FJR 2. The exhausted men of 3./559 moved into two houses on the edge of a copse, the occupants of which were awaiting events in their cellars. The power and water were still in working order and the men managed to wash a little. At around eight p.m. *Hauptfeldwebel* Karl Kornke, the commander of *Sturmgeschütz* 302, arrived with some lorries with provisions. The *Sturmgeschütze* were refuelled and ammunition was loaded up. The men were also grateful that Kornke had brought hot food along plus cold rations for two days. Kopka, because he suffered from a stomach complaint, in addition received some medicine from the health officer. Soon after finishing their suppers the crews were checking their machines.

In the meantime, Kopka, as company commander, had to take care of all the paperwork, together with Kornke, the senior NCO. Even though he had been in life-or-death situations only hours before, this was still expected of him. His duties included reporting on the fighting, ordering materials, reporting on casualties, looking at requests for leave etc. One request he sent in that evening was to Sattler. Kopka knew that the next day would be hard, with only half his unit left and he therefore asked Sattler to send him some reinforcements, preferably *Jagdpanther*. In

³⁹⁵ II/723 and I/FJR 2.

³⁹⁶ War Diary 32nd Guards Brigade, 13.09.44.

³⁹⁷ KTB 88 AK, 07.09.44, 17.40 hours and interrogation Paul Oswald (captured on 07.09.44), who mistakenly says that the StuGs belonged to 2. Kompanie which is impossible as this was not fully engaged yet.

³⁹⁸ All details this section, Kopka (35 Stunden am Albertkanal), quoted in Louche, *Heppen en Leopoldsburg*, 105.

order to relax a little Kornke and Kopka had a glass of red wine. Kornke then drove back to Leopoldsborg while Kopka did the rounds. He found that, with the exception of the men on guard, everyone was fast asleep. He soon turned in himself. Disliking sleeping in other people's homes, he made himself comfortable on the back seat of his *Horch* staff car, soon falling asleep from sheer exhaustion.

Battle among the collieries

During the evening of 7th September *Generaloberst* Student himself arrived at the headquarters of *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps* to discuss with Reinhard and *Oberst* Eichert-Wiersdorff, the latter's chief of staff, how to deal with the bridgehead at Beringen.³⁹⁹ He issued new orders.⁴⁰⁰ The next attack was to go in at dawn on 8 September. Chill was to be in charge while *Oberstleutnant* von der Heydte, *Kommandeur* of *Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 6*, would carry out the actual attack. The main goal was to blow up the bridge.⁴⁰¹ Student had high hopes, because both *FJR 6* and its commander had excellent reputations. Like the other German units it was nearly wiped out in Normandy and at the end of August it assembled in Güstrow, again under Von der Heydte, to be rebuilt a second time.⁴⁰² Von der Heydte himself was also a renowned soldier. Originally serving in the army he switched to the *Luftwaffe* in 1940 where he had served with distinction in the *Fallschirmtruppe* since. In an official army assessment he is described as a 'Besonders passionierter Offizier, für welchen Beweglichkeit, Schwung und ein ausgesprochener Unternehmungsgest sind. Dafür auch Freude am selbstständigen Entschluss und an Verantwortung. Offen, anständig in der Gesinnung, zuverlässig.'⁴⁰³ Von der Heydte was to show all of these characteristics, both positive and negative, which were so typical of him. Waiting for their trains to move at some marshalling yard close to Aachen Von der Heydte noticed another waiting train nearby. It contained part of a *Gebirgs Flak-Kompanie*, equipped with 2 cm *Flak* who had no idea how to join their regular unit. Von der Heydte managed to persuade these soldiers and their guns to join him. As he had no proper *Flak* himself the unit was to stand him in good stead during the fighting over the next two months.⁴⁰⁴ Still, the problem was that *FJR 6* was only just arriving in Tilburg during the night. It very much remained to be seen, therefore, if the attack could begin as planned.

In the meantime their opponents had not been idle either. As dawn broke, new plans were being put into effect. The Irish Guards were still north of Beringen, on the edge of Beringen-mijn. Because the Welsh Guards had found that they could not deal with both Helchteren and Hechtel the Irish Guards were ordered to clear Helchteren while the Coldstream Guards Group (organised like the Irish and Welsh Guards Groups in infantry-tank groups) was ordered to take over from them and advance on Leopoldsborg through Beverlo and Heppen. From five a.m. the first columns of the two Coldstream Guards battalions had crossed the Beringen bridge heading for the starting-line near the entrance to the coal mines, just beyond the slag-heap which

³⁹⁹ KTB 88 AK, 07.09.44, 23.00 hours.

⁴⁰⁰ KTB 88 AK, 07.09.44, A 158.

⁴⁰¹ KTB 88 AK, 08.09.44, 08.55 hours.

⁴⁰² Griesser, *Die Löwen von Carentan*, 7, 67, 85 and 170-4.

⁴⁰³ Beurteilung 15.11.1939, in Neitzel, *Abgehört*, 452.

⁴⁰⁴ Von der Heydte, *Muss ich sterben*, 164.

had caused so much trouble the day before.⁴⁰⁵ Here, No.3 Squadron 2nd Irish Guards had set up a defensive cordon behind which the infantry, the 5th Coldstream Guards, began to assemble.

The attack was to be made in four phases. First No.1 and 3 Companies were to clear Beringen-mijn, then the tanks could come in and No.2 Company and No.3 Squadron would take Beverlo. After this No.4 Company and No.1 squadron would capture Heppen and finally the Group would advance on Leopoldsburg, eight kilometres from the starting-line. That was the plan. Considering the opposition, it had a reasonable chance of success. It was now almost seven a.m. and slowly getting light. On the left of the main road, No.1 Company under Major C.H. Feilden, was assembling, to the right No.3 Company under Major the Marquess of Hartington, did the same.

As *FJR 6* was still a long way off, that morning, for the moment, once again, the job of holding the Allied attack fell to *II./GR 723*, together with half of *I./FJR 2* (Finzel). Also once again, the exhausted *Grenadiere* and *Fallschirmjäger*, with no heavy weapons and hardly any artillery support, were no match for the combined tank-infantry group attacking them. The only real hardware were the eight *Sturmgeschütze* of *3./559*. The terrain was in the defenders' favour though, as much of Beringen-mijn, just as its name indicates, consisted of gasworks, collieries and a railway yard. The day certainly began well for *Oberleutnant* Kopka. For once he took his enemies by surprise, making maximum use of the terrain.

An invisible enemy

Kopka's action can only be described as inspired.⁴⁰⁶ As soon as he heard the rattling of tracks and the growling of engines to the south he climbed on to the railway embankment, where it crossed over the Koolmijnlaan, to get a better view of the grounds in front of him. He suspected that his opponents were about to renew their attack. He saw that the Koolmijnlaan, the main road running south, fell sharply over a distance of about four hundred metres before rising again. This meant that at ground level he was as invisible to the British troops, six hundred metres away, as they were to him, but also that from his position on top of the railway he was able to see them. Kopka noticed the two infantry columns in their halftracks assembling east and west of the road. Screening them he saw were some Sherman tanks. Kopka immediately ordered two of his *Sturmgeschütze* to take up position right underneath the railway bridge. The crews were to leave their hatches open so that he could shout his instructions. He told the first *Sturmgeschütz* to fire. The first shot was short and bounced back into the air. Kopka shouted corrections. The second shot was a hit and Kopka saw an explosion and fire. The crew of the second *Sturmgeschütz* fired, using the same coordinates. Kopka then had his *Sturmgeschütze* fire in turn, each firing a total of four times.

Within minutes a smoke screen appeared, hiding his opponents from view, but not before two of the leading Shermans of the Irish Guards had been hit, both going up in flames. A lorry driver who tried to protect the wounded crew of the second Sherman by placing a captured German lorry in front of them saw this vehicle being

⁴⁰⁵ Michael Howard and John Sparrow, *The Coldstream Guards 1920-1946*, Oxford 1951, 287.

⁴⁰⁶ This section, unless otherwise specified, Kopka, *Missbraucht und Gebeutelt*, 136-8, and Howard and Sparrow, *The Coldstream Guards*, 287.

hit as well. In addition, unbeknownst to Kopka, the German shells severely wounded three junior officers. The burning tanks for a while completely obscured the view and Lieutenant-Colonel E.R. 'Roddy' Hill, CO of the 5th Coldstream Guards Group, briefly postponed the attack while sorting out the resulting chaos. To make matters worse, at 07.50 hours Hill was informed that there would be no barrage. The infantry would have to attack on its own.

A slow start

At eight a.m. Hill ordered his two companies to advance, carefully avoiding the main road which was deemed too dangerous.⁴⁰⁷ The German defenders were ready for them. While he was wondering why the British had not responded more aggressively to his shelling (probably because they could not see him) Kopka told his eight *Sturmgeschütze* to pull back slowly and take up new positions along the railway line. There the *Fallschirmjäger* of *Hauptmann* Finzel's *I./FJR 2* had also dug in, holding a line of trenches about 300 metres long.

As a result of the German concentration behind the railway, the two advancing companies of the Coldstream Guards each faced different problems. On the right, Lord Hartington's No.3 Company had to cope with the mining terrain. The Guardsmen had to climb over the walls surrounding the terrain as well as negotiating the many railways tracks of the huge yard. It was slow and hard work, but after two hours the men finally arrived at their objective, the Leysestraat. For the moment they were alone, because on the left, the going had been even slower. Major Feilden's company had run into some serious problems as soon as they neared the railway.

From their positions along the railway line Finzel's men had an excellent view of the advancing British troops across the open grounds below them. As soon as they had come within range, the *Fallschirmjäger* opened fire. Losses were rapidly mounting and the advance had come to a complete standstill. When he was informed of the deadlock, Lieutenant-Colonel Hill, sent No.4 Company, Major J. Chandos-Pole, to cross the Beverlosesteenweg, sweep around the left and come in on the German flank. Even though this took the German defenders by surprise No.4 Company had a tough fight and bayonets and hand-grenades were needed to prize the *Fallschirmjäger* out of their deep trenches. But by eleven a.m. the way was clear and No.1 Company could resume their advance and seize their objective. Finzel and Kopka were forced to pull back a kilometre to the village of Beverlo. Because it had taken so long to take Beringen-mijn, Hill decided to go over to the second phase of the attack, the capture of Beverlo, without delay. There, *schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559* had just lost its first precious *Jagdpanther*, ironically, not to enemy action.

The first *Jagdpanther* are lost

Because Kopka had realised the previous day that he was heavily outnumbered, he had requested his commanding officer, *Major Sattler*, to send him a few *Jagdpanther* as reinforcements.⁴⁰⁸ Sattler sent the third *Zug* (Troop), *Jagdpanther* 131, 132 and

⁴⁰⁷ This section Howard and Sparrow, *The Coldstream Guards*, 287-8, and Kopka, *Missbraucht und Gebeutelt*, 138-9.

⁴⁰⁸ This section unless otherwise specified Kopka, *Missbraucht und Gebeutelt*, 134-8; Louche, *Heppen en Leopoldsburg*, 113-4, and Wuyts, *Herfststorm over Hechtel*, 33-4.

133, under *Leutnant* Heinrich Koch, to help Kopka.⁴⁰⁹ The *Zug* left Leopoldsburg around eight a.m., travelled to Korspel and arrived in Beverlo about an hour later. There they got into trouble almost right away. Entering Beverlo they decided to head for the main road towards Heppen. The vehicles turned into the village proper.⁴¹⁰ There they met one of Kopka's *Sturmgeschütze*, carrying identification number 333, driving back from the direction of the village centre, probably to take up position on the northern end of Beverlo. Unfortunately for the Germans the area they had entered (Eindeken) was extremely swampy and the road narrow. *Jagdpanther* 133 and the *Sturmgeschütz* both slid off the road and ended up in narrow ditches on either side of the road. *Jagdpanther* 132 drove up and stopped behind the stranded vehicle. The towing cables were then attached to 133, contrary to regulations which said that at least two vehicles needed to be used for such a job. It seems that Koch in his command *Jagdpanther*, 131, did not stay, but instead drove on while the rescue attempt was being made. The heavy Maybach engines roared, the cables tightened and the rescue vehicle, 132, suffered such severe damage to its road wheels that it, too, became stuck. In the end, none of the three vehicles could be rescued and the crews abandoned them, without first blowing them up as they should have done.⁴¹¹ Koch, meanwhile, in 131, had arrived at the southern exit of Beverlo.

While Koch's *Zug* arrived in Beverlo, all the other *Jagdpanther* and two *Sturmgeschütze* of 2./559 (the rest of *Oberleutnant* Haile's 2. *Kompanie* stayed in reserve at Leopoldsburg) had also been sent to investigate the area between Leopoldsburg and Hechtel. The *Jagdpanther* operated in four groups of two, as laid down in the regulations. Sattler and his headquarter vehicles set off later. Most of them did not come across any British armour that morning, but that would change within the next few hours.

Next stop, Beverlo

As mentioned above, at 11.20 hours Lieutenant-Colonel Hill ordered his men to begin phase two of the advance on Leopoldsburg, the capture of Beverlo. This time tanks joined the infantry. Deviating slightly from the plan, both No.4 and 2 Companies, supported by the Shermans of No.3 Squadron set off in the direction of Beverlo. Artillery was now available and a smoke screen was put down. The Guardsmen had to cross some 800 metres of open ground, covered by troops from *II./GR 723* and *I./FJR 2*, while Kopka's remaining *Sturmgeschütze* took up positions throughout the village. The smoke screen was very effective and the infantry soon approached the village. The tanks, however, had run into trouble immediately.

⁴⁰⁹ Obviously *Jagdpanther* 134 was temporarily out of action. Kopka, who is quoted by Wuyts and Louche, remembers only three *Jagdpanther*, 132 and 133, confirmed by the War Diary of the Guards Armoured Division (09.09.44), and 131. Possibly one *Jagdpanther* lagged behind for mechanical reasons.

⁴¹⁰ Either from the east or the west, this is unclear.

⁴¹¹ This points to a hasty retreat, suggesting that the rescue efforts went on until noon when the British attack began.

From where he was positioned at the top of the Koolmijnlaan, *Leutnant* Koch in *Jagdpanther* 131 looked straight down the road.⁴¹² He had a perfect view of the Shermans of No.3 Squadron as they drove out from under the same railway bridge that Kopka had stood on early that morning. Koch did not hesitate and fired off a shot. But the leading Sherman had spotted him, too, and was a little quicker off the mark. Several shells slammed into the *Jagdpanther*. It was as if a giant was banging on the outside and the crew literally shook in their seats. Koch at once ordered his driver to pull back out of sight of the advancing Sherman tanks. Because of the distance, some 1,100 metres, the British 75 mm shells had not penetrated the heavily armoured sloping front of the *Jagdpanther*. But they had damaged the electrical firing mechanism rendering the tank-hunter useless. Koch quickly drove back and managed to reach the centre of Beverlo where a heavy recovery vehicle pulled back the damaged *Jagdpanther* to Leopoldsburg. It would be repaired just in time to take part in the battle of Geel two days later (see 3.2).

Beverlo captured

Slowly the Coldstream Guards began to enter Beverlo. It was now almost one p.m.⁴¹³ Around this time Kopka in his command vehicle, *Sturmgeschütz* 301, had taken up position at the junction in the centre of Beverlo. Incredible as it may seem in the midst of a battle, Kopka had dozed off for a short while. When he woke up he spotted a Sherman tank only 400 metres away. The two AFV's immediately began firing on each other. The Sherman was hit, but not fatally and it managed to pull back. Kopka now carefully studied the streets in front of him. Because of the houses he did not spot a second Sherman tank until it was just 45 metres from him. Kopka's heart pulsed in his throat. He shouted to his gunner to fire, but before he could do so the driver of the Sherman had put her in reverse and disappeared in the rubble of the inn it had just crashed into. After waiting another fifteen minutes Kopka radioed back that the village of Beverlo had been lost to the enemy and he sent an urgent request for additional infantry as well as more ammunition.⁴¹⁴ He decided that discretion was the better part of valour and he pulled back as he could see more and more British troops entering the village.

The Coldstream Guards captured three *Pak* guns and took about a hundred prisoners. The job of capturing Beverlo had taken them less than an hour, although five Shermans had been knocked out by the *Sturmgeschütze* of 3./559 and the *Pak* guns. This time Finzel could not repeat his success at Beringen-mijn and his band of *Fallschirmjäger* was scattered to the four winds. Finzel would need some time to gather them back into some semblance of order. Fortunately for him, his opponents, the Coldstream Guards Group, also needed time to get ready for the third stage of their attack towards Leopoldsburg. There was another piece of good news for the defenders. The two batteries of 17. and 18. *SS-Artillerie Ersatz und Ausbildungs Regiment* with their powerful 10.5 cm guns reported at two p.m. that they had finally arrived from De Kolonie and were in position and ready to open fire.⁴¹⁵ Only two

⁴¹² Louche (*Heppen en Leopoldsburg*, 120) puts *Leutnant* Kossack in *Jagdpanther* 131, but Kossack's vehicle was 121.

⁴¹³ KTB 88 AK, 08.09.44, 13.07 hours.

⁴¹⁴ KTB 88 AK, 08.09.44, 13.20 hours.

⁴¹⁵ Not 8.8 cm as Louche reports. (Cf. KTB 88 AK, 23.09.44, B 311).

weeks earlier these guns (together with *19.* and *20. Batterie*) had been in positions alongside the Dutch Northsea coast leading a life of leisure.⁴¹⁶ Now, as for so many units in the Netherlands, the reality of war finally caught up with them. Around the same time Kopka (in *Sturmgeschütz* 301) and Kornke (in 302) took up position at the cemetery northwest of the village of Beverlo, from where they could cover the main road leading to Heppen. Once again, the German defenders did not intend to give up without a fight.

Just before receiving the news of the loss of Beverlo on 8 September, Reinhard met with Chill at the latter's advanced headquarters east of Mol. Chill informed Reinhard of his plans with regards to Beringen and also expressed his anger with Vehrenkamp. Chill felt that Vehrenkamp and his entire regiment, *GR 723*, had utterly failed.⁴¹⁷ Following this meeting Reinhard went forward to see for himself what the situation was like at the front.⁴¹⁸ But there was nothing either Reinhard or Chill could do for the moment except hope that their troops would halt the Allied advance until *FJR 6* arrived when, hopefully, the tables could be turned.

Clash of Armour

Further east, on the morning of Friday 8 September, the Welsh Guards had renewed their efforts to capture Hechtel.⁴¹⁹ Because Helchteren was continually under attack from *Fallschirmjäger* from *FJR 21* (*Oberst* Rolf Löytved-Hardegg) and *FJR 24* (*Major* Friedrich Hübner), the Welsh had to leave part of their force behind there. The Irish Guards Group was to take over, but their departure was delayed by Kopka's action early that morning and then they had to wait for their successors to take over and these did not arrive until noon. For the time being the Welsh Guards would have to fend for themselves, which they did, fighting off one frenzied attack after another. Meanwhile, the attack on Hechtel was to be carried out by the Prince of Wales Company⁴²⁰ (*Major* J.M. Miller) and X Company Scots Guards (attached as usual to 1st Welsh Guards), under *Major* P. Stewart-Fotheringham, supported by the Cromwell tanks of No.2 Squadron under *Major* J.O. Spencer. The group would not attack up the main road from Helchteren to Hechtel, the Hasseltsebaan, for fear of a repeat of the events of the previous day. Only a diversion was planned to take place along this road. Instead of using the main road, the attacking group, which set off around midday, headed northwest, across the heath and straight for the road running into Hechtel from Leopoldsburg (the Kamperbaan). Soon the infantry reached their designated starting points, X Company to the left (north) of the road, the Prince of Wales Company to the right (south). They were ready to begin the attack on the village. The supporting Cromwell tanks found the going much harder. The countryside reminded the Guardsmen of Aldershot, the traditional British training area, undulating, heavily wooded and with large patches of heath. The Cromwells forged their way forward carefully because of the poor visibility.

⁴¹⁶ KTB 88 AK, Küsten Artillerie Karte 29.08.44.

⁴¹⁷ KTB 88 AK, 08.09.44, A 169.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid.

⁴¹⁹ *Details this section Ellis, Welsh Guards*, 219-221; Erskine, 371-3, and Bussels, *De Slag om Hechtel*, 44-45.

⁴²⁰ The senior company in the Welsh Guards is called the Prince of Wales Company.

Around the same time the commanding officer of *schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559*, Major Erich Sattler set off from Leopoldsburg. He had decided to investigate the situation to the east which was still unclear. The road was reported to be free of enemies when he left.⁴²¹ This would soon change as at that very moment Major Spencer's No.2 Squadron was coming up from the south. Sattler was not on his own. Following the regulations about always working in pairs, his *Jagdpanther* (01) was accompanied by that of his *Adjutant, Oberleutnant* Erwin Seitz (02). They drove up the road encountering no opposition until they reached the pump house after about five kilometres. Suddenly, ahead and a little to his right, Sattler spotted a tank half hidden by the undergrowth. The muzzle pointed threateningly in his direction. Sattler wasted no time and ordered his gunner to fire. The 8.8 cm shell grazed the turret of the British tank, disabling the M.G. The commander of the Cromwell tank, 21-year old Lieutenant W.H. Griffith, responded and ordered his driver to reverse. He knew that his tank would not survive a second hit. The Cromwell disappeared out of sight. Content that he had chased his adversary away, Sattler resumed his advance towards Hechtel, while he and Seitz sprayed the countryside with their bow M.G.'s hoping to draw out any hidden tanks.

But Griffith had only pulled back a short distance and he was biding his time. He knew that his 75 mm gun could never knock out a *Jagdpanther* unless from a much shorter distance and even then the best chance was to hit it in the side or, even better, in the rear. His patience was rewarded when Sattler passed in front of him. This was what Griffiths had been waiting for. The *Jagdpanther* was a mere forty-five metres away. In rapid succession Griffith's gunner fired off four AP rounds which hit the engine compartment of the *Jagdpanther*. The engine caught fire and Sattler and his crew hurriedly bailed out. Sattler was the last one to abandon the vehicle, his foot got caught and he hit the ground head first, knocking him unconscious. He also suffered wounds on his arms. Looking round them the crew saw that Seitz and his *Jagdpanther* had hurriedly left the scene after seeing the vehicle in front of them being hit. Sattler slowly came round. His crew picked him up and got him back safely to Leopoldsburg. After receiving first aid he first told off Seitz while the battalion surgeon, Dr. Friedrich Reichel, was treating his wounds. Sattler was then sent on to a hospital in Eindhoven. There a Dutch surgeon operated on him, after which he was transferred to a hospital in Germany. Sattler was not the only victim of the advancing Cromwell tanks of the Welsh Guards. *Oberleutnant* Zoske, commanding *1. Kompanie*, in *Jagdpanther* 101 was also wounded, but his vehicle survived the encounter unlike that of Sattler. His *Jagdpanther* was probably hit later that afternoon when the Welsh Guards attacked Hechtel itself.⁴²²

A new Kommandeur

After pulling back from Beverlo, Kopka and *Oberfeldwebel* Kornke had positioned their two *Sturmgeschütze*, 301 and 302, at the entrance of the cemetery north of the village.⁴²³ In this way, should the Coldstream Guards continue their attack further north they would be spotted right away. Just before three p.m. a dispatch rider

⁴²¹ KTB 88 AK, 08.09.44, A 165.

⁴²² Rosse and Hill, 112.

⁴²³ Details this section Kopka, *Missbraucht und Gebeutelt*, 138-9; Howard and Sparrow, *The Coldstream Guards*, 288, and Louche, *Heppen en Leopoldsburg*, 125-7.

arrived and told Kopka he was to go to Heppen Station to report to *Generaloberst* Student himself. Kopka hopped on to the back of the motorcycle, but not before instructing his crew to pull back towards Heppen station in case they were attacked by more than one tank. They would not have to wait very long.

At the railway station, which was halfway between Beverlo and Heppen, Student asked Kopka about his view of the situation. While the men were discussing these issues shells suddenly came crashing down. The British had obviously resumed their attack. There was no time to be lost. Student informed Kopka what had happened to Sattler and said that he was to take over as *Kommandeur* of 559. He was also ordered to go to Oostham and investigate whether British tanks had also broken through there. But he was told not to leave before he had met the liaison officer from *FJR 6*. After issuing these orders Student hurriedly left the station. After only having been in charge of a *Kompanie* for a year Kopka was now suddenly in charge of the whole *Abteilung*. According to his superiors he should be able to handle the job. In his assessment in 1944 it said, 'Trotz seiner Jugend gereift und ernst. Gutes taktisches Verständnis, gute Kenntnisse und Leistungen, sehr strebsam.' Moreover, he was 'bei Kameraden beliebt, von Untergebenen geachtet'.⁴²⁴

Soon afterwards Kopka was met by *Oberleutnant* Hans Redding, his liaison with Chill and *Oberleutnant* Rudolf Beck, commanding 2./*FJR 6*, who liaised on behalf of *FJR 6*. Just after Kopka had shaken hands with Beck a British shell exploded nearby. Beck lost both of his legs just below the knees. Quickly Kopka and another soldier carried the severely wounded man into a house. There they tied off his legs with telephone wire. But they were too late and Beck died within minutes. Furious Kopka left the house. Outside he was met by his crew. *Feldwebel* Franz Muschiol, his gunner, informed him that his *Sturmgeschütz* had become stuck in the mud at the cemetery gates and could not be retrieved. Kopka had no option but to walk, or rather run, back to Heppen where his second command vehicle was positioned. Following the orders Student had given him, Kopka told his driver to head west, to find out about the possible Allied breakthrough in the area around Oostham.

The good news for the Germans was that *FJR 6* finally began to arrive, the bad news that they had no ammunition. Chill did not hesitate. He had the ammunition as well as the mortars and about 2,000 rounds confiscated from the train of *III./GR 723* and handed these over to the *Fallschirmjäger*.⁴²⁵ It was evident that, understandably, Chill trusted the new arrivals more than Vehrenkamp's *Grenadiere*, who had failed so dismally before. Kopka was on his way to Oostham, the new *Kommandeur* of 559. It was destined to be one of the shortest commands ever, at least initially.

One village too far

As Kopka was receiving his orders from Student, the Coldstream Guards Group began the third phase of their attack towards Heppen and Leopoldsburg.⁴²⁶ Unfortunately for the attackers, the two hours which it took to prepare for this, was exactly the break that the German defenders needed to reorganise. Finzel gathered

⁴²⁴ Personalakten Kopka, 01.03.44, NARA.

⁴²⁵ KTB 88 AK, 08.09.44, 12.45 hours.

⁴²⁶ This section Louche, *Heppen en Leopoldsburg*, 127- 138, and Howard and Sparrow, *The Coldstream Guards*, 288-9.

together what was left of *I./FJR 2* and together with *III./GR 723* and the first arrivals of *FJR 6*, dug in about a kilometre out of Beverlo, around the railway station, halfway to Heppen. Also, one *Jagdpanther* was ordered by Kopka to take up position near the railway crossing from where it could cover the roads from Beverlo.⁴²⁷ Of course, using a *Jagdpanther* in this way, alone, was against all regulations, but desperate times call for desperate measures. Roughly in the same area *III./GR 723* had set up one 7.5 cm *Pak* behind a haystack with a second gun a few hundred metres up the road. This was where the battle for Heppen would be fought.

By coincidence Lieutenant-Colonel Hill had somewhat altered his original plan and the station happened to be the exact point which he had now chosen as the intermediate objective. Once again No.1 Company (Major Feilden) was in the lead, supported this time by No.1 Squadron. Moving through the woods on the left of the road the infantry reached the station without difficulty. But then the Guardsmen saw themselves face to face with the *Jagdpanther* at the railway crossing. To make matters worse for them, their own tanks could not reach them. The Shermans of No.1 Squadron had tried a wide left hook from Beverlo in an attempt to get at the German defenders from the side. But in the wide open fields the tanks came under accurate fire which stopped the advance. The squadron then tried the main road, the Heppensesteenweg, but this manoeuvre failed as well. As soon as the leading Sherman entered the road it was hit by the *Pak* and burst into flames. The second Sherman shared this fate. The four other tanks following tried to leave the roads but become hopelessly bogged. The remaining six tanks put down smoke and withdrew. Without tank support the infantry of No.1 Company were stuck. One *Jagdpanther* and one *Pak* had turned the tide, for the moment.

In spite of the unexpectedly fierce resistance Lieutenant-Colonel Hill decided to renew the attack on Heppen with another mixed tank-infantry group as soon as sufficient artillery support could be arranged. This took some time and it was not until four a.m. that No.4 Company and No.2 Squadron made an even wider left hook around Feilden's company near Heppen Station. The infantry again successfully negotiated the woods as far as the railway line. Then, disaster struck. The company commander, Major Chandos-Pole, was seriously wounded and wireless contact was lost with Battalion Headquarters. The tanks found the going much harder. They had had to swing even further out to the left than No.1 Squadron and dusk was already beginning to fall by the time they reached the infantry. One tank then threw a track and two other Shermans were knocked out by anti-tank guns. But the squadron pushed on through the darkening woods to get into Heppen from the west. It was nearly dark as the Shermans entered the village where the *Jagdpanther* knocked out the leading Sherman. As any tank was now an easy target in the light of the burning houses, the squadron pulled back to Beverlo. The first attempt to take Heppen had failed.

Meanwhile there was still no contact between No.4 Company and the Battalion. Captain D.I.T. Eastman, the company second-in-command, received permission to take a carrier and try and locate the missing company even though it was dark by then and the enemy could be anywhere. He successfully accomplished his mission

⁴²⁷ It seems logical to assume that the *Jagdpanther* in Heppen was the fourth in Koch's Zug. If that assumption is correct, this vehicle carried number 134.

and was awarded the Military Cross for this. All in all, the Coldstream Guards had suffered serious losses on 8 September, 29 soldiers had been killed and total casualties were around 150.⁴²⁸

Oostham

While the fighting raged around Heppen Station, a new British unit joined in the fight around Beringen. It was the independent 8th Armoured Brigade under Brigadier G.E. Prior-Palmer.⁴²⁹ The Brigade was one of eight independent armoured brigades of the Twenty-First Army Group.⁴³⁰ The brigades were used whenever extra armour was required. Sometimes a brigade as a whole was assigned, at other times the battalions were used individually. The 8th Armoured Brigade had landed with the 50th (Northumbrian) Division on D-Day, had supported both the 50th and the 43rd (Wessex) Divisions during the fighting in Normandy and had acted independently since 28 August in the race into Belgium, advancing between the 11th and the Guards Armoured Divisions. After the Guards had left Brussels on 6 September the Brigade had followed at a leisurely pace, waiting for the Guards to break out of the Beringen bridgehead. The Brigade was composed of four battalions. Three were armoured, the 4th/7th Royal Dragoon Guards (Lieutenant-Colonel R.G. Byron), the 13th/18th Royal Hussars (Lieutenant-Colonel V.A.B. Dunkerly) and the Nottinghamshire Sherwood Rangers Yeomanry (Lieutenant-Colonel S.D. Christopherson), while the 12th King's Royal Rifle Corps (KRRC, Lieutenant-Colonel M. Edwardes) was the Brigade's motorised infantry battalion. All four battalions had spent the previous day, 7 September, in and around Aarschot, 30 kilometres west of Beringen. During the evening they were told to get ready to cross into Beringen where they were to turn left to get behind the German lines south of Geel. Only the Sherwood Rangers were held back for the moment. They were eventually attached to the 50th (Northumbrian) Division which would soon become involved in a battle for the town of Geel itself.

At around seven a.m. on 8 September the other three battalions moved out and headed for Diest. From there they drove on and at the end of the morning they began to arrive west of the Albert Canal, in the area of Paal. Soon a huge traffic jam blocked the road leading to Beringen bridge. The 4th/7th Royal Dragoon Guards and the 12th KRRC were in the lead and slowly moved on, but the 13th/18th Royal Hussars were held up for three hours before they got anywhere near the canal.

Finally, at 13.45 hours the battalions received the orders to cross and about an hour later the leading battalions, the 4th/7th Royal Dragoon Guards and the 12th KRRC, had arrived in Beringen-Mijn. They then discovered that, although the enemy had been driven out off Beringen-Mijn and Beverlo, he was still very much present in large numbers in the woods to the west, as far as the Albert Canal. But as it had taken them a long time to get to Beringen-Mijn the job of cleaning up was left to the

⁴²⁸ Howard and Sparrow, *The Coldstream Guards 1920-1946*, Oxford 1951, 289-290.

⁴²⁹ This section is based on the War Diaries of 12th KRRC, 13/18th Hussars and 4/7th RDG, Rijmen, 56-7, and Louche, *Heppen en Leopoldsburg*, 162-8.

⁴³⁰ The others were: 4th Armoured Brigade, 6th Guards Tank Brigade, 27th Armoured Brigade, 31st Tank Brigade, 33rd Armoured Brigade, 34th Tank Brigade and 2nd Canadian Armoured Brigade (George Forty, *British Army Handbook 1939-1945*, Stroud 1998, 345). We shall meet most of them later on in this book.

13th/18th Royal Hussars who made up the rear. In spite of the shelling, mortaring and the occasional firing by one of the *Sturmgeschütze* of 3./559 the 13th/18th Royal Hussars managed to subdue the scattered German forces and by the end of the afternoon had taken some two to three hundred POWs. It was during this period in the fight north of Beringen that 3./559 later claimed to have knocked out a 600 ton Belgian freighter in the Albert Canal.⁴³¹ As darkness fell, the Hussars' job was done and they returned to Beverlo to laager for the night.

Kopka's demise

Meanwhile the other two battalions had forged on and they had found the going much less easy. In the lead were B Squadron 4th/7th Royal Dragoon Guards (Major Richards) and A Company 12th KRRC (Major N. Trench), while B Company (Major William Deedes) followed close on their heels. After arriving in Beverlo the leading units turned northwest and took the main road leading to Oostham as far as the hamlet of Geneberg. It was now three p.m. There, about one kilometre from Oostham, Belgian civilians informed their liberators of the presence of German 'tanks' at the railway crossing straight ahead. Richards and Trench decided to split their forces into three columns. The four Shermans of No.2 Troop of the Dragoon Guards were to continue along the main road while No.1 Troop was to hook to the left and No.5 Troop to the right in an attempt to outflank the German defences. The manoeuvre did not meet with a great deal of success. The three columns all lost their lead tanks as soon as they got near Oostham, one (No.5 Troop) was knocked out by a *Panzerfaust*, the other two by *Sturmgeschütze*, one of which was commanded by *Oberleutnant* Kopka, who had arrived in the village just in time to meet the attack. The Shermans retaliated and managed to hit one of the *Sturmgeschütze*.⁴³² Cautiously the British tanks and infantry closed in on the village. It was now just after five p.m.

After knocking out the Sherman tank at Wasseven, Kopka had driven back to the centre of Oostham to see how the situation was developing there. He stopped to inquire from an infantry officer where the British were and whether he knew of any other *Sturmgeschütze* in the area. The officer could not help him out and Kopka thereupon decided to return to Heppen as the clanking of Allied tanks became louder and louder. He left the village at full speed and had just entered the road back to Heppen when he spotted two Shermans (No.2 Troop) to his right. The distance between him and the British vehicles was less than two hundred metres. Kopka shouted to his driver, *Unteroffizier* Herbert Gallus, to drive like a bat out of hell and pull up behind a house which was just ahead of them. However, Gallus misunderstood the order and pulled up right away! The *Sturmgeschütz* had come to a halt in an open stretch between two houses in plain view of the two Sherman tanks. The outcome was a foregone conclusion and within seconds the first A.P. shell slammed into the *Sturmgeschütz*. The crew hastily abandoned their vehicle just as it was hit a second time. It burst into flames and a huge explosion ripped through the air. All four crew members were wounded, Kopka had shrapnel in his lungs, but they

⁴³¹ Second Army Intelligence Summary 121.

⁴³² In their War Diary B Squadron claims to have 'brewed' up two SPs, but this does not tally with the fact that 3/559 lost three *Sturmgeschütze* that day: 333 at Eindeken, 301 at Beverlo cemetery and 302, Kopka, in Oostham.

still managed to crawl away until they came upon a 2 cm *Flak* gun of *Heeresflak-Abteilung 347*. The gun commander took the four wounded men back to Leopoldsburg. There Kopka's wounds were dressed and he was taken to Tilburg where he was operated on. Kopka was hospitalised and it took him until 17 September to recover from his wounds. Command of *559* was taken over by *Oberleutnant* Haile, who until then had commanded *2./559*.⁴³³ Not only had *3. Kompanie* lost its commanding officer, after two days of fighting, just five *Sturmgeschütze* survived, none of them serviceable.⁴³⁴

This meant that in two days' fighting, Kopka's *3. Kompanie* had lost nine of its fourteen *Sturmgeschütze*. In return they had knocked out twelve British tanks.⁴³⁵ This was not a great score. In addition, they had not been able to annihilate the British bridgehead or even halt its expansion. In other words, this first action had been an unmitigated disaster. In a report about the attack on the Beringen bridgehead, written three weeks later, Kopka blamed the failure and the huge losses on a number of factors. He wrote bitterly: 'Due to the attachment situation, only one *Sturmgeschütze-Kompanie* was employed during the attacks on the Beeringen [sic] bridgehead, where strong enemy tank forces had been expected as reported by reconnaissance troops and infantry. When it was revealed during the battle that in comparison to the enemy tanks the *Sturmgeschütze* were outnumbered and could not break through in every zone, the Panther-Kompanie was also sent in. This piecemeal employment led to our heavy losses. The Abteilung is convinced that a concentrated attack by a combined force of *Sturmgeschütze* and *Jagdpanther* would have resulted in the destruction of all of the enemy tanks found there, cleaned out the bridgehead, and our own losses would have been significantly lower.'⁴³⁶

Whatever the merits of this somewhat bold claim, Kopka was certainly right to point out that employing the *Sturmgeschütze* in a piecemeal way was a sure way to negate the usefulness of the assault guns. This was to become abundantly clear over the next few days at Geel. But other lessons were learned, which would be put to good use later on.

Guards on the move

In Beringen itself new troops had taken over. The previous evening *Gevechtgroep* (Battle Group) I of the Dutch Prinses Irene Brigade (Lieutenant-Colonel A.C. De Ruyter van Steveninck) had arrived to secure the bridgehead. On 8 September, the other *Gevechtsgroepen* joined it, securing positions around Beringen. Around midday the Irish Guards Group began to hand over control of the town. At least that was the official description. According to one of their officers it would have been more accurate to say that the Irish Guards 'just cleared out.'⁴³⁷ The Irish Guards left for Helchteren where they arrived as dusk fell and where they soon discovered that they were more or less surrounded by enemy troops attacking every now and again. In fact, the fighting at Helchteren went on throughout the (pitch black) night, the only

⁴³³ KTB 88 AK, 10.09.44, A 207.

⁴³⁴ KTB 88 AK, 08.09.44, Tagesmeldung.

⁴³⁵ Five from the Irish Guards, five from the Coldstream Guards and two from 4th/7th Royal Dragoon Guards.

⁴³⁶ Quoted in Jentz and Doyle, *Panzer Tracts* No. 9-3, *Jagdpanther*, Boyds 2005, 86.

⁴³⁷ Fitzgerald, *The Irish Guards*, 467.

light coming from the burning houses and haystacks. To add to the confusion infantry and armour occasionally fired on each other. It was only towards dawn that both sides took a few hours' rest.

The main event, however, took place a few kilometres further north. There the attack on Hechtel had begun.⁴³⁸ The Welsh Guards were determined to make up for the failure the day before. At 14.30 hours the 374th, one of the two batteries of the 55th Field (West Somerset Yeomanry) Regiment, and the Cromwell tanks of No.2 Squadron, fired a brief barrage on the village, particularly on the crossroads and the northwestern part of Hechtel. The leading troops were supposed to go in almost right away after this. But because of the thick terrain the infantry were delayed and when the first troops entered Hechtel the element of surprise had been lost.

According to the plan there were two lines of advance, X Company Scots Guards (Major P.S. Fotheringham) would move up on the left of the road from Leopoldsborg towards its objective, positions north of the crossroads, while the Prince of Wales Company from the Welsh Guards (Major J.M. Miller) on the right of the same road would occupy the western part of Hechtel.

Further delay was caused when a convoy of ten German lorries came down the road from Leopoldsborg at high speed.⁴³⁹ The Scots Guards opened fire. The first two vehicles managed to escape into Hechtel, the third was shot up and the others turned and disappeared back to Leopoldsborg. Now Major Fotheringham had the added worry of having to keep an eye over his shoulder as X Company penetrated the village. This was not an easy job. The German defenders (*FJR 20*, Major Franz Grassmel) put up a stiff resistance. When the Guardsmen crossed a road they came under fire from some machine-guns and an 8.8 cm *Flak* in the Kerkstraat, less than fifty metres away. Guardsman Pettigrew, without considering the danger to himself, fired his PIAT through a wooden door, set fire to the gun and killed several of the crew. The Scots Guards then made for the Rijkswachtstraat, their intended objective, but were faced with a second 8.8 cm *Flak* on the Lommelsebaan which for the moment made all movement impossible. Again several PIATs were fired at the gun and, again the gun and its crew were disabled. Quickly the Scots Guards crossed the Lommelsebaan and at 18.15 hours No.13 and 14 Platoons set up positions in the northeast of Hechtel. The Headquarters, No.15 Platoon and the Mortar Section remained in the area of the church, a few hundred metres further west.

The Prince of Wales Company had found the going even more difficult. The Welsh Guards had to advance over more open country and were soon stopped by several machine-guns dug in on the western edge of Hechtel. The tanks could not break the deadlock either. Because of the many hedges *Fallschirmjäger* could crawl close to the Cromwells and soon several were knocked out by *Panzerfäuste*. Major Miller decided to direct his company forward by the route taken by the Scots Guards. So the Welsh Guards doubled back to the Leopoldsborg road, but then the leading platoons found that they were unable to cross it because of the intense machine-gun fire. On top of that they were suddenly fired on by a *Jagdpanther* which had sneaked up on them

⁴³⁸ This section, Ross and Hill, 112-3, Erskine, 372-3, Ellis, *Welsh Guards*, 219-221, Bussels, *De Slag om Hechtel*, 46-54, and War Diary 1st Welsh Guards.

⁴³⁹ Either from 3./Fla.Pz.Jg.,.Abt.185 or Kampfgruppe Dankward (Bussels, *De Slag om Hechtel*, 47).

from the direction of Leopoldsburg.⁴⁴⁰ Cromwell tanks came up and hit the *Jagdpanther* which withdrew.⁴⁴¹ Later other *Jagdpanther* continued to pop up every now and again to make a nuisance of themselves.

Slowly Miller with his Headquarters and two Platoons managed to reach the outskirts of the village. They settled in the vicarage (see map). It was now nearly six p.m. Meanwhile No.1 and 3 Platoons reached the Kerkstraat. Again they were held up by murderous fire. There were many casualties and the British asked for a temporary cease fire to retrieve the wounded. The request was granted and Lieutenant H.R.E. Mitchley, one of the platoon commanders, was even carried back to his own lines by German stretcher bearers. After the end of the cease fire the fighting was resumed. German counterattacks were beaten off, but the Welsh Guards could not advance. Miller decided to call it a day, especially as No.2 Squadron had only three tanks still operational. All four companies dug in around the vicarage. The hold the Guards had on Hechtel at the end of 8 September can at best be described as tenuous. But the Germans had no reason to be triumphant either.

Von der Heydte arrives

Student's order to Chill the previous evening, to drive back the British forces on 8 September and blow up the Beringen bridge, had not been carried out.⁴⁴² The main problem was that the main body, *FJR 6*, did not arrive until later that day. In fact, that morning only the second battalion, *II./FJR 6*, had arrived in Belgium after detraining in Tilburg.⁴⁴³ It was told to unload at Maria-ter-Heide, north of Antwerp, because that was where Student and Reinhard still feared an Allied breakthrough. The rest of *FJR 6* still had to leave Tilburg. Moreover, *Oberstleutnant* Von der Heydte himself had not received the order to move to Beringen until 03.35 hours on 8 September.⁴⁴⁴ Only at eleven a.m. did the advance guard of his regiment arrive in Mol. With lorries shuttling to and fro between Tilburg and Mol, a distance of fifty kilometres, and the regiment having to walk another ten kilometres from there to Oostham and Heppen, Von der Heydte did not expect to arrive much before five p.m. Long before that, Chill had already decided that an attack would be pointless without *FJR 6*. Von der Heydte's regiment was a crack unit. Still, it should be borne in mind that the regiment that arrived in Belgium and the Netherlands was a mere shadow of its former self. The fresh recruits which made up 75% still had to fire their first shots in anger and many of the officers were equally untried in battle.⁴⁴⁵ Nevertheless, Von der Heydte himself, was an excellent commander although he loved to act independently a little too much, a quality that was to land him in trouble from time to time.

⁴⁴⁰ Once again completely against regulations, unless a second *Jagdpanther* was in support but invisible to the British.

⁴⁴¹ Not knocked out, as the Welsh Guards claimed, because only Sattler's *Jagdpanther* was knocked out that day near Hechtel and that was early in the afternoon, so in all likelihood this was Zoske's *Jagdpanther* (101) as we know that he was hit and wounded that afternoon.

⁴⁴² KTB 88 AK, 07.09.44, A 169.

⁴⁴³ KTB 88 AK, 08.09.44, 03.10 hours.

⁴⁴⁴ KTB 88 AK, 08.09.44, 12.36 hours.

⁴⁴⁵ Von der Heydte, *Muss ich sterben*, 1.

But Chill had additional problems in his sector that day. Contact had been lost with the Dutch *SS*-battalion near Hasselt that morning.⁴⁴⁶ Later *I./SS-Grenadier Regiment Landstorm Nederland* was discovered to have taken up an all round defence and asked for more ammunition.⁴⁴⁷ For the moment they were ordered to stay in place. Worst of all for Chill, during the night of 7 to 8 September, the 50th (Northumbrian) Division had established a bridgehead south of Geel, which also required his urgent attention. Student was adamant that he wipe out this bridgehead as well.⁴⁴⁸ We shall look more closely into the fighting there in the next chapter (3.2). From 8 September Chill's entire sector was under attack. The few troops under his command were now fully stretched if not overstretched. No reinforcements were available in the foreseeable future and much would depend on how skilfully Chill would be able to juggle his units over the next few days.

As *FJR 6* finally arrived fierce fighting was still raging in Oostham. While Kopka and his crew were taken to Leopoldsburg to have their wounds dressed, the British forces had occupied most of Oostham. B Company 12th KRRC under Major Deedes had now joined A Company and supported by the Shermans of B Squadron 4th/7th Royal Dragoon Guards they managed to consolidate their hold on the village even though the *Fallschirmjäger* were now coming to the aid of their comrades of *III./GR 723*. Normally tanks were pulled back after dark, but the situation in Oostham remained tense throughout the night and in this case their assistance was clearly essential.

In view of the situation Chill decided that the attack would be undertaken by *FJR 6* on the right, supported by *Sturmgeschütze* from *2./559*. Finzel with *I./FJR 2* in Heppen, would make up the middle, and to the left would be unspecified units from Erdmann's *Fallschirmjäger-Division*.⁴⁴⁹ However, the attack was delayed because the *Fallschirmjäger* were still arriving and it could not be launched that day. Chill must have been extremely worried as he now had two bridgeheads to contend with. The following days would be decisive, one way or another. At a higher level the estimate was remarkably optimistic. Major Berlin, Chief of Staff or *Ia* at *1. Fallschirmarmee*, reported without blinking an eyelid to *Heeresgruppe B* that the bridgehead at Beringen had been sealed off, that twenty-one tanks had been destroyed and that the bridgehead would be annihilated the following day!⁴⁵⁰ That this very much remained to be seen, must have been clear to everyone involved.

Third and final attempt

The third and last German attack on Beringen began at three a.m. on 9 September.⁴⁵¹ It took place long before sunrise and it was not clear right away what the results were and no reports were received from Erdmann's headquarters in Bree for a while. The first report, at seven a.m. was pessimistic.⁴⁵² Beringen bridge had not been reached, *Oberstleutnant* Von der Heydte had lost communication with his two battalions and *Oberleutnant* Sprenger, Chill's *O1* (*Ordonnansoffizier 1*, in charge

⁴⁴⁶ KTB 88 AK, 08.09.44, 12.25 hours.

⁴⁴⁷ KTB 88 AK, 08.09.44, 15.10 hours.

⁴⁴⁸ KTB 88 AK, 08.09.44, 09.02 hours.

⁴⁴⁹ KTB 88 AK, 08.09.44, A 169.

⁴⁵⁰ KTB 88 AK, 08.09.44, 23.49 hours.

⁴⁵¹ KTB 88 AK, 09.09.44, 05.30 hours.

⁴⁵² KTB 88 AK, 09.09.44, 07.00 hours.

of despatches), considered that the attack had failed. An hour later *Oberstleutnant* Kurt Schuster, *Ia* (First General Staff Officer in charge of operations) of the *85. Infanterie-Division*, was on the phone. He reported that the situation of *FJR 6* had deteriorated because of enemy armour. Also the supporting guns of *17.* and *18./SS-Artillerie Ersatz und Ausbildungs Regiment* were running low on ammunition, they were down to just forty shells per gun.⁴⁵³ At noon a more hopeful report came in, saying that *FJR 6* had reached Beringen, although this was not confirmed yet. The situation was described as tense and unclear.⁴⁵⁴ But Sprenger had been a little premature. Although the attackers had not reached their objective, the bridge, they had come very close and they had caused some havoc among the British troops there.

In fact a small group of twenty-five *Fallschirmjäger* from *III./FJR 6*, led by their commanding officer, *Oberleutnant* Walter Ulmer, together with a small platoon of *Pioniere* from the *Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler* (about nine men under an *Untersturmführer*) had traversed the woods and open fields along the canal until they were almost within sight of or rather, within hearing distance of Beringen bridge.⁴⁵⁵ They could only deduce from the engine noises that they must be close to the bridge as a mist had gradually reduced visibility to less than fifty metres. A patrol was sent to see what lay ahead. After a long wait, at around eight a.m., the patrol returned and told Ulmer that they had come on a group of sixty vehicles parked around a crossroads. The crew were just sitting down for breakfast. Ulmer decided to go in, guns blazing, which is not saying much as his men were poorly equipped and had little ammunition.⁴⁵⁶ But in they went, firing and throwing hand grenades and this small band of men managed to create havoc out of all proportion to their numbers. They destroyed some thirty-three lorries, fifteen loaded with fuel and ammo, all belonging to the A1 echelon of the 8th Armoured Brigade who in addition suffered twelve casualties.⁴⁵⁷ But the British rapidly recovered from their surprise and fired back with everything they had, including one of the Shermans of the 13th/18th Royal Hussars which was parked close by. Ulmer himself was wounded when a brick hit him in the head and he was taken prisoner. Nor did the Germans reach their goal, the bridge itself. The most important reasons were the lack of heavy weapons and the complete lack of coordination with the eastern attack group. It became clear during the morning that none of Erdmann's units had even tried to close in on Beringen, mainly because they had their hands full around Hechtel and Helchteren. Coordinating different units during counterattacks was increasingly becoming a problem for the Germans. But whatever the reasons, the third and final attempt to destroy the bridge at Beringen had failed.

Immediately after the attack by Ulmer's little group had begun, C Squadron 13th/18th Royal Hussars despatched two troops from Beverlo to restore the situation. The mist by now had dissolved into rain and the tanks soon picked out

⁴⁵³ KTB 88 AK, 09.09.44, 07.55 hours.

⁴⁵⁴ KTB 88 AK, 09.09.44, A 185.

⁴⁵⁵ Details this section, Louche, *Heppen en Leopoldsburg*, 187-190, War Diary 4th/7th Royal Dragoon Guards and War Diary 13th/18th Royal Hussars.

⁴⁵⁶ Ulmer refers to them as 'Schweine', poor bastards.

⁴⁵⁷ This was the supply echelon immediately behind the forward troops, the A2 echelon was further back.

small pockets of infantry that had infiltrated through the woods between Beringen and the Albert Canal. About an hour later, at nine p.m., these Shermans were joined by a troop of B Squadron which travelled straight west from Beverlo in an attempt to catch retreating German troops. Confused fighting continued throughout the morning, but eventually the attack petered out and the *Fallschirmjäger* withdrew. Still Von der Heydte persisted in his attempts to get at the bridge and early in the afternoon, just after one a.m., more troops from *III./FJR 6* reached the Tervanterheide where they began to dig in.⁴⁵⁸ Around that time another British division began to cross the Bailey bridge at Beringen, so that the defenders would be even more outnumbered than they already were.

The 11th Armoured Division had left Antwerp the previous day (8 September) after handing over to the 50th (Northumbrian) Division. The 8th Rifle Brigade (RB), commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel T. Hunter, and the 3rd Royal Tank Regiment (RTR), the liberators of Antwerp, under Lieutenant-Colonel D.A.H. Silvertop were the first units to enter Beringen in the early afternoon, just as *III./FJR 6*, started to close on Beringen once more. The new units were to take over from the 8th Armoured Brigade which was to come under command of the Guards Armoured Division the following day to cover its left flank. The area from the canal to Heppen was to be taken over by units of the 11th Armoured Division. All of which meant that it was up to the infantry of the 8th RB and the Sherman tanks of the 3rd RTR, together with the Princess Irene Brigade, to deal with the troublesome *Fallschirmjäger* on the heath. Rounding them up or driving them off was a slow and tiresome operation but the German troops had no anti-tank weapons and were basically powerless against the Shermans. A demand for "Panther" (presumably *Jagdpanther* were meant) went out.⁴⁵⁹ However, no SPs arrived and at the end of the day a large number of Germans had been killed, forty-five had been taken prisoner and the new main line of resistance was established about four kilometres north of the bridge.⁴⁶⁰ There were to be no more surprise attacks on Beringen even though Student that same afternoon exhorted his troops, 'Um alle Zweifel auszuschliessen, befehle ich, dass der Albert-Kanal bis zum letzten Mann zu halten ist. Unsere Blicke müssen in erster Linie nach vorwärts gerichtet sein!'⁴⁶¹ Brave words that could not make up for the numerical inferiority of his troops.

Heppen finally taken

During the early morning *I./FJR 2* had advanced from Heppen in support of their comrades of *FJR 6*, but they had suffered tremendous losses, and early in the morning Finzel reported that he had only thirty men left⁴⁶², so he decided to fall back on Leopoldsborg to wait for the other two companies of his battalion to arrive. This meant that Heppen was now defended by the remnants of *III./GR 723* who were still dug in on the edge of the village.⁴⁶³ At around 08.15 hours they had set up a number of *Pak*, covering both the main roads, the one from Oostham and the one from

⁴⁵⁸ KTB 88 AK, 09.09.44, 14.25 hours.

⁴⁵⁹ KTB 88 AK, 09.09.44, 14.25 hours.

⁴⁶⁰ Louche, *Heppen en Leopoldsborg*, 193.

⁴⁶¹ KTB 88 AK, 09.09.44, 15.50 hours.

⁴⁶² KTB 88 AK, 09.09.44, B 265.

⁴⁶³ This section, Louche, *Heppen en Leopoldsborg*, 197-210, and Howard and Sparrow, *The Coldstream Guards*, 289-290.

Beverlo. Most of the *Grenadiere* had dug in at the southeast corner of the village. From there they had a clear view of any attackers coming up from Beverlo. But morale was not high. The men lacked ammunition and complained of the lack of decent food. The only support they might get would have to come from the *Jagdpanther* and *Sturmgeschütze* of 1. and 2./559 back in Leopoldsburg. For the moment all the men could do was huddle in their trenches and wait. They would not have to wait long, for their opponents were getting ready to do battle at around the same time.

During the night the 1st Coldstream Guards had incurred heavy losses by shellfire and Lieutenant-Colonel Hill amalgamated No.1 and 3 Squadrons under Major H.R. Allsopp. Artillery was brought up and under a heavy barrage Captain D.M.G.J. Willoughby (2 Company) and Major Lord Hartington (No.3 Company) ordered their troops forward for the assault. The tanks were to follow. This time the fight for Heppen was to be short and bitter. The attack went in at 08.45 hours.⁴⁶⁴

Willoughby's company which advanced west of the Beverlosesteenweg suffered some serious casualties before they reached the start-line when several soldiers were killed by a *Pak* from Leopoldsburg. But once the company had passed this point the going was much easier and half an hour later they reached their objective in the centre of Heppen. Hartington's company meanwhile had met much stronger opposition because they attacked exactly where the *Grenadiere* had dug in. Advancing along a secondary road they had to clear obstacles, created by felled trees, and they ran straight into murderous rifle and machine-gun fire even though the Germans had suffered heavily as a result of the barrage. The fighting became very intense. After Heppen had been taken, the bodies of a German and a British soldier were found, still holding on to each other's throats. While storming a farmhouse Lord Hartington, the company commander, was shot through the heart by a sniper. He was killed instantly and Sergeant-Major James Cowley took over the command of No.3 Company as no more officers were available. He led his men successfully into Heppen where he reached their objective exactly one hour after the attack had started. Cowley later received a DCM (Distinguished Conduct Medal) for this.

Now that the infantry had taken their objectives they could begin to secure the village and at ten a.m. the tanks of the 1st Battalion were ordered to join them. Wishing to avoid the main road because it might still be covered by the 8.8 cm *Flak* on the edge of Leopoldsburg, the Shermans of No.2 Squadron first followed the railway tracks towards Leopoldsburg then turned left into Heppen. There they took up defensive positions alongside the infantry. Then two patrols of two Shermans each were ordered to explore the two roads in the direction of Leopoldsburg. The northernmost pair could see German infantry running away and the Shermans drove out of Heppen at high speed. Turning a corner the lead Sherman suddenly came under fire from a *Jagdpanther* further up the road. Fortunately for the Guardsmen its gunner proved to be a poor shot, for the two shells he fired in rapid succession both missed and instead damaged two farmhouses. The Shermans turned tail and headed back to Heppen to take up defensive positions. But the day was not over yet for the Coldstream Guards.

⁴⁶⁴ Howard and Sparrow's claim that it was all over in half an hour (*The Coldstream Guards*, 289) is a bit of an oversimplification.

About an hour later, at 12.30 hours, three *Jagdpanther* of 1./559 and a company of Finzel's I./FJR 2, counterattacked from Leopoldsburg. Apparently Finzel's other companies had arrived. As the defence of Heppen was now more or less complete and because more artillery had arrived, the Germans did not stand a chance. Shells rained down on the attackers who soon gave up and turned back to Leopoldsburg. Some of the *Fallschirmjäger* were taken prisoner. None of the *Jagdpanther* was disabled. Finzel pulled back even further and, together with the 10.5 cm guns of 17. and 18./SS-Artillerie Ersatz und Ausbildungs Regiment, set up a new defence at Malou, about half-way between Leopoldsburg and Balen together with some 8.8 cm guns of 6./schwere Flak-Abteilung 602.⁴⁶⁵ Heppen itself was to remain in British hands, unlike Oostham, where the story took an unexpected turn.

Oostham evacuated

For the defenders of Oostham (B Squadron 4th/7th Royal Dragoon Guards and A and B Companies 12th KRRC) 9 September began as the previous day had ended: without a moment's peace.⁴⁶⁶ Civilians also suffered from the continuous fighting in their village and eight people were killed. Lieutenant-Colonel R.G. Byron, CO of the Dragoon Guards ordered B Squadron to stay put in Oostham, together with the 12th KRRC (C Company would arrive later and take over from B Company), while A and C Squadrons were to patrol the roads between the village and Beverlo.

B Squadron had a busy day and regularly needed to call on the artillery for assistance. During the night more and more of Von der Heydte's *Fallschirmjäger* began to assemble around the village and they now attempted to take it back. But without support, now that the last of Kopka's *Sturmgeschütze* had gone, all their efforts were doomed to fail. At one point five shells fell in the middle of a concentration of about sixty *Fallschirmjäger* with predictable results. All day long the sniping, mortaring and shelling continued, without any discernible result. Then, at 18.45 hours something unexpected happened. The British units in Oostham were told that they would have to pull out. Because the 8th Armoured Brigade was only supposed to protect the left flank of the Guards Armoured Division, the attempt to extend the bridgehead beyond Heppen was abandoned. During the late evening all the British troops pulled out of Oostham and headed for an area south of Leopoldsburg. Their opponents, FJR 6, quickly followed their departure and Oostham was once again in German hands. It was a disappointing end to a battle which had lasted two days and cost many lives. Because of the same shifting of troops, the Coldstream Guards had to leave Heppen for Stal, east of Beverlo. This area had been cleared by the Grenadier Guards that day. Heppen was now the responsibility of the 13th/18th Hussars.⁴⁶⁷ As infantry support they received B Company 12th KRRC.

⁴⁶⁵ KTB 88 AK, 10.09.44, A 201, and Louche, *Heppen en Leopoldsburg*, 232.

⁴⁶⁶ This section, War Diary 4th/7th Royal Dragoon Guards, Louche, *Heppen en Leopoldsburg*, 195-6, and Rijmen, 59-62.

⁴⁶⁷ Not by 15th/19th King's Royal Hussars as Howard and Sparrow write (*The Coldstream Guards*, 289) as this battalion was still west of the Albert Canal (War Diary 15th/19th King's Royal Hussars) that day. The 13th/18th were at Beringen (B Squadron) and Beverlo (A and C Squadrons), and B Company had been assigned to them after the pull-out from Oostham (Hereward Wake and W.F. Deeds, *Swift and Bold, The Story of the King's Royal Rifle Corps in the Second World War*, Aldershot 1949, 289).

The key village

At Hechtel, the key centre on the main road to Eindhoven, 9 September was a day of extremely intense fighting by small bands of men over very limited territory, sometimes no more than one or two buildings. Yet it was here that the whole of the British XXX corps was being held up, for the second consecutive day.⁴⁶⁸ Although the two Guards companies had managed to claw their way into the village the previous day, they only held a few scattered positions. They were under constant attack throughout the night. In order to give his men some rest, Major J.O. Spencer, CO of No.2 Squadron Welsh Guards, had taken his headquarters up to support the infantry. While keeping watch from his tank he was shot by a German patrol. He would not be the last officer to lose his life in this small Belgian village that day.

At five a.m. *Major* Franz Grassmel ordered *3. Kompanie* (*Oberleutnant* Günther Plaumann) to retake the north of Hechtel, meaning the positions the Scots Guards had occupied the afternoon before. Plaumann set up his headquarters in a pub only two hundred metres from the Guards positions. After a thorough reconnaissance of the surroundings, the attack went in at 06.30 hours. It failed miserably. The two Scots Guards platoons refused to budge in spite of losses due to accurate mortar fire. In the intense fighting Lieutenant Thorpe, in charge of No.13 Platoon was killed. By ten a.m. the platoon was virtually cut off, but still the position resisted the attacks. Around the same time Lieutenant-Colonel J. Gresham, who commanded the 1st Welsh Guards, ordered his No.3 Company (Captain P.M. Beckwith-Smith) to come up and try and push through to establish contact with the Scots Guards around the church. This was possible, because after the Irish Guards had relieved them in Helchteren, the evening before, the whole Welsh Guards Group was now assembled to the west of the Hechtel. Initially No.3 Company's attack went well and the German *2. Kompanie* (*Oberjäger* Hühnlein) was forced to pull back a few hundred metres pursued by the Guardsmen. However, when the company tried to cross the Kamperbaan, things began to go horribly wrong. A sniper killed Major H.E.J. Lister in charge of the Support Company. Due to the intense German fire No.3 Company only got as far as the church, just one hundred metres from the Scots Guards. Attempts by Cromwell tanks to break the deadlock failed. Only one managed to reach the crossroads before it was knocked out by a *Panzerfaust*. The crew were taken prisoner. But worse was to come.

The tables are turned

While the Guards were trying to get a firmer grip on Hechtel, some fifteen kilometres north of the village, at De Kolonie, a counterattack was being planned. *Hauptmann* Willie Müller, commanding *II./Fallschirm Panzer Ersatz- und Ausbildungsregiment Hermann Göring*, assembled his troop commanders to give out orders.⁴⁶⁹ Müller's battalion was one of three that had been undergoing training on the Veluwe area in central Holland, when it received orders on 7 September to travel to Eindhoven. These *Fallschirmjäger* distinguished themselves from the other, regular, Paratroopers by a blue cuff band with the inscription 'Hermann Göring'. The battalion arrived at Eindhoven the following day and then travelled on to the Maas-Scheldt Canal at De

⁴⁶⁸ This section, War Diary 1st Welsh Guards, Ellis, *Welsh Guards*, 221-3, Erskine, *The Scots Guards*, 373-6, and Bussels, *De Slag om Hechtel*, 55-76.

⁴⁶⁹ Details this section Wuyts, *Herfststorm over Hechtel*, 87-91, who quotes Minn's report in full.

Kolonie. Müller ordered his battalion to go to Locht, a hamlet just north of Hechtel, assemble there and then advance west across the heath to establish contact with the troops in Leopoldsburg. He was to come under Chill's command.⁴⁷⁰ At around one p.m. on 9 September the battalion began to arrive at the woods around Locht. An hour later the attack on Hechtel began. Müller had split his battalion into four columns.⁴⁷¹ Müller also had an older type *Sturmgeschütz III* and two *Sfls* which he had assigned to *Oberleutnant* Otto Minn.

The attack went off to a promising start and the groups soon closed in on Hechtel, although the vehicles assigned to Minn had trouble following the infantry because of the close country. When the attackers got to within 300 metres of Hechtel, all hell was let loose. The Guards had observed the Germans as they approached the village and they fired with everything they had to drive off the attackers. They were partially successful. Both *1.* and *2. Kompanie* were forced to veer to the west and there, outside Hechtel, they ran into some tanks from the Irish Guards which were carrying out a *recce* for the following day. In the ensuing fight the Germans were driven back. The left hand columns fared better. By sheer accident they entered Hechtel just as two Cromwell tanks were taking supplies to the beleaguered platoons of the Scots Guards. The British tanks hastily disappeared and the platoons, already under attack from the south were now completely surrounded. Still, they stubbornly held on to their positions until in the early evening Müller and Plaumann got together to coordinate their attacks. In the end the two platoons had to abandon their positions and pull back to the rear platoon near the church. The Welsh Guards fared little better. Both Müller's and Beckwith-Smith's companies were pushed back. When it got dark the Prince of Wales Company as well as No.3 Company had been forced to pull back to the park behind the rectory where they were forced to spend the night. Finally, after ten p.m. the sound of fighting began to die down and both sides settled down for the night.

Part of the determination with which X Company Scots Guards had defended themselves that day was thanks to their commanding officer, Major P. Stewart Fotheringham. His name had become a byword in the division for valour and that was why his two platoons, surrounded and outnumbered though they were, never gave ground until they were ordered to do so. But even Fotheringham could not change the outcome. At the end of 9 September the British troops had been driven out of their positions in the northeast of village and after three days they now clung desperately to a few houses in the western part of Hechtel.

⁴⁷⁰ KTB 88 AK, 09.09.44, Tagesmeldung.

⁴⁷¹ KTB 88 AK, 10.09.44, A 207. To the right (west) of the road were 3. motorisierte Panzergrenadierkompanie (Oberleutnant Minn) and 2. Radfahr Panzergrenadierkompanie (Oberleutnant Hagenmüller), to the left (east) were 1. Radfahr Panzergrenadierkompanie (Oberleutnant Esterer) and 4. Aufklärungskompanie (Leutnant Vetter) plus 5. Panzerkompanie (Leutnant Sommer) which possessed one Panzerkampfwagen III and two Panzerkampfwagen IV. This division is based on XXX Corps Intel Sum 511 which quotes a captured document assigning each company a letter.

Shifting forces

Further south the Irish Guards could finally move out of Helchteren where they had been under constant attack by units of Hübner's *FJR 24*.⁴⁷² At 11 a.m. the 2nd Fife and Forfar Yeomanry, another of the 11th Armoured Division's tank battalions, took over and even though Helchteren was still hotly contested the Irish Guards Group set out to move north by a sand track to join the Welsh Guards in Hechtel. On their way the Irish Guards met some opposition from infantry and they captured a unique prisoner for a ground unit, a deep-sea diver. He was one of a marine detachment who had been hurriedly sent to the front, vehemently, but vainly, protesting against his new assignment. When he learned of the stiff German opposition in Hechtel, Brigadier N.W. Gwatkin (5th Guards Armoured Brigade) decided to waste no more time. He ordered the Welsh Guards to remain where they were and told the Irish Guards to go round the right flank the following morning, then clear Eksel, northeast of Hechtel and from there drive straight for the objective, the bridge over the Maas-Scheldt Canal. Lieutenant-Colonel J.O.E. Vandeleur, decided to reconnoitre the terrain, which was when he encountered some of Müller's companies and found, to his horror, that the so-called open ground over which he was to advance looked fairly impassable. He realized that the advance the next day would be as much an exploration as an attack.

At the end of the day, at the headquarters of *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps* in Moergestel, General Hans Reinhard studied the map. He realized that, once again, he and Chill would have to juggle their forces. *FJR 6* was now arriving in full, the last of Finzel's *I./FJR 2* would join their unit the following day, but his only armour, *559*, had already lost one company and could not be committed everywhere. Reinhard was convinced that the Beringen bridgehead would be held because troops from Erdmann's *Fallschirmjäger-Division* were still arriving.⁴⁷³ His main concern was the bridgehead south of Geel, which will be discussed in the next chapter (3.2). Reinhard's estimate of the morale of Erdmann's *Fallschirmjäger* was certainly correct in view of their stubbornness in Hechtel so far, but whether that was true for their fighting power remained to be seen, particularly now that they would have to face the whole of the Guards Armoured Division. Lieutenant-General Horrocks (XXX Corps) had decided to keep up the momentum by ordering the Guards to push on and capture a bridge over the Maas-Scheldt Canal (hence the assignment for Vandeleur and his men).⁴⁷⁴ Reinhard was understandably worried about Geel, because from there to the Maas-Scheldt Canal was a mere four kilometres over open ground. Once Geel had fallen the canal was within Allied reach. Hechtel, on the other hand, was about twelve kilometres from the canal. Moreover, the road north ran through very close country which, so far, had helped the German defence. Still, in view of the Allied concentration of power in the Beringen bridgehead, Reinhard took a serious risk by focusing on Geel. The next day would show whether he had made the right decision or not.

⁴⁷² This section Fitzgerald, *The Irish Guards*, 470.

⁴⁷³ KTB 88 AK, 09.09.44, Tagesmeldung.

⁴⁷⁴ Horrocks, *Corps Commander*, 87.

Decision time

Early that Sunday morning, 10 September, *Kampfgruppe Chill* was officially created. The order ran 'Fsch.A.O.K.1 stellt aus Resten 85., 84., und 89.I.D. Kampfgruppe unter Führung Stab 85.I.D. zusammen.'⁴⁷⁵ The other two headquarters soon returned to the army reserve for later use. At that moment the *Kampfgruppe* numbered 4,420 men exclusive of the three battalions of *FJR 6* and *II./Fallschirm Panzer Ersatz- und Ausbildungsregiment Hermann Göring*.⁴⁷⁶ This meant that on the day it was created the *Kampfgruppe* numbered about 6,000 men, about half a division.

Oostham, the focus of such bitter fighting the previous day, stayed quiet throughout the Sunday, that is to say, with regards to fighting, because a huge row broke out over who was in command of who. *Oberstleutnant* Von der Heydte, the self-willed commander of *FJR 6* had obviously put his foot in it again.⁴⁷⁷ At noon he was seen by Reinhard who was visiting the forward headquarters of the troops under his command. After visiting Dreyer in Geel and Chill in Balen, Reinhard's last stop for the day was, together with Chill, to see Von der Heydte at his headquarters, which was also in Balen. After reporting the situation there was apparently some disagreement between Chill and his subordinate commander, because Reinhard found it necessary to point out to Von der Heydte that *559* was not under the command of *FJR 6*, but rather under that of Chill. Also it appears that Chill blamed Von der Heydte for taking orders directly from *Generaloberst* Student, *Oberbefehlshaber 1. Fallschirmarmee* and that he was only kept informed ('*orientiert*'). Von der Heydte denied this vehemently. He took his orders from Chill and was merely informed by Student about the orders that *1. Fallschirmarmee* passed on to him through Chill. The quarrel reveals that there was some bad blood between Chill and Von der Heydte, both extremely able, but strong-willed commanders. It is also clear that Reinhard did not manage to sort it out that day, because the issue of who was really in charge of *Kampfgruppe Chill* would be raised at least one more time.

Since Reinhard still was not sure where the main blow would fall, he ordered the *Jagdpanther* company of *559* to pull out and concentrate in a wood near the village of Tenderloo, one kilometre and a half southeast of Mol, so that it could strike where necessary, west towards Geel or east towards Leopoldsburg.⁴⁷⁸ This was also in line with how Student saw the situation. Early that morning he had personally spoken over the phone to *General der infanterie* Hans Krebs, *Chef des Generalstabes Heeresgruppe B*, about the situation. Student said that though Hechtel had been recaptured he doubted whether he would be able to destroy the Allied bridgehead 'mit den nur vorhandenenen Inf. Kräfte ohne genügende Pz.Abwehrwaffen und ohne Artillerie'⁴⁷⁹ However, his opponents would decide for him. Now that it had become clear that the chance of a breakthrough north of Beringen was increasingly unlikely, Allied attention focused on Hechtel where success seemed to be within reach.

⁴⁷⁵ KTB 88 AK, 10.09.44, 06.30 hours. Both 84 ID and 89 ID received new commanders in September 1944, were reformed and continued to operate on the Western Front (Kursietis, *The Wehrmacht at War*, 128-9).

⁴⁷⁶ KTB 88 AK, 09.09.44, B 265.

⁴⁷⁷ This section: KTB 88 AK, 10.09.44, A 206.

⁴⁷⁸ KTB 88 AK, 10.09.44, 12.05 hours.

⁴⁷⁹ KTB OB West, 10.09.44, 11.35 hours.

A difficult start

Major-General A.H.S. Adair felt that for the Guards to resume the drive north quickly Hechtel would have to be by-passed.⁴⁸⁰ As Leopoldsburg also seemed to hold out, there was no alternative but to advance part of the way across country between these two centres of resistance. The risk of moving over difficult terrain, Adair felt, was outweighed by the chance of a surprise capture of a bridge over the Maas - Scheldt Canal. While the Welsh Guards Group pinned down the enemy troops in Hechtel, both the Irish and the Grenadier Guards would advance over the Hechtel-Leopoldsburg road (Kamperbaan), swing right (east) and cut the main road running north out of Hechtel and then continue up to the canal to capture Bridge 9 or another one if that happened to be blown up. In fact, Bridge 9 was one of only two bridges still intact as all the others had been blown the previous day.⁴⁸¹

The morning dawned misty and cold on 10 September, but a bright sun soon cleared the atmosphere and shortly after ten a.m. the first tanks and armoured cars crossed the Kamperbaan, the Grenadier Guards group on the left, the Irish Guards group on the right.⁴⁸² The previous night there had been an attack on the positions of the Scots Guards inside Hechtel, near the church, but this had been beaten off. A second attempt, at seven a.m. was also successfully repulsed by the beleaguered Scots. After this it became quieter in this part of the village. The armour of the *Hermann Göring Regiment* assembled on the northern edge of the village, in a wooded area called Kamert.⁴⁸³ From there they could cover the fields to the east. They were positioned precisely where the Guards would attack. A clash was inevitable. At first the Irish Guards Group found the going very hard, because of the terrain. For half an hour they moved slowly through the pines and sand-dunes. The tanks battered their way through the trees, slithering and churning in the soggy sand. Visibility was virtually nil and the troops soon lost sight of each other. The advancing group was also invisible to the Germans, initially, but as soon as they left the woods, the leading tanks of No.2 Squadron (Major E.G. Tyler) were hit. All of a sudden a fierce battle erupted where both sides gave as good as they got. The infantry of No.4 Company (Major J. Haslewood) leaped off the Sherman tanks and together they fought their way slowly forward in the direction of the road from Hechtel. Then, at noon, came the next setback.

Between the forward British positions and the road ran a marshy stream, unmarked on any map.⁴⁸⁴ One tank had already bogged down there and it was clear that tanks could not cross it. Tyler and Haslewood reported to Battalion that, in addition to the Germans, the stream made this route impossible. The Grenadier Guards (followed by the Coldstream Guards) had been luckier. They had come across a disused railway track on an old artillery range. This enabled them to pass the treacherous ground. Upon hearing this, Lieutenant-Colonel J.O.E. Vandeleur asked Division to be allowed

⁴⁸⁰ Adair's plan, Orde, *The Household Cavalry*, 285.

⁴⁸¹ Israel, 32. The other bridge was Bridge 12, between Lommel and Luyksgestel.

⁴⁸² Details this section, unless otherwise specified, Orde, *The Household Cavalry*, 285-6, Howard and Sparrow, *The Coldstream Guards*, 290, Fitzgerald, *The Irish Guards*, 471-3, Ellis, *Welsh Guards*, 376, Erskine, 223, and Bussels, *De Slag om Hechtel*, 76-95.

⁴⁸³ Reputedly, some were PzKw IV (Fitzgerald, *The Irish Guards*, 470, Bussels, *De Slag om Hechtel*, 85).

⁴⁸⁴ This is the Dorperloop.

to change over to the left with his Irish Guards Group. Adair granted him permission and at three p.m. the leading units withdrew. Inside Hechtel, early in the afternoon the Welsh Guards had again tried to reach their comrades of the Scots Guards near the church. But again, they failed to make contact and two more tanks were knocked out at the crossroads. It was now clearly up to the other battalions to break the deadlock at Hechtel.

Trapped

After the Irish Guards Group had retraced its steps, it reformed. Now No.1 Squadron (Major D. Peel) and No.2 Company (Captain A. Hendry) were in the lead. They passed through the Grenadiers and Coldstreamers, who had completely torn the track to ribbons and the going was appalling. 'At every bump and turn everyone was shot several feet into the air,' was the comment of one officer.⁴⁸⁵ Still, the Irish Guards crossed the main road from Hechtel to the Maas-Scheldt Canal and by six p.m. were in the village of Eksel.

The German forces in Hechtel were now also under threat from another direction.⁴⁸⁶ That morning an infantry-armour combat group from the 11th Armoured Division, which was to secure the right flank of the Guards Armoured Division, started their attack from Helchteren. Both the 2nd Fife and Forfar Yeomanry (FFY) under Lieutenant-Colonel W.G.N. Walker, and the 1st Herefordshire Regiment under Lieutenant-Colonel G.R. Turner-Cain, set off from the north of Helchteren village in the direction of Peer and Bree. Meeting only scattered opposition from *I./FJR 20* they soon broke out in the open country east of the Helchteren – Hechtel road. The Sherman tanks of 2nd FFY moved up on the left and reached Wychmaal and the eastern edge of Hechtel at around two p.m. Together with the 1st Herefords, but only after some intense hand-to-hand combat, they took some 400 prisoners and killed at least thirty enemy soldiers for a loss of four dead and eleven wounded and with not a single tank lost. It was a text book example of infantry-tank co-operation.⁴⁸⁷ Nevertheless, the operation had not been a piece of cake.⁴⁸⁸

The *Fallschirmjäger* had occupied a wood east of the road with some small ridges in front of it. They also had an 8.1 cm mortar battery and some *Panzerfäuste* in addition to the usual small arms. Asking the infantry to advance over the open ground would be pointless without a great deal of fire support. After a brief recce and consultation, the Squadron and Company commanders decided to tackle this position by launching a company/squadron operation from the left flank with another company/squadron group providing frontal fire support. The commanders emphasised the necessity for fire and movement between tanks and infantry. And even though 2nd FFY 's squadrons were under strength (they were down to ten tanks apiece at the time) the attack was a resounding success because tanks and infantry moved and fired together. When machine-gun fire from previously unlocated positions threatened to bring the attack to a premature halt, the reserve platoon and two tanks were sent up. When they attempted to resume the attack the Shermans came under anti-tank fire which was overcome by the infantry with a bayonet

⁴⁸⁵ Fitzgerald, *The Irish Guards*, 473.

⁴⁸⁶ This section, War Diary 11th Armoured Division and Delaforce, *The Black Bull*, 146-7.

⁴⁸⁷ The War Office called the operation 'a model encounter battle' (Harrison, 166).

⁴⁸⁸ This section, War Diary 1st Herefordshire Rgt, AppendixA and Harrison, 166-7.

charge. The attack by units of the 11th Armoured Division illustrated what could be achieved when armour and infantry practised mutual co-operation in battle, something that the British troops had begun to learn the hard way in Normandy, but which was still not an everyday occurrence as the fighting moved north. No wonder then that Carlo D'Este in his book on Normandy found that, 'Commanded by the highly regarded Major General G.P.B. 'Pip' Roberts, the 11th Armoured was generally considered the best British armoured division to fight in Northwest Europe.⁴⁸⁹

The noose around the *Fallschirmjäger* in Hechtel was being drawn ever tighter and they were now virtually surrounded. The only way out was a strip of wooded land between Wychmaal and Eksel. At the end of the day the situation would change for the worse in a somewhat dramatic way. Major Grassmel wishing to avoid becoming entrapped, gathered what was left of *FJR 20*, apart from the companies inside Hechtel, and took them to Peer, outside the encirclement. This retreat was covered by a platoon of infantry and one *Pak*.⁴⁹⁰ Now only a few platoons of Germans were left.

Further South

Major-General 'Pip' Roberts despatched other units, further south, between Helchteren and Hasselt, to mop up there and protect the flank of the 2nd FFY and the 1st Herefords (see above) advancing on Wychmaal.⁴⁹¹ A second infantry-armour groep, the 23rd Hussars and the 8th Rifle Brigade advanced as far as the crossroads at Wanberg six kilometres northeast of Helchteren while a third combined group, the 3rd Royal Tanks and the 3rd Mons approached the village of Laak, two kilometres south of Helchteren. Because the 15th/19th Hussars were only asked to protect the southernmost flank of the division that day, they did not really expect a lot of trouble. Still that Sunday would see one of the sharpest battles in which the regiment was ever involved.

The first attempt by its B Squadron to break through the German defences west of Zonhoven immediately ran into trouble. As soon as the Cromwell tanks started down the road they were fired on by a 7.5 cm *Pak*. An artillery barrage by the 151st Field Regiment followed. This normally did the trick. But not that day. The leading tank was hit and immobilised, blocking the village street. Attempts to get round the defences were not very successful initially. The Dutch SS-men (*I./SS-Grenadier-Regiment Landstorm Nederland*), especially the so-called *Jeugdstorm Kompanie* (formed from members of the Dutch equivalent of the Hitler Youth), put up fierce resistance. This was no mean feat as the SS-men in the meantime had to look over their shoulders at the U.S. 2nd Armored Division who were on the other side of the canal in Hasselt. Still, they were not on their own. They were in touch with the *176. Division zbv* and *FJR 21* (Löytvedd-Hardegg).⁴⁹² The *Fallschirmjäger* had been ordered to advance towards Beringen.⁴⁹³ The order was pointless, but the presence

⁴⁸⁹ D' Este, *Decision in Normandy*, 373.

⁴⁹⁰ Bussels, *De Slag om Hechtel*, 91.

⁴⁹¹ This section: G. Courage, *The History of the 15/19 The King's Royal Hussars 1939-1945*, Aldershot 1949, 103-7 and War Diary 11th Armoured Division.

⁴⁹² KTB 88 AK, 10.09.44, 16.00 hours and Tagesmeldung.

⁴⁹³ KTB 88 AK, 10.09.44, 10.50 hours.

of the *Fallschirmjäger* meant that the heavy fighting continued into the afternoon and eventually C Squadron 15th/19th Hussars had to take over from B Squadron. At least two *Sturmgeschütze* and two *Pak* guns were knocked out, but the Regiment in return suffered twenty casualties of whom nine were killed.⁴⁹⁴ Also, no less than nine tanks were hit, although some could be recovered and were later put back into service.⁴⁹⁵ At the end of the day the Dutch SS troops were forced to pull back to Zonhoven where they were now almost surrounded.

The bridge

When the Irish Guards crossed the Lommelsebaan, the main road between Hechtel and the canal, in the direction of Eksel, they were fired on by three *Sturmgeschütze* from 2./559.⁴⁹⁶ The Guards fired back and, probably impressed by the superior numbers streaming out of the woods, the *Sturmgeschütze* pulled back. The Irish Guards moved as quickly as they could. Upon reaching Eksel they found that the Germans had abandoned the village.⁴⁹⁷ As dusk was fast approaching the Guards considered settling in for the night. The village seemed perfect for it. But then a Troop from A Squadron the 2nd Household Cavalry had some spectacular news for "Colonel Joe" Vandeleur: a fine, unmapped road leading straight to the bridge over the Maas-Scheldt Canal. In fact, finding the road clear had also been a surprise for Lieutenant J.N. Creswell, Troop Leader of No.5 Troop, who had warned his men to expect German resistance all the way from Eksel to the canal. The only 'resistance' they came across along the twelve kilometres to Overpelt, however, was a lone German soldier demanding to be taken prisoner.

Once he reached Overpelt, Creswell had to make a decision. He realised that driving on was pointless, but that instead he should attempt to get behind the German defences around the bridge. These consisted of some infantry and one *Flakkampftruppe* (two 8.8 cm guns) from *schwere Flak-abteilung 602 (RAD)*.⁴⁹⁸ The Germans at the bridge were as yet unaware of his presence.⁴⁹⁹ Arriving near a zinc factory, which obscured the view of the bridge, but also prevented the Germans from seeing his Troop, Creswell ordered the armoured cars to stop. He knew that if he took them any further the Germans might see them and blow the bridge. He needed to make a decision soon, for it was getting dark. Creswell decided that it was time for some unorthodox reconnaissance. He borrowed two bikes from civilians and together with Corporal-of-Horse S.W. Cutler raced to the factory. There they left their bicycles and climbed to the top of the building. Beneath Creswell were the German defences, as clear as if they had been marked on a map. Once he had seen enough, Creswell climbed back down. Before taking the bikes again the two Guardsmen were informed

⁴⁹⁴ The Divisional War Diary also mentions one tank, but what that might have been remains a mystery.

⁴⁹⁵ It is unclear where the StuGs came from. *Courage, History of the 15/19*, also mentions Jagdpanthers, but this seems rather fanciful. See also note 297 below.

⁴⁹⁶ Haile reported three StuGs from 2/559 near Hechtel (KTB 88 AK, 10.09.44, 10.50 hours).

⁴⁹⁷ This section, unless otherwise specified, based on Fitzgerald, *The Irish Guards*, 474-8, Orde, *The Household Cavalry*, 287-191, Israel, 36-40.

⁴⁹⁸ Not 647 as Margry states (*Market Garden*, 57). KTB 88 AK, 11.09.44, Tagesmeldung, also War Diary Guards Armoured Division, IS 63, Appendix W. Fl.Abt. 602 was commanded by Hauptmann Seifert (Wo 208/3605).

⁴⁹⁹ KTB 88 AK, 12.09.44, A 238, map.

that there were now some Germans outside the factory. Avoiding these Creswell and Cutler proceeded back on foot. As soon as he arrived back at his armoured car Creswell wired back that the route was clear. He urged the dispatch of an attack force immediately. Would this arrive in time?

No go

Around the same time that the armoured cars of Lieutenant Creswell's Troop reached Overpelt, the two other Troops took the more direct route, the road running north from Hechtel.⁵⁰⁰ Because the side roads were all more or less impassible, No.2 and 4 Troops were forced to follow the main road. This was a time consuming task as the road ran dead straight until it reached a railway crossing eight kilometres from Hechtel. *Sturmgeschütze* were hidden among the trees lining the road. The British troops would advance some way, then get bogged down because of enemy fire. Tracer shots bounced along the road like cricket balls. As soon as the German gun was located and fired upon it would withdraw slightly under cover of the trees and the whole process would start all over again. The advance which had started from De Locht at three p.m. did not reach the vicinity of the railway crossing, Karrestraterheide, until it was getting dark. Once again the advancing force ground to a halt as it came under intense fire from the German defences. Resistance was particularly fierce because the German troops there, mainly from *II./Fallschirm Panzer Ersatz- und Ausbildungsregiment Hermann Göring*, some 8.8 cm guns from *schwere Flak-abteilung 602* plus three *Sturmgeschütze* from *2./559* (the other six were near Lommel), were told that they were the last line of defence protecting bridge 9 which was two kilometres further north.⁵⁰¹ While the infantry of No.2 Company and the tanks of No.3 Squadron Grenadiers Guards halted at Karrestraterheide crossroads Lieutenant Franklin, commanding No.4 Troop, had noticed that German defences further west appeared to be slightly less formidable. Upon hearing this news Lieutenant-Colonel Goulburn (2nd Grenadier Guards) ordered the King's Company and No.2 Squadron to attack along the left flank. The ensuing battle was short and one of the *Sturmgeschütze* of *2. Kompanie* was knocked out in addition to seven *Pak* guns and three tanks. Vehicles were burning everywhere and one witness described the scene as "a Guy Fawkes Night gone mad".⁵⁰² The opposition had been overcome, but by now it was too dark to proceed to bridge 9. The direct route was obviously not the solution. But had the Irish Guards, who had taken the side road, fared any better?

Joe's bridge

After receiving the news from Lieutenant Creswell at six p.m. Lieutenant-Colonel Vandeleur wasted no time.⁵⁰³ He immediately despatched No.1 Squadron (Major D. Peel) and No.2 Company (Captain A. Hendry) from Eksel where they were just settling in for the night. The infantry rode on top of the tanks and in the gathering dusk arrived at the zinc factory. The infantry de-bussed and Major David Peel, who was to be in charge of the battle group, and Vandeleur climbed the slag-heap to get

⁵⁰⁰ This section: War Diary Grenadier Guards, Orde, *The Household Cavalry*, 285-6.

⁵⁰¹ KTB 88 AK, 10.09.44, A 207.

⁵⁰² Orde, *The Household Cavalry*, 286.

⁵⁰³ This section: Fitzgerald, *The Irish Guards*, 473-8.

a look of the German defences for themselves. The main force seemed to be concentrated around the two 8.8 cm *Flak* guns at the northern end. It was clear that speed was of the essence. Vandeleur, 'Colonel Joe' to his men, told Peel that he would have to rush the bridge. Peel studied the terrain carefully. He noticed that about 350 metres south of the bridge the road from the zinc factory crossed the main road from Hechtel. The Germans should have been defending this crossroads, but there was no sign of enemy soldiers. It was clear that the Germans considered themselves sufficiently defended by their comrades at the Karrestraat railway crossing. There was more good news for the Guardsmen. Halfway between the crossroads and the bridge there was a slight bend in the road, due to the 1936 bridge being built slightly to the east of the original site. This meant that the guns at the north end would not see the attackers until they were almost upon them. Right away one troop and one platoon slowly advanced to the crossroads. The rest of the Squadron kept up heavy and steady machine-gun and HE fire to discourage the Germans. Lieutenant Duncan Lampard in the lead tank reached the crossroads and was just in time to see a halftrack towing an 8.8 cm gun across the bridge. A couple of HE shells put paid to their plans and knocked them to one side. The scene was now set for the final attempt.

Peel told Lampard that it was now up to him and Lieutenant John Stanley-Clarke with his platoon to storm the bridge. Unfortunately for them, by now the Germans had woken up to what was happening. As Lampard moved his tanks into position the 8.8 cm guns began to fire. This did not deter the Guardsmen. The German guns did not have shields as they had just arrived from airfields which until then they had been defending, and machine-gun fire soon dispersed the crew. Just after eight p.m. the infantry reached the bend in the road and they fired a green Verey light as a sign to the other eleven tanks of No.1 Squadron to fire only on the bridge. All the gunners and co-drivers in the Shermans kept their right feet down on the firing buttons that controlled their Brownings. Then a red Verey light went up, the sign that the infantry were now almost upon the bridge, and the firing stopped. It was time for Lampard's Troop to take over and rush the bridge. Lance-Sergeant McGurran in the lead tank hit the corner of a house and the engine stalled. The second tank, Sergeant Steer, swung past McGurran's tank and drove straight for the bridge where the tractor was still burning. The Sherman crashed through the flames and explosions and, followed by the other two tanks and Stanley-Clarke's infantry, Steer reached the north end of the bridge. Once again, as so often before in Normandy, a *Flakkampftruppe* had failed to do its work.⁵⁰⁴

'Colonel Joe', who had witnessed the whole scene from the top of the slagheap, was dancing with excitement. But the job was not over yet. Captain Ron Hutton, 615th Field Squadron R.E., had the unenviable task of locating the charges and putting them out of order.⁵⁰⁵ He had four Guardsmen with him whom he instructed what to do and as soon as the infantry began to pour over the bridge Hutton and his motley crew followed. Hutton found both sides of the road covered by a confusion of wires and fuses. He removed all the initiating assemblies, having to fire through some of them as he had dropped his cutters, and then reported back to Vandeleur that the

⁵⁰⁴ Wolfgang Pickert, *Das II. Flakkorps in den Normandie-Schlacht*, OCMH MS B-597, 17.

⁵⁰⁵ This section: *Royal Engineers Battlefield Tour*, 81-3.

bridge was safe. Immediately No.3 Company and No.3 Squadron crossed to reinforce the attackers and make sure the bridge remained in British hands. The headquarters and the other Squadrons set up a hedgehog around the crossroads. As Brigade headquarters was out of wireless touch it was not until after midnight that Vandeleur was able to pass the good news on to divisional headquarters. The following day, the sign writer of the 615th Field Squadron got to work. In honour of the Irish commander the bridge was named 'Joe's Bridge'. Major Peel was commended for the Military Cross.

Apart from the capture of this crucial bridge on the way to Germany, Sunday 10 September was a historical day for another reason, because it was also the day that the idea for operation Market Garden was born.⁵⁰⁶ Meanwhile, the big question for the Guards in their new bridgehead was, how would the Germans react, or to put it more simply, how soon and from what direction would they launch the inevitable counterattack?

Initial German response

At the end of Sunday 10 September, Reinhard still had no idea of the extreme danger his troops were now in. He continued to be more worried throughout the day about Geel which had been captured. For that reason he decided to order *1./559* with all its available *Jagdpanther* to Geel to restore the situation there (see next chapter).⁵⁰⁷ Tactically this made sense, because Geel was closer to the Maas-Scheldt Canal. If the British troops were to throw a bridgehead over the canal north of Geel, they would have cut behind the whole of Reinhard's forces still fighting further east. What makes less sense is that in his daily report Reinhard noted that he stood by his original estimate of the 9th in which he concluded that Erdmann (*7. Fallschirmjäger-Division*) was strong enough to contain the British forces opposing him, but that the greatest threat was still posed by the enemy at Geel.⁵⁰⁸ He thought that the forces in this sector were still too weak, too much of a motley crew, had little or no will to fight and not enough artillery to support them. He therefore asked Student to send (what was left of) the *346. Infanterie-Division*, one of the divisions of *15. Armee* which was about to be ferried across the Scheldt, to reinforce the units near Geel.

Obviously Reinhard was not aware of recent events between Hechtel and the Maas-Scheldt canal. It may be that this impression was reinforced by a report at the end of the afternoon about the fierce resistance put up by *I./ SS-Grenadier-Regiment Landstorm Nederland*, who were still in their old positions north of Hasselt.⁵⁰⁹ One thing is clear, German communications were not functioning properly and Reinhard was in for a rude awakening that very night. The news of the capture of the bridge just after midnight and the German countermeasures will be discussed in full detail in Chapter 3.4. Suffice it to say that the British bridgehead could not be eliminated which basically meant that all German troops within the 'bloody triangle' were now outflanked and in danger of becoming trapped. Still, even after 11 September, the

⁵⁰⁶ MacDonald, *The Siegfried Line Campaign*, 120.

⁵⁰⁷ KTB 88 AK, 12.50 hours.

⁵⁰⁸ KTB 88AK, Tagesmeldung 09.09.44 and 10.09.44.

⁵⁰⁹ KTB 88 AK, 16.00 hours. Also, Delaforce, *The Black Bull*, 148, where, amazingly, 15/19th reported to have encountered JagdpanzerIV! The Dutch SS men would have been pleasantly surprised if they had had this kind of support.

fighting would rage on for a few more days, among other things by Hitler's insistence 'nichts unversucht zu lassen um den Albert-Kanal zu halten.'⁵¹⁰

Leopoldsburg again

Now that the focus of the British drive had shifted east, Oostham and Leopoldsburg, the scenes of such bitter fighting the previous three days, had fallen relatively quiet. Both places were still in German hands, even though attempts had been undertaken by units from the 8th Armoured Brigade to rectify this situation.⁵¹¹ Although the brigade was told to stay put because all it had to do was protect the flank of the Guards attacking Hechtel, throughout Sunday 10 September conflicting reports about the German strength in Leopoldsburg began to come in. Through their binoculars some tank commanders could see civilians walking about the town, seemingly without any interference. It was unclear whether there were still enemy soldiers within the town or whether they had pulled back further north. If that was the case, it would be a shame not to use the opportunity. At noon Brigadier G.E. Prior-Palmer ordered the 13th/18th Royal Hussars (Lieutenant-Colonel V. Dunkerly) to send in a Squadron to reconnoitre the situation while the 12th KRRC (Lieutenant-Colonel M. Edwardes) passed through northwards towards Mol. After conferring with the commanding officers Prior-Palmer changed his mind. He had by now received information that there were still German troops inside Leopoldsburg and in view of the recent fighting the brigadier decided that house clearing operations could not be undertaken by one battalion of infantry. Prior-Palmer thereupon decided to modify his plans and he ordered aggressive patrols to explore the situation. Only if the town was not held they were to go in and take it. The patrols were to enter Leopoldsburg from two directions. The 13th/18th Royal Hussars were to enter from the west and the 4th/7th Royal Dragoon Guards (Lieutenant-Colonel G. Byron), plus some infantry from the 12th KRRC, were to come in from the east.

B Squadron of the 13th/18th Royal Hussars set off first. They left Heppen at three p.m. and encountered two 7.5 cm and one smaller *Pak* guns near the railway crossing. Still, the Shermans managed to knock all three of them out. They then entered the village and temporarily occupied the western part taking nine POWs, six from *Grenadier-Regiment 723* and two from *FJR 6*. The demoralised soldiers said that a force of about sixty men were still in Leopoldsburg. The Germans were then told to climb onto the tanks which were told to pull back towards Beverlo. While driving back Lieutenant J.H. Aldam spotted a munitions lorry. He ordered his gunner to fire at it with spectacular results.⁵¹² No British tanks were lost and the patrol was a resounding success. The same could not be said for the attempt to explore Leopoldsburg from the east.

Both No.1 and 5 Troops from C Squadron the 4th/7th Royal Dragoon Guards had set off for Leopoldsburg at six p.m. after C Company 12th KRRC had reported that the military camp, to the southeast of the town was deserted. The assignment was considered a piece of cake. But the Royal Dragoon Guards were in for a rude surprise. Either the actions of the Royal Hussars that afternoon had alerted the

⁵¹⁰ KTB 88 AK, 11.09.44, 10.20 hours.

⁵¹¹ This section, unless otherwise specified, War Diaries, 8th Armoured Brigade, 13th/18th RH, 4th/7th RDG and 12th KRRC.

⁵¹² Louche, *Heppen en Leopoldsburg*, 252.

Germans inside Leopoldsborg that something was up, or they were were made of sterner stuff than their comrades holding the western end. Whatever the reason, the Royal Dragoon Guards ran into serious trouble at a point about seven hundred metres from the eastern end of the town. The Troops had leapfrogged ahead, taking the lead in turn and No.5 Troop was in front as the first Sherman was knocked out by a *Sturmgeschütz* from 2./559.⁵¹³ The Sherman burned like a candle. The other tanks fired smoke grenades and opened fire on the suspected position. In vain. Within minutes a second Sherman was ablaze and a third had its tracks knocked off. The remaining British tanks pulled back a little and although they kept firing into the area where they thought the *Sturmgeschütz* might be hiding they could not silence the enemy gun. A very high O.P tower was also shot up because it was thought that a German might be directing the fire from there. A dead German was indeed discovered there later, but whether or not he attributed to the British losses must remain a mystery. Because it was clear that Leopoldsborg could not be taken by a mere patrol the four Shermans returned to their harbour. Later attempts by C Company 12th KRRC to 'stalk' the *Sturmgeschütz* also failed to find the offender and Leopoldsborg was still in German hands as darkness fell on 10 September.

Müller refuses to budge

On Monday 11 September Reinhard tried to eliminate the newly formed Guards bridgehead. Before going into detail about these actions and their outcome it is necessary to have a look first at what happened south of the canal after the capture of bridge 9 by the Irish Guards. I shall start at the most hotly contested place, Hechtel, and then move west to Leopoldsborg and Oostham, the other two key towns where the Germans still held firm.

Even though they were surrounded the Germans from 1./FJR 20 and the *Hermann Göring Regiment* in Hechtel continued to resist all attempts by the Welsh Guards to seize the crucial crossroads that would finally open up the direct road towards the Dutch border.⁵¹⁴ Incredibly, on this, the fifth day of the battle for Hechtel, the Welsh Guards discovered that German resistance had actually stiffened and they found it extremely difficult to hold on to what they already had. *Hauptmann* Müller (II./Fallschirm Panzer Ersatz- und Ausbildungsregiment Hermann Göring) was in charge of the northern sector, *Leutnant* Walter Schauf (1./FJR 20) of the southern one. Müller had set up his headquarters in a pub, Buitenlust, near the crossroads, Schauf had his headquarters in the pub across the road. Still, the Germans were now too weak to undertake a counterattack, as they had two days before on the 9th, and the Welsh Guards managed to stick to their positions, even though these were still on either side of the Kamperbaan. The British now tried a new tactic. They would try to blast their way towards the crossroads. Infantry of No.4 Company were to advance from the southwestern corner of the village while M 10 Achilles SPs from Y Anti-tank Battery (Major Harry Tuzo) would continually fire on the German positions with their deadly 76 mm guns.

⁵¹³ Louche (*Heppen en Leopoldsborg*, 285) suggests that a Jagdpanther knocked out the three Shermans. That is extremely unlikely as the Jagdpanther were already fighting in Geel.

⁵¹⁴ This section, unless otherwise specified, Bussels, *De Slag om Hechtel*, 97-102 and War Diary 1st Welsh Guards..

The attack went in at ten a.m. with a devastating bombardment by five M 10's and four seventeen-pounders. The *Fallschirmjäger* in their foxholes were powerless against the SPs and slowly No.4 Company made headway until they finally linked up with No.3 Company south of the Kamperbaan at the end of the afternoon. Then the SP group was fired on by two of Müller's *Sturmgeschütze* and a 7.5 cm *Pak* gun. The M 10's hastily pulled back. All afternoon Hechtel was shelled once more by the British and most of the village was now ablaze. *Hauptmann* Willie Müller was wounded at around three p.m. by shrapnel and taken to the cellar of the pub. *Oberleutnant* Plaumann (3./FJR 20) took over. Still the Germans would not budge and a final effort to penetrate their positions at seven p.m. was beaten off. It was clear that Hechtel was still a hard nut to crack and it was decided to lay on a full two battalion attack the next day. Once again the German defenders had triumphed.

But it was a Pyrrhic victory for the German troops inside Hechtel. They knew that it was only a matter of time before they would have to surrender. *Generalleutnant* Chill, who had lost touch with the troops in Hechtel (now called *Kampfgruppe Müller*) two days before, sent a patrol to find out what was going on in the village.⁵¹⁵ This patrol, which approached Hechtel from the artillery range reported that Müller was surrounded. Chill then approached both Student and Reinhard with the request for permission to get the troops out. This permission was denied, because Student said that Müller had been ordered 'sich nach Westen durchzuschlagen'.⁵¹⁶ Müller had certainly tried to act on this order. The evening before he had consulted his fellow commanders, *Oberleutnant* Günther Plaumann and *Leutnant* Walter Schauf, in an attempt to persuade them to break out.⁵¹⁷ They had rejected his proposal then, saying that they had not received any orders from Erdmann to do so. Why Müller did not insist again on the 11th when the situation was even more desperate is not clear. Whatever the reason, he decided to stay put. Hechtel would be fought over one more day.

Leopoldsburg revisited

After the somewhat disappointing reconnaissance in force the previous day, the actual liberation of Leopoldsburg on 11 September was a walk-over for the 8th Armoured Brigade, although at the same time a bit shambolic, too.⁵¹⁸ At 09.10 hours Brigadier Prior-Palmer gathered his commanders for an 'O' Group. He had been told by his Corps commander, Lieutenant-General Horrocks, to take Leopoldsburg to make sure that the enemy could not attack the Guards' left flank from this important crossroads. The idea was basically a repeat of the day before, on a bigger scale. While the 13th/18th Royal Hussars and the 12th KRRC would attack from the west, the 4th/7th Royal Dragoon Guards would come in from the east. The Dragoon Guards would be supported by elements of the 1st Belgian Brigade, also known as the Brigade Piron after its commander Colonel Jean Piron, which had just been assigned to the 8th Armoured Brigade. However, the plan did not work out that way. All the attacks were supposed to go in at two p.m. and B Squadron 13th/18th Royal

⁵¹⁵ KTB 88 AK, 12.09.44, 19.38 hours.

⁵¹⁶ Ibid.

⁵¹⁷ Statement Müller, 4th June 1947, quoted in Wuyts, *Herfststorm over Hechtel*, 268.

⁵¹⁸ This section, unless otherwise specified: War Diaries 8th Armoured Briagde, 3th/18th Royal Hussars, 12th KRRC and 4th/7th Royal Dragoon Guards.

Hussars together with B Company 12th KRRC entered Leopoldsburg again. This time there were no *PaK* guns to greet them as Finzel (*I./FJR 2*) had been ordered back to Balen, a few kilometres north, and within an hour British troops were in full control of the town centre. Enemy soldiers were spotted in the direction of Balen and some artillery fire was put down. The Hussars were eager to get back to their harbour now that they had done their share of the job, but where were the Belgians and the Dragoon Guards?

At about four p.m. the first Belgians showed up. It appeared that they had advanced over the grounds of the military camp, which meant that they had a much longer way to go. This partly accounted for their delay. Another reason was that the Dragoon Guards were supposed to be supported by the infantry element of the Belgian Brigade. However, this was still on its way to Heppen and the Dragoon Guards were supported by the Armoured Car Squadron. Not having any infantry and still smarting from the loss of three Shermans and three of his men, made Lieutenant-Colonel Byron cautious. He therefore ordered C Squadron to advance first to the Hechtelsesteenweg, the road between Hechtel and Leopoldsburg, before turning east. While advancing cautiously through the dense woods south of the road the Squadron learned that Leopoldsburg was free of Germans. Hereupon the Squadron Leader ordered his tanks to drive to the road as fast as possible. Cheered by crowds the Dragoon Guards finally entered Leopoldsburg at 17.30 hours to take over from the Hussars. The three battalions of the 8th Armoured Brigade had their first official stand down since D-Day.⁵¹⁹ So far the liberation had been easy if a little confused. The day would end in a minor tragedy, however.

The Belgian armoured cars drove up to the crossroads at the northern exit of Leopoldsburg. At this point, known locally as Quatre-Bras, the road branched in two directions: north towards the village of Kerkhoven and northwest towards Balen and Mol. The latter road was covered by Finzel's *Fallschirmjäger* who had dug in just outside Balen around a battery of three 8.8 cm guns from *6./schwere Flak-Abteilung 602*.⁵²⁰ The crossroads were still covered by three Shermans from the 13th/18th Royal Hussars when No.3 and 4 Troops of the 1st Belgian Brigade took over at 16.30 hours. Their CO, Colonel Jean Piron, had ordered aggressive reconnaissance over the two roads leading out of Leopoldsburg. No.3 Troop was to explore towards Balen, No.4 towards Kerkhoven. The latter patrol did not meet with any real resistance and at 17.30 hours reported that Kerkhoven had been abandoned by the enemy although civilians had spotted German troops a little to the east, on the northern edge of the artillery range. But No.3 Troop, which consisted of a scout car, three Daimler armoured cars, two jeeps and a motorcycle, was not so fortunate. When they set off down the road to Balen one of the British crews shouted, "Where are you going with those peashooters?" a remark which the Belgians took in good spirit. Soon they left the last houses behind them and entered the open terrain which extended as far as Balen. Then, around five p.m., when they had travelled about three kilometres, they ran into serious trouble. The patrol met a barrage of combined machine-gun and 8.8 cm fire, covering the road and was forced to pull back. The second Daimler was hit and two of its crew were killed. Their bodies were recovered by Belgian civilians.

⁵¹⁹ A reason for Brigade headquarters to give a cocktail party (War Diary 8th Armoured Brigade).

⁵²⁰ See note 304.

Mention should also be made of the contribution of the Belgian resistance in Leopoldsburg to the liberation of their home town.⁵²¹ The group attacked Germans (*I./FJR 2* pulling back in the general direction of Balen) in the area of the railway station and in the area of the airfield. The results of these actions were negligible (only one POW is reported), but must have made the German soldiers even more trigger happy than they already were. Maybe the unexpected attacks from armed civilians offered *Fallschirmjäger* sufficient excuse to execute ten more Belgian civilians near Balen that day. Miraculously two survived the massacre and crawled out from under the sand in which they had been buried. It was another of the many war crimes committed by German troops in this area. The front in Oostham meanwhile, the left flank of the original Beringen bridgehead, remained quiet throughout that day, understandably as both sides had enough on their plates elsewhere. As a belated footnote, almost literally, to the fighting that day a Messerschmitt Me 262 from *Kommando Schenk*, the first jet bomber unit in the world, tried to bomb the bridges at Beringen.⁵²²

The southern flank

Also on Monday 11 September the eastern flank of the advance was being extended by the 11th Armoured Division.⁵²³ At first light the tanks of the 23rd Hussars and the motorized infantry of the 8th Rifle Brigade pushed on until they reached Peer without any serious opposition. It was almost surreal for a while. They soon returned to normalcy. Inside Peer the main force of *FJR 20* (*Major* Grassmel), mostly the second battalion, resisted fiercely, but by two p.m. the town was in British hands. The advance then continued in the direction of the Maas-Scheldt Canal and once again a few tanks were lost to *Panzerfäuste* before they could liberate Grand-Brogel and Petit-Brogel. Following this B Squadron 23rd Hussars and F Company 8th Rifle Brigade were sent to Caulille to secure a crossing of the canal two kilometres outside the town. The group found the bridge destroyed but an 8.8 cm gun knocked out two tanks and one carrier.

The other combined infantry-armour group, the 2nd Fife and Forfarshire Yeomanry and the 1st Herefordshires, which had entered Wychmaal the previous day, completed the occupation. The escape route for the German troops in Hechtel in this direction was definitely blocked after the railway crossing in Wychmaal was secured. Patrols were also sent to Bree, another nine kilometres further east, where most of *FJR 20* was now concentrating.

The third combined group, the 3rd Royal Tanks and the 3rd Monmouths, had cleared up in Laak and concentrated in Helchteren. Then the 15th/19th Hussars and the 4th KSLI took over the crossroads six kilometres north-east of Helchteren from them. Starting at this crossroads the Hussars sent A Squadron to Bree, to try and, more importantly, seize the bridge over the Maas-Scheldt Canal (called Zuid-Willemsvaart there) just east of the town. If the attack was successful the Allies would have two

⁵²¹ Louche, *Heppen en Leopoldsburg*, 268.

⁵²² Richard J. Smith and Eddie J. Creek, *Me 262 Volume Two*, Crowborough 1998, 371. That this was not noted by the troops on the ground at the time is not surprising since the jets were not allowed to operate lower than 4,000 metres.

⁵²³ This section: War Diary 11th Armoured Division, *Courage, History of the 15/19*, 107-8, Delaforce, *The Black Bull*, 147-9.

bridgeheads. The Squadron reached the outskirts of Bree without incident. Then enemy infantry was engaged and a Troop was sent around the north-west of the town but then one of the Cromwell tanks was hit. Soon afterwards the bridge was blown and the Hussars were told that they could return to join the rest of the Regiment after covering their retreat by making as much noise as possible. Later that day the armoured cars of the Inns of Court Regiment investigated all other bridges from Bree northwards, as far as Neerpelt. All had been blown and were covered by enemy fire from the far bank. The next big operation would obviously have to start from one bridgehead only, the one at De Kolonie.

Robert's division also made contact with the 2nd US Armored Division (Major-General E.H. Brooks) which had crossed the Albert Canal in the meantime. Because the previous day *I./SS-Grenadier-Regiment Landstorm Nederland* had prevented the American tankers from crossing at Hasselt where both bridges had been blown, the 82nd Armored Reconnaissance Battalion had to swing into the British sector and use the bridge at Beringen before exploring east on the north side of the canal.⁵²⁴ All of which meant that finally, on 11 September, both Erdmann's *Fallschirmjäger* and the Dutch SS-troops now had their backs firmly against the Zuid-Willemsvaart. The only option left was to pull back behind the security of this waterway. The fight for the 'bloody triangle' was all over, except at Hechtel.

Curtain for Müller

Before sunrise on Tuesday 12 September all British troops inside Hechtel were withdrawn to avoid casualties from the artillery barrage.⁵²⁵ This went in at 08.15 hours and lasted for forty-five minutes. Just before the firing started someone had discovered that the start-line was on top of the position of the command post and headquarters of the Welsh Guards. This error was hastily rectified. The barrage, supported by mortars, machine-guns and six-pounders swept the village with a devastating storm of steel. Even then, the attack which went in at 08.30 hours and came in from the south was slow. Whenever the infantry was held up, the supporting tanks fired on the enemy trenches until resistance was finally broken. Even though their position was now hopeless, the *Fallschirmjäger* fought with 'great determination'.⁵²⁶ Every point had to be cleared before the advance could be resumed. Still, by noon the crossroads, which had evaded the Guards for six days, were finally reached and an hour later most of Hechtel was in British hands. The last German stronghold was the Rijkswacht (National Police) building in the north-eastern part of the village. *Oberleutnant* Otto Minn and his men put up as stiff fight as their comrades had done and it was not until two p.m. that the Germans finally surrendered.

An eerie calm settled on Hechtel. Amidst the ruins was the detritus of battle: dead bodies, knocked out tanks, vehicles and guns, abandoned uniforms, the smell of blood and death. Around the crossroads were the spoils of war. The Germans left behind one *Jagdpanther* (Sattler's), one *Sturmgeschütz*, which possibly belonged to

⁵²⁴ E.A. Trahan, *A History of the Second United States Armored Division 1940 to 1946*, Atlanta n.d., Chapter VI (the pages are not numbered).

⁵²⁵ This section: War Diary 1st Welsh Guards, Ellis, *Welsh Guards*, 223-4, Erskine, *The Scots Guards*, 376-7 and Bussels, *De Slag om Hechtel*, 104-9.

⁵²⁶ War Diary 1st Welsh Guards.

2./schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559, and an assortment of vehicles.⁵²⁷ The Welsh Guards also took 400 prisoners, *Hauptmann* Müller among them, equally divided between II./Fallschirm Panzer Ersatz- und Ausbildungsregiment Hermann Göring and I./FJR 20.

Some Germans tried to escape the encirclement. They crawled through the woods in a north-easterly direction towards Eksel and, beyond, the Maas-Scheldt Canal. Amazingly no fewer than 89 succeeded.⁵²⁸ The following day *Oberleutnant* Heider⁵²⁹ of the *Sturmgeschütz Kompanie* and *Leutnant* Zimmermann of the *Stabs Kompanie*, together with some of their own men and some from FJR 20, managed to reach their own lines by swimming the canal at Neerpelt.⁵³⁰ Ironically Zimmermann was captured three days later by Belgian resistance men, but Heider reported back to *Oberst* Fritz Fullriede, the *Kommandeur* of Fallschirm Panzer Ersatz- und Ausbildungsregiment Hermann Göring.⁵³¹ The men were completely demoralised after the intense fighting of the previous three days. Most of them were assembled north of Eindhoven, near Son. Little did they know that they would only have a few days to recover before they once more found themselves in the thick of it at the start of Market Garden.

The devastation in Hechtel was enormous. A total of 124 houses had been destroyed, 13 of them deliberately set on fire by German troops. The final death toll for Hechtel is shocking. In all between 100 and 150 Germans lost their lives, although the exact number will never be known. On the Allied side, 62 soldiers were killed. But worst of all, thirty-five Belgian civilians had lost their lives, not just casualties of the battle, but victims of atrocities committed against them. In Hechtel *Fallschirmjäger* summarily executed no fewer than eleven civilians.⁵³² It was a blot on their reputation.

Withdrawal

After the counterattacks on the Guards' bridgehead failed (see 3.4), the German units south of the Maas-Scheldt Canal were increasingly in danger of becoming trapped. Therefore Model in the early evening of Tuesday 12 September told Reinhard to evacuate the whole area and pull his troops back behind the canal.⁵³³ Most of the evacuation was completed during the night. In the meantime the positions of the 8th Armoured Brigade at Leopoldsburg and Oostham had been taken

⁵²⁷ According to the War Diary Guards Armoured Division, 12.09.44, Appendix BB also a Panzer III, a Panzer IV, an Sd Kfz 251/9 and two 7.62 cm Sfl's.

⁵²⁸ Bussels, *De Slag om Hechtel*, 110.

⁵²⁹ Bussels and Wuyts both give Kaden, probably because of a misreading of the somewhat blurred typing, but closer study reveals that Fullriede (2) wrote Heider.

⁵³⁰ Diary of a survivor quoted in Ellis, *Welsh Guards*, 224.

⁵³¹ Fullriede is an interesting character who was basically a deserter as he had served in the British army in Africa in the early thirties before returning to Germany in 1936. He fought bravely and distinguished himself at the Kasserine pass in January 1943 and was awarded the Ritterkreuz. He then fought in Sicily and Italy before being asked to assume command of the Hermann Göring troops in the Netherlands on 17 August 1944. In 1945 he was the last commander of Kolberg, the famous fortress on the Baltic (De Keizer, *Putten, De razzia en de herinnering*, Amsterdam 1999, 112-125).

⁵³² For a full discussion of who was responsible we refer the reader to Wuyts, *Herfststorm over Hechtel*.

⁵³³ KTB 88 AK 12.09.44, 18.30 en 19.38

over by units of the 50th (Northumbrian) Division. In the afternoon of 13 September the left flank of what used to be the hotly contested Beringen bridgehead was finally cleared by the 1st Dorsetshires and the 2nd Devonshires. Even at this late stage some German troops still committed atrocities. Five Belgians who were curious and ventured out of their houses in Oostham and Olmen were put against a wall and shot in cold blood, possibly by men from *FJR 6*.⁵³⁴ By the end of that day the Germans had finally cleared the area south of the Maas-Scheldt Canal also on the eastern end, where patrols from the Inns of Court found Bree free of enemy and the 11th Armoured Division finally had some time to 'indulge in maintenance, rest and even a little entertainment'.⁵³⁵

Conclusion

While the fight along the Albert Canal was raging, *Kampfgruppe Chill* had been assigned regular infantry units and the first report sent to *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps* on 9 September showed an impressive array of troops.⁵³⁶ Although *Kampfgruppe Buchholz* was now part of *719. ID*, Chill could still boast 4,240 men exclusive of *FJR 6*, whose three battalions had a total of 1,200 men plus.⁵³⁷ All in all Chill commanded about 5,500 infantry. More importantly he could call on five artillery batteries (remnants of *AR 185, 17. and 18./SS-Artillerie Ersatz und Ausbildungs Regiment, and 3. and 4./AR 1719*) and some armour (*schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559*).⁵³⁸ Nevertheless, one battalion (*FEB 347*) was in a back-up position behind the Maas-Scheldt Canal and only half of Chill's troops, mainly the *Fallschirm* units, had been involved in the fighting around Beringen and Leopoldsburg. It was these battalions that were given the highest destination. German units received numbers on a scale of I to IV, I (für jede Angriffsaufgabe geeignet) being the highest and IV (bedingt zur Abwehr geeignet) the lowest.⁵³⁹ On 10 September Chill reported that he had four strong battalions (*FJR 6 plus Marschbataillon 352. ID*), three medium (*I./FJR 2, II./Fallschirm Panzer Ersatz- und Ausbildungsregiment Hermann Göring and FEB 347*), two weak (*II. and III./GR 723*) and one that was at the end of its tether (abgekämpft).⁵⁴⁰ None of the troops got the highest rating, the *Fallschirmjäger* were given a II (bedingt zum Angriff geeignet), all the others were rated a IV, meaning that out of nine battalions the majority were fit only for a limited defence. Moreover, *Kampfgruppe Chill* had an impossibly large sector to defend. From Grobbendonk to Hasselt was no less than sixty kilometres which was a staggering stretch for what amounted to one weak division even behind the relative security of a waterway. Still, together with the armour of *559* and the artillery Chill had been able to deflect the British attack.

The first battles that *Kampfgruppe Chill* was engaged in showed how skilful manoeuvring enabled a numerically inferior unit could tie down opposing forces.

⁵³⁴ Rijmen, 67.

⁵³⁵ War Diary 11th Armoured Division.

⁵³⁶ KTB 88 AK, B 265, 09.09.44.

⁵³⁷ This can be concluded from B 269 (10.09.44) where they are described as 'stark' i.e., 400 men or stronger.

⁵³⁸ KTB 88 AK, B 269, 10.09.44 and B 276, 14.09.44.

⁵³⁹ KTB 88 AK, B 262, 08.09.44.

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid.

Although the attack by *3.schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559* and *FEB 347* failed in its objective, once again showing that in the attack role *Sturmgeschütze* were no substitute for tanks, the next few days, as part of the defence of Beringen, Oostham, the SPs were most successful. Unable to annihilate the British bridgehead, the *Kampfgruppe* did manage to block the advance towards Leopoldsburg, forcing the Guards to take the only other route north which ran via Hechtel where they ran into the *Fallschirmjäger* of *FJR 20*. So how did this effect the Allied and German plans?

Montgomery's operational plans as laid down in directive M 523 were frustrated completely. In their plans Montgomery and Dempsey had envisaged XXX Corps as starting their advance towards the Ruhr, anywhere between Arnhem and Wesel, on 7 September. Because of the fierce German defence, that day the leading Guards units were still stuck at Beringen and Hechtel instead. Things then took a turn for the worse for the British and the advance crawled almost to a standstill. A request from the War Office to Montgomery on the 9th asking him how soon he could 'rope off the coastal area contained by ANTWERP – UTRECHT – ROTTERDAM [capitals in original]' in connection with the danger of the V-1 and V-2's must have rankled in his mind even though he answered, somewhat laconically, that he expected to be able to do this 'in about a fortnight's time.'⁵⁴¹ Eisenhower, reporting on the same date, was more cautious and reported that German resistance was 'stiffening somewhat' now that Allied troops were closing in on the German border.⁵⁴² Nevertheless he felt that it was 'doubtful' that the Germans would be able to block the Allied advance effectively. It was not until 11 September, when the Irish Guards captured the Neerpelt bridge that the first German line of defence had been cracked. It was then that Montgomery began to feel less sanguine about the pace of the operations when he informed Lieutenant-General A.E. Nye, the Vice-Chief of the Imperial General Staff, that he was 'meeting with more opposition than he had expected.'⁵⁴³ Chill was largely responsible for the German opposition the British troops now had to face. But there was no time for him to rest on his laurels. While successfully halting the Allied advance in the area of Leopoldsburg and Beringen, he also had another crossing to contend with on his right flank, south of Geel. There the other half of Chill's battle group, *Kampfgruppe Dreyer*, was to face its first real test in battle.

3.2. Geel (7 – 13 September 1944)

"We now faced the battle for the Albert Canal, which for our part was fought with great bitterness in the area of Gheel."⁵⁴⁴

'Gheel... Some names seemed to embody the fate they held for us. Gheel resounded across our path like the blare of a gong, and brought to an end our great swan song. (...) We had to fight a war again, and fought a battle that stood among the fiercest of our campaign.'⁵⁴⁵

⁵⁴¹ Message VCIGS and answer Montgomery, 09.09.44, TNA WO106/4338, 29A.

⁵⁴² SCAF 78, 09.09.44, TNA WO106/4338, 31B.

⁵⁴³ Letter VCIGS to CIGS, 11.09.44, TNA WO106/4338, 33 A.

⁵⁴⁴ Ewart W. Clay M.B.E., *The Path of the 50th, The story of the 50th (Northumbrian) Division in the Second World War 1939-1945*, Aldershot 1950, 285.

Another of those battles lost in the mists of military history, like the one at Beringen which took place almost simultaneously, is the battle for Geel. Nevertheless both deserve closer study as they mark the end of the Allied summer campaign or, to put it the other way round, the beginning of the slugging match that characterized the fighting on the Western Front during the autumn of 1944. While the battles were still raging north of Beringen and at Hechtel, British Second Army had established two more bridgeheads across the Albert Canal, south of the town of Geel. These were to be the next focal points of some extremely intense fighting in which *schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559* was involved and where it inflicted, but also incurred, very heavy losses in the second big clash of armour against armour. This time only the heavy *Jagdpanther* of *1. Kompanie* were involved. The origins of the struggle for Geel can be traced back to Thursday 7 September when the Irish Guards took Beringen and the Welsh Guards reached Helchteren.

The first bridgehead

That day the 50th (Northumbrian) Division was informed by Second Army that it would be required to cross the Albert Canal either at Beringen or south of Geel.⁵⁴⁶ The three brigades of the division, which was commanded by Major-General D.A.H. Graham, were still widely dispersed. The 69th Brigade was in Aalst (between Brussels and Gent), the 151st Brigade was partying in Brussels and the 231st Brigade had just taken over from the 11th Armoured Division in Antwerp. Nevertheless, Lieutenant-General Dempsey (Second Army) made it clear that owing to the continued German resistance north of Antwerp Graham's division would have to cross the Albert Canal south of Geel as soon as possible. Since the 69th Brigade was on the point of moving to Malines, it received the order first. At noon Brigadier F.Y.C. Knox was told by Major-General Graham to strike swiftly. He was told to head for the canal at Het Punt, where the main road to Geel crossed the canal and to investigate the bridge sites further east at Steelen to find the most suitable place. No time was wasted and within an hour long columns of vehicles were leaving Aalst.

Although speed was of the essence, it was still almost an eighty kilometres' drive to the canal and the advancing reconnaissance parties from the 6th Green Howards did not arrive there until the end of the afternoon. They reported that all bridges had been blown and that they had come under rifle fire from the opposite bank. Little was known of the enemy forces. At eight p.m. Brigadier Knox visited the Green Howards' headquarters at Zammel and told the commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel G.F. Hutchinson, to establish a bridgehead near Het Punt that night to cover the construction of a bridge by the side of the original road bridge which had been blown. As soon as possible the 7th Green Howards would follow. Hutchinson was none too pleased. He had discovered that the canal had a steep bank that would make the launching of assault boats difficult. To make matters worse there were just two assault and twelve (rubber) reconnaissance boats. Moreover, only Hutchinson and the four company commanders had had time to take a look at the crossing site. Just as at Antwerp and Beringen, one of Belgium's more formidable water obstacles had to be

⁵⁴⁵ Robert Woolcombe, *Lion Rampant*, London 1955, 128.

⁵⁴⁶ This section, unless otherwise specified, War Diaries 50th Northumbrian Division, 69 Brigade, 151 Brigade, 231 Brigade and Clay, *The Path of the 50th*, 285-295.

forced without proper reconnaissance. Again, a swift operation was to be carried out with slender resources.

Heavy rain fell throughout the evening, but it stopped just before the crossing was to take place. Bright moonlight shone down on A and B Company as they carried the two assault boats over the top and pushed them into the water opposite Meulenberg. The Germans did not notice the action and the first troops reached the other side without a shot being fired. It was 01.30 hours on Friday 8 September. A cable was laid to pull the rubber recce boats and guide the assault ones. It was slow going but after just over three hours all four companies were across. There was still no response from the enemy. The responsibility for this stretch of the Albert Canal was *Kampfgruppe Dreyer's*, named after *Oberstleutnant* Georg Dreyer, *Kommandeur* of *Grenadier Regiment 1053*. This was one of the three regiments of Chill's original division and the only one more or less intact. More or less, since it was reduced to the size of a battalion.⁵⁴⁷ Forty-one year old Dreyer was almost the stereotypical Germanic warrior with his pointed face, blonde hair and blue eyes.⁵⁴⁸ He looked young for his age, was energetic and he was one of the senior officers who had helped Chill set up the blocking position behind the Albert Canal four days earlier.⁵⁴⁹ That he was to play a key role in the autumn campaign was no accident since in his last assessment he was described as 'zuverlässige, gereifte Persönlichkeit, passionierter Soldat, energisch. Besitzt Tatkraft und Schwung, Führernatur.'⁵⁵⁰ Although he was noted to be 'Etwas empfindlich, teilweise übertriebener Ehrgeiz', one of his strong points was that he possessed 'Gutes taktisches Verständnis'.⁵⁵¹ In other words, even though he apparently suffered from a 'permanent nervous tremble',⁵⁵² in Dreyer his men had a seasoned veteran who could 'read the battle'. It was a quality that he had already shown as a regimental commander during the fighting in France in August for which he would eventually receive the *Ritterkreuz* on 5th November. It was also a quality that would stand him in good stead during the battles to come. Dreyer set up his headquarters in Geel. Apart from his own divisional troops *Kampfgruppe Dreyer* at first only consisted of some odds and ends from the *85. Infanterie-Division* plus *III./GR 723*.⁵⁵³ The very day on which the Green Howards crossed the Canal he received reinforcements in the form of *Flieger Regiment 51* under *Oberst* Stein.⁵⁵⁴ It was a welcome addition even though its three battalions totalled no more than 790 men. Another *Flieger Regiment, 53 (Oberst von Lindenau)*, numbering no less than 1,300 men, was just assembling around Turnhout.⁵⁵⁵ These regiments were set up to provide *Luftwaffe* personnel with basic

⁵⁴⁷ Schuster, Appendix 10.

⁵⁴⁸ 1st Cdn Army, IR PoW 85 ID, 08.11.44.

⁵⁴⁹ Schuster, 41.

⁵⁵⁰ Personalakten Dreyer, 13.03.44, NARA RG 242.

⁵⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵⁵² 1st Cdn Army, IR PoW 85 ID, 08.11.44.

⁵⁵³ KTB 88 AK, 07.09.44, map.

⁵⁵⁴ Originally: *Flieger-Ausbildungs-Regiment 51* and *53*. In June 1944 they were renamed *Luftgau-Feld-Regiment Belgien-Nordfrankreich (mot) 51* and *53* respectively, each with two battalions. After the fighting along the Albert Canal, like *Fl.R. 22* (see note 174), the regiments were disbanded and absorbed by the *Fallschirmtruppe*. When interrogated, *Stabsfeldwebel* Neye told the British that *Fl.R. 51* consisted of three battalions. His company (10) came under *III./FR 51* commanded by *Hauptmann* Hecht (WO 208/3606, 29.09.44).

⁵⁵⁵ Figures for the two regiments: KTB 88 AK, 09.09.44, B 265.

infantry training (some of the men had barely finished this when they arrived at the front). Now they found themselves in the thick of the fighting. All these units would play a crucial role in the battle for Geel. At the height of the battle Dreyer would have no fewer than 3,500 men under his command. Still, that night the German units along the Albert Canal were literally caught napping. However, as dawn broke this would all rapidly change.

It became clear that the Green Howards' leading company, D, had advanced undetected to its objective at the top of Het Punt through several enemy positions. As it grew light the Germans realised what had happened and soon machine-gun and mortar fire began to rain down on the British troops and the 6th Green Howards were pinned down. To make things worse, Lieutenant-Colonel Hutchinson was wounded and had to be evacuated. Nevertheless, the 7th Green Howards (Lieutenant-Colonel W.R. Cox) managed to cross successfully and by 09.30 hours it had joined its sister battalion. A raft was constructed, which took time, but just after midday six-pounder anti-tank guns and carriers were ferried across. No sooner had they arrived, at two p.m., than the Germans made the first counterattack. As soon as he had learned of the new bridgehead (consistently referred to in the German reports as Meulenberg), *Generaloberst* Student had ordered Chill to annihilate it by all possible means.⁵⁵⁶ Later, at eleven a.m. *General* Reinhard himself had come to inspect the front.⁵⁵⁷ He ordered the *Kommandeur* of *I./Flieger Regiment 51*, *Hauptmann* Hinrichsen, to attack and restore the situation. Obviously Reinhard was not happy with the way Hinrichsen organised things because within the hour he ordered *Major* Horst Pohl, the *Kommandeur* of *Füsilier-Bataillon 85*, to take over, as Reinhard felt that the *Luftwaffe* personnel organised themselves in an extremely 'clumsy' way.⁵⁵⁸ Pohl and his adjutant were the only two soldiers to escape the trap at Falaise while the rest of the battalion was taken prisoner.⁵⁵⁹ He was ideally suited to this task. The thirty-year old officer was described by Chill as a 'Frische, schwungvoller Offizier, taktvoll, offen und ungezwungen. Tüchtiger Batls.-Kdr. der es versteht seine Leute zu begeistern und mitzureissen. (...) Denkt schnell und wendig, entschlossfreudig.'⁵⁶⁰ No wonder that over the next weeks Pohl would be called upon to command ever more troops.

The first German counterattack went in at around two p.m. It overran some platoons of the 6th Green Howards and forced the 7th Green Howards to withdraw from the road junction at Het Punt but that was as far as it went. Three further counterattacks followed, but they were all repulsed. The bridgehead held firm and by five p.m. things finally calmed down, at least along the frontline. Back at the headquarters of *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps*, *General* Reinhard and his staff were not convinced that the motley of troops south of Geel would be able to withstand the Allied attack for long. They were extremely worried that the canal line would be broken wide open and the daily report remarked that 'Eigene Truppe ist besonders im Abschnitt der 85.I.D. stark durcheinandergewürfelt, viele Kampfunlustige Splittereinheiten älterer Jahrgänge aller Wehrmachtteile, die junge Mannschaft von Luftwaffeneinheiten sind

⁵⁵⁶ KTB 88 AK, 08.09.44, 09.02 hours.

⁵⁵⁷ KTB 88 AK, 08.09.44, 11.00 hours.

⁵⁵⁸ KTB 88 AK, 08.09.44, 11.55 hours. The word used is 'ungewandt'.

⁵⁵⁹ PoW interview, WO 208/3603.

⁵⁶⁰ Personalakten Pohl, Beurteilung 3.11.44, NARA RG 4242

grösstenteils Rekruten, im Gefecht noch ungewandt. Es fehlen tatkräftige Führer, besonders Unterführer bei der Truppe.⁵⁶¹ Another problem was that 'Häufig tritt wegen zu geringen Transportraumes Munitionsmangel ein. Es fehlen Panzerabwehrwaffen und vor allen Dingen Panzernahbekämpfungsmittel, dadurch verliert die Truppe das Selbstvertrauen.'⁵⁶² In spite of these, very real, problems, Reinhard need not have worried, because the battle for Geel would develop in a surprising way. Still, as mentioned in the previous chapter, Chill now had to contend with two breakthroughs, the one at Beringen and the other south of Geel. He would have to make maximum use of the troops at his disposal as there were no reinforcements in the foreseeable future.

The second bridgehead

It was clear to the 50th Division that more troops were needed to capture Geel. During the afternoon of 8 September General Graham therefore ordered the 151st Brigade to leave Brussels and as soon as possible establish a bridgehead at Steelen to build a Class 9 folding boat bridge there. The CO, Brigadier D.S. Gordon, had kept in close touch with Brigadier Knox of the 69th Brigade and he soon realised that it would take at least one battalion to do the job. The task was assigned to the 8th Durham Light Infantry (DLI) under Lieutenant-Colonel H.R.D. Oldham, supported by two platoons from the 2nd Cheshires, the Machine Gun battalion of the division. The attack was launched late in the afternoon and was met with immediate enemy reactions. Spandau machine-gun fire raked the water and three boats were sunk. Mortar bombs also continued to rain down on the infantry but by eight p.m. the whole battalion was established on the north bank and construction of a bridge began right away. There was a counterattack which was beaten off and around eleven p.m. the lead company was just south of the Doornboom crossroads. There they were again counterattacked early the following morning around four a.m. and the situation was only restored after some fierce fighting. Still the folding bridge was finished as it grew light and at seven a.m. the first armoured cars of C Squadron 61st Reconnaissance Regiment could cross the canal. They ran into heavy opposition at the Doornboom crossroads.

At Het Punt the third battalion of the 69th Brigade, the 5th East Yorkshires under Lieutenant-Colonel T.L. Charles, had also crossed the Albert Canal that night.⁵⁶³ In an attempt to get around the very determined opposition by *Flieger Regiment 51* the East Yorks were ordered to attack further west, on the left flank of the bridgehead. Once again it was a rainy and stormy night. This helped the first two companies (D and B) cross without being observed by the Germans. However, when the two other companies began to cross, the enemy woke up to the fact that they now had troops behind them and the East Yorks had to land under a hail of small-arms fire. Still, the attack on the houses at Het Punt went ahead as planned. Supported by the 7th Green Howards the East Yorks stormed the houses where, incredible but true, they found some of the enemy still fast asleep. Fifty prisoners were taken and eight of the Green Howards were liberated. By five a.m. on 9 September the bridgehead around

⁵⁶¹ KTB 88 AK, 08.09.44, Tagesmeldung.

⁵⁶² Ibid.

⁵⁶³ Clay, *The Path of the 50th*, 288, puts the crossing on the night of the 9th, but the war diaries of the division and 69th Brigade clearly state that it took place on the 8th.

Het Punt was secure. Later that morning contact was made with the 151st Brigade on the right. The two small bridgeheads had now become one big one. At Steelen the 6th DLI (Lieutenant-Colonel A.E. Green) had joined the 8th DLI and they were able to push the Germans back as far as Wilders (then: Willaart) three kilometres south of Geel. Meanwhile the 9th DLI (Lieutenant-Colonel H.J. Mogg) stayed south of the canal ready for the main push the following day. More importantly, work on a class 40 bridge at Het Punt was finished at ten that evening. Finally tanks could join the infantry in the push north of the canal. It was clear from one look at the map where that next push was heading: Geel.

Back at *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps*, Reinhard while convinced that he could contain the Beringen bridgehead, continued to be extremely worried about the situation near Geel because the troops fighting there 'sind einem ersten Feindangriff nicht gewachsen, wenn nicht beschleunigt eine gute Truppe mindestens zwei Infanterie-Regimenter mit Artillerie und Pak in den Abschnitt geführt werden.⁵⁶⁴ Nevertheless, all the major German counterattacks that day still focussed on Beringen (see previous chapter). To remedy the situation slightly Dreyer was now permitted to employ *Flieger Regiment 53* as well as various airfield defence units from France and Belgium, all in all some 2,200 additional *Luftwaffe* personnel that could be used as infantry.⁵⁶⁵ They would have to serve as a stop-gap measure. A more important reinforcement for Dreyer was in the form of artillery. He received no fewer than three batteries, *3. and 4./AR 1719* and *9./AR 185*, which were ordered to take up positions to cover the bridgeheads.⁵⁶⁶ At least his *Kampfgruppe* now had support for the untrained and unreliable *Luftwaffe* troops. Most of these young recruits had only been called up during the last few months and had never seen combat before.⁵⁶⁷ On the plus side they had some light *Flak* with them. The lack of serious anti-tank weapons, apart from a few 8.8 cm *Flak* guns operated in the ground role by inexperienced crews, continued to worry Dreyer.

Into Geel

Dawn patrols sent out on 10 September by all three battalions of the Durham Light Infantry met with mixed responses from their opponents.⁵⁶⁸ The 6th DLI put out its feelers towards Geel and the first patrols actually entered the outskirts as early as five a.m. German troops countered with machine-gun fire along fixed lines. The 8th DLI tried to enlarge the bridgehead towards the east, but came under withering fire from 2 cm *Flak* guns which definitely ruled out any expansion in this direction. The 9th DLI, meanwhile, crossed the canal and also explored east, just south of the 8th battalion, to arrive at the same disappointing conclusion. It was clear to Brigadier Gordon that, although his men were facing low grade units, the defenders of Geel would not be taken by surprise. It was to be a set piece battle after all. A new plan was drawn up. The 6th DLI was to push on into Geel while the 9th DLI would protect its right flank by capturing the hamlets of first Winkelom and then Laar. Each of the

⁵⁶⁴ KTB 88 AK, 09.09.44, Tagesmeldung.

⁵⁶⁵ KTB 88 AK, 09.09.44, B 265. The five airfield defence units were from Montdidier, Connelles, Amy, Rosieres and St. Denis.

⁵⁶⁶ KTB 88 AK, 09.09.44, A 185. The guns were: ex-Russian 7.62 cm for 3/AR 1719, ex-Dutch 14.91 cm for 4/AR 1719 and German 10.5 cm for 9/185.

⁵⁶⁷ War Diary 50th (N) Division Intelligence summaries 64-66.

⁵⁶⁸ This section war diaries 50 Division, 69th, 151st Brigade and Nottinghamshire Yeomanry.

two battalions would be assisted by a squadron of Shermans from the Nottinghamshire Yeomanry (the Sherwood Rangers). The 8th DLI meanwhile would plug the gap opening up with the 69th Brigade by advancing northwest as far as the main road into Geel. Anti-tank support was to be provided by the 107th Battery 102nd Anti-Tank Regiment. Zero time was two p.m.

Before the troops could assemble the 6th and 8th DLI had to beat off another counterattack by *Kampfgruppe Dreyer*. For a moment it was feared that this would interfere with the Brigadier's plan for the attack, but after defensive fire (DF) had been called down the enemy attack soon broke up in confusion and preparations went ahead as scheduled. The artillery switched back to their original fire plan which was duly launched at two p.m. Back in Geel, it being a Sunday, people had attended mass as usual. But as soon as the artillery barrage began the civilians fled back home to await events. A few houses went up in flames and a number of Belgians lost their lives.⁵⁶⁹ D Company 6th DLI, supported by C Squadron the Sherwood Rangers, pressing on behind the barrage, fairly quickly reached the centre of Geel. In fact, C Squadron, rather to their own relief, on the way to Geel managed to knock out an 8.8 cm *Flak* gun which had not put up much of a fight. Moving into the outskirts of the town the Sherman tanks put a shell into every suspect house they passed in order to reduce the danger from Spandau fire for the infantry following closely behind. This certainly helped progress and soon the leading troop of Shermans under Lieutenant Stuart Hills entered the central market square near St. Amand's church. At that very moment a *VW Schwimmwagen* with three German officers drove up at high speed. Corporal Burnett spotted the amphibious car and, even though some Belgian civilians were riding his tank, shot it up. The three Germans ran for their lives but were arrested by Belgian resistance fighters soon after.

The German defenders of Geel slowly pulled back and eventually dug in behind the railway crossing, a few hundred yards further north. Nevertheless, the persistent and accurate sniping on the way into town caused many casualties among the British troops and things got so bad that C and D Companies had to be amalgamated as they were down to three officers and fifty men.⁵⁷⁰ A Company shortly thereafter reached the area around St.-Dimpna's church a few hundred metres to the east. B Company soon joined the others and at the end of the afternoon the whole of C Squadron the Sherwood Rangers was also in Geel. Almost 200 prisoners were taken and many German dead littered the fields south of Geel. Civilians poured out of their houses and cheered the British soldiers. They were offered flowers, fruit and drinks. Belgian flags and bunting were everywhere. The CO of C Squadron, Major Jack Holman, set up his headquarters in the market square confident that this position was consolidated. It seemed that the battle for Geel was over whereas in fact it had only just begun. When Lieutenant-Colonel A.E. Green, the CO of the 6th DLI, went forward to see the situation for himself he was hit by a piece of shrapnel from a shell burst nearby. He was evacuated, leaving Major G.L. Wood in command of a battalion, now thin on the ground in both officers and men.⁵⁷¹ Moreover, the two

⁵⁶⁹ It is not known exactly how many civilians lost their lives that day, but at the end of the fighting in and around Geel, on 12th September, 140 Belgians were dead and almost 800 were wounded, severe losses, indeed.

⁵⁷⁰ War Diary 74th Field Regiment, Appendix 1.

⁵⁷¹ War Diary 6th DLI, Appendix 1.

flanking battalions were unable to fulfil their tasks. At the end of the afternoon the 9th DLI and B Squadron the Sherwood Rangers had fought their way into Winkelom, but they were unable to reach Laar because of intense German fire. Another, much bigger, problem was that the 8th DLI was somewhat slow in moving up to protect the south flank of the 6th DLI in Geel, leaving a huge gap which could be infiltrated at any time. The consequences would soon make themselves felt.

Counterattack by the Jagdpanther

While Brigadier Gordon was drawing up his plans on Sunday 10 September, his opponents had not been idle. At ten a.m. *General* Reinhard visited Dreyer at his headquarters in Geel.⁵⁷² He was informed by the *Oberstleutnant* that the enemy had two battalions inside the bridgehead as well as some armoured cars. Obviously Dreyer was not aware of the fact that he was actually facing three times that number. Also, Dreyer told Reinhard that only three British batteries had ranged in on the troops that sealed off the bridgehead. Reassured by these numbers Reinhard told Dreyer that he was now responsible for the annihilation of the bridgehead using all units around it. He should attack that evening supported by artillery, if necessary without any *Sturmgeschütze*. Reinhard then left Dreyer to prepare a plan of attack and went to visit Chill in Moll to see how the Beringen-Hechtel situation was developing.

As told in the previous chapter, shortly thereafter he ordered *1./schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559* to assemble in the woods near Tenderloo ready to strike at short notice in whatever direction the main danger would come from.⁵⁷³ But the problem of Geel obviously kept nagging Reinhard and at one p.m. he decided to order the *Jagdpanther Kompanie* to Geel to help restore the situation. It was a fortuitous decision. Rather typical for an armoured unit at this period, the *Jagdpanther Kompanie*, which was now down to fourteen vehicles, since three had been lost in the fighting for the Beringen bridgehead, could only muster half of their strength.⁵⁷⁴ This meant that seven or eight vehicles were in repair even though they had not been involved in any fighting yet. The *Jagdpanther* were too late to prevent the capture of the town, but they might just be in time to stop the British from advancing further.

The first to notice the arrival of the lethal tank hunters at the end of the afternoon were the Shermans from B Squadron the Sherwood Rangers who had found their attack from Winkelom to Laar blocked by what they refer to as tanks, but were in fact *Jagdpanther* firing on them from positions near St.-Dimpna's church. Around the same time, probably five p.m., the *Jagdpanther* also inflicted the first casualties on the Sherwood Rangers. They knocked out three Shermans from C Squadron who were supporting the 6th DLI at the cemetery near St.Dimpna's, killing the Troop commander, Lieutenant Ted Cooke. Further south, at Winkelom, a *Jagdpanther* also put in an appearance. Captain Highfield, the FOO with B Company 9th DLI, then called 'Mike Target, Mike Target, Mike Target'. This meant that all twenty-four guns

⁵⁷² KTB 88 AK, 10.09.44, 10.00 hours.

⁵⁷³ KTB 88 AK, 10.09.44, 12.30 hours.

⁵⁷⁴ KTB 88 AK, 10.09.44, A 207 gives seven, B 268 gives six, 50th (N) Division, Intel Sum 66 (based on interrogation of a PoW of 53, Fl.Rgt.) mentions seven, while Second Army Intel Sum 1202 again gives six.

of one Field Regiment (in this case the 74th) opened fire on the same target. The *Jagdpanther* were not hit, but as shells exploded all around them the vehicles moved off to safety between the houses.⁵⁷⁵ It was becoming clear to the British troops in Geel itself that something very serious was brewing. Over their radios they could hear the other squadrons and battalions mention the presence of German 'tanks' and just before dark it was clear that they would not have to wait long. At eight p.m. *Kampfgruppe Dreyer*, now supported by six or seven *Jagdpanther* launched the counterattack aimed at eliminating the bridgehead. It differed markedly from the plan drawn up by Dreyer that afternoon.⁵⁷⁶ Only the broad outline of how the counterattack developed is clear from documents. The various sources are conflicting concerning the details. For example, the number of enemy SPs (often called 'tanks') knocked out according to the British war diaries far exceeds the number of *Jagdpanther* operating in the area. Moreover, the number of *Jagdpanther* that were knocked out is a given, since there exists a very reliable source, a list drawn up after the war by the town of Geel giving the locations of all the wrecks, Allied and German, which were to be sold for scrap.⁵⁷⁷ What follows is the most logical sequence of events as can be deduced from the available evidence.⁵⁷⁸

It appears that most of the time the *Jagdpanther* did operate in pairs, as laid down in their tactical guidelines.⁵⁷⁹ There are some strong indications that one stayed behind near St.-Dimpna's, at least for a while, to cover the north-eastern exit of the bridgehead, leaving three pairs to assist in the attack.⁵⁸⁰ Once again, as with Kopka's attack on Beringen, the SPs of 559 were used as tanks, a role which they were never intended to perform, and once again there would be a heavy price to pay. Around noon, during a conference with *Oberst Von Lindenau*, *Kommandeur* of *Flieger Regiment 53*, Dreyer envisaged a three-pronged attack.⁵⁸¹ While *I./Flieger Regiment 53* (*Major Jürgens*) covered the west flank of the bridgehead *II./Flieger Regiment 53* (*Major Ernst Heino Leopold Eberhard Senfft von Pilsach*) would undertake the main effort along the road from Geel to Doornboom and *I./Flieger Regiment 51* would come in from the east.⁵⁸² However, events had overtaken these plans. The loss of Geel to British armour meant that the main road south was now blocked and Dreyer had to abandon his original plan and come up with a new one. This was for *II./Flieger Regiment 53* to form up southeast of Poel⁵⁸³ and attack in the direction of the road from there. The troops duly formed up and waited for the *Jagdpanther* to arrive. The *Jagdpanther* first drove north, crossed the railway line and then via Holven and Elsum tried to circle the bridgehead from the west. The *Flieger* companies were now close to their starting point, but when the *Jagdpanther* arrived

⁵⁷⁵ War Diary 74th Field Regiment, Appendix 1.

⁵⁷⁶ Details of the plan were given by Leutnant Deutschmann, adjutant II/Fl.Rgt. 53, during an interrogation (War Diary 50th (N) Division, Intelligence Summary 66).

⁵⁷⁷ Dienst Domeinen Geel, 1946.

⁵⁷⁸ Also some oral testimony of civilian eyewitnesses, thanks to Carl Rijmen and Steven Gorts.

⁵⁷⁹ Merkblatt 76a/20, quoted in full in Jentz and Doyle, *Jagdpanther*, 80-81.

⁵⁸⁰ War Diary 74th Field Regiment, Appendix 1, and *Jaarboek 39 – 2004 van de Vrijheid en het Land van Geel*, Geel 2004, 70.

⁵⁸¹ Von Lindenau is named as Kommandeur of Fl Rgt 53 in 1st Cdn Army IR PoW 53 German Air Force Regiment, 10.10.44, , rather than Major Mizek who is named in IS 66 of the 50th (N) Div.

⁵⁸² This section, War Diary 50th (N) Division, Intelligence Summary 66, Appendix C and situation map KTB 88 AK, A 233, 11.09.44.

⁵⁸³ Rhymes with 'boil'.

at 5.30 p.m. they brought news that British infantry had joined the tanks in Geel. It was time to come up with version three of the plan. The whole battalion had to do an about turn and attack back in the direction of Geel. This manoeuvre was attempted, but the situation became so chaotic that by last light just two *Jagdpanther* and some of the young and inexperienced *Luftwaffe* men followed orders and attacked the 6th DLI in Geel while at least two other vehicles turned south towards the 8th DLI and Doornboom.⁵⁸⁴ Meanwhile the other battalions had attacked as agreed. Ordering these inexperienced troops to carry out such a complicated manoeuvre was of course a recipe for disaster. It is amazing that they achieved as much as they did.

Indeed, for a large group of *Luftwaffe* men and two *Jagdpanther* to penetrate the positions of the 8th DLI is nothing short of a miracle, although they were helped by the fact that the 8th DLI did not begin its advance until eight p.m. The Germans overran A Company and headed for the all-important crossroads near the canal. Attempts by a six-pounder of the 107th Anti-Tank Battery to stop a *Jagdpanther* failed. Sergeant Teussel's gun got off two rounds which temporarily halted the massive SP, but then the gun jammed.⁵⁸⁵ The *Jagdpanther* trundled on and as one British chronicler put it at the time, "the picture became very confused and no one seems to have had a clear idea as to what happened".⁵⁸⁶ When Captain P.G. Hampson of the 8th DLI went forward along the main road from Doornboom to Geel to pick up some of the wounded he came upon a group of about sixty men sitting by the side of the road. He could only dimly see them in the gathering darkness and he asked them if they were D Company. He was answered by three hand grenades which flew towards his carrier. The carrier survived, turned around and sped back to Doornboom to warn Brigade headquarters.⁵⁸⁷ A second officer proceeding up the same road and unaware of what had just happened saw another carrier in front of him blown up. He told his own driver to wait while he set off to investigate on foot. He then heard what he thought was a tank coming down the road from Geel. He decided to stop it for some information. Seated on top were twelve soldiers. He suddenly realized that he was about to address a *Jagdpanther* instead of a Sherman. Fortunately for him it rumbled on, oblivious of his presence. Starting from the area north of St.-Dimpna's the two *Jagdpanther* attacked southwest into the gap between the 9th and 8th DLI, catching A Company of 9th DLI in the open and killing several soldiers, among them Captain W. Rideleagh, then the only officer left in the company. Sergeant G.H. Self took over command and took the majority of the men back to safety through the German lines.

At 22.30 hours one of the other *Jagdpanther* in support of that part of *II./Flieger Regiment 53* entered Geel via a back street to catch the defenders in the market square unaware.⁵⁸⁸ Probably the *Jagdpanther* was following the other two down south, but apparently lost its way. Instead of taking the road towards Stokt and

⁵⁸⁴ War Diary 8th DLI, 10.09.44, 20.50 hours.

⁵⁸⁵ War Diary 102nd A/Tk.

⁵⁸⁶ War Diary 74th Field Regiment, Appendix 1.

⁵⁸⁷ This incident and the following, P.J. Lewis M.C. and I.R. English M.C., *Into Battle with the Durhams, 8 D.L.I. in World War II*, London 1990, 283-4.

⁵⁸⁸ Stuart Hills, *By Tank into Normandy*, London 2002, 163-4, describes the incident, but his story does not tally with the facts.

Doornboom it drove across some fields and ended up a hundred metres too far west.⁵⁸⁹ It came upon a steep bank called de Brukel (nowadays a dead-end street). The ground was extremely slippery and even the *Jagdpanther* could not get across. Four times the forty-five ton vehicle drove up the bank, only to slide back every time. In frustration the driver gave up. The *Jagdpanther* thereupon turned through ninety degrees until it got to the Waterstraat which it entered and headed back into Geel. A strange decision, in view of the British occupation. The driver either lost his way in the darkness, thinking he was heading back to Poel where he came from, or the crew must have decided to bluff their way through. The reason for the move is not clear, what happened next is. From the Waterstraat the *Jagdpanther* turned right into the Pas, now heading straight for the Market Square where C Squadron Sherwood Rangers headquarters were still parked unaware of the danger they were in.

To enter the market square the *Jagdpanther* had to make a sharp turn.⁵⁹⁰ Once it had done so it immediately spotted one of the Shermans guarding the four corners of the square. Without hesitation the German gunner fired on the Sherman. The 88 roared, but the shot was fired in haste, missed and slammed into a house. Another Sherman fired at the *Jagdpanther* almost simultaneously, but it also missed its target. Then the *Jagdpanther* hit the Sherman it had spotted, knocking it out. Almost right away it was hit in turn, possibly by Corporal Burnett in his Firefly.⁵⁹¹ He sent an armour-piercing shot from his seventeen-pounder into the German's right hand track, immobilizing the giant SP. The crew fled the scene, but not before they had set fire to the *Jagdpanther*. Because it blocked the street the British later pushed it into the central square. The threat to the British troops in Geel was temporarily averted.

Confusion all around

All of this did not provide much comfort to Brigadier Gordon who not only kept receiving confused reports of German infiltrations all along the line on 10 September, but also because his headquarters came under direct fire at one point. Just after eight p.m. Brigade headquarters were moving to a new location just south of the Doornboom crossroads. The column had crossed over the canal by means of the Class 40 bridge at Het Punt when an officer ran up and warned the Brigadier that there were some German tanks in a sunken lane close by, whereupon Gordon is said to have shouted to (A Squadron) the Sherwood Rangers, 'For God's sake, bring your tanks up quickly.'⁵⁹² As it was the vehicles were now caught between the infiltrating Germans and the canal. The road was too narrow for the long line of defenceless vehicles to turn around and there was no option but carry on. The headquarters stopped at a new destination 200 metres south of the crossroads, still too close to the battle for comfort and by midnight had moved on to a position just north of the canal. To make matters worse, the Class 9 Bridge at Steelen was useless. It had once again been hit by German artillery and was not thought worth repairing. Moreover, the two *Jagdpanther*, accompanied by a group of infantry, mainly from

⁵⁸⁹ This incident, interview Sus Vandijck (with Steven Gorts), via Carel Rijmen.

⁵⁹⁰ This incident, Ray Lepoudre.

⁵⁹¹ Hills, *By Tank*, 164, although he cannot have been in the position noted on the map in Hill's book, because the *Jagdpanther* was definitely knocked out at the southern entrance (bottom of the map).

⁵⁹² Hills, *By Tank*, 159.

II./Flieger Regiment 53 under *Major* Senfft von Pilsach had definitely managed to infiltrate through the gap between the 6th and 8th DLI albeit at some cost since Senfft von Pilsach himself was killed that day.⁵⁹³ Command was taken over by *Hauptmann* Trede.⁵⁹⁴ In an audacious sweep the German battle group got as far as the Doornboom crossroads before deciding to call it a day. One *Jagdpanther* took up position south of the crossroads, while the other did the same north of there.⁵⁹⁵ Effectively the 6th DLI and C Squadron in Geel were now completely cut off. Ironically, they were the only ones who had a relatively quiet night. All the other units were in for a very restless one.

In order to restore a continuous front-line, General Graham ordered the 69th Brigade to help by advancing up to the Geel road. The 7th Green Howards began their advance at 22.50 hours and were on their objectives just south of Poel by 02.20 hours. The gap between the 8th DLI and the 69th Brigade was at last plugged. Meanwhile the 6th Green Howards had earlier taken over positions near Doornboom, which was supposed to be in the rear of the bridgehead, but actually would turn out to be one of the focal points of the fighting. In fact, most of the infiltrating German troops were now in the area between Stokt and Doornboom and the vicinity of the crossroads. The *Jagdpanther* with the accompanying infantry, had taken up position in two of the many lanes flanked by shrubbery that criss-cross this landscape. Although they were completely invisible to their opponents, the German force could clearly be heard. The situation was confusing in the extreme.

During the night the German troops sent up a number of parachute flares and by the light of these the *Jagdpanther* knocked out two Shermans of the Sherwood Rangers which proceeded to blaze furiously. A section of the 6th Green Howards in their carriers was hit by a shell from a *Jagdpanther* as they came up the road, unaware of the enemy positions. The section was nearly obliterated. Just before one a.m. Brigadier Gordon, only one hundred metres away from there with his staff, sensibly decided to swallow his pride and the headquarters column quickly drove back south of the canal out of reach of the enemy. Staying put would have spelled certain destruction for the soft-skinned vehicles.

Meanwhile, more German troops were thrown into the cauldron. Learning of the penetration of the bridgehead, Reinhard decided to reinforce the success of *Kampfgruppe Dreyer*. He ordered *II./FJR 6* (*Hauptmann* Rolf Mager), which had only recently arrived in Maria Ter Heide, to leave and move via Turnhout and Kasterlee to retake Geel.⁵⁹⁶ They would arrive the following morning to play their bit in the unfolding drama.

Armour versus armour

Monday 11 September was to see the culmination of the struggle for Geel. Around this time *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps* received another report about the situation there. It stated that 'II./Fsch.Jg.Reg. 6 passierte mit Stab und 3 Kompanien gegen 05.00 Uhr Divisionsgefechtsstand in Loenhout. (...) Eigener Gegenangriff aus Norden gegen

⁵⁹³ PAJVD.

⁵⁹⁴ War Diary 50th (N) Div, IS 66.

⁵⁹⁵ War Diary 9th DLI, 11.09.44, 09.00 hours.

⁵⁹⁶ KTB 88 AK, 10.09.44, Tagesmeldung.

Brückenkopf nördl. Meulenberg erreichte westl. An Gheel vorbeistossend, den Raum südl. Davon (alte HKL). Infolge Einbruchs der Dunkelheit konnte der in Gheel erneut eingedrungene Feind (mit Panzern) nicht zurückgeworfen werden. Die Verbindung zu den südl. Von Gheel stehenden Teilen der Pz.-Jäg.-Abt. 559 ging in der Dunkelheit verloren. Lage ist z.Zt. dort ungeklärt.⁵⁹⁷

It is not known how Reinhard responded to this news. Probably his mind was elsewhere. Only hours before had he learnt of the capture of Joe's Bridge at Neerpelt the evening before. This spectacular action meant that all German troops still along the Albert Canal were suddenly in danger of being outflanked. The most sensible thing to do would be to call off the attack at Geel and start a gradual withdrawal. However, *Generaloberst* Student soon put a stop to that. When he was visiting Chill that morning Reinhard was called to the phone. Student told him curtly that the *Führer* had decided that the Albert Canal was to be held as long as possible. Both in Geel and Beringen the enemy was to be contained.⁵⁹⁸ Meanwhile Reinhard learned from Chill that some *Jagdpanther* had reached the Doornboom crossroads, having destroyed seven tanks, two anti-tank guns and ten AFV's on the way; they were in desperate need of infantry and *Sturmgeschütze*.⁵⁹⁹ There were no reinforcements that Reinhard could send them, the *Sturmgeschütze* were by then involved in the attack on the Neerpelt bridgehead (see next chapter) and the *Fallschirmjäger* had not arrived yet. Moreover, they would have their hands full in Geel itself. The group would have to fend for itself. Later, just after midday, *Kampfgruppe Chill* confirmed the earlier report and added that the *Jagdpanther* were engaged in heavy fighting with enemy armour and that they were down to five or six vehicles.⁶⁰⁰ In fact, the audacious attack towards Doornboom the previous evening, meant that they had been hoist with their own petard. The German force was now, in fact, virtually imprisoned in the heart of the bridgehead. The only thing that saved it from destruction was the wooded landscape and the dense morning fog.

Brigadier Gordon ordered his troops to stay put for the moment until that cleared. It was still far too foggy to try and dislodge the Germans near the Doornboom crossroads. Gradually the fog began to lift and the opponents could finally see each other. What followed that morning was a series of small engagements in which the two *Jagdpanther* wreaked havoc among the British vehicles, but not without incurring losses themselves. The vehicles of 559 were cunningly concealed around the houses and defiladed from the British guns. Each time one of the Shermans of A Squadron the Sherwood Rangers attempted to move up to engage them it was promptly knocked out. Soon three were ablaze. A six-pounder was hurriedly uncoupled from an M 14 halftrack and put into action. After it had fired two or three rounds the *Jagdpanther* fired two in reply both of which hit an ammunition truck next to the M 14. The driver of the halftrack hurriedly drove off, running the gauntlet between the German gun and the six-pounder.⁶⁰¹ As the morning light grew stronger it became clear to the German force that they were more or less surrounded and they began to try and withdraw discreetly. They only succeeded in part. The intensity

⁵⁹⁷ KTB 88 AK, 11.09.44, A 218.

⁵⁹⁸ KTB 88 AK, 11.09.44, 10.20 hours.

⁵⁹⁹ KTB 88 AK, 11.09.44, 10.45 hours.

⁶⁰⁰ KTB 88 AK, 11.09.44, 12.45 hours.

⁶⁰¹ War Diary 74th Field Regiment, Appendix 1.

of the fighting rapidly increased. While the Shermans tried to battle it out with the *Jagdpanther* the *Luftwaffe* men fell victim to the machine-guns of A Company 2nd Cheshire Regiment. The machine-gunners saw a party of about a hundred try to move back behind a *Jagdpanther*.⁶⁰² They engaged them. The infantry went to ground and the *Jagdpanther* waddled back along the road. The 2nd Cheshires drove up in their carriers and engaged the *Luftwaffe* men at point-blank range as they lay in the open, killing fifteen and wounding over twenty. The others all surrendered.

Elsewhere the fighting was just as intense. B Squadron the Sherwood Rangers was trying to push into Geel to establish contact with their beleaguered comrades there. It was a disaster. They lost seven tanks,⁶⁰³ the CO, Major Michael Gold, was severely wounded as was his second-in-command, Captain Colin Thomson while another officer, Captain John Mann, was killed. Things were not much better at Regimental headquarters near the Doornboom crossroads either.⁶⁰⁴ The Sherwood Rangers CO, Lieutenant-Colonel Stanley Christopherson, was told by a machine-gunner of the Cheshires, 'I am sorry to worry you, sir, but I should just like to confirm that the tank 300 yards to my left is one of yours.' Christopherson took one look and had a shock as he saw a *Jagdpanther*. As his tank had no gun he ordered his driver to double back to A Squadron. There he stopped near a Firefly commanded by Sergeant Charity. This tank backed slightly down the sunken lane in which it had been hidden and found a position from which it could engage the *Jagdpanther*. The first two shots went high, but the third hit the *Jagdpanther*. Immediately a second *Jagdpanther* appeared, coming to the rescue of its mate. This one was hit by Sergeant Allen. It was now around midday. One of the *Jagdpanther* was knocked out, the other managed to escape.⁶⁰⁵ The *Jagdpanther* destroyed southwest of the Doornboom crossroads was a command vehicle and it was probably the one commanded by *Leutnant* Gerhard Kossack, the *Kommandeur* of 2. *Zug*, who was killed that day, in which case it bore the number 121.

It has proved impossible to establish exactly at what time the other *Jagdpanther* was knocked out. What is known is the location, about three hundred metres north of the crossroads, and it also probably happened around noon.⁶⁰⁶ This *Jagdpanther* was heading back towards Geel, infantry riding along on top, when it struck C Company 8th DLI south of the hamlet of Stokt.⁶⁰⁷ It had not been possible to get anti-tank guns to C Company the previous night, but still C Company fired with every weapon they had. The enemy fired back and the vehicle bore straight for Company headquarters, but stopped just forty metres from it. Right away Sergeant J.K. Middleton, commanding a section of the carrier platoon, crawled about thirty metres with a PIAT and with his first shot disabled the *Jagdpanther*. An amazing feat, under any circumstances. The explosion killed a number of Germans. Middleton then machine-gunned the remainder of the Germans who turned and ran for their lives.

⁶⁰² Clay, *The Path of the 50th*, 294, calls it a Mk IV, which is impossible. This was possibly the *Jagdpanther* knocked out by Charity (see below).

⁶⁰³ Hills, *Phantom*, 165.

⁶⁰⁴ This incident, T.M. Lindsay, *Sherwood Rangers*, London 1952, 130.

⁶⁰⁵ Since only one wreck was left behind southwest of the crossroads. Also, the War Diary of 50 (N) Division reports one tank knocked out at 12.40 hours.

⁶⁰⁶ War Diary 9th DLI, 11.09.44, 11.35 and 13.45 hours.

⁶⁰⁷ Following incident, Lewis and English, *Into Battle*, 285.

Middleton was awarded the Military Medal for this action. Just before, a second attempt had been made to penetrate the bridgehead from the northwest.

Around nine a.m. the 7th Green Howards established contact with the 8th DLI in Stokt and there was now a more or less continuous perimeter on this side of the bridgehead.⁶⁰⁸ The nearest enemy troops were dug in around Larum chapel seven hundred metres away. Shortly afterwards the familiar clatter of tank tracks could be heard and D Company, which was in position in Standonk, a cluster of houses about five hundred metres east of Poel, spotted a *Jagdpanther* and some infantry from *I./Flieger Regiment 53* approaching from the north.⁶⁰⁹ Obviously the Germans used the same approach as the night before and for some reason the vehicle was operating on its own. Most of the Green Howards were still shaving as the enemy came closer. They dropped their kit, grabbed their weapons and ran outside. The *Jagdpanther* was allowed to come to within about a hundred metres. Then one of the Green Howards' six-pounder guns fired and hit the SP between the wheels. A flame shot out. Immediately afterwards several of the PIATs were fired and the *Jagdpanther* went up in flames. The accompanying infantry went to ground and crawled back in the direction of Larum. It was the third *Jagdpanther* to be lost that day. After the German threat had been dealt with the situation within the bridgehead gradually took on some semblance of normality during the afternoon. The RAF also put in a brief appearance. Eight Typhoon fighter-bombers of 247 Squadron (Melsbroek, Brussels) tried to find the 'tanks' that had been reported around St.-Dimpna's. They could not locate them, however, and flew back without attacking.⁶¹⁰

By coincidence, at the same time the last German attack went underway, Lieutenant-General Horrocks (XXX Corps) visited the 69th Brigade headquarters south of the canal. There are no records of what was discussed. As Horrocks was already fully engaged in the planning of operation Market Garden (see Chapter 3.4) he must have informed Brigadier Knox not to incur any unnecessary losses as his troops were soon needed elsewhere, the more so as the fighting in Geel had taken a turn for the worse for the British. While the fighting in the bridgehead had been raging all that Monday, the town itself had seen some ferocious fighting as well.

In between two drinks

The night in Geel had passed relatively quietly. Dreyer had sent most of his *Kampfgruppe* around Geel and they were now heavily engaged south of the town. The situation remained like this throughout most of the morning. This changed, however, when *Hauptmann* Rolf Mager's *II./FJR 6* began to arrive in the early afternoon. The first unit to enter Geel was *5. Kompanie*, soon followed by *6.* and *7. Kompanie*. The arrival of the *Fallschirmjäger* rapidly made a real difference for Dreyer. At around one p.m. there were only three *Jagdpanther* left, which had assembled north of the railway line, and losses among the two *Flieger Regimenter* had been so severe that it was not clear to them whether they could hold the line.⁶¹¹ The *Fallschirmjäger*, with their usual panache immediately set about to retake Geel

⁶⁰⁸ This section, War Diary 7th Green Howards 11.09.44, 11.00 hours, and interview with Mr Louis Wouters, via Carl Rijmen and Steven Gorts.

⁶⁰⁹ War Diary 50th (N) Division, IS 66.

⁶¹⁰ Second TAF, Daily Log 11.09.44, 11.11 – 20.42 hours.

⁶¹¹ KTB 88 AK, 11.09.44, 13.35 hours.

as they had been ordered, led by *5. Kompanie* under *Fahnenjunker* Heinz Köhne. Starting at the railway line they infiltrated towards the centre of town by moving from house to house keeping out of sight of the tanks of the Sherwood Rangers. In the town centre Köhne from a pub, 'Het Schild van Turnhout', and between two drinks knocked out a British tank.

Whether the story of the drinks is true or not, Köhne certainly knocked out a Sherman, namely that of Captain Jimmy McWilliams. He and Lieutenant Stuart Hills had taken up positions at the north end of the town square to cover the two exits. They were about to consider how to execute a withdrawal when McWilliams' tank was hit by Köhne. The crew tumbled out except for the driver, Corporal E.J.K. Higgins, who was killed. Hills was horrified, particularly as he had no idea from which direction the tank had been hit. About two minutes later it was his turn. They were hit in the sprocket assembly, but they were still able to move. McWilliams was informed by his driver that they had probably been hit by a *Panzerfaust*. Slowly, firing the machine-gun in what they thought was the direction the shot came from, the Sherman backed into the town square where C Squadron headquarters were still established. Since Sergeant Gordon Nesling's Firefly was the only battleworthy tank now left in Geel, he was recalled from his exposed position. Nesling drove back at top speed along what is now the Lebonstraat, blazing away at the area from which he believed the *Panzerfaust* shot had come. He was later awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal for his brave conduct. The whole of C Squadron was now down to five tanks and the situation was no longer tenable, the more so as the infantry were also in serious trouble.

The arrival of *II./FJR 6*, began to make itself felt more and more as the afternoon wore on.⁶¹² The 6th DLI pulled back to the Market Square which C Company now held with just thirty men. The battalion also began to run short of food and ammunition and were by now pretty thin on the ground. Using the opportunity, Lieutenant-Colonel Wood ordered A Echelon not only to provide the desperately needed food and ammunition, but also to reinforce D Company who were in danger of being overrun. Sections and parties were cut off by groups of *Fallschirmjäger* who moved slowly forward behind concentrations of artillery. Again and again the attacks were beaten off in some of the fiercest hand-to-hand fighting the battalion had experienced since landing in France. At one stage the advancing *Fallschirmjäger* used a disabled carrier for shelter. A hit from a Sherman tank blew up carrier and *Fallschirmjäger* together. At 16.30 hours two tanks managed to break through to the 6th DLI destroying several machine-gun positions on the way. Eventually, continued infiltration forced the depleted battalion to fall back. At five p.m. Graham decided to pull the 6th DLI back from Geel.⁶¹³ The move started at around six p.m. and was concluded two hours later. Tanks went first and last to protect the infantry, the fitters and the wounded in the middle. D Company, which was surrounded, had to fight their way out. Together with B Company they arrived back at the lines of the 8th DLI, convinced that A and C Companies had apparently all been killed or captured. However, two days later the survivors turned up. Darkness brought a lull and a welcome respite. The battle for Geel proper was all but over. This news had

⁶¹² This section mainly David Rissik, *The D.L.I. at war, the History of the Durham Light Infantry 1939-1945*, London n.d., 276-7.

⁶¹³ War Diary 50th (N) Division, 11.09.44, 17.07 hours.

not reached higher headquarters yet and Reinhard continued to fret about the situation there. In fact he thought 'Nach wie vor grösster Schwächepunkt: Abschnitt 85.I.D.'⁶¹⁴ The main ground for his worries was that Chill 'einen Abschnitt von 36 km Breite zu verteidigen hat'.⁶¹⁵ The war diarist added a footnote which suggests that Chill was slightly irritated by the continued reference to the *85. Infanterie-Division* even after his *Kampfgruppe* had been created a day before, because it reads, 'Die Division bittet deshalb, um keine falschen Vorstellungen zu erwecken, die Bezeichnung Kampfgruppe Chill (85.I.D.) führen zu dürfen'.⁶¹⁶

Retaking Geel was a minor triumph for *Oberstleutnant* Dreyer.⁶¹⁷ The following morning he could proudly report that the old front-line had been restored.⁶¹⁸ Both the British infantry and the tanks had taken a terrific beating. All in all the 50th (Northumbrian) Division had suffered severe casualties. In addition fifteen of its carriers were completely destroyed. The Sherwood Rangers noted that the two days in Geel had seen eleven tanks knocked out and two damaged, the highest number since fighting in the desert.⁶¹⁹ But it had been a costly victory for the Germans. Most of *Flieger Regimenter 51* and *53* had either been killed (around 200) or wounded and on 11 September alone 192 *Luftwaffe* men had been taken prisoner and four *Jagdpanther* had been lost.⁶²⁰ *Schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559* reported that it still had two operational *Jagdpanther* which were in position north of Geel.⁶²¹ One was under repair.⁶²²

Relief

On Tuesday 12 September Major-General Graham received specific orders from XXX Corps about the relief of the bridgehead south of Geel by the 15th (Scottish) Division.⁶²³ His own division was needed to take over the Neerpelt bridgehead from the Guards who were then free to spearhead the upcoming operation, Market Garden. The 15th Division under Major-General C.M. Barber, would take over the hotly contested area. The previous evening there had already been consultations between the brigades concerned.⁶²⁴ The idea was for the Scottish Division to take over as soon as possible so that it would be in a position to jump the Maas-Scheldt Canal as part of XII Corps effort to broaden the base of XXX Corps' salient, an essential feature of Market Garden.

Meanwhile, the battle at Geel was not really over yet. Before they could organise a pull-back the 8th and 9th DLI were subjected to a most horrific concentration of artillery and mortar fire early in the morning. A *Jagdpanther* continued to shell the

⁶¹⁴ KTB 88 AK, Tagesmeldung, 11.09.44.

⁶¹⁵ Ibid.

⁶¹⁶ Ibid.

⁶¹⁷ <http://www.ritterkreuztraeger-1939-45.de/>

⁶¹⁸ KTB 88 AK, 12.09.44, 10.29 hours.

⁶¹⁹ Lindsay, *Sherwood Rangers*, 131.

⁶²⁰ According to War Diary 50 (N) Division, IS 76, 350 had been taken prisoner and over 500 had been killed (and wounded?).

⁶²¹ KTB 88 AK, 11.09.44, A 228.

⁶²² Someone wrote on the situation map for the day (A 233) that 1./559 had three operational *Jagdpanther*, so possibly the repair was carried out quickly.

⁶²³ War Diary 50th (N) Division, 07.38 hours.

⁶²⁴ War Diary 69th Brigade, 17.00 hours and WD 151st Brigade 15.15 hours.

positions throughout the morning and early afternoon.⁶²⁵ But worse was to come for the Scots. During the afternoon the 15th Division moved up to debus south of the Albert Canal and to cross into the Geel bridgehead.⁶²⁶ The crossings were still under pretty continuous shell-fire and the Scots suffered their first casualties as a result. The 44th Brigade was to relieve the 151st Brigade on the right. The relief began at the end of the afternoon, after the 9th DLI had beaten off another counterattack from Winkelom, the 6th DLI going back first, followed by the 8th and 9th battalions. The relief of the 69th Brigade by the 44th Brigade was even more problematic. The 5th East Yorks and 6th Green Howards could be pulled back without any serious problems but that very afternoon *Kampfgruppe Dreyer* made one last effort to wipe out the bridgehead. At 16.30 hours two *Jagdpanther*, were seen coming out of Elsum, infantry once again riding along.⁶²⁷ The counterattack, somewhat amazingly, was again aimed at the boundary between the 8th DLI and the 7th Green Howards, south of Poiel. The SPs were immediately engaged by artillery. Thereupon the two *Jagdpanther* turned tail and headed back towards their own positions near Larum. While driving back one *Jagdpanther* was hit and it was ablaze within seconds, the fifth and last to be lost during the battle for Geel. This was the one commanded by *Unteroffizier* Hans Rabe who was killed when his vehicle was hit by a shell that went through an open hatch.⁶²⁸ Four crewmen were burnt inside the vehicle, but one managed to jump out, also badly burnt, and locals could hear him screaming as he lay dying next to the *Jagdpanther*. Later they wrapped him up in a blanket and buried him in an improvised grave.⁶²⁹ In all, this last attempt to penetrate the bridgehead lasted well over two hours. The Germans withdrew after having set fire to some of the houses. Finally the Green Howards and the DLI could relinquish their positions and by eleven p.m. the relief was complete. This counterattack had been the last effort to drive the British back to the Albert Canal. It was time for a change of tactics for the British troops. This was exactly what the German commanders, too, had in mind.

While the British troops in the bridgehead were being relieved *Generalfeldmarschall* Walter Model, *Oberbefehlshaber Heeresgruppe B*, visited *General* Reinhard at his headquarters in Moergestel himself, to discuss the situation.⁶³⁰ The discussion lasted almost an hour. As their opponents seemed to be pouring troops into the Geel bridgehead (the German commanders had no idea that it was a relief and not reinforcements), Model and Reinhard feared a renewed attack across Geel in the direction of Turnhout and from there north to outflank their defences north of Antwerp. Also, an attack from Geel towards Mol could cut off most of Chill's units near Beringen. In effect, all of *Kampfgruppe Chill*, was in danger of being outflanked.⁶³¹ At 18.30 hours Model authorized *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps* to pull the *Kampfgruppe* back behind the security of the Maas-Scheldt Canal. A quarter of an

⁶²⁵ War Diary 74th Field Regiment, Appendix 1.

⁶²⁶ This section, H.G. Martin, *The History of the Fifteenth Scottish Division 1939-1945*, Edinburgh and London 1948, 129-130.

⁶²⁷ The after action report of 7th Green Howards mentions four, but this is highly unlikely in view of the total number of *Jagdpanther* that were sent to Geel, also cf. KTB 88 AK, A 228.

⁶²⁸ Kopka (*Missbraucht und Gebeutelt*, 142) wrongly puts this at Aart.

⁶²⁹ Interview with Louis Wouters, via Carl Rijmen and Steven Gorts.

⁶³⁰ KTB 88 AK, 12.09.44, 17.45 hours.

⁶³¹ KTB 88 AK, 12.09.44, Tagesmeldung.

hour after issuing this order Model left Moergestel and Reinhard himself drove up to Chill in Dessel to inform him of the decision. He told Chill to pull his troops back during the night.⁶³² On his way back Reinhard saw *Generaloberst* Student (*1. Fallschirm Armee*) at his headquarters to inform him of the withdrawal. Student fully concurred and promised to send Reinhard one more battalion of *Fallschirmjäger* in view of the bloodletting of *Kampfgruppe Chill*.⁶³³

Conclusion

The battle for the Bloody Triangle between the Albert Canal, the Maas-Scheldt Canal and the Zuid-Willemsvaart was finally over. Interestingly enough it had all played out quite differently from how Reinhard had envisaged it. He had continually fretted about the situation at Geel, confident that Erdmann's *Fallschirmjäger* would be able to prevent the Guards from breaking out of the Beringen-Hechtel bridgehead, but the exact opposite had happened. This was all the more amazing as Reinhard stated that '85.I.D. besteht als solche nicht, sonder nur der gekürzte Stab mit kleinen Restsplitterverbänden, den zahlreiche andere Splitterverbände von Heer und Luftwaffe angeschlossen sind'.⁶³⁴ This was praise indeed. And it was more than justified. Chill's rag tag band of thrown together *Luftwaffe* men had performed much better than expected, whereas the situation north of Hechtel had gone completely out of hand. It was a tremendous achievement for *Kampfgruppe Chill*, especially considering the poor supply situation the Germans were in. Most of the men had not had a full food ration in weeks.⁶³⁵ The outstanding achievement of *Kampfgruppe Chill*, aided by the *Jagdpanther Kompanie* of 559, was the result of tactical insight and skilful manoeuvring although once again, as at Beringen, when SPs were used offensively they failed to achieve their objective, in this case the annihilation of the bridgehead, even though they did punch a hole in the British lines and caused mayhem for a while. The *Jagdpanther* would never make a proper substitute for tanks. Nevertheless, the armoured giants accompanied by small bands of infantry did manage to upset the British battle plan and even led to the retaking of Geel itself, a fairly unique event during this period and in this theatre of war. The fact that the 50th Division was unable to advance any further for the moment also meant that Model could concentrate his resources against the bridgehead near Neerpelt and that he no longer had to worry that the sector between Lommel and Antwerp would be outflanked. The successful defence at Geel had consequences beyond merely stabilizing part of the front line. Ironically, the day that Geel was recaptured was the very day it had to be abandoned again because of the capture of Joe's Bridge at Neerpelt. The fight for Geel had been very costly. After just over a week of intensive fighting 559 had lost no fewer than eight of its *Jagdpanther*, three north of Beringen and five at Geel, and *1. Kompanie* had been reduced to nine vehicles, only three of which were fully operational.⁶³⁶ However, the effective defence in the 'Bloody Triangle' in fact forced Montgomery to revise his operational plans. The result was directive M 525. Before discussing this in some detail, another important engagement fought by *Kampfgruppe Chill* needs to be examined first.

⁶³² This was when Chill raised the issue of rescuing Müller inside Hechtel (see previous chapter).

⁶³³ KTB 88 AK, 12.09.44, 21.40 hours.

⁶³⁴ KTB 88 AK, 11.09.44, Tagesmeldung

⁶³⁵ War Diary Guards Division, IS 67 (PoW interview).

⁶³⁶ KTB 88 AK, 12.09.44, 22.00 hours.

3.3. Ten Aard (13 – 20 September 1944)

"... at Ten Aard on the Escaut Canal we had a private "Arnhem". We were puzzled as to what was being achieved by the severe fighting here, and by the vehemence of the enemy's reaction."⁶³⁷

"15. schottische I.D. kämpft zäh und verbissen."⁶³⁸

If Geel and Beringen are all but forgotten battles that finally deserve to have their histories written, this applies even more to the battle for Aart or Ten Aard as it is known these days. Here is a battle which has indeed been completely gone from the annals of military history it seems, and when it is referred to it is sometimes wrongly called the battle for Geel.⁶³⁹ The reasons for its neglect are probably twofold, it was a genuine defeat during a period that the Allies were generally winning, and it was largely fought while Market Garden was taking place. Because the fighting at Ten Aard was connected to this major airborne operation, the outcome was to have serious consequences for Market Garden. Once again *Kampfgruppe Chill* and, to a limited degree, *schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559* were key players.

It all began on Tuesday 12 September, the day that the 15th (Scottish) Division took over from the 50th (Northumbrian) Division south of Geel. After their take-over the 15th Division faced the same adversary as 50th Division, an improvised battle group under *Oberstleutnant* Dreyer. Once again Dreyer was called upon to use his skills as a commander and once again he would have to push the troops under his command to the limit of their endurance.⁶⁴⁰

A calculated risk

As related earlier on 12 September *Generalfeldmarschall* Model, *Oberbefehlshaber Heeresgruppe B*, ordered a withdrawal behind the Maas-Scheldt Canal during the night. Exactly one day after it had recaptured Geel *Kampfgruppe Dreyer* abandoned the town, the last two hundred men from *Flieger Regimenter 51* and *53* clearing it just hours before the first Allied troops arrived at eight a.m. on 13 September.⁶⁴¹ The first unit to enter Geel was the 8th Royal Scots (Lieutenant-Colonel P.R. Lane Joynt), one of the nine battalions that made up the 15th (Scottish) Division. The 15th had taken over this area from the 50th (Northumbrian) Division because the latter was needed in the Neerpelt bridgehead to free the Guards Division for operation Market Garden. While XXX Corps was to go straight north to establish a link with the three airborne divisions, VIII and XII Corps would operate on the flanks. From Geel the 15th Division would be in a position to lead the XII Corps break-out across the Maas-Scheldt Canal. As a preliminary move it was to establish a bridgehead over the

⁶³⁷ Robert Woollcombe, *Lion Rampant*, London 1955, 139.

⁶³⁸ KTB 88 AK, 16.09.44, Tagesmeldung.

⁶³⁹ E.g. H.G. Martin, *Fifteenth Scottish Division*, Edinburgh and London, 1948, 129, and Patrick Delaforce, *The Black Bull*, Stroud, 1993, 148, who call it the Gheel bridgehead, which is patently wrong as that battle was the struggle described in the previous chapter.

⁶⁴⁰ This chapter, unless otherwise indicated based on War Diaries 15th Scottish Division, 44th, 46th and 227th Brigades, 3rd/4th CLY, Martin, *Fifteenth Scottish Division*, 129-148 and *Royal Engineers Battlefield Tour*, 83-87.

⁶⁴¹ War Diary 50th Division, IS 69.

canal after clearing Geel and surroundings. To assist in the hoped for break-out the division had under command a tank battalion, the 3rd/4th County of London Yeomanry (CLY), known as the Sharpshooters. The division was commanded by, if not the tallest soldier in the British Army, certainly the tallest divisional commander, Major-General C.M. Barber, who, in view of his length, with typical army humour was naturally nicknamed 'Tiny'.

Dawn patrols on 13 September discovered that the enemy had pulled back. After learning that the Germans had cleared the area south of the Maas-Scheldt Canal, Barber decided to repeat the tactics that had paid so well in crossing the Seine on 27 August, barely a fortnight before. He wanted once more to dispense with a set-piece battle, the traditional approach in Twenty-First Army Group, but rather operate by stealth.⁶⁴² This meant that he would do without an extensive reconnaissance, build-up of ammunition and all the other ingredients that normally preceded a river crossing. By doing so he was taking a calculated risk. Both the 44th and 227th Brigades were ordered to push on to the canal and see if they could get across. In the sector assigned to the 44th Brigade there was one road-bridge at Ten Aard and another one at Lock 7. For the 227th Brigade there was one road-bridge, at Donk. This was in fact the same as that used by 559 and Von der Heydte during their withdrawal twenty-four hours earlier. Anticipating success, each of the brigades was followed by a field company of the Royal Engineers ready to construct one Class 9 and one Class 40 bridge as soon as crossings had been secured.

Brigadier J.C. Cockburn (44th Brigade) decided to send two battalions along the two roads running out of Geel. The 8th Royal Scots (Lane Joynt) followed the road to Turnhout where Chill had his headquarters, seventeen kilometres away. At the same time the 6th King's Own Scottish Borderers (KOSB) under Lieutenant-Colonel C.W.P. Richardson would advance up the road to Retie to the right of the Royal Scots. Late in the afternoon both battalions were nearing the canal. On the Retie road the 6th KOSB were held up by a roadblock for some time and they did not reach the canal until eleven p.m. The bridge was blown, but the lock gates with a small bridge were only partially destroyed and it looked as if that might even take tanks. The Royal Scots arrived a little earlier at Ten Aard. They, too, found that both the road-bridge and the bypass had been destroyed. Both battalion commanders held an 'O' group. It started to rain and it was pitch-black. In the spirit of Barber's orders they decided to try and cross the canal during that very night.

Meanwhile the 227th Brigade had come into the bridgehead to extend it eastwards, an easy task since the Germans had just cleared the area. The 10th Highland Light Infantry (HLI) under Lieutenant-Colonel D.R. Morgan occupied Mol to the usual scenes of cheering civilians. After 10th HLI had established a firm base in and around Mol the 2nd Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders under Lieutenant-Colonel J.W. Tweedie passed through at top speed riding on the Shermans of B Squadron 3rd/4th CLY. They reached the canal at Donk, a hamlet south of Dessel, as it grew dark. They need not have hurried because the bridge there had also been blown and the site was well covered by German troops. The Argylls dug in and at last light the tanks withdrew.

⁶⁴² Cf. Hart, *Colossal Cracks*, 174-8.

Worries

Facing the Scots behind the Maas-Scheldt Canal from Herentals to Luyksgestel was *Kampfgruppe Chill*. Although following the withdrawal he had had to give up his best formations, the bulk of *Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 6* and *559* (see Chapter 3.4), he was compensated for this loss. Chill was still in command of a sizeable force. As noted in the previous chapter, besides his own troops, he still had *Grenadier-Regiment 723*, *I./FJR 2*, *II./FJR 6* and *Kampfgruppe Dreyer* (although since the struggle for Geel *Flieger-Regimente 51* and *53* were mere shadows of their former selves, having lost over half their complement). On top of that *II./SS-Grenadier Regiment Landstorm Nederland* was now transferred from the *719*. to the *85. Infanterie-Division* because Reinhard and Student correctly surmised that the Allies no longer wanted to push north from Antwerp, but instead intended to outflank the Antwerp defences by a move from Geel to Turnhout. The battalion moved from Oostmalle, where it had been held in reserve, via Turnhout to the area around Retie.⁶⁴³ From there it went south to the canal. It would arrive there in time, but only just. Early in the evening, *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps* received extremely alarming news: *Oberstleutnant* Schuster, Chill's *Ia*, reported that British troops had crossed the Maas-Scheldt Canal at Lock 7. A company led by *Luftwaffe Major Koch (Flieger-Regiment 53)* had pulled back and said that the British had established themselves in the wood north of the lock gates.⁶⁴⁴ Chill despatched two companies of *Landstorm Nederland* to plug the perceived gap. The information, however, turned out to be incorrect and Chill learned this by midnight.⁶⁴⁵ Reinhard, higher up the hierarchy, did not know yet that the report was false. The very idea of a second bridgehead across the canal in just two days and at the exact spot he feared it most, must have come as a shock. In view of this threat he decided that Chill was to receive additional units. In the evening *Major Berlin* from *1. Fallschirmarmee* phoned *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps* informing them that it would receive *I.* and *III./Fallschirm Panzer Ersatz und Ausbildungs-Regiment Hermann Göring*. As the two battalions were still some distance from the front, *I./F.E.u.A.R.H.Gö.* was in Loon op Zand and *III./F.E.u.A.R.H.Gö.* was in Udenhout, both villages north of Tilburg, this took time. Together they were about 1,600 strong. Reinhard ordered them to Arendonk with the utmost celerity ('grösster Beschleunigung') where they were to get in touch with Chill who would direct them to the front and restore the situation.⁶⁴⁶ There was one proviso, if they were not needed, the two battalions were to be returned to *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps*, a clear case of wishful thinking, as they, too, would arrive not a moment too soon.

Two assaults

Of the two battalions that reached the canal, the 6th KOSB was the first one to try and cross it. A Company had been ordered forward to lead. Between Geel and Lock 7 there was a wood and unseen by the Germans they marched up the road accompanied only by the crunching of boots and the patter of rain dripping from the

⁶⁴³ KTB 88 AK, 12.09.44, Tagesmeldung.

⁶⁴⁴ KTB 88 AK, 13.09.44, 20.30 hours.

⁶⁴⁵ KTB 88 AK, 14.09.44, A 266.

⁶⁴⁶ KTB 88 AK, 13.09.44, 23.40 hours.

leaves.⁶⁴⁷ As soon as they left the security of the woods mortars and machine-guns opened fire on them. It got worse after the first section had crossed the small bridge. This section was engaged by two 2 cm guns while 8.8 cm guns and mortars opened fire on the rest of A company. It was clear that a trap had been set by *II./SS-Grenadier-Regiment Landstorm Nederland* which had arrived in the nick of time to cover this obvious crossing-place. The section that had crossed was isolated, two soldiers were killed and the rest, except for one, were taken prisoner. Moreover, the company commander, Major Duncan Rollo, was mortally wounded when he tried to sort out the situation and the exhausted Borderers could only lie behind the dyke, up to their waists in water. It was clear that the attempt to cross had failed. But things would get worse. The Dutch SS-men, in the best tradition of their country where flooding had halted enemy invaders in the past, blew holes in the dykes on the south side of the canal between Locks 7 and 8 and slowly, but inevitably, the area south of the canal became flooded. By ten a.m. there was already sixty centimetres of water on the road and it was quickly spreading westward. An hour and a half later Lieutenant-Colonel Richardson was forced to pull his battalion back about a kilometre, through half a metre of water.

The second assault, by the 8th Royal Scots, took place around the time the 6th KOSB sank down exhausted after their failed attempt. Since all the bridges at Ten Aard had been completely destroyed, this crossing was made using assault-boats. Lieutenant-Colonel Lane Joynt had decided not to cross in the obvious place. Instead the crossing was to take place slightly west of Ten Aard. The battalion would then turn east and hopefully outflank the German defences at the bridges. Beginning at 05.30 hours a.m. the first two companies, A and B, crossed in the face of some fire and set up the bridgehead. Then the other companies followed. They went straight east to clear the big factory building on the canal, the Bloemmolens, which dominated the village.⁶⁴⁸ Then the 8th Royal Scots fanned out and occupied the village. The stiffest opposition was east of the village, from 2 cm *Flak* guns. It was now time to build a bridge and there things started to go wrong rather rapidly.

The supporting Field Company, 279th RE, was busy trying to build a Class 9 bridge while the Royal Scots were taking the village. The officer in charge, Major P.T. Wood, decided that the lock east of Ten Aard was the best place to build a bridge quickly. However, when he inspected the site he found that it was covered by Spandau and mortar fire as well that of a 2 cm *Flak* gun. To save time the bridging equipment had been brought up under cover of the canal bank and a bulldozer set to work to make a ramp up the canal dyke. But then the water level began to rise and it became obvious that the water would overflow the southern bank. Wood decided to blow the gates at once. He lit the fuses and put a charge against the eastern lock gates. It went off and blew a hole. Next it was time to blow the western gates. It took three attempts before the engineers succeeded, working under fire all the time. But it was too late and the southern bank collapsed anyway. It was clear that this first attempt to construct a bridge had failed and a ferry was now necessary. But the bridgehead was so narrow that the ferry site was under constant fire as well. Nevertheless, a

⁶⁴⁷ For a moving description of the action, Woollcombe, *Lion Rampant*, 136-8.

⁶⁴⁸ Meaning Flour mills. It was established in 1923.

much needed six-pounder was ferried across as well as some vehicles. At 22.20 hours the ferrying stopped, just as the Germans were beginning to stir.

When he learned of the bridgehead Chill was not unduly worried. He told *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps* that he felt confident as he outnumbered the Scots in Ten Aard. However, the difficult terrain (completely open) made a counterattack extremely difficult. Speed was of the essence therefore and he would do his utmost to settle the affair that same night.⁶⁴⁹ Throughout the afternoon of 14 September *Kampfgruppe Dreyer* put pressure on the 8th Royal Scots and the probing attacks became bolder as time wore on. Two SPs, probably *Jagdpanther* from *1./schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559*, taunted the battalion's positions from a copse northwest of the village. They parked themselves just a hundred and fifty metres away and fired at any movement until British artillery fire eventually drove them away.⁶⁵⁰ These *Jagdpanther* were the only two operational ones at the time.⁶⁵¹

The real counterattack started at ten p.m. and it came in three waves. Chill now sent in the only fresh reserve he had. Since *III./Fallschirm Panzer Ersatz und Ausbildungs-Regiment Hermann Göring* under Major Werner Kraemer, was the battalion equipped with *Flak* and artillery he ordered that to set up around Retie while *I./Fallschirm Panzer Ersatz und Ausbildungs-Regiment Hermann Göring*, the infantry battalion under *Hauptmann* Johann Wimmer, was flung straight into the cauldron at Ten Aard. In a kind of modern day Trojan horses Wimmer's were transported in buses which drove up to a point about two hundred metres north of the road and the by-pass junction. Before the startled Royal Scots could call down artillery fire the *Fallschirmjäger* were already running down the road, killing or capturing most of the Royal Scots forward platoon.⁶⁵² The attack was so fierce that it was only halted about a hundred metres from the canal bank. The last attack of the day came in from the west and was again supported by two *Jagdpanther*. One was hit by a PIAT with unknown results, but once again a platoon of the Royal Scots was overcome. The fighting went on and lasted until the early hours of 15 September. The German troops were unable to push the Royal Scots across the canal, but they had inflicted severe losses and the bridgehead had now shrunk to just two hundred by seventy metres.

Coming to a head

As dawn broke on 15 September the Royal Scots were hanging on to their territory for dear life. The situation was confusing in the extreme as the German troops held positions in the bridgehead intermingled with those of the Royal Scots. However, at ten a.m. Wimmer's *Fallschirmjäger* disengaged so that their own artillery could bombard the tiny bridgehead. At least it would be easier now for Brigadier Cockburn to send in reinforcements. However, as a result of the flooding the 6th Royal Scots Fusiliers (RSF) under Lieutenant-Colonel I. Mackenzie, who were supposed to have crossed on 14 September had to wait a full twenty-four hours, until they could go over to the north bank in assault boats. Finally, at noon the 6th RSF started to go

⁶⁴⁹ KTB 88 AK, 14.09.44, 21.40 hours.

⁶⁵⁰ The SPs can only have been *Jagdpanther* as the vehicles from the Hermann Göring-Regiment had not yet arrived.

⁶⁵¹ KTB 88 AK, 14.09.44, Tagesmeldung.

⁶⁵² Eyewitness interviewed by Chris van Kerckhoven.

across between the bridge and the by-pass slightly to the east of the constricted bridgehead. They then moved up on both sides of the street until they reached the junction and the village was once again in Allied hands.

In spite of his bravado the evening before, Chill was apparently growing increasingly concerned that the troops he had at his disposal might not be able to prevent the Scots from breaking out of their bridgehead. Through Reinhard he asked *I. Fallschirmarmee* for *III./FJR 6* which he would then place at Kasterlee to stop any breakthrough from Ten Aard.⁶⁵³ Student turned down the request, no doubt because he did not wish to weaken the cordon round Joe's Bridge after the failed attack the day before (Chapter 3.4). Reinhard did, however, order two heavy batteries from the *719. I.D.* to support *Kampfgruppe Dreyer*.⁶⁵⁴ These were already being moved east anyway as Sievers (*719. I.D.*) wanted to prevent his left flank from being rolled up and therefore had ordered two batteries to switch to this side of his sector. In total Chill could now call on eight batteries comprising 29 heavy and 21 medium guns.⁶⁵⁵ Reinhard also ordered Siever's division to set up a security screen of 7.5 cm *Pak* around Turnhout in case Allied armour should break out from Ten Aard which is what Chill feared could happen the following day.⁶⁵⁶ Obviously Chill was really worried that afternoon, so worried in fact that in addition to *Hauptmann Wimmer's I./ Fallschirm Panzer Ersatz und Ausbildungs-Regiment Hermann Göring* he had also ordered elements of *II. and III./GR 723* up to cordon off the bridgehead.

Chill's Ia, *Oberstleutnant Schuster*, sent in an anxious report to *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps* in the afternoon saying that the situation at Ten Aard was coming to a head ('sich verschärft').⁶⁵⁷ He need not have worried. Even as this report was being processed *Wimmer's Fallschirmjäger* counterattacked. They suffered appalling losses, but they managed to push the Scots back for the second time, particularly west of the main road. Scottish losses were high, too. Maybe they were added to by an atrocity that was committed that day. According to a *Fallschirmjäger* who was later taken prisoner, one *Leutnant* Neumann took charge of about twenty Scottish soldiers who had been surprised sheltering in a house. While marching them back he was heard to mutter 'Why should I bother with this shit?' He took his MP and then shot all of them cold blood. About four hours later Neumann himself was killed.⁶⁵⁸ Whether the story happened exactly this way or not, it is certainly indicative of the bitter nature of this forgotten battle. The bridgehead had, once again, shrunk to almost nothing. The Scots only managed to hold on because all of the divisional artillery now mercilessly pounded the German lines. To assist the beleaguered battalions Second Tactical Air Force put in a rare appearance. Eight Typhoon fighter-bombers of 247 Squadron took off from Melsbroek, Brussels, just after four p.m. and attacked artillery positions near Lichtaart firing 64 rocket projectiles on to the target area. Almost three hours later the same number of Typhoons of 182 Squadron put up a

⁶⁵³ KTB 88 AK, 15.09.44, 10.30 and 11.25 hours.

⁶⁵⁴ KTB 88 AK, 15.09.44, 10.45, 10.50 and Tagesmeldung.

⁶⁵⁵ Namely: I./AR 1719, II./AR 1719 and I./AR 347, KTB 88 AK, 15.09.44, Tagesmeldung and 16.09.44, Tagesmeldug.

⁶⁵⁶ KTB 88 AK, 15.09.44, Tagesmeldung.

⁶⁵⁷ KTB 88 AK, 15.09.44, 14.10 hours.

⁶⁵⁸ First Cdn Army, IR PoW 85 ID, 07.11.44.

repeat performance near Kasterlee.⁶⁵⁹ The brief lull this created was used to feed still more Scottish troops into the cauldron.

At six p.m. the 6th KOSB, who had made the failed attempt to cross at Lock 7 the day before, now went across to expand the bridgehead north- and westward. They arrived amidst scenes of confusion. The Borderers entered Ten Aard in the middle of another counterattack by Wimmer's battalion and found the other two battalions fighting for their lives. In the circumstances the plan for the 6th KOSB and the 6th RSF to undertake a coordinated attack had to be abandoned. Brigadier Cockburn was also assigned a battalion of the 46th Brigade, the 2nd Glasgow Highlanders (Lieutenant-Colonel P.U. Campbell), to reinforce the bridgehead. It was assembling south of the canal as the 6th KOSB went across. In view of the constriction in the bridgehead, Cockburn decided that they should stay where they were until the situation had improved. Hopefully a bridge would be ready soon. Unfortunately this turned out not to be the case. Lieutenant-Colonel Wood (279th RE), had told his men to convert the raft of folding-boat equipment into a bridge. However, the German guns were zeroed in on the ferry site and they secured one direct hit after another on the raft, reducing it bit by bit until it sank at ten p.m. Braving the fire, the sappers salvaged as much of the equipment as they could. It was too dark now to carry on.

That same day Field-Marshal Montgomery visited the divisional headquarters in Geel. He was there to present medals to various officers, a regular event for Montgomery and one designed to maintain morale, one of the two foundations of the Field-Marshal's operational thinking.⁶⁶⁰ The Recce Regiment provided the guard of honour. Montgomery commented, 'I can say that there is no one to beat the 15th Scottish Division today. I hope, too, that this news will get home to Scotland (...) that I came here today and told you that the 15th Scottish Division had done magnificently.'⁶⁶¹ Words to inspire and boost morale, but it must still have been a rather bizarre event for the Scottish officers, having a mess dinner with all the trimmings in Geel, while some of their comrades lay dying amidst bloody chaos just three kilometres up the road.

Seesaw

In the early morning of 16 September the bridgehead had increased to its biggest size yet, about seven hundred by six hundred metres, extending to just beyond the junction of the old and the new by-pass road. Certainly this was the right moment to ferry the 2nd Glasgow Highlanders across. Lieutenant-Colonel Campbell's battalion was to advance up the road and capture the bridge over the Witte Nete about a kilometre from Ten Aard. Once the bridge was secured the 46th Brigade should have a clear run to Turnhout as the completely open terrain offered no real opportunity for defence. However, *Kampfgruppe Dreyer* still had the initiative. *Hauptmann* Wimmer's battalion counterattacked again from the direction of Kasterlee at 08.30 hours.⁶⁶² The 6th KOSB were hit hardest. The attack was beaten off, but the Borderers were pushed back towards the canal and the bridgehead shrunk for the third time. The most forward positions of the 6th KOSB were now round about Sint-Hubertus church.

⁶⁵⁹ Second TAF, Daily Log 15.09.44, 16.05 and 18.45 hours.

⁶⁶⁰ Hart, *Colossal Cracks*, 21.

⁶⁶¹ Martin, *Fifteenth Scottish Division*, 148.

⁶⁶² KTB 88 AK, 16.09.44, A 304.

It also ruled out any advance towards Kasterlee and the Glasgow Highlanders were told to stay south of the canal. The fighting went on all the day while once more the engineers attempted to build a more permanent link across the canal. Again the Royal Air Force tried to help out. Three squadrons from 124 Wing took off from Melsbroek just before four p.m. A total of twenty-three Typhoon fighter-bombers from 137, 182 and 247 Squadrons strafed German battery and mortar positions in the triangle Lichtaart-Kasterlee-Turnhout silencing them at least for a while.⁶⁶³

Being unaware that he had just successfully blocked an attack towards Turnhout, Chill reported somewhat despondently to *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps* that Wimmer's battalion had been unable to annihilate the bridgehead and it looked as if the Scots might be preparing a counterattack.⁶⁶⁴ He had to come up with a new plan. Artillery fire had so far prevented Wimmer's men from ejecting the Scots from Ten Aard and Chill felt that two could play that game. He told Reinhard over the phone that he now had twelve batteries at his disposal and was fairly sure that this should be enough to prevent the Scots from breaking out.⁶⁶⁵ Accordingly his intention was to limit the attacks and instead concentrate on sealing off the bridgehead and use artillery and attacks on a limited scale to keep the Scots occupied. He ordered *III./GR 723* to extend its front and assist to the east of the village. Chill's tactics appeared to work and in the evening he was a bit more optimistic.⁶⁶⁶ The Scots in Ten Aard still occupied the church and factory area but they were in no position to break out. Chill hoped to compress the bridgehead even further, but there was only so much that he could do with the troops at his disposal. It was clear that *Hauptmann* Wimmer's *I./ Fallschirm Panzer Ersatz und Ausbildungs-Regiment Hermann Göring* was at the end of its tether; many officers and NCOs had been killed and the young recruits were no longer up to serious attacks. Hence Chill ordered *I./FJR 2* to extend its front and thus managed to create a reserve, albeit a small one, of just one company. This would have to do. The main purpose now was to keep the bridgehead as small as possible and prevent the Scots from putting a bridge in place by constantly bringing down a rain of shells. So far, the artillery had done its best in this respect. The only problem was that ammunition was beginning to run low and bringing up new stocks would be hard, especially for the exotic *schwere Feld Haubitze 414 (f)* (ex-french *Canon de 155 C M-17*) as the only stocks left were along the Dutch coast (near Alkmaar). Once these were exhausted the guns would be useless.

It is obvious that artillery played a key role in this battle. The only thing preventing the Scots from breaking out was the German artillery. The only reason the Scottish battalions inside the bridgehead survived were the defensive fire (DF) tasks from the divisional artillery around Geel, nine batteries with a total of 72 guns. They had one Forward Observer in the church spire and another on top of the Bloemmolens factory roof who could pinpoint the artillery and use it with devastating effect even though they were constantly fired on themselves. One phone call from any of the beleaguered companies was sufficient to bring shells crashing down on the advancing Germans.⁶⁶⁷ It was enough, but only just. Realizing that the battle for Ten

⁶⁶³ Second TAF, Daily Log, 16.09.44, 15.57 – 20.06 hours.

⁶⁶⁴ KTB 88 AK, 16.09.44, 13.10 hours.

⁶⁶⁵ KTB 88 AK, 16.09.44, 16.25 hours.

⁶⁶⁶ This part, KTB 88 AK, 16.09.44, Tagesmeldung.

⁶⁶⁷ Woollcombe, *Lion Rampant*, 140.

Aard was getting nowhere, General Barber the day before had decided to try and break the deadlock by making another crossing further east. It might relieve the pressure on the 44th Brigade if the attention of *Kampfgruppe Chill* was diverted elsewhere.

This diversionary attack was to be undertaken by the 227th Brigade (Brigadier E.C. Colville). Colville, who had received the DSO from Montgomery in Geel only the previous day, assigned the mission to the 2nd Gordon Highlanders under Lieutenant-Colonel J.R. Sinclair. They were to establish the second bridgehead west of Donk. After the 2nd Gordons had successfully crossed the 10th HLI was to follow and secure Dessel on the other side. The crossing was to be made by means of barges and planks. While studying air photos Sinclair discovered that the map he had, contained many errors. In fact, the position chosen for the crossing entailed the crossing of not one, but two canals with a strip of land in between. Still, as the first one was packed with barges this should not be too difficult and the operation was to begin before first light on 16 September. The crossing started off well enough. Bargees, living on the barges with their families, assisted C Company and it reached the 'island' without mishap followed by B and D Companies. But it was now 06.30 hours and dawn was breaking. Moving down to the lock where they would cross the second canal the lead companies were spotted. The Dutch SS-men along this stretch of the canal, *II./SS-Grenadier-Regiment Landstorm Nederland*, were wide awake now. Heavy *Spandau* and mortar fire rained down on the Gordons. Eventually 8.8 cm guns joined in and the 2nd Gordons were pinned to the ground. At noon Colville decided to abandon the operation and the battalion was pulled back as far as Achterbos, leaving C Company on the 'island'. They spent a long day in their trenches until they were withdrawn as soon as darkness fell.

At the end of the day the situation in Ten Aard was back to where it was on the first day, a stalemate. The only difference was that now there were three battalions inside the village instead of one. After three days the 8th Royal Scots were no more than a shadow of their former selves and Brigadier Cockburn decided to get them out of the bridgehead as soon as possible. This could not be done during the night as the fighting continually flared up, but early the following morning, at 06.30 hours, the exhausted Royal Scots were finally pulled out. They had lost a staggering 230 officers and men.

A change of plans

Sunday 17 September was a day of plans. Barber realised that he still needed to come up with something to break the deadlock. The new solution he came up with was operation Flood.⁶⁶⁸ The idea was to enlarge the bridgehead by ordering the 227th Brigade to make new crossings immediately to the right and left of Ten Aard early the following day. Planning began that morning. However, XII Corps, Lieutenant-General Neil Ritchie, decided differently. Ritchie's Corps was supposed to protect the left flank of XXX Corps after its breakout from the Neerpelt bridgehead. But because of the fierce resistance at Ten Aard the 15th Division was clearly getting nowhere and Ritchie decided to develop the main axis of advance the following day from a new bridgehead further east, north of Lommel. This task was

⁶⁶⁸ War Diary 15th Sc Div, 17.09.44, Appx C.

assigned to the 53rd (Welsh) Division. Operation Flood was cancelled and the 15th Division was merely told to maintain pressure at Ten Aard, build a Class 9 bridge there and hold the canal line from Geel eastwards.⁶⁶⁹ Therefore even the stalemate they had managed to create was an important tactical and operational victory for *Kampfgruppe Chill*. The western sector, held by the 46th Brigade, would be taken over by the 7th Armoured Division. At noon Barber held an 'O' Group in Geel. In view of the new orders he instructed the 227th Brigade to take over from the 44th Brigade that night. As soon as this move had been completed, the 227th Brigade was to break out of the bridgehead while the 46th and 44th Brigades covered the canal line. It was a somewhat optimistic instruction in the light of recent events. The first move was made after dark when the 2nd Argylls were ferried across. The bridgehead was extended eastward slightly. Counterattacks kept coming in regularly, as ordered by Chill, to keep the Scots busy, and just as regularly they were beaten off with the help of the artillery.

It is extremely ironical that Operation Flood was cancelled, just when it might have succeeded. Precisely because Market Garden had begun, the German commanders had bigger worries from the afternoon of 17 September. Units such as *I.* and *III./GR 723* as well as artillery and every reserve there was, were sent east to plug the holes created by the breakout of XXX Corps and XII Corps. *Kampfgruppe Chill* was soon threatened from that side and it was no longer as strong as it had been. Still, that morning before the storm burst Chill did not have an inkling of what was about to happen and neither did any of the other German commanders. There was also a conference between Reinhard and Dreyer.⁶⁷⁰ It was evident that things were not going the way Dreyer wanted them to. Several battalion commanders accused each other of shirking. Reinhard was forced (as at Beringen on 6 September) to warn the officers of *GR 723* that the honour of their regiment was at stake. In view of the crippling losses his *Kampfgruppe* had sustained Dreyer proposed to attack only after dark from then on. Reinhard concurred and assigned one company of *II./SS-Grenadier-Regiment Landstorm Nederland* to Dreyer to make up for the losses. Soon after that the Allied airborne landings began and Reinhard had other things to worry about.

Also that day *Oberst* Fritz Fullriede, commanding officer of *Fallschirm Panzer Ersatz- und Ausbildungsregiment Hermann Göring*, decided to inspect his troops.⁶⁷¹ He left Utrecht early in the morning but because of Allied air attacks it took him a long time to get anywhere near the front. The first stop was at *III. Bataillon* whose headquarters were in Pomfort near Retie. Fullriede arrived in the early afternoon just as airborne troops were passing overhead. The *Flak* there was fully engaged in a fire fight with Allied planes. He then drove on to the front line south of Kasterlee where trees were blocking the road and inspected Wimmer's *I. Bataillon*. Next he went to Bakel where he found what was left of *II. Bataillon* after the rest had been wiped out in Hechtel. Fullriede returned to Utrecht late in the evening, appalled by the mess ('Durcheinander') that he had come across.

⁶⁶⁹ Martin, *Fifteenth Scottish Division*, 143.

⁶⁷⁰ KTB 88 AK, 17.09.44, A 317.

⁶⁷¹ Fullriede, 2-3.

The end

At 07.30 hours on Monday 18 September another battalion of the 44th Brigade, the 6th Royal Scots Fusiliers, began to pull out of Ten Aard. The move was completed at eleven a.m. Only the 6th KOSB and the 2nd Argylls were now left inside the bridgehead. In compliance with Dreyer's instructions his *Kampfgruppe* spent the day shelling the village and the first attack went in just as it began to grow dark at six p.m. There were, in fact, three attacks, two from the west against the 6th KOSB and one from the north against the 2nd Argylls. A few hundred infantry supported by two SPs –probably the *Jagdpanther* of *1./559*– attacked the latter's positions on the northern tip of the bridgehead. The forward platoon was in danger of being wiped out, but once again the Scots' artillery came to the rescue and when the attackers were no more than fifty metres from the forward positions they fell back in disorder. These were the only attempts made that day and after they petered out around ten p.m. it was finally the turn of the 6th KOSB to leave the bloody cauldron. They had beaten off thirteen attacks.⁶⁷² For the last time they stumbled over corpses down the street to the canal where assault boats were waiting for them. They handed their sector over to the 2nd Gordon Highlanders and this ended the responsibility of the 44th Brigade for the bridgehead. Losses had been appalling. The brigade had lost 24 officers and 514 other ranks of whom 9 officers and 134 other ranks were killed. It had been a bloodbath, for the Germans as well, since the number of killed ran as high as about 200, no fewer than 94 from *I./ Fallschirm Panzer Ersatz und Ausbildungs-Regiment Hermann Göring* and 100 from *Flieger Regiment 51* and *53*. These two regiments had been bled white. Tragically, the village which had been so hotly contested for almost a week, at the same time had lost its significance.

The following evening, 19 September, the 10th HLI joined the other two battalions in Ten Aard and the whole of the 227th Brigade was now inside the bridgehead. The day saw a repeat performance of the 18th. All day long German guns shelled the village and at last light another counterattack was launched. This was not as strong or determined as the previous one and it quickly broke up. It was a repeat in every sense: during the night another fruitless attempt was made to build a Class-9 bridge. Meanwhile Lieutenant-General Ritchie and Major-General Barber were considering two options. One was to keep on trying to advance through Ten Aard to Turnhout, the other was to use the bridgehead at Lommel, which the 53rd (Welsh) Division had established during the evening of the 17th. From there the 15th (Scottish) Division could advance to Boxtel and 's-Hertogenbosch. It was eventually decided to adopt the latter plan, called Operation Box, because the enemy's resistance appeared to be much less tenacious there.

The bridgehead had now outlived its usefulness and Barber decided to evacuate it during the night. The German commanders were not aware of this and as before they still feared an attack on Turnhout. In his daily summary Reinhard said that since his troops, Chill among them, now had so few units that 'Angriffe aus Brückenkopf Aart (...) kaum nachhaltig abgewehrt werden können.⁶⁷³ The same sentiment was expressed on 20 September. When Chill mentioned his fears that he could only contain the bridgehead for one more day *General Krebs (Chef des Generalstabes*

⁶⁷² Woollcombe, *Lion Rampant*, 140 and Martin, *Fifteenth Scottish Division*, 145.

⁶⁷³ KTB 88 AK, 19.09.44, Tagesmeldung.

Heeresgruppe B) made it clear that that needed to be at least another forty-eight hours.⁶⁷⁴ To make matters worse, that afternoon *Hauptmann* Wimmer was wounded severely.⁶⁷⁵ *Hauptmann* Westphal took over. Chill felt that *I./ Fallschirm Panzer Ersatz und Ausbildungs-Regiment Hermann Göring* now had to be pulled out because without its inspiring *Kommandeur* it might fall apart. Reinhard agreed. To make up for it *Feld Ersatz Bataillon 1719* was to move from *Kampfgruppe Zuber* at Reusel to *Kampfgruppe Chill* at Ten Aard. It was to be transferred that night. Reinhard still feared that the Scots might break out towards Turnhout. Unbeknownst to him the 227th Brigade had begun to evacuate the bridgehead the same time *FEB 1719* was marching towards it. The tricky operation started at 22.15 hours and was completed by midnight. The long ordeal for the Scots was over. The following day German troops entered Ten Aard and found it abandoned. They captured some equipment that had been left behind.⁶⁷⁶

In the morning of 21 September Reinhard's Chief of Staff, *Oberst* Eichert-Wiersdorff, was summoned to Student's headquarters in Vught.⁶⁷⁷ There he learned that *Generalfeldmarschall* Model among other things agreed that *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps* had permission to fall back behind the Antwerp-Turnhout Canal if it needed to, in order to free units for the battle against the British troops west of Eindhoven. Eichert-Wiersdorff countered that this move would not really free units as the main problem was and remained the open terrain west of the Valkenswaard-Eindhoven road which was difficult to defend. Student replied that such a move would at least gain them some time, although naturally the *Führer* would have the last say before permission was definitely granted. Upon return to his headquarters Eichert-Wiersdorff met with Reinhard and the Chief of Staff of *15. Armee*, *Generalleutnant* Hoffmann. Reinhard disagreed with Eichert-Wiersdorf and decided it would be unwise to wait too long lest the retreat turn into a rout. Hoffmann agreed with Reinhard. The die was cast and it was decided to begin disengaging the troops along the Maas-Scheldt Canal the following evening, 22 September, as soon as it was dark. The move would have to be completed the next morning. Thus the bridgehead at Ten Aard was abandoned by the 15th Division just as their opponents were also on the point of giving up!

The order also meant that the *Jagdpanther* of *1./schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559* were on the move again. Leaving their stations near Turnhout they were called upon to fulfil an important mission, help the *59. Infanterie-Division* break through to the bridge at Veghel in order to stop the Allied advance on Arnhem (see Chapter 3.4).

Failure or success?

The Scots had fought long and with great tenacity for a bridgehead that ultimately was given up. In the end this was due to the vicious circle that could not be broken, namely that "of being unable to build the bridge until the bridgehead was expanded sufficiently to deny to the enemy observation on to the building site, and at the same

⁶⁷⁴ KTB OB West, 20.09.44, 19.00 hours.

⁶⁷⁵ KTB 88 AK, 20.09.44, 17.10 hours.

⁶⁷⁶ KTB 88 AK, 21.09.44, 12.15 and 12.50 hours.

⁶⁷⁷ KTB 88 AK, 21.09.44, 11.30 hours.

time of being unable to expand the bridgehead until the bridge was built...".⁶⁷⁸ That still leaves the question: had the ferocious battle for Ten Aard been a wasteful exercise for the British or not? Lieutenant-General Ritchie (XII Corps) thought it had been useful. On 19 September he sent a letter to Barber.⁶⁷⁹ In this he said that Horrocks (XXX Corps) thought capturing Ten Aard had greatly helped Market Garden. Horrocks contributed the rapidity with which his troops had broken out of their bridgehead at De Kolonie to the fact that "a very great proportion of the German's available resources had been drawn against the 15th (Scottish) Division front." In this way, according to Horrocks, the success of Market Garden owed "a lot to what the 15th Scottish Division had achieved and the threat that you have developed against the enemy, thus forcing him to move his reserves from the vital place."

That seems a typical case of morale boosting and wishful thinking, since it was basically just one battalion, *I./ Fallschirm Panzer Ersatz und Ausbildungs-Regiment Hermann Göring*, that had tipped the scales and prevented the Scots from expanding the bridgehead. In addition the deadlock continued even after the start of operation Market Garden when Chill had been forced to send two battalions of *Grenadier-Regiment 723* east to counter the new threat. There is a case for putting it the other way round. Because the iron cordon around Ten Aard could not be broken open, XII Corps did not have a bridgehead and hence could not adequately fulfil its part in Market Garden, covering the west flank of the advance of XXX Corps. This, in very a real way, contributed to the failure of Market Garden.

Conclusion

Once again Chill and Dreyer had triumphed over their opponents, this time even more dramatically than at Geel. The circumstances, terrain and weather, had been working in their favour. On the other hand, they had less artillery, no tanks (and only two *Jagdpanther*), little ammunition and a hodgepodge of troops. This success was also quite an achievement since the strength of *Kampfgruppe Chill* was far below what it had been just a week earlier. On 17 September Chill commanded just four battalions of which one was strong, four were average and two were in tatters, giving him about 1,500 men.⁶⁸⁰ Admittedly this time the sector covered by the *Kampfgruppe* was just thirty-five kilometres (Herentals to Lommel), but that still came out to one man every twenty-three metres, a far from comfortable situation. Both Chill and Dreyer had simply managed both engagements very skilfully by making maximum use of what resources available to them had and by continually counterattacking they had kept the Scots off balance all the time. In another sense the battle for Ten Aard was also a replay of the battle for Geel. Just as the *Kampfgruppe* had pulled back a day after taking Geel, so it was now ordered to pull out of Ten Aard and fall back behind the next canal. However, like the battle for Geel, the fight for Ten Aard was a tactical victory for the Germans with operational consequences for the Allies. The 15th (Scottish) Division was unable to break out of the bridgehead (Operation Flood), capture Turnhout and advance on Tilburg, rolling up the whole of *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps* right wing covering Antwerp and consequently the Scots could not block the escape route of *15. Armee* just as its

⁶⁷⁸ *Royal Engineers Battlefield Tour*, 88.

⁶⁷⁹ Martin, *Fifteenth Scottish Division*, 146.

⁶⁸⁰ KTB 88 AK, 17.09.44, B 292.

divisions were entering the mainland, or prevent them from becoming involved in the Brabant side of Operation Market Garden. Also as a result XII Corps was slow in securing the left flank of Market Garden in effect preventing more Allied troops from reaching Nijmegen. This was the result of the highly successful defence conducted by *Kampfgruppe Chill*. After the start of Operation Market Garden, Chill and his subordinate commanders would once more need their professional skills in the battles to come. Even as they were pulling back behind the Antwerp-Turnhout Canal on the night of 22/23 September they had been anxiously watching their left flank for five days. Here Market Garden was unfolding and this was where the decision for the immediate future would be made.

3.4. Market Garden (11 – 26 September 1944)

"These airmen were heroes."⁶⁸¹

"A tank that is mortally hit belches forth long searing tongues of orange flame from every hatch. As ammunition explodes in the interior, the hull is racked by violent convulsions and sparks erupt from the spout of the barrel like the fireballs of a Roman candle. (...) When the inferno subsides, gallons of lubricating oil in the power train and hundreds of pounds of rubber on the tracks and bogey wheels continue to burn, spewing dense clouds of black smoke over the funeral pyre."⁶⁸²

While Geel was being retaken and the fighting there reached a climax the German higher command had another worry, a bigger 'pebble in their shoes', the new bridgehead across the Maas-Scheldt Canal at Neerpelt. The capture of 'Joe's Bridge' by the Irish Guards on Sunday 10 September presented them with a major problem, literally overnight. That is, once they found out, which was not the case right away.

Panic

Brigadier N.W. Gwatkin, the CO of the 5th Guards Armoured Brigade, after learning of the capture of the bridge, had originally intended to launch two groups, the Grenadier and Coldstream Guards, to cross over at first light on 11 September and break out towards Eindhoven. However, the Corps Commander, Horrocks, cancelled this order. It is clear that he did not wish to draw the attention of the Germans to this all-important bridgehead because operation Market Garden (the decision had only been taken the day before) was to be kept secret for as long as possible. As a result it was just a few companies of the Irish Guards who were at the bridge as dawn broke. They were extremely surprised after they had seized the bridge that there was no response, not the usual counterattack, no small-arms fire, nothing.⁶⁸³ The reason was that the Germans had no idea the bridge had been lost until more than four hours after the event. Amazingly the first inkling that the German commanders had of the new bridgehead was when *Oberst* Halberstadt, *Kommandeur* of the *18. Flakbrigade*⁶⁸⁴, reported to *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps* at 1.10 a.m. that the *Flak* group at Neerpelt bridge had been defeated and that tanks had crossed the

⁶⁸¹ Rauter, quoted in David Bennett, *A magnificent Disaster*, Newbury 2008, 32.

⁶⁸² Blumenson, *Breakout and Pursuit*, 65-6.

⁶⁸³ War Diary Guards Division, IS 63, Appendix W.

⁶⁸⁴ Assigned to 88 AK on 05.09.44.

bridge.⁶⁸⁵ The Chief of Staff, *Oberst* Eichert-Wiersdorff, immediately got in touch with his counterpart at *1. Fallschirmarmee*, *Major* Berlin. Eichert-Wiersdorf had two important questions, first whether the bridge (consistently referred to as Broeseind by the Germans) could still be blown and second whether the *Armee* had any troops to engage against the bridge. While waiting for the answers from *1. Fallschirmarmee*, Eichert-Wiersdorff ordered Halberstadt to bring up *Flak* units from further back. Not waiting for an answer he also summoned *Oberstleutnant* Kuske, *Stabsoffizier der Pioniere LXXXVIII. Armeekorps*, to go to the engineer battalion of the *85. Infanterie-Division* and form an attack group. They were to try and blow up the bridge so British tanks could no longer cross it. To add insult to injury, twenty minutes later there was another report with even worse news. *Hauptmann* Wagner who had been despatched by Eichert-Wiersdorff to find out what was going on, reported back from Valkenswaard (about twelve kilometres from the bridge), 'Es strömt alles zurück, Sturmgeschützbesatzungen, Pioniere, Flakbedienungen, Feldersatz-Batl. Offiziere nicht auf zu finden. Der Engländer ist mit 3 Panzern und Infanterie über den Kanal bei der Brücke nördlich Helchteren (Broeseind).'⁶⁸⁶

The report established that obviously panic had set in. Certainly the unit responsible for the stretch west from Neerpelt, *Feld Ersatz Battalion 347*, was indeed on the run. The *Kommandeur*, *Hauptmann* Sick, was found by Reinhard himself in Westerhoven, ten kilometres from the canal in the early afternoon.⁶⁸⁷ He was told in no uncertain terms to go back at once. But by then the damage had already been done. The hasty retreat had all the ingredients of a nightmare scenario and if the Maas-Scheldt Canal had been crossed by the Allies it meant that all the efforts along the Albert Canal to stop the Allied advance, providing the *Wehrmacht* with its first breathing space in a month, had been in vain. It seemed as if the Allied juggernaut was on the move again. The significance of the bridgehead was not lost on Student. As early as 9 September, *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps* had predicted that one of the axes along which it expected the Allied forces to advance was towards Arnhem and Wesel, a remarkably educated guess.⁶⁸⁸ Ten minutes after Wagner's report, 1.40 a.m., *1. Fallschirmarmee* ordered *schwere Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559* to pull out of the line and hunt for tanks that had broken through. The order did not make any sense as the *Jagdpanther* of *1. Kompanie* were still engaged in battle at Geel and the *Sturmgeschütze* of *2. and 3. Kompanie* were south of the canal near Lommel. There was no way the order could be carried out and it was soon to be rescinded. However, it shows the nervous state of mind on the German side that night.

It was clearly time to quell the panic once and for all. At 1.50 a.m. Wagner was told to get in touch with the *Ortskommandant* in Eindhoven, *Hauptmann* Schürmann, set up a defence and halt everyone that was still on the run. He was also told to summarily shoot any soldiers that tried to dodge their orders. This was not an easy task as Schürmann only had a mixed batch of about a hundred men, nearly half of them from a baker's company.⁶⁸⁹ There are no records of deserters being shot, but during the day Schürmann did manage to have the bridges at Aalst and

⁶⁸⁵ KTB 88 AK, 11.09.44, 01.10 hours.

⁶⁸⁶ KTB 88 AK, 11.09.44, 01:30 hours.

⁶⁸⁷ KTB 88 AK, 11.09.44, 13.35 hours.

⁶⁸⁸ KTB 88 AK, 09.09.44, Tagesmeldung.

⁶⁸⁹ KTB 88 AK, 11.09.44, A 222.

Valkenswaard prepared for demolition.⁶⁹⁰ At 2.30 a.m. Student finally confirmed the orders for a counterattack. The Neerpelt bridge was to be retaken from the south. The mission was assigned to Chill. When this news was passed on to Chill, fifteen minutes later, he said that he had already taken the initial steps to implement the new assignment, which in view of his previous record rings true. However, at the same time Chill made it clear that time was at a premium and that he very much wondered if it was possible to start the counterattack before dawn of 11 September.⁶⁹¹

Take the bridge

After Wagner had given the original order for *559* to counterattack with all of its SPs he must have begun to realize that pulling the *Jagdpanther* out of Geel, where they were still in support of *Kampfgruppe Dreyer*, was not really feasible. So they were left out of Chill's plan of attack. Chill assigned the mission to *Hauptmann* Leopold von Hütz, another of his energetic and outstanding officers. Von Hütz had received the *Ritterkreuz* only six days earlier, on 5 September.⁶⁹² As mentioned earlier he had received the reward because of his bravery as *Kommandeur* of *III./Grenadier Regiment 1054* during the battle for Potigny. Red-haired Von Hütz, at twenty-six was already a seasoned veteran in every sense of the word as he was one of the lucky few to be flown out of the Stalingrad pocket as late as 19 January 1943. He had only three fingers on his right hand, a permanent reminder of wounds received there.⁶⁹³ He was described as a 'Passionierter Soldat, ausgesprochene Führerpersönlichkeit. Hervorragend in der Fürsorge für die Truppe.'⁶⁹⁴ But Von Hütz was not just a young diehard, he was an extremely complex character as, in contrast to what is suggested by the above, he openly listened to the English radio, refused to give the Hitler salute and was even connected to the 20 July plot to kill the *Führer*.⁶⁹⁵ Also, he transferred to the *Fallschirmjäger* soon after and eventually would take over *II./FJR 6*. Assembling the remaining *Sturmgeschütze* of *2.* and *3./559* in the dark took some time.⁶⁹⁶ They were still some distance from the bridge and also needed to find the infantry that was to accompany them. These were all from *14., 15.* and *16. Kompanie, IV./FJR 6* (the heavy weapons battalion led by *Hauptmann* Dobbeler). All of these men were more or less stragglers who had lost touch with their battalion for the moment and two score were being roped in by the fearless Von Hütz to join in the attack.⁶⁹⁷ Although information about the enemy was scarce he knew that time was rapidly running out.

While Von Hütz was getting ready, *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps* despatched three junior officers to find out exactly what was going on north of the Maas-Scheldt Canal.⁶⁹⁸

⁶⁹⁰ KTB 88 AK, 11.09.44, A 228.

⁶⁹¹ KTB 88 AK, 11.09.44, 02.45 hours.

⁶⁹² Lodieu, *La Massue*, 91, gives details about Von Hütz.

⁶⁹³ PoW interview 12./GR 1054, WO 208/3603.

⁶⁹⁴ Personalakten Von Hütz, 01.07.44, NARA RG 242.

⁶⁹⁵ PoW interview 12./GR 1054, WO 208/3603.

⁶⁹⁶ KTB 88 AK, 10.09.44, B 269.

⁶⁹⁷ War Diary Guards Division, IS 63, Appendix W.

⁶⁹⁸ KTB 88 AK, 11.09.44, 08.45 hours. They were: Oberleutnant Kuske, Oberleutnant Heiermann and Hauptmann Schick.

They left at 08.30 hours and did not report back until early afternoon.⁶⁹⁹ They had good news and bad news. The good news was that there was no enemy armour roaming about north of the canal, the bad news that there were very precious few German troops that side of the canal either. As we have seen *Feld Ersatz Battalion 347* had simply abandoned their positions. But help was on the way and in the meantime the British had their hands full fending off the counterattack by a small group of Germans south of the canal.

Kampfgruppe von Hütz, a fancy name for what was initially a battle group of just four *Sturmgeschütze*, about forty *Fallschirmjäger*, a platoon of engineers to blow up the bridge and some towed 8.8 cm guns, was ready at 7.50 a.m.⁷⁰⁰ Chill, himself, energetic as ever, added to the fire power. As he saw four *Sturmgeschütze*, which had just been repaired, pass his headquarters, he personally ordered them to support the *Kampfgruppe*, thus doubling the number of *Sturmgeschütze* in one stroke.⁷⁰¹ Like at Geel, there was a very thick fog shrouding everything in a greyish veil around the village of Lommel. This aided the German advance as it hid their movements from their opponents, but it also hindered them, because it prevented a proper reconnaissance. Very slowly the *Sturmgeschütze* moved through Lutlommel, only the clanking of their tracks breaking the early morning stillness. There they took a right turn and headed for the canal. Gradually the mist began to lift, but the last part of their advance was hidden by a copse along the bank of the canal.

The Irish Guards group, like the others in the Division, had a tendency to set up their headquarters on a crossroads.⁷⁰² Staff cars, lorries, tanks and everything else that was part of an armoured group headquarters were parked close together, completely oblivious to the fate that awaited them. They could have known of the danger facing them since they had just received a report from the armoured cars of A Squadron 2nd Household Cavalry (Major D. Bowes Daly) warning them about some German armoured vehicles as well as infantry near De Leuken, a tiny village two kilometres south-west of the bridge. The Irish Guards felt that this was of no concern to them and they went on with their breakfasts. While A Squadron were exploring west, D Squadron (Major E.J.S. Ward) had assembled at the zinc factory, close to the crossroads, in preparation for a reconnaissance trip north. Hence, they would also become involved in the fracas at the crossroads. At around nine a.m. *Kampfgruppe von Hütz* was closing in on the unsuspecting Guards just south of the bridge. The *Fallschirmjäger* jumped off the *Sturmgeschütze*, ready for the order to advance. Then the group broke cover and all hell was let loose.

Von Hütz attacks

One of the sentries just had time to shout, 'tanks attacking down the road,' when the leading *Sturmgeschütze* opened fire. The first two shells crashed into the Honey tanks of the Reconnaissance Troop of the Irish Guards, killing seven men and wounding several others, among them their CO, Captain R.S. Langton. The crew of

⁶⁹⁹ KTB 88 AK, 11.09.44, A 222.

⁷⁰⁰ KTB 88 AK, 11.09.44, 10.15 hours.

⁷⁰¹ KTB 88 AK, 11.09.44, A 219. The situation map for that day (A 233) has a handwritten note stating that 2./559 had nine operational StuGs, while 3./559 had four.

⁷⁰² This section, unless otherwise indicated, based on Israel, 47-61, Orde, *The Household Cavalry*, 291-4 and Fitzgerald, *The Irish Guards*, 478-481.

the six-pounder anti-tank gun covering the 3rd Battalion's headquarters ran to their positions. The commander was about to shout 'Fire' when an artillery officer ran outside and said, 'Hold it, it may be one of ours.'⁷⁰³ These were his last words as the next shell killed both him and the crew of the six-pounder. By now everyone had woken up and the other six-pounders opened fire. Elsewhere confusion still reigned supreme. Hot metal tore through the air in both directions. Another Guards vehicle that was hit almost straightaway was Lieutenant-Colonel 'Joe' Vandeleur's Humber staff car. The vehicle was equipped with a sound system to entertain the troops by playing records to his troops. As a result of the explosion his records were scattered all over the crossroads much to Vandeleur's dismay, but not that of his troops as they found his taste in music a trifle too 'classical'. One of the *Sturmgeschütze* managed to knock out an M10 Achilles and destroyed an AEC Matador armoured car, the 7.5 cm shell slicing through its gun mantlet as if it was butter. Major Peel, CO of No.1 Squadron and the conqueror of the bridge the day before, saw the *Sturmgeschütz* in a field only four hundred metres away. He climbed into 'St. Patrick', the Sherman of Lieutenant-Colonel Giles Vandeleur (cousin to 'Colonel Joe'), the CO of the 2nd (Armoured) Irish Guards, and took aim. He hit the SP four times and set it alight, although a Firefly of Peel's Squadron, shooting at the same *Sturmgeschütz* from the north side of the canal took half the credit for this. The *Fallschirmjäger* withdrew to the cover of the gardens temporarily, then renewed the attack. Major Peel now handed back 'St. Patrick' and walked from garden to garden to observe for Major Gordon Watson in his Sherman, 'Ulster'. He was trying to locate the next *Sturmgeschütz*. Tragically it found him first and fired an HE shell which wounded Peel mortally. He was to die later that afternoon, the day after his great success which won him the Military Cross.

Meanwhile the gun fire had alerted D Squadron 2nd Household Cavalry which became involved in the brawl. With great coolness Major Ward and the crew of his Staghound armoured car shot back with their puny 37-mm gun. There was no chance of penetrating the frontal armour of the *Sturmgeschütz*, but they hoped to distract the attention of the German SP away from the numerous soft-skinned vehicles long enough for a heavier gun to arrive. This was precisely what happened and after some tense minutes an M10 Achilles IIC belonging to the 21st Anti-Tank Regiment pulled into the middle of the road and destroyed the *Sturmgeschütz* with the first shot from its 17-pounder gun.

The other *Sturmgeschütze* now turned right. They knocked out two more Shermans while *Kampfgruppe von Hütz* tried to storm the bridge over the fields between the canal and the crossroads. No matter how hard they tried, they failed to reach their objective because of the determined resistance of the Irish Guards. While manoeuvring to get in a proper firing position one of the *Sturmgeschütze* knocked down part of a house along the road to the bridge. Then, while firing its gun, it drove up and down the garden, accidentally crushing an improvised shelter where seventeen civilians were trying to find security. Twelve of them died, among them a father and his six children.

⁷⁰³ Captain Good, CO of 374 Battery, 55th Field Regiment.

Payback time

Gradually the German attack petered out and by midday all was quiet again at the bridge. It was clear that there was no way Von Hütz' tiny group would ever reach the bridge, and so the *Kampfgruppe* withdrew to the hamlet of De Leuken, on the shortest route back to Lommel, their starting point.⁷⁰⁴ Ten *Fallschirmjäger* had been taken prisoner and 559 had lost three of its *Sturmgeschütze*. But the battle south of the canal was not quite over yet. On top of the failure Von Hütz had an added worry. By now the Grenadier Guards were on their way to Lommel and they threatened to cut off his route of retreat. The *Sturmgeschütze* rattled back as fast as they could, hoping to get there before the Grenadier Guards did. However, the first enemy troops they encountered were A Squadron 2nd Household Cavalry who had been out exploring west of the bridge. Somewhere near Lutlommel Lieutenant G.L.M. Murray in his AEC armoured car engaged one of the *Sturmgeschütze* with his 75-mm gun at 1,400 metres. He registered a direct hit at his first attempt and scored four more in rapid succession when the SP was finally seen to burst into flames. It was the fourth *Sturmgeschütz* of 559 to be lost, but it would not be the final casualty of the day.

The attack on Lommel was undertaken by a combined force composed of the King's (No.1) Company of the 1st Grenadier Guards, the tallest soldiers in the British Army⁷⁰⁵, and No.1 Troop, No.3 Squadron, 2nd Grenadier Guards, together with some M10's and towed seventeen-pounders of the 21st Anti-Tank Regiment.⁷⁰⁶ Captain V.P. Gibbs, the CO of the King's Company, was to be in charge. The group set off from the crossroads at Karrestraterheide at 08.30 hours, stopping about a kilometre from Lommel to park the lorries. The infantry was to advance on foot from there on. Gibbs had decided to take Lommel in two stages. During the first stage the infantry was to advance as far as the church. As soon as those crossroads had been taken the M10's and tanks would take over. While slowly advancing on Lommel, the Shermans of No.3 Squadron managed to knock out the fifth *Sturmgeschütz* of 559 that day.⁷⁰⁷ The other three *Sturmgeschütze* with the remainder of *Kampfgruppe von Hütz* disappeared in the direction of Mol after which they blew up the bridge over the Turnhout-Hasselt Canal.⁷⁰⁸ Von Hütz was an independent spirit and had ignored Chill's order 'Lommel sei als Stützpunkt unter allen Umständen zu halten'⁷⁰⁹ and consequently lived to fight another day. At around 10.30 hours the Grenadier Guards were closing in on the village.

Back in the village mayhem had broken out.⁷¹⁰ Some resistance fighters had taken pot shots at German soldiers who had just entered the village with a couple of towed 8.8 cm guns.⁷¹¹ It appears that one was actually wounded and the Germans, among them some Dutch speaking collaborators, furious and, no doubt anxious had retaliated by taking about forty Belgians hostage. They threatened to execute them if

⁷⁰⁴ KTB 88 AK, 11.09.44, Tagesmeldung.

⁷⁰⁵ To join No.1 or the King's Company of the Grenadier Guards, a recruit must be at least six feet tall, a rule which still applies today.

⁷⁰⁶ This part, War Diaries 1st and 2nd Grenadier Guards.

⁷⁰⁷ KTB 88 AK, 11.09.44, A 227.

⁷⁰⁸ KTB 88 AK, 12.09.44, A 242.

⁷⁰⁹ KTB 88 AK, 11.09.44, A 217.

⁷¹⁰ This part, Israel, 55-9.

⁷¹¹ Possibly schwere Flak-Abteilung 137 (WD Guards, IS 63, Appx W).

the attacks continued. Ten hostages would be shot for every German. Fortunately for the villagers no more shots were fired and no hostages were executed. The whole exercise became a moot point anyway as the British attack went underway and the first shells crashed into the village at the end of the morning. Just after midday the hostages were free again. The two 8.8 cm guns were set up to cover the southern and eastern exits of Lommel. In vain, as Gibbs outwitted the German defences. He had ordered his men to turn the enemy's flank by moving further west. Bullets and shells ripped through the air and the noise was devastating. But the battle was brief. The Grenadiers shot the German officer who appeared to be in command whereupon the gun crews, most of them still teenagers, left their positions. They fled back to the canal and safety, taking the body of their *Kommandeur* with them on one of the halftracks.

Silence suddenly descended on the centre of the village. Then civilians poured out of their houses and soon the Grenadiers found themselves surrounded by cheering Belgians. But the battle was not over yet. A Belgian, Louis Gerrits, who had witnessed the withdrawal of *Kampfgruppe von Hütz* from his house in Lutlommel warned the Grenadier Guards that a column of stragglers, a halftrack towing an 8.8 cm gun followed by a lorry and a staff car, was closing in on Lommel. The crew of the seventeen-pounder which had taken up position on the church square fired as soon as the halftrack came into view. The result was carnage. Only the staff car managed to get away. It was 14.30 hours and Lommel was now officially captured. The fighting south of the canal was over in this sector as well. All future attempts to annihilate the bridgehead would be undertaken from the north side of the canal.

Changes

Although little fighting took place, 12 September is an important date for a number of reasons. First, it was a turning point for the Germans south of the Maas-Scheldt Canal (previous two chapters). It was the last day that any serious fighting took place there. From dusk German troops began to withdraw behind the Maas-Scheldt Canal. The area bounded by the Leopoldsburg, Albert and Maas-Scheldt Canals was given up. This was partly done, as explained earlier, to prevent the bulk of *Kampfgruppe Chill* from being outflanked, but it also meant a considerable shortening of the frontline. This had the double effect of freeing Von der Heydte's regiment for the attack on the bridgehead and maintaining the (uneven) balance of power, according to Student.⁷¹² The withdrawal of Von der Heydte's *Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 6* from its furthest positions, in Oostham and Heppen, west of Beringen, took most of the night and the early morning of 13 September. While pulling back the *Fallschirmjäger* found it necessary to shoot five civilians in Olmen who had the 'temerity' to watch them.⁷¹³ All of *559* pulled back at the same time. At the end of the day *559* reported that it had twelve *Sturmgeschütze* and three *Jagdpanther* operational.⁷¹⁴ Because all of *FJR 6* and *559* had to use the Dessel bridge the troops did not arrive in the area between Postel and Luijksgestel until the early morning of

⁷¹² KTB 88 AK, 12.09.44, C 220.

⁷¹³ Rijmen, 67.

⁷¹⁴ KTB 88 AK, 12.09.44, Tagesmeldung.

13 September. Then *1. Fallschirm Armee* assigned them to *Kampfgruppe Von Hoffmann*.⁷¹⁵

A second major shift that took place that Tuesday was the handing over by *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps* of the sector north of Antwerp to *LXVII. Armeekorps* (*General der Infanterie* Otto Sponheimer), the first corps of the *15. Armee* which had escaped being trapped again at the Belgian North sea coast.⁷¹⁶ This was only possible because the German commanders had correctly deduced that the Allied effort was shifting away from Antwerp. For the first time in a week they felt comfortable enough to leave that sector in the hands of weak divisions, the *711. Infanterie-Division* and the *346. Infanterie-Division*. Reinhard earlier that day had got a phone call from *Generalmajor* Sievers (*719. I.D.*) about a Belgian informer reporting that the British would no longer attack north out of Antwerp, but would instead try to outflank the defences there by an advance through Geel and Turnhout.⁷¹⁷ Reinhard immediately phoned Student and told him that he agreed with this new assessment.⁷¹⁸ Student likewise concurred and promised Reinhard a battalion for the Turnhout sector. He also granted Reinhard's request to start moving *Flak* away from north of Antwerp to Turnhout. The new boundary between the two armies ran from Schoten via St.-Lenaarts to Breda. This meant that Reinhard could now concentrate on a much narrower sector and with a much better chance of holding it.

Attacking the bridgehead

The withdrawal behind the Maas-Scheldt Canal meant that from 13 September *FJR 6* and *559* were now available as well to attack the British bridgehead. The bulk of Von der Heydte's regiment had arrived near Postel in the early morning.⁷¹⁹ He set up his headquarters in Luijksgestel where *Major* Helmut Kerutt (*I/FJR 18*) also had a command post. Obviously British observers had spotted the coming and going because a British salvo hit it just as Von der Heydte was visiting.⁷²⁰ With an elegant leap the latter disappeared through the window which had just been blown out while Kerutt's adjutant, *Leutnant* Heinz Volz, sheltered under the table. Meanwhile the phone kept ringing and ringing. Eventually, during a brief fire pause Volz managed to pick it up. It was Schacht who explained in no uncertain terms that he was not used to being kept waiting so long, at least without knowing the situation.

That day the three companies of *559*, or rather what was left of them, were again split up. All ten operational *Sturmgeschütze* of *2.* and *3./559*, commanded by *Oberleutnant* Edmund Haile, together with most of *FJR 6* (*I, II* and *IV*) came under the command of *1. Fallschirmarmee* and were to join *Kampfgruppe Walther*.⁷²¹ The four operational *Jagdpanther* of *1./559* were ordered to Hapert to become a reserve unit for *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps*.⁷²² They would remain there for two days. On 15 September they were ordered to move on to Turnhout and assemble there. Then *1.*

⁷¹⁵ KTB 88 AK, 12.09.44, A 248.

⁷¹⁶ KTB 88 AK, 12.09.44, C 220.

⁷¹⁷ KTB 88 AK, 12.09.44, 09.55 hours.

⁷¹⁸ KTB 88 AK, 12.09.44, 10.05 hours.

⁷¹⁹ KTB 88 AK, 13.09.44, 08.15 hours.

⁷²⁰ Story, Heinz Volz, Fjg-Regiment von Hoffmann, *Der Deutsche Fallschirmjäger 20 September 1954*, 10-12, 11.

⁷²¹ KTB 88 AK, 13.09.44, Tagesmeldung.

⁷²² KTB 88 AK, 13.09.44, C 220.

Kompanie was told to stay in touch with *Kampfgruppe Chill* and *Grenadier-Regiment 743* and continually monitor the situation in the sectors covered by them.⁷²³ Meanwhile, the other seven *Jagdpanther* plus six *Sturmgeschütze* were still in workshops.⁷²⁴

All the preparations for the attack had robbed Chill of the core of his *Kampfgruppe*. Apart from his 'own' troops from the *84.* and *85. Infanterie-Division*, 150 officers and 2,027 other ranks, he also retained *Grenadier-Regiment 723, II./FJR 6* and *Kampfgruppe Dreyer*.⁷²⁵ But he was partly compensated for his losses. He was assigned *II./FJR 18* under *Oberstleutnant* Stephan, the second of *Oberst* Helmuth von Hoffmann's battalions.⁷²⁶ It was first ordered to Arendonk to cover the left flank of *Kampfgruppe Chill*.⁷²⁷ There it was to make contact with its neighbour, *FJR 6*, with whom a wire connection had already been established because Chill and Von der Heydte had agreed that keeping in close touch was essential.⁷²⁸ Chill also got *II./SS-Grenadier-Regiment Landstorm Nederland*, which had been north of Antwerp until two days before.

The attack by *Kampfgruppe Walther* supported by six *Sturmgeschütze* of *559* went in early on 14 September. It failed miserably. Later in the afternoon the Irish Guards launched a counterattack and regained most of the lost ground, throwing the *Fallschirmjäger* out of their old trenches. Nevertheless, it was decided that the Irish Guards would abandon the woods and fall back to positions a little closer to the road. By six p.m. the affair was over. The attack, the big effort by *Kampfgruppe Walther* to take the bridge, had failed. Von der Heydte's men had done their utmost, fighting their way forward as far as the middle of De Kolonie, until it became clear that there was no way they could get through to their real objective, the bridge. They had suffered huge losses, about 60 men had been killed and no fewer than 114 were taken prisoner.⁷²⁹ This meant that the two companies of *I./FJR 6*, originally about 250 strong, had lost nearly 80% of their complement.⁷³⁰ As a result *1.* and *2. Kompanie* were amalgamated.⁷³¹ Afterwards, Von der Heydte blamed the failure on the lack of artillery support which is confirmed by Allied sources.⁷³² It soon became clear that this was due to what can only be described as a very major blunder.

At 09.40 hours, when the attack was already underway, *Major* Berlin from *1. Fallschirmarmee* phoned to ask why there was no artillery support.⁷³³ It was

⁷²³ KTB 88 AK, 14.09.44, B 280.

⁷²⁴ Second Army, IS 121.

⁷²⁵ KTB 88 AK, 14.09.44, A 265.

⁷²⁶ Schacht and everyone following his manuscript (e.g. Kershaw, Margry) seem to think that Von Hoffmann had three battalions. This is probably based on Schacht's mistaken memories, the evidence clearly suggests there were never more than two, i.e. Btl Kerutt and Btl Stephan. Cf. article Kerutt, also Thomas and Wegmann, 430, and Fallschirmjäger-Suchdienst, Suchliste 5/1967, 1 (via Peter Vandermissen).

⁷²⁷ KTB 88 AK, 13.09.44, 10.40 hours.

⁷²⁸ KTB 88 AK, 13.09.44, 10.30 hours.

⁷²⁹ War Diary Guards Division, IS 66.

⁷³⁰ PAJVD.

⁷³¹ War Diary Guards Division, IS 70.

⁷³² Ibid.

⁷³³ KTB 88 AK, 14.09.44, 09.40 hours.

supposed to have been given by a battery of Chill's artillery, named *Artillerie Gruppe Ackermann* after the *Kommandeur* of *II./AR 185*, which now consisted of the twelve guns of *17./* and *18./SS-Artillerie Ersatz und Ausbildungsregiment* plus four 8,8 cm guns from *4./leichte Flak-Abteilung 925*.⁷³⁴ It soon transpired that nobody from *Kampfgruppe Walther* had bothered to pass this message on to *Hauptmann* Ackermann himself. He certainly was not aware of any such request. An hour later Berlin rang *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps* again to stress the need for artillery support as their own guns, the *Fruntsberg* battery, had run out of ammunition.⁷³⁵ Chill's Ia, *Oberstleutnant* Schuster, said that in that case he would like to know how many batteries were required exactly and he pointed out that a position change might weaken the left flank of *Kampfgruppe Chill*. He also asked where the forward observer (*V.B.*) was to report. When all these questions were put to Berlin, he said that he would consult Student and get back to Chill. Nothing more was heard of the matter. By that time it was a moot point anyway as the two parties were locked in close combat and artillery support had become pointless. After this major debacle, there was nothing left for Walther but to go over to the defence. The two days following the attack, 15 and 16 September, were spent in relative quiet. There was the occasional mortaring and shelling, mainly airbursts, with the usual lack of results, and the odd exchange of machine-gun fire. The bridgehead was there to stay. The Allied units were getting ready for the big day, Sunday 17 September.

Planning

One of the major operations of the Second World War was Market Garden. It is regularly, but erroneously, referred to as the Battle of Arnhem. That it is much more has already been made clear in lots of books, but exactly how much more will become evident in this chapter, as well as the crucial role that *schwere Heeres Panzerjägerabteilung 559* and *Kampfgruppe Chill* would play. When dealing with Market Garden, the focus will be on what happened in the areas where *559* and *Chill* were involved, that is south of the river Maas, basically the province of North Brabant, the operational area of the US 101st Airborne Division. Brief references will be made to what happened north of there, at Nijmegen and Arnhem, in order not to lose sight of the overall picture. First the origins of this ambitious project need to be described.

To understand that we need to turn to the operational and strategic levels. On 4 September, the day that Antwerp was captured, General Eisenhower, outlined his strategy in directive FWD13765 in which he stated that 'the mission of Northern Group of Armies (...) is to secure Antwerp, breach the Siegfried Line covering the Ruhr and seize the Ruhr'.⁷³⁶ At the same time General Bradley's US Twelfth Army Group was "to occupy the Siegfried line covering the Saar and then to seize Frankfurt".⁷³⁷ This principle of advancing along as wide a front as possible soon came to be known as the 'broad front policy'. Montgomery favoured a different approach, that of one powerful push to the Rhine. This was known as the 'narrow thrust

⁷³⁴ KTB 88 AK, 24.09.44, B 311.

⁷³⁵ KTB 88 AK, 14.09.44, 10.35 hours.

⁷³⁶ Ellis, *Victory II*, 9 and Adams, *The Battle for Western Europe*, 96-7.

⁷³⁷ Ibid.

policy'.⁷³⁸ That it was his Twenty-First Army Group that would carry out the main attack on Germany, went without saying for the Field-Marshal. But Eisenhower was not convinced. Also because he did not want to favour Montgomery's armies over the others for political reasons he issued the abovementioned order.⁷³⁹ In it Montgomery was asked to undertake three tasks at the same time, in the belief that the German army in the west was on the verge of collapse. An impossible task, as time would show.

Montgomery basically had two choices after capturing Antwerp, clear the Scheldt estuary with the added bonus of destroying *15. Armee*, or pursue the more glorious and potentially rewarding course of pushing on the Rhine with the prospect of entering Germany before winter set in. Montgomery opted for the latter and XXX Corps was ordered to advance along two basic routes, via Tilburg to Zaltbommel and via Eindhoven to Nijmegen and Arnhem.⁷⁴⁰ To assist the ground forces and secure bridgeheads Montgomery asked First Allied Airborne Army (Lieutenant-General Lewis H. Brereton) to set up an operation in which the 1st Airborne Division and the Polish Parachute Brigade were employed. This, however, was not the first plan involving airborne troops. Since early June no fewer than twenty-five operations had been proposed. This made perfect sense, because the First Allied Airborne Army was an 'army in waiting', literally. Since the end of August, when all the airborne divisions were back in the U.K. the troops had either been recuperating (US 82nd and 101st Airborne Division and 6th Airborne Division) or waiting for their first assignment (1st Airborne Division and Polish Brigade). Clearly such a well-trained, top-quality force needed to be used. That is why planners at SHAEF constantly came up with new plans.⁷⁴¹ The operation proposed on 3 September was called Comet. The idea was to secure crossings of the Waal at Nijmegen and the Rhine at Arnhem using the 1st Airborne, the Polish Brigade and the 52nd (Lowland) Division. The operation was to take place on 6 or 7 September. The plans took longer to draw up than envisaged and they were not ready until the 7th. A storm warning then postponed its execution until the following day. Meanwhile it became clear that German resistance was stiffening. It was the day that the struggle for Hechtel began and the bridgeheads south of Geel had not yet joined. Montgomery felt that Comet was too optimistic an option. His forces were clearly not strong enough for what they had to do. The broad front strategy did not work, Montgomery felt. It was time to try and convince Eisenhower to follow a different route.

A new plan

On the morning of 10 September Montgomery and Eisenhower had a meeting. In a letter to Eisenhower dated three days before Montgomery again complained about the failing logistical situation. If only all resources were reallocated they would be adequate "to get one thrust to Berlin".⁷⁴² He would now try to get Eisenhower to see

⁷³⁸ Adams in his recent book on the autumn battles disagrees with this simple distinction and he makes a good case for calling Ike's strategy a 'two phase, two thrust campaign'. Adams, *The Battle for Western Europe*, 55-98.

⁷³⁹ For a more detailed discussion see Robin Neillands, *The Battle for the Rhine 1944, Arnhem and the Ardennes: the Campaign in Europe*, London 2005, 63-85.

⁷⁴⁰ Ellis, *Victory II*, 7.

⁷⁴¹ This section, Margry, *Market Garden*, 10-22.

⁷⁴² Ellis, *Victory II*, 17.

things his way. The meeting took place at Melsbroek airfield near Brussels. As Eisenhower had wrenched his right knee it was in a cast. Eisenhower was in a litter and so they met in Eisenhower's aircraft, a converted North American B-25 Mitchell bomber.⁷⁴³ In far from parliamentary language Montgomery told Eisenhower what he thought of his decisions as Supreme Commander so far. At one point Eisenhower put his hands on Montgomery's knee and said, "Steady, Monty! You can't speak to me like that. I'm your boss."⁷⁴⁴ Montgomery apologized but kept on repeating his arguments for a single thrust towards the Rhine. Eisenhower would not relent. He believed in his broad front policy, but he did agree that Montgomery could launch a new airborne operation, in fact a kind of enlarged version of Comet. He refused to halt all other operations and when the meeting ended Montgomery had not gotten what he wanted. Three days later, however, Eisenhower relented and he agreed to immobilise US divisions to provide the necessary motor transport, but stressed that this measure was only 'temporary', to enable Montgomery's Twenty-First Army Group to cross the Rhine.⁷⁴⁵ Montgomery felt that he had won the argument, at least for now, and D Day for the new airborne operation, code name Market, was Sunday 17 September. The planning could now begin in earnest for what was to evolve into operation Market Garden. The broad outlines were laid down in directive M 525. The general aim was 'to destroy all enemy west of the general line ZWOLLE - DEVENTER - CLEVE - VENLO - MAASTRICHT [capitals in original], with a view to advancing eastwards and occupying the Ruhr.'⁷⁴⁶ To achieve this Second Army would secure crossings over the rivers Meuse and Rhine, establish itself astride the IJssel from where it was to be directed at the area of Münster and then cut off the Ruhr area from the northeast. Meanwhile the US Twelfth Army Group was to capture Bonn and Cologne and encircle the Ruhr from the south. Interestingly Montgomery still did not recognize the full extent of the German recovery as he directed First Canadian Army, after having secured the opening of Antwerp, it was to 'operate northwards on the general axis BREDA - UTRECHT - AMSTERDAM [capitals in original].'⁷⁴⁷ The aim was the destruction of the German troops west of that line and the opening up of the port of Rotterdam. It is clear that Montgomery still hoped to attack the Ruhr area before autumn set in and also that he was still seriously underestimating German resistance.

For the new airborne operation, Comet was extended by adding the two US airborne divisions, 82nd and 101st, to the equation.⁷⁴⁸ The operation acquired a double name because the new plan called for two separate, but related elements. Three airborne divisions were to seize vital crossings (Market) and lay out a kind of carpet over which Second Army would advance to beyond the Rhine at Arnhem (Garden). There it would establish itself on the high ground between Arnhem and the Zuiderzee. In detail this meant that the 1st Airborne under Major-General Roy Urquhart, would secure the Rhine bridge at Arnhem, the 82nd under Brigadier-General James M. Gavin would do the same for the bridges over the Waal at Nijmegen and the Maas at

⁷⁴³ Adams, *The Battle for Western Europe*, 125.

⁷⁴⁴ Chester Wilmot, *The Struggle for Europe*, London 1952, 489.

⁷⁴⁵ Ellis, *Victory II*, 23.

⁷⁴⁶ M 525, 14.09.44.

⁷⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁴⁸ 6th Airborne Division would need until December to recover from the Normandy campaign.

Grave, while the 101st under Major General Maxwell D. Taylor would have to capture no fewer than four bridges, at Veghel, St.-Oedenrode, Son and Eindhoven. At the same time XXX Corps would thrust north out of the Neerpelt bridgehead, the Guards Division leading the way, followed by the 43rd (Wessex) and the 50th (Northumbrian) Divisions. Meanwhile XII Corps would secure the left flank of the advance with the 53rd (Welsh), 15th (Scottish) and 7th Armoured Divisions, and VIII Corps would do the same on the right with the 3rd Division and the 11th Armoured Division. Unlike in Normandy the airborne landings would take place by day this time. It was a difficult decision for Brereton because obviously the planes and gliders would now be more exposed to *Flak* and enemy fighters.⁷⁴⁹ This was outweighed, however, by the fact that a daylight operation should provide a better drop pattern. In Normandy troops had been scattered over such a wide area that some soldiers had never found their parent unit at all. Assured of a comprehensive anti-flak program Brereton decided it was worth the risk.

In the days before the operation Second Army regrouped. For XII Corps this meant that while the 15th (Scottish) Division still had its hands full at Ten Aard, the 53rd (Welsh) was to move to Lommel to cross the canal there, and the 7th Armoured Division shifted further eastward. For VIII Corps the 3rd Division had come up and was assembling near Hechtel while the 11th Armoured Division was still in position along the Maas-Scheldt Canal northeast of it. The first and most important blow would have to be dealt by Horrocks' XXX Corps. That, too, was getting ready. As mentioned in Chapter 3.2, the 231st Brigade of the 50th (Northumbrian) Division had taken over the bridgehead at De Kolonie while the Guards were getting ready south of the canal. The rest of the 50th was assembling further south while the 43rd Division was even further back around Diest. It was clear from the start that the ground offensive would not be easy as it would have to use a single road with marshy land on both sides. Therefore it relied heavily on artillery assisted by large numbers of fighter-bombers of Second Tactical Air Force. Forward air controllers would play a crucial role in calling up air support if the advance should get stuck.

On Saturday 16 September everything was in readiness. That day Horrocks held a conference for all division and brigade commanders and staff officers of XXX Corps in the cinema in Leopoldsburg.⁷⁵⁰ The inhabitants must have wondered at the motley stream of officers arriving in the sleepy little town. There was no standard uniform code and Horrocks himself was dressed in a high-necked woolly with a battle-dress top and a camouflaged airborne smock. The atmosphere was casual and cheerful, but there were very few questions at the end of the orders and the officers looked deep in thought as they left the cinema, especially the Irish Guards. The fact that they were leading the advance was, no doubt an honour, but not one to cheer a soldier.

In his directive to Second Army issued on the 14th Montgomery himself had emphasized the need for speed when he wrote, 'The thrust northward to secure the river crossings (...) will be rapid and violent without regard to what is happening on the flanks.'⁷⁵¹ Time would tell if this important instruction would be met.

⁷⁴⁹ MacDonald, *Siegfried Line Campaign*, 129-130.

⁷⁵⁰ Horrocks, *Corps Commander*, 96-100.

⁷⁵¹ M 525, 14.09.44.

The German side

After 10 September more and more troops began to arrive to oppose the Allied offensive. Because of the major error made by the Allies not to push ahead north of Antwerp and thus cut off *15. Armee* on 5 September, Von Zangen's divisions now began to arrive one by one. The first to reach the mainland was the *711. Infanterie-Division* under *Generalleutnant* Josef Reichert. This extremely weak division was in reality no more than a regiment with its four battalions and many soldiers did not even have fire-arms. It took up position slightly to the right of and behind the *719. I.D.* northwest of Antwerp.⁷⁵² Immediately thereafter the *346. I.D.*, *Generalleutnant* Erich Diestel, at 75% considerably stronger than the *711. Infanterie-Division*, entered Brabant.⁷⁵³ It was to take over the right wing of the *719. Infanterie-Division* north of Antwerp. The new arrivals had come just in time. During the evening of 12 September Reinhard's westernmost sector was taken over by units from these two divisions and the responsibility for preventing a breakthrough north of Antwerp fell to *LXVII. Armeekorps*, *General der Infanterie* Otto Sponheimer.⁷⁵⁴ As soon as the relief was completed *15. Armee*, under *General der Infanterie* Gustav-Adolf von Zangen, would be in charge. Thus, precisely as the pressure mounted on his left flank by the Allied bridgeheads at Ten Aard, Reinhard could shift units from the *719. I.D.* to the endangered sector and the divisional artillery was just in time to assist in the battle at Ten Aard. Originally Reinhard had suggested another solution. Feeling that reliefs took time and that the danger at Antwerp had diminished, he suggested to Student that the new divisions from *15. Armee* should be sent further east, to Turnhout where he still feared a breakthrough.⁷⁵⁵ But Student was not convinced the danger at Antwerp was really over and he stuck to his original decision, *15. Armee* would take over the area west of the line Antwerp-St.Lenaarts-Tilburg. He did, however, permit Reinhard to shift some *Flak* from Antwerp to Turnhout.

The next three days saw both successes and failures for the Germans, which have already been discussed. The Scottish bridgehead at Ten Aard was successfully contained, but the counterattack on De Kolonie bridgehead failed miserably. After 14 September it seemed as if a new stalemate had been achieved. The British could not get out of the bridgeheads, while the Germans could not retake them. On 14 September Student took an extra precautionary measure which so far has received little or no attention in any of the books about of Market Garden. Aware that he needed to prevent another unexpected crossing of the next canal line (like the one at Neerpelt), Student set up two independent commands, *General zur besondere Verwendung 1*, under *Generalmajor* R. Gohthsche, the erstwhile town commander of Antwerp, and *Stab General zur besondere Verwendung 2* under *Oberst* Von Hoffmann, the former *Kommandeur* of *FJR 18*.⁷⁵⁶ Both of them were put in charge of a stretch of canal, in Von Hoffmann's case the Wilhelmina Canal and in Gohthsche's case the Zuid-Willemsvaart from Helmond northward. Their assignment was to set up a defensive line behind the canals, secure the bridges and create strong points in Tilburg, Eindhoven, Helmond and Weert. For this they were assigned only a handful

⁷⁵² Interrogation Report Diestel, 7.

⁷⁵³ Rehm, OCMH MS P-182, 9-13 and Frank, OCMH MS B-532, 49.

⁷⁵⁴ KTB 88 AK, 12.09.44, C 220.

⁷⁵⁵ KTB 88 AK, 12.09.44, 10.05 hours.

⁷⁵⁶ KTB 88 AK, 14.09.44, 15.45 hours.

of troops. They received about three companies, including one platoon each from *SS-Unterführerschule Arnheim*, and some 7.5 cm *Pak*.⁷⁵⁷ They were told to use Dutch civilians in the construction of the defences. Their immediate task was to blow up the minor bridges and make sure that the others would be protected by *Pak*, barbed wire and mines. It was clear that after the failures at Beringen and Neerpelt Student did not want to be taken by surprise a third time. Little did Von Hoffmann and Gohtsche know when took up their assignment that they would have only three days to get their act together.

Further south *Oberst* Walther had the same problem. He had positioned his units as best he could since the failed counterattack on the 14th. This meant that *Kampfgruppe Heinke* (*III./SS-Panzer Grenadier-Regiment 19*, *Hauptsturmführer* Dr. Karl Segler, *II./SS-Panzer Grenadier-Regiment 21*, *Hauptsturmführer* Friedrich Richter, and the two batteries making up the artillery under *Hauptsturmführer* Gustav Krause) were dug in to the east of De Kolonie, Von der Heydte's *I.*, *III.* and *IV./FJR 6* to the west. Von der Heydte was supported by the remaining (now) seven *Sturmgeschütze* from *2.* and *3./559*. The penal battalion, *6. Luftwaffe Bewährungs Bataillon zur besondere Verwendung*, as well as *I./FJR 18* (*Major* Kerutt) covered both sides of the road right in the path of any attacker. Kerutt's antitank platoon under *Leutnant* Vinke, had set up a tank-trap a few kilometres up the road.⁷⁵⁸ It was cleverly hidden in slit trenches with *Panzerfäuste* and *Ofenrohre*. Further back, at the Dommel bridge, was *14. Kompanie* (*Hauptmann* Brockes) with its nine ex-Russian 7.62 cm *Pak* close to the road. To provide artillery cover *Sturmbannführer* Krause's four guns and four howitzers were in position near Borkel and Schaft.

A new fact that came to light while researching this book was that Von der Heydte was aware of operation Market Garden, which is not really surprising as 'There cannot have been many troops in XXX Corps in contact with the enemy who have not been warned of an impending airborne operation' as the intelligence report stated on 14 September.⁷⁵⁹ Although he did not know the exact size of the assaulting forces, a Belgian informant passed through the lines during the night of 14-15 September and told him that the Guards Armoured Division and elements of other armoured units were concentrating near Neerpelt, ready to move up at short notice. Von der Heydte then used this information to obtain support from *schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559* whose *Sturmgeschütze* as a result were positioned closer to the road to Valkenswaard and Eindhoven.⁷⁶⁰ There is no information about who else –if anyone- he informed. But then higher echelons already expected an attack along this axis. In fact as early as 9 September, even before Eisenhower had approved

⁷⁵⁷ KTB 88 AK, 14.09.44, A 274 and B 287; Von Hoffmann: troops in Eindhoven plus two companies of stragglers, Sicherings Kompanie 16, one platoon 8./SS-Unterf. Schule Arnheim, five 7,5 cm Pak, SS Motorcycle platoon Nederland, Flak-Abt. 428; Gohtsche: Marschbatl. 437, mortar platoon 8./SS-Unterf. Schule Arnheim, four 7.5 cm Flak plus troops in Helmond and Weert.

⁷⁵⁸ Not Finke as Margry states in *Market Garden*, 215, although there was also a *Leutnant* Finke in Kerutt's battalion. *Der deutsche Fallschirmjäger*, 20 September 1954, 11.

⁷⁵⁹ Quoted in Sebastian Ritchie, *Arnhem, Myth and Reality, Airborne Warfare, Air Power and the Failure of Operation Market Garden*, London 2011, 175.

⁷⁶⁰ Von der Heydte revealed this in January 1945 when interrogated by British officers. However, his claim that this move delayed the Guards' advance by 10 to 15 hours was nonsense; TNA WO 208/1200.

Montgomery's plan, the German high command had surmized that XXX Corps would launch a thrust from Eindhoven to Arnhem.⁷⁶¹

The day before Market Garden started, a new boundary was drawn up between *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps* and *Kampfgruppe Walther*.⁷⁶² The same day a new corps headquarters arrived, *LXXXVI. Armeekorps*, commanded by *General der infanterie* Hans Von Obstfelder. It would take charge of Erdmann's division and *Division zbV 176*. All these changes meant that only the *Jagdpanther* in *1./schwere Heeres Panzerjägerabteilung 559* were now the responsibility of Chill (and Reinhard), while Walther (and hence Student) was in control of the *Sturmgeschütze* in *2. and 3. Kompanie*.⁷⁶³ *Schwere Heeres Panzerjägerabteilung 559* no longer operated as one unit. Once again one of the tenets of armoured operations, keeping the iron fist together, was neglected. The *Jagdpanther* in reserve at Turnhout would not be involved in the initial stages, but the *Sturmgeschütze* who were with *Kampfgruppe Walther* were the only SPs available and they would have to weather the worst of the storm.

Market

As Sunday 17 September dawned Reinhard got ready for another round of inspections. It was a sunny day and the skies were clear. He left his headquarters in Moergestel just before nine a.m. and headed straight for Turnhout to meet with Dreyer.⁷⁶⁴ After discussing the situation at Ten Aard he spoke to Schuster, *Ia Kampfgruppe Chill*, and then drove on to visit *Feld Ersatz Bataillon 347* in Voorheide near the Belgian-Dutch border. After that he proceeded up the road to Eersel, where *schwere Heeres Panzerjägerabteilung 559* had its headquarters, to inspect the terrain along the new boundary of his Corps. From there Reinhard intended to drive back to his headquarters in Moergestel via Wintelre and Oirschot. It was nearly noon and Reinhard noticed an increase in Allied air activity.⁷⁶⁵ Because of this he frequently had to stop and park under cover of some trees. After many delays he finally arrived in Oirschot just in time to see long streams of C-47's, a number of them towing gliders, passing low overhead. Some were so low that he could see the cables connecting the gliders to the planes. Hundreds of planes filled the sky, the humming of their engines loud and clear. Reinhard immediately realized the significance of what he saw: airborne landings on a major scale. It was also clear to him that he needed to get back to his headquarters right away. But there was still the danger from the dreaded *Jabo's*, the fighter-bombers. There was only one thing for it. Reinhard jumped onto the pillion of one of the motorcycles escorting him and raced back to Moergestel where messages had been coming in thick and fast since two p.m.⁷⁶⁶

Reinhard phoned Tilburg and ordered *Oberst* Böhmer, the *Kommandeur* of *SS-Polizei-Sicherungs-Regiment 3*, a collection of policemen aged between 35 and 45, to

⁷⁶¹ Ultra message HP 242, 15.09.44, quoted in Jeffson, *Operation Market-Garden*, 71.

⁷⁶² KTB 88 AK, 16.09.44, C 226.

⁷⁶³ Captured documents, Second Army IS 121, 03.10.44.

⁷⁶⁴ Full report, KTB 88 AK, 17.09.44, A 317.

⁷⁶⁵ This section, Reinhard, 13.

⁷⁶⁶ KTB 88 AK, 17.09.44, 14.00 hours, phone call from Schuster at K.Gr.Chill.

give him his first battalion which was stationed in one of the local barracks.⁷⁶⁷ These (reserve) policemen had been independent tradesmen or shopkeepers and none had been in the police before that time. Since May they had only had rudimentary infantry training in between normal police duties and were lightly armed.⁷⁶⁸ Each company had two machine-guns and one 5 cm mortar. Nevertheless, Reinhard immediately despatched two companies to the reported landing zone, the Sonse Heide north of Eindhoven.⁷⁶⁹ One company was sent to Udenhout where a landing was reported. Later this turned out to be false, it was a lonely British Horsa glider which had come loose, and the policemen joined the others at Best early in the evening.⁷⁷⁰ What Reinhard had seen was part of the Allied air armada, consisting of 1,047 C-47's, 440 gliders and about 1,200 fighters.⁷⁷¹ These had come in along two routes, the southerly one (which Reinhard had seen a part of) across the liberated part of Belgium to IP (Initial Point) Delos near Beringen, where it turned north to drop the US 101st on their designated zones. The northern one ran straight east as far as Vught, IP Ellis, where Student had set up his headquarters in a villa (Bergen) on 7 September. From there it turned north to drop the US 82nd and 1st Airborne on their destinations.

The gamble to make the landings by day paid off. Although planes were hit by light and heavy *Flak*, losses were light. The *Flak-Kompanie* of 559 commanded by *Oberfeldwebel* Lustnauer, with its *Sdkfz 7/1* also claimed to have shot down a number of WACO gliders.⁷⁷² In spite of these losses the rest managed to drop most of the troops in the designated Landing Zones or Dropzones. However, at the end of the day, both the 1st Airborne Division at Arnhem and the US 82nd Airborne Division at Nijmegen had failed to secure the main prizes, the road bridges over the Rhine and Waal.⁷⁷³ The British had a few companies from the 2nd Parachute Battalion occupying the northern end of the Arnhem bridge, the Americans had only just sent the 1st Battalion of the 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment to Nijmegen and it would not get there until just after midnight. Further south, the 101st had done significantly better although they had not secured all their objectives either.⁷⁷⁴ The Screaming Eagles managed to seize the bridges at Veghel and St.-Oedenrode and at Bokt they

⁷⁶⁷ The other two battalions were in Amsterdam and The Hague. The police regiment was not strictly an SS unit but had been absorbed by the SS in 1943. Their uniform was a green version of the normal Wehrmacht type. Most of the men, except for 120 Slovenes, had only served with the police since being drafted in 1939. Before the war most of them had been professional tradesmen (Second Army IS 112 and 114).

⁷⁶⁸ II Cdn Corps, IS 66, 11.10.44.

⁷⁶⁹ KTB 88 AK, 17.09.44, A 323. Source: Second Army IS 112 and IS 114.

⁷⁷⁰ The Horsa carried two jeeps and had a crew of six. They managed to unload the jeeps and before Germans, members of the Hermann Göring Regiment, could stop them they had driven off in their jeeps. For details of their escape, *Over d'n Oorlog, Udenhout en Biezenmortel tussen bezetting en bevrijding*, Udenhout 1994, 163-5.

⁷⁷¹ Broken down: 101st: 424 C-47 and 70 gliders, 82nd: 480 C-47 and 50 gliders, 1st: 143 C-47 and 320 gliders (Margry, *Market Garden*, 96, 132, 176).

⁷⁷² Kopka, *Missbraucht und Gebeutelt*, 145.

⁷⁷³ Interestingly the British are always criticised for this, the Americans never are. We shall get back to this issue at the end of chapter 9.

⁷⁷⁴ Following section, Jack Didden and Maarten Swarts, *Einddoel Maas*, Weesp 1984, 35-40.

established a bridgehead across the Wilhelmina Canal, from which they could launch the attack on Eindhoven the following day.

Garden

Horrocks had taken up position on the flat roof of the same zinc factory south of the canal from which the Irish Guards had first studied the bridge only a week earlier.⁷⁷⁵ He watched the vast armada on its way north. His feelings about the operation were decidedly mixed. On the one hand he was worried because he knew it was going to be a tough fight. On the other he was confident of its success. Like most Allied commanders Horrocks was still feeling the euphoria that had characterized the preceding weeks and the sight of the German army in retreat. Still, he was anxious. He knew that the terrain, marshy and flat and with numerous waterways, would make a speedy advance tricky at best. Still, the idea of failure never entered his head. At two p.m. sharp the artillery barrage began. More than three hundred guns, ten field regiments, three medium regiments and one heavy regiment, opened fire on pre-arranged targets. Exactly thirty-two minutes later the barrage shifted to a line 360 metres in front of the main line and extending 900 metres either side of the road. The road itself was not targeted to avoid cratering, which might impede the advance. Three minutes later it was Zero Hour, 14.35 hours, and the barrage began to creep forward at 180 metres a minute. It was time for the Irish Guards Group to advance.

The march column consisted of four groups. Leading the advance was No.3 Squadron, without infantry.⁷⁷⁶ It was followed by No.1 Squadron with No.1 Company (the infantry riding on top of the Shermans), No.2 Squadron carrying No.4 Company and finally No.2 Company in lorries. Lieutenant-Colonel 'Joe' Vandeleur and his headquarters party would travel right in the middle. Lieutenant Keith Heathcote had the dubious honour of commanding the lead tank. At 14.35 hours exactly he shouted 'Driver –Advance' and operation Garden began. Overhead the first patrol of Typhoons was arriving, waiting for further instructions. The fighter-bombers had rocketed targets earlier in the day, they had then been grounded whilst the airborne landings took place. Now they returned in the form of 'cab ranks', circling lazily overhead ready to give support when called upon. Heathcote and the rest of No.3 Squadron followed the creeping barrage as closely as they could. The clouds of dust made it hard to see the actual shell bursts and Heathcote several times got too close as he was nearing the German lines. Right before the attack began *Oberst* Walther had ordered Kerutt who was visiting him at his headquarters in Valkenswaard to despatch one company to Valkenswaard.⁷⁷⁷ The barrage made it impossible for the *Fallschirmjäger* to obey the order and they could only cling to the soil praying that the ordeal would soon end. The barrage also raged further back across the positions of Brockes' *14. Kompanie. Hauptmann* Brockes himself was fatally wounded in the head by shrapnel and all of his ex-Russian *Pak* were knocked out without having fired a shot, the result of their being positioned so close to the road. Meanwhile the Irish Guards kept advancing, followed by the infantry of the 2nd Devons and the tanks of the 15th/19th Hussars on either side of the road.

⁷⁷⁵ Horrocks, *Corps Commander*, 100-1.

⁷⁷⁶ This section, Fitzgerald, *The Irish Guards*, 490-2.

⁷⁷⁷ Details concerning I./FJR 18, Volz, Fjg-Regiment von Hoffmann, 11-2.

For the first ten minutes everything went well. Then the leading Shermans passed the tank trap set up by *Leutnant* Vinke and his anti-tank platoon.⁷⁷⁸ They allowed the first tanks to pass them by before they arose from their well-hidden trenches and opened fire on the Shermans with *Panzerfäuste* and *Ofenrohre*. Within a space of two minutes nine tanks had been knocked out, the last three of No.3 Squadron in the lead and the first six of No.1 Squadron following it. The leading half of No.3 Squadron careered on until Major M. O’Cock, the CO of No.1 Squadron, was informed that they had “lost their tail”, which brought them to a halt. Even before they came to a complete standstill the infantry riding the tanks along were off and into the ditches while the Shermans began to spray the hedges and woods with their Brownings and guns. Outraged at the ambush the Irish Guards gave the Germans a rough treatment that afternoon. As soon as the advance came to a standstill, Vandeleur called in the RAF Typhoons. The air attack was impressive and devastating. Each Typhoon carried eight rocket projectiles (RP) which hissed towards their targets. Down the planes screamed, guided by eleven VCP’s (Visual Control Posts). All in all 91 ‘Tiffies’ made nineteen attacks, firing a total of 427 rocket projectiles.⁷⁷⁹ The attacks were made in an area from de Kolonie as far as Valkenswaard and along both sides of the road. Only one Typhoon was hit by *Flak* and had to make a forced landing. The tanks laid down yellow smoke to indicate their own positions and red for the enemy ones. Although the Typhoons in most cases reported that they could not observe the results of their attacks, these still had the desired effect and demoralised *Fallschirmjäger* from *I./FJR 18* left their trenches, most of them trembling with shock.

The Irish Guards also got involved with *schwere Heeres Panzerjägerabteilung 559*. The *Sturmgeschütze*, together with a few companies of Von der Heydte’s men, held the left (west side) of the road. Leaving it in order to bypass the German positions ahead, Lance-Sergeant Bertie Cowan spotted a *Sturmgeschütz* against a farm, the Odiliahoeve. He knocked it out with one shot, drove up and ‘persuaded’ the crew to climb on to the back of his Firefly and point out their comrades’ position. In this way *559* lost at least two *Sturmgeschütze*, possibly three.⁷⁸⁰ Von der Heydte and *FJR 6* were pushed back, well away from the main road.

The Irish Guards resumed the advance at 16.30 hours after a bulldozer had shoved aside some of the wrecks. This time there was no trouble and an hour later No.3 Squadron reached the Dommel bridge, passing the wreckage of Brockes’ guns which should have stopped them. The squadron now took up defensive positions while the other two groups passed through. This reshuffle took considerable time and it was already getting dark by the time No.2 Squadron and No.4 Company approached

⁷⁷⁸ *Der deutsche Fallschirmjäger*, 20 September 1954, 11-2.

⁷⁷⁹ Second TAF Daily Log, 17.09.44. One squadron (182) attacked targets further west, close to Retie, knocking out three vehicles and three guns from III./F.Pz.Ers.und Ausb.Rgt. H.Gö. The eight Typhoons fired 28 RP’s. This attack (including the rockets fired) is often included in the attack along the Corridor in other books (e.g. Margry, *Market Garden*, 217). For some mysterious reason 143 Wing is never included in these attacks, but 2 TAF Daily Log clearly specifies strafing of the road and the woods from a point four kilometres south of Valkenswaard and upwards. The planes were from: 174, 175, 184 and 245 Squadron (121 Wing), 137, 181 and 247 Squadron (124 Wing), 132 Squadron (125 Wing) and 438, 439 and 440 Squadron (143 Wing).

⁷⁸⁰ Kopka, *Missbraucht und Gebeutelt*, 145.

Valkenswaard. The only light came from three of four big fires. The roads were strewn with debris, but at 20.05 hours Major E.G. Tyler's Squadron reached the northern exit of the town.⁷⁸¹ Then something happened which has been a source of controversy ever since: at ten p.m. Brigadier Gwatkin gave the order to halt for the night and the infantry set up an all-round defence.⁷⁸²

Gwatkin's order to halt in Valkenswaard, showing an apparent lack of urgency, has puzzled historians ever since. Several explanations have been given. The most logical and reasonable one seems to be that the Guards had reached their D-Day objective for Phase I as described in the divisional order. Moreover the order also clearly stated that they would pause on the line Veldhoven-Aalst-Heeze until ordered forward by Horrocks, to establish contact with the 101st in Eindhoven.⁷⁸³ So basically the Guards did exactly as they had been instructed to albeit a few miles south of the objective. The lack of a sense of urgency can also be explained by the fact that the Guards themselves thought that they were 'more or less through and (...) expected the battle will loosen up tomorrow.'⁷⁸⁴ Suggestions, made long after the controversy had begun, that the Guards knew when they halted in Valkenswaard that the Son bridge was blown and therefore should have carried on, are refuted by the records. Just after midnight Second Army noted that 'There is NO [capitals in original] news of the airborne troops as they are using a different cipher to 30 Corps...'⁷⁸⁵ Moreover, it was pitch black by the time the order came so continuing along a single road with armour against unknown opposition was a certain recipe for disaster. As it was the Guards would make up for any time lost during the next stage of their advance.

The Germans

When operation Market Garden began, *Oberleutnant* Franz Kopka, officially still the acting *Kommandeur* of 559, was recuperating in Coudewater near 's-Hertogenbosch, a psychiatric institution cum hospital used as a *Kriegslazarett* (military hospital) for the last three days.⁷⁸⁶ He was woken up by his driver, *Obergefreiter* Rudi Nägele. It was then that Kopka heard the droning of the Allied air armada passing overhead. He quickly grasped what was happening. Kopka discharged himself and took over command of his *Abteilung* back at the command post in Eersel. Next Kopka consulted Walther, who had pulled back to Leende after the loss of Valkenswaard. Kopka ordered the three *Sturmgeschütze* that were left to reinforce the next line of resistance at Aalst, a few miles north of Valkenswaard. During the night he set up a new headquarters near Aalst. As yet Kopka could not use his two operational *Jagdpanther* which were still in *Korps* reserve at Turnhout to block a potential advance from the Ten Aard bridgehead.⁷⁸⁷

⁷⁸¹ Second Army Intel Log, 17.09.44, serial 52.

⁷⁸² Bennett, *A magnificent disaster*, 100.

⁷⁸³ Guards Division, War Diary, Divisional Order 12, 4.

⁷⁸⁴ Second Army Intel Log, 18.09.44, serial 3.

⁷⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁸⁶ This section, Kopka, *Missbraucht und Gebeutelt*, 323. Re: the *Kriegslazarett* which was under Generalstabarzt Neumüller, Ad Hermens, *Rosmalen in de Vuurlinie*, Rosmalen 1994, 19-20.

⁷⁸⁷ KTB 88 AK, 17.09.44, Tagesmeldung.

Meanwhile the bulk of Von der Heydte's regiment, still without its *II. Battalion*, was largely unhurt by the breakthrough.⁷⁸⁸ As mentioned above, only *IV./FJR 6* nearest De Kolonie, got caught up in the whirlwind and about a hundred *Fallschirmjäger* were taken prisoner. Von der Heydte lost touch with Walther, and decided to pull back his left wing to a wood (Maay) about a hundred metres from the road. In vain he then tried to establish contact with friendly units to the north, the direction of Eindhoven.⁷⁸⁹ It was clear that a huge gap had been torn in the German defences and because there was still no communication between the two sides of the breach, Student reassigned Von der Heydte to *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps*. Reinhard in turn straight away put *FJR 6* back under Chill's command.⁷⁹⁰

The second day

Operation Garden was not just restricted to XXX Corps advancing along a single highway to Nijmegen and ultimately Arnhem. In fact, the whole of Second Army was to be employed in this ambitious plan. Both VIII Corps and XII Corps were to advance alongside XXX Corps. In detail this meant that VIII Corps was to secure the right flank while XII Corps was to carry out the same task on the left. On the right VIII Corps was commanded by Lieutenant-General Sir Richard O'Connor, the general who, as commander of the Western Desert Force, in 1941 had won the first spectacular victory for the British Army of the Second World War. He was later taken prisoner by Rommel's men, but escaped after more than two years of captivity. Were it not for his long absence this able soldier instead of Montgomery might have risen to the highest command.⁷⁹¹ His counterpart in XII Corps was Lieutenant-General Sir Neil Ritchie who was considered an able and cool-headed officer by his superiors.⁷⁹² Although in 1941 he had suffered a major defeat as commanding officer of the famous Eighth Army and had been relieved of his command, he had turned out to be a competent Corps Commander since D-Day. Nevertheless, both commanders had their work cut out for them as they needed to keep pace with XXX Corps in the middle. The problem was that the main roads ran lateral to the direction of attack, plus they did not even have a decent bridgehead from which to start their operations. For VIII Corps establishing a bridgehead was going to be a major headache anyway as most of its divisions were still assembling or on their way. Nevertheless, the 3rd Division was ordered to cross the Maas-Scheldt Canal on D+1 (18 September) in the vicinity of Lille St.Hubert. The starting point for XII Corps was to have been the bridgehead at Ten Aard, but as mentioned in the previous chapter, the Germans had effectively sealed that off. Ritchie thereupon decided to try and establish a new bridgehead closer to the main advance. He ordered the 53rd (Welsh) Division to cross north of Lommel on D-Day (17 September). If Von der Heydte's men thought they could spend the night in relative peace, they had a big surprise coming to them.

⁷⁸⁸ Von der Heydte, *Muss ich sterben*, 4.

⁷⁸⁹ Von der Heydte also complains of a gap to the west, but his memory is mistaken here by half a day as the crossing by 53rd Division had yet to take place.

⁷⁹⁰ KTB 88 AK, 18.09.44, 04.15 and 04.30 hours.

⁷⁹¹ Details on O'Connor in Keegan, *Churchill's Generals*, 183-198.

⁷⁹² Keegan, *Churchill's Generals*, 208.

The attack by the 53rd Division under began at eleven p.m.⁷⁹³ A barrage by seven Field Regiments, two Medium Regiments and mortars hit the positions of the *Fallschirmjäger*.⁷⁹⁴ Brigadier G.B. Sugden, commanding the 158th Brigade, decided to send two battalions across on either side of the demolished bridge north of Lommel. After the bridgehead was sufficiently deep the divisional engineers were to construct a Class 9 and a Class 40 bridge. The night was dark and it was pouring with rain as the first boats crossed half an hour after the artillery had opened fire. The 1st East Lancashire Regiment under Lieutenant-Colonel G.W.P.N. Burden operated on the left, the 7th Royal Welsh Fusiliers (RWF) under Lieutenant-Colonel G.F.T.B. Dickson on the right. The East Lancs were soon across. This was sheer luck and due to the German troop dispositions opposite them. The wood to the west of the Lommel-Luijkgestel road was occupied by *Fallschirmjäger* from *Oberstleutnant* Stephan (*II./FJR 18*) while troops from von der Heydte's *5./FJR 6* were in the wood east of the road.⁷⁹⁵ By a fluke the East Lancs landed unobserved, then skirted around the positions of *II./FJR 18* and took their objective, north of the wood by 03.30 hours. However, the 7th RWF did not fare so well. They landed in full view of Von der Heydte's men and were unable to expand their bridgehead which was only two hundred metres deep. As a consequence, on the right flank a raft was soon in operation, but on the left one all movement came to a standstill. Still, that was the extent of the success for the East Lancs. Because Stephan's men were still in the wood, it proved impossible to construct a proper bridge. Every time the engineers started work they came under fire and it took repeated calls to Brigade before the East Lancs finally cleared the wood at 13.30 hours and removed thirty-six *Fallschirmjäger* from slit-trenches less than three hundred metres from the canal. Around the same time the right flank of the bridgehead was also enlarged after the 1/5th Welch under Lieutenant-Colonel H.T. Gibson had crossed over and a raft was in operation there as well. Gibson himself was seriously wounded and subsequently died. Bridge construction could now begin and in the evening of 18 September XII Corps finally had a bridgehead from which to launch its supporting operation.

Von der Heydte, who now saw his right flank threatened as well as his left one near the road, ordered his troops to pull back. As mentioned above Von der Heydte was once more part of *Kampfgruppe Chill*.⁷⁹⁶ Reinhard had only just issued orders that Von der Heydte was to maintain his current positions as long as possible when he learned of the withdrawal. Reinhard was livid with rage. Von der Heydte was reputed to have pulled back his troops as far as Bladel, but that turned out to be only a rumour. Nevertheless he instructed Chill to take a firm grip on the regiment. It was to be clear that Von der Heydte was not permitted to order a withdrawal by himself. In his defence Chill said that he was not aware of this as he had only just been given *FJR 6* back.⁷⁹⁷ Von der Heydte himself complained about the lack of artillery support

⁷⁹³ Oddly, the division's history by Barclay maintains the attack happened on the 16th, primary sources all confirm it was on the 17th.

⁷⁹⁴ Details attack, War Diary 53rd Welsh Division and *Royal Engineers Battlefield Tour*, 88-91.

⁷⁹⁵ Second Army, Intel Log, 18.09.44, serial 45.

⁷⁹⁶ KTB 88 AK, 18.09.44, 04.15 and 04.30 hours.

⁷⁹⁷ KTB 88 AK, 18.09.44, 08.52 hours.

and urgently requested new *Panzerfäuste* and heavy machine-guns. His companies, he said, were now down to an average of forty men.⁷⁹⁸

Best and Eindhoven

There was also some positive news for Reinhard. That Monday he was informed of the arrival of two divisions from *15. Armee* that were assigned to *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps*. Just after being told about the new bridgehead by Von der Heydte, he learned that he was to receive the *59. and 711. Infanterie-Division*.⁷⁹⁹ Reinhard intended to send the *59. I.D.* to the area Boxtel-Tilburg and the *711. I.D.* 'probably' to Eindhoven and environs. Early on the 18th the plans changed. Reinhard got a phone call from *1. Fallschirmarmee* informing him that Student had assigned *LXXXVI. Armeekorps* (Von Obstfelder) the *107. Panzerbrigade*. The new plan was for Von Obstfelder's troops to attack via Eindhoven and block the advance of XXX Corps, while the *59. I.D.* would attack the American Paratroopers on the Sonse Heide. The two attacks were to meet near Son. Meanwhile at Best German plans had gone awry.⁸⁰⁰ The *Kampfgruppe* under *Oberstleutnant* Berthold Rink (*GR 723*) was supposed to occupy the DZ and LZ on the Sonse Heide, but it never got the chance to start the attack, mainly because the Americans were also on the move. When it became clear the previous evening that H Company was stuck at Best, Colonel Michaelis (502nd) decided to send the rest of the 3rd Battalion under Lieutenant-Colonel Robert G. Cole to join them. At first light the battalion did manage to make contact with H Company. However, the attack by *Kampfgruppe Rink*, now including *FEB 347* and *I./GR 723* (originally the *Korps* reserve), collided with the move west of the 3rd Battalion and the result was that both became stuck. Only from Best itself had German troops managed to advance about one kilometre.⁸⁰¹ In the ensuing fight Cole was killed and in a twist of irony his opposite number, *Oberstleutnant* Rink, was seriously wounded. Rink was found by the Americans and eventually ended up in a military hospital in Brussels where he died of his wounds nearly two months later.⁸⁰² He was succeeded by *Oberstleutnant* Lenz.⁸⁰³ The latter was obviously a lesser man than his predecessor and soon Reinhard learned that Lenz considered pulling his troops back. He told him off in no uncertain terms informing him that he would be court-martialled if he ever seriously considered retreat. From the next day his *Kampfgruppe* would come under the *59. Infanterie-Division* whose attack he was to support, so there was no more room for independent actions.⁸⁰⁴ The rest of the day the balance kept shifting to and fro, but eventually the Americans reached the Eindhoven-Boxtel road and set up a road block there. The American attempt to get to the Best bridge had become futile anyway as the bridge was blown at 13.10 hours on Student's personal orders.⁸⁰⁵

⁷⁹⁸ KTB 88 AK, 18.09.44, A 344.

⁷⁹⁹ KTB 88 AK, 18.09.44, 04.15 hours.

⁸⁰⁰ This section, Leonard Rapport and Arther Northwood jr., *Rendezvous with Destiny, A History of the 101st Airborne Division*, Washington 1948, 289-293.

⁸⁰¹ KTB 88 AK, 18.09.44, 10.45 hours.

⁸⁰² He died on 12 November 1944. PAJVD.

⁸⁰³ KTB 88 AK, 18.09.44, B 295.

⁸⁰⁴ KTB 88 AK, 18.09.44, 18.45 hours.

⁸⁰⁵ Second Army Intel Log 18.09.44, serial 30.

The same day Eindhoven was captured by the American paratroopers after a stiff fight with a small detachment from *Kampfgruppe Köppel*.⁸⁰⁶ Further south XXX Corps had more problems overcoming the German resistance. Three *Sturmgeschütze* from *schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559* supported by another *Flak* group of the same *Kampfgruppe Köppel*, managed to hold up the Guards' advance throughout the day.⁸⁰⁷ It was not until the Germans finally gave up at the end of the afternoon that the advance was resumed and entered Eindhoven amid the cheers of Dutchmen and Americans. Meanwhile after almost a fortnight in action, on 18 September *schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559* was reduced to just four fighting vehicles, one, single operational *Sturmgeschütz* and three operational *Jagdpanther*, north of the Ten Aard bridgehead.⁸⁰⁸

New worries

At the end of Monday 18th *General* Reinhard began to be increasingly worried about his left flank. Because Von der Heydte had pulled back his troops and had taken up positions from the Maas-Scheldt Canal up to Hapert, a huge gap had opened up from Hapert northwards, as far as Best. In desperation Reinhard looked around, realising there were no units to spare for the moment. He had already assigned the *59. Infanterie-Division* to attack the American Paratroopers at Son and the next reinforcement, the *245. Infanterie-Division* was only now on its way to Tilburg. It would take at least three days to arrive. Gambling that the Allied advance north of Antwerp had stopped for the moment he decided once again to use the *719. Infanterie-Division*, to create reserves. Initially he assigned *FEB 1719* to Von der Heydte to plug the gap.⁸⁰⁹ However, sometime during the afternoon he changed his mind. He decided to insert a whole new *Kampfgruppe* instead.⁸¹⁰ Reinhard put *Oberst* Zuber, originally *Arko 119*,⁸¹¹ in command of a combined infantry force made up of *III./743* and *FEB 1719*.⁸¹² The new battle group was initially assigned to Chill.⁸¹³ *Kampfgruppe Zuber* which comprised of about 700 men, four field guns and some 7.5 cm *Pak* guns was to plug the twenty kilometre gap. An impossible task if ever there was any and Zuber realised that he could only stall for time. Around midnight the bulk of the *Kampfgruppe* assembled in Hilvarenbeek. Soon they were on their way to set up a defensive line anchored on the string of villages between Hapert and Eindhoven. Still, Reinhard remained anxious. As he himself put it 'Sicherungsfront von Hapert bis Best, Abschnitt Zuber, ist so dünn, dass sie mehr eine Beobachtungs- als eine Verteidigungsfront darstellt. Auf eine Breite von 19 km konnten nur 2 Btle. eingesetzt werden.'⁸¹⁴ That evening Reinhard was not optimistic of a positive outcome anyway because, as he pointed out to *1. Fallschirmarmee*, several of his units, *Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 6* and *Grenadier-Regiment 723* among

⁸⁰⁶ This section, Rapport and Northwood, *Rendezvous with Destiny*, 301-6, and Karel Margry, *De bevrijding van Eindhoven*, Eindhoven 1982, 42-62.

⁸⁰⁷ Cf. KTB 88 AK, 18.09.44, 11.40 and 13.18 hours.

⁸⁰⁸ KTB 88 AK, 20.09.44, Tagesmeldung.

⁸⁰⁹ KTB 88 AK, 18.09.44, 04.30, 04.45, 08.25, 08.30, 12.07 hours.

⁸¹⁰ KTB 88 AK, 18.09.44, Tagesmeldung.

⁸¹¹ KTB 88 AK, 21.08.44, A 97.

⁸¹² KTB 88 AK, 18.09.44, A 343.

⁸¹³ KTB 88 AK, 18.09.44, A 341.

⁸¹⁴ KTB 88 AK, 18.09.44, Beurteilung der Lage.

them, had suffered huge losses over the last fortnight.⁸¹⁵ It was, once again, a race for time, this time between *Kampfgruppe Zuber* and the 53rd (Welsh) Division.

Counterattacks

While Reinhard fretted about the front west of Eindhoven, he also realized on 19 September that the decisive attack could and should fall at the American Landing Zone near Son. He had high hopes for this counterattack. Moreover, the fact that the American Paratroopers there were to be attacked from two sides, Poppe's *59. I.D.* from the west and the *107. Panzerbrigade* under Major Berndt-Joachim Freiherr von Maltzahn from the east, meant that there was a real chance of success. Poppe's division was the strongest infantry division within *15. Armee* and it boasted five infantry battalions, each about four hundred strong, one *Füsilier-Bataillon* of 150 strong and a *Feld Ersatz Bataillon* with 450 men, which meant it had at least 2,600 infantry.⁸¹⁶ In addition the division had fifteen light and six heavy howitzers plus ten 7.5 cm *Pak* guns. The German attack had become all the more urgent as that very morning the Guards had completed the Bailey bridge across the Wilhelmina Canal at Son. At 06.15 hours the first vehicles crossed and soon the Household Cavalry were on their way to the 82nd Airborne Division. During the day most of the Guards Division reached Nijmegen. However, there they were stuck because the Americans had failed to seize a bridge over the river Waal. Further south the 101st received the first of two tank battalions, the 15th/19th Hussars commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel A.D. Taylor. The second one, the 44th Royal Tank Regiment (RTR) under Lieutenant-Colonel G.C. Hopkinson would not arrive until the early evening of the 19th. Both would play crucial roles in the fight for the Corridor, the road between the Belgian border and Nijmegen.

Aware of the urgency Poppe had launched the attack as soon as he could. At seven a.m. his troops established contact with *Kampfgruppe Lenz* at Best and started their attack in the direction of Son.⁸¹⁷ It became an unmitigated disaster. The 502nd Parachute Infantry Regiment counterattacked and by the end of the day Poppe's division had been beaten. Total German casualties that day were a staggering 600 which meant that Poppe had lost at least a quarter of his infantry.⁸¹⁸ In view of these figures *Kampfgruppe Lenz* and the *59. I.D.* had no option but to go over to the defensive. The armoured attack from the other side of the Corridor also failed completely.⁸¹⁹ After setting off from Venlo railway station it took Von Maltzahn's brigade most of the 19th to close on the Wilhelmina Canal near Son. Then a hastily summoned sixpounder gun of the 101st Airborne managed to knock out the leading *Panther*. After this Von Maltzahn ordered his tanks back to Nederwetten.

The flanks move up

While the fight for the Corridor was heating up, the same happened with the two flanking operations. On the left XII Corps (Lieutenant-General Sir Neil Ritchie) had

⁸¹⁵ KTB 88 AK, 18.09.44, Tagesmeldung.

⁸¹⁶ Details: KTB H Gr B, 16.09.44, Ia 6101/44.

⁸¹⁷ KTB 88 AK, 19.09.44, 07.00 hours.

⁸¹⁸ PAJVD. Rapport and Northwood, *Rendezvous with Destiny*, 311, mention 1,100 plus 700 dead. This seems rather excessive. Thanks to Johan van Doorn I can give a more realistic figure.

⁸¹⁹ This section, Didden and Swarts, *Einddoel Maas*, 51-2 and 58-61, and Sixt, 1-3.

not been very successful initially. After the crossing in the evening of the 17th, the bridgehead established by the 53rd (Welsh) Division north of Lommel remained small throughout the following day. It was not until the early morning of the 19th that the 53rd Division finally managed to break free. Von der Heydte pulled his units back to a line roughly from Postel to Hapert widening the gap north of the bridgehead which was exactly what Reinhard had feared and which was why he had sent *Kampfgruppe Zuber* there. But worse was to come. At three p.m. bad news reached Chill.⁸²⁰ His headquarters had received a garbled radio message from Stephan's *5. Kompanie* that the enemy had broken through. The word 'surrender' was mentioned. Later it became clear that *7. Kompanie* was also in serious trouble. It was said to have been 'crushed' ('*überraunt*'). But that is not what happened. In fact Stephan's battalion (*II./FJR 18*) had not been crushed at all, it was on the run. Soon the armoured cars of the 53rd Recce Regiment were racing ahead. They made spectacular progress and early in the afternoon even reached the outskirts of Bladel at a hamlet with the curious name *Egypte*, some twenty kilometres from the Maas-Scheldt Canal.⁸²¹ Even though *FJR 6* made a strong stand and prevented the 4th Welch from advancing further west, other British units proceeded almost unopposed and reached Hapert, Duizel and Steensel. Reinhard's greatest fear, the collapse of his left flank, was about to come true. He was livid with rage, but Chill had already taken a grip and restored the situation. He assigned the remnants of *II./FJR 18* to Von der Heydte who distributed the men among the companies of *III./FJR 6* and demoted *Oberstleutnant* Stephan for incompetence and assigned him to command a bridge guard.⁸²² Also, *Kampfgruppe Zuber* arrived in the nick of time. During the night it occupied a line from Bladel to Wintelre where it managed to block the advance of the 4th Royal Welch Fusiliers on 20 September. Meanwhile the 1st Ox and Bucks reached Veldhoven and were poised to strike north which would mean that the split south of the Wilhelmina Canal between the German units on either side of the Corridor would be complete and irreparable. Reinhard still did not rule out a complete collapse of the front here and he seriously wondered how long the extremely thin line of strongpoints set up by Zuber would manage to hold.⁸²³

East of the Corridor VIII Corps (Lieutenant-General Sir Richard O'Connor) also finally saw action.⁸²⁴ During the early morning the 3rd Division established a small bridgehead over the Maas-Scheldt Canal despite fierce opposition from the remainder of *Kampfgruppe Heinke*. A bridge was completed, but the infantry was held up. O'Connor now ordered the 11th Armoured Division to move the 2nd Fife and Forfar Yeomanry Group across the bridge used by the Guards and then swing east towards Achel to outflank the German defences along the canal. Because of the enormous flow of traffic along the Corridor this was easier said than done and the group was not clear of the bridge until 17.30 hours. In the meantime the 3rd Division had widened its bridgehead. Fighting continued throughout the night and by dawn on 20 September the leading troops reached the line Achel-Hamont. Another bridge had been built across the canal meanwhile and now the 11th Armoured Division could

⁸²⁰ KTB 88 AK, 19.09.44, 15.00 and 20.00 hours.

⁸²¹ Second Army Intelligence Log, 19.09.44, serial 27.

⁸²² KTB 88 AK, 24.09.44, B 311 and I Corps, IS 86, 25.10.44.

⁸²³ KTB 88 AK, 20.09.44, Tagesmeldung.

⁸²⁴ This section, G.S. Jackson, *Operations of Eighth Corps*, 1948, 152-3.

finally be committed as per original plan. This was the breakthrough O'Connor had been waiting for and the advance of the mixed groups of the 11th Armoured Division encountered only negligible opposition as the 29th Armoured Brigade Group pushed north as far as Heeze and Someren, which was strongly defended, while the 159th Brigade Group reached Soerendonk and Hamont. The net result was that the *107. Panzerbrigade* now had to begin looking over its shoulder even while it was engaged in fierce combat with British tanks while attacking the Corridor.

Because of the failure of the attacks both by the *59. Infanterie-Division* and the *107. Panzerbrigade* and because the British XII and VIII Corps began to push ever further north on 20 September all German attempts to eliminate the Americans from the Landing Zone near Son now had to be abandoned. The focus of the battle for the Corridor shifted further northwards and for the next week Veghel, Schijndel and Eerde would become household names for both sides. Once more, *Kampfgruppe Chill* and *schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559* would be called upon to fulfil an important role.

The fifth day

As dawn broke on Thursday 21 September the prospects for operation Market Garden looked increasingly bleak. After two days' hard fighting the Guards and the US 82nd Airborne Division had finally cleared most of Nijmegen. The day before Paratroopers had crossed the Waal and established a small bridgehead on the north bank. At seven p.m. Sergeant Peter Robinson leading a troop of four Shermans from No.1 Squadron 2nd Grenadier Guards rushed across the road bridge in the gathering dusk. In a spectacular coup they took the bridge linking up with American Paratroopers about a kilometre north of the bridge even though Robinson's Firefly and another Sherman were hit by accurate 8.8 cm fire. Some Paratroopers were so glad to see the British tanks they even kissed them. Later the small troop was joined by another Sherman, commanded by No.1 Squadron's second-in-command, Captain Lord Peter Carrington. Two companies of infantry from the 3rd Irish Guards were also rushed across, but as it was now completely dark the tanks decided to halt for the night. This decision has been another source of controversy ever since. It was started by the CO of 82nd Airborne Division, Major-General Jim Gavin, who insisted that the Guards should have pushed on to Arnhem. How unrealistic it was to expect a troop of five tanks and some infantry to push on in the dead of night over land which was virtually impassable for tanks even under more favourable circumstances can be judged from what happened the following days.

At the farthest end, in Arnhem, the British 1st Airborne Division clung on to the bridge for dear life, in fact, the only building still in British hands at the end of the 20th was the 1st Brigade headquarters. Just before dawn on the 21st at five a.m. British resistance at the bridge ended. The gallant airborne soldiers had held on for more than three days, well over the forty-eight hours that had been in their original orders.⁸²⁵ It was up to XXX Corps to make one last, determined effort to get through to the bulk of the 1st Airborne, which was now concentrated in a perimeter at Oosterbeek, about three kilometres from Arnhem. That was not going to be easy.

⁸²⁵ Margry, *Market Garden*, 483.

Horrocks realised he was fighting three battles at the same time, trying to reach the Airbornes at Oosterbeek, preventing the Germans from closing in on Nijmegen and, last but not least, keeping open his tenuous supply line.⁸²⁶ The Germans, too, realised the importance of cutting this road, which by then had various names. It was Club Route for XXX Corps, Hell's Highway for the Americans and the Corridor for Second Army. Now that VIII Corps was closing on the Zuid-Willemsvaart, forcing the *107. Panzerbrigade* to pull back through Helmond, and XII Corps seemed to be about to break out west, threatening the German forces at Ten Aard from the rear, the only realistic chance for a German attack lay further north. The question was where and with which troops? New plans were being made that Thursday, on both sides.

American plans

The American Airbornes, in particular, had not been idle.⁸²⁷ General Taylor (101st Airborne) and his regimental commanders, were not content to await events alongside the road waiting for the Germans to attack them. Instead, they decided to find and destroy the German forces threatening Hell's Highway. Colonel John H. Michaelis of the 502nd Regiment was the first to strike. Now that his regiment was complete his three battalions were to attack the German forces around the key village of St.-Oedenrode. General Taylor had assigned C Squadron 44th Royal Tank Regiment (RTR) to assist him in this job. Michaelis sent the sixteen Shermans to the 3rd Battalion (Major John Stopka) which was to establish three outposts to the west of the village. The American attacks met with mixed success. The first two positions were occupied, but close to number 3 infantry supported by a 7.5 cm *Pak* gun beat off all attempts to advance. This area around St.-Oedenrode was held by *Hauptmann* Ewald's men who felt the full brunt of the Anglo-American attack.⁸²⁸ When night fell the attackers were still a hundred metres from their goal. The 1st Battalion (Lieutenant-Colonel Patrick F. Cassidy) was even less successful, although it should be emphasised that it had an almost impossible task, to attack in three different directions, to Olland, Schijndel and Koevering. Only the latter advance, up Hell's Highway, went without a hitch. The other two, both supported by two Shermans from the 44th RTR, soon ran into serious trouble. Back in Veghel, Colonel Howard R. Johnson (501st Regiment) had much more ambitious ideas about tackling the Germans.

What Johnson envisaged was an operation like the encirclement conducted by his 1st Battalion the day before, only on a somewhat grander scale.⁸²⁹ From members of the Dutch underground and the 3rd Battalion at Eerde, he learned that German troops were assembling near Schijndel. Suspecting an attack on Hell's Highway Johnson decided to lay a trap for the enemy. He told Lieutenant-Colonel Harry W.O. Kinnard (1st Battalion) to advance on Schijndel from Heeswijk, where he had won a spectacular victory the day before. Meanwhile Lieutenant-Colonel Julian J. Ewell (3rd Battalion) was to attack towards Schijndel from Eerde. When he learned of this plan General Taylor decided to up the ante even further. Instead of just two battalions, he

⁸²⁶ Horrocks, *Corps Commander*, 118.

⁸²⁷ This section, Didden and Swarts, *Einddoel Maas*, 73-4.

⁸²⁸ KTB Dewald, 21.09.44, 18.55 hours.

⁸²⁹ This section, Didden and Swarts, *Einddoel Maas*, 74-5.

decided to involve two regiments. He expanded Johnson's original plan by ordering Michaelis' 502nd to attack Schijndel from its positions north of St.-Oedenrode to be the 'dustpan' which would hopefully catch the Germans being pushed back by Johnson's 'broom' from Schijndel. The operation was to start early the following morning (22 September). However, just as they got back to their headquarters, Ewell and Kinnard received calls from Johnson ordering them to initiate the attack right away. A night attack over unknown ground did not really make much sense and Ewell was so angry that he was ready to quit.⁸³⁰ But orders were orders and as night fell American Paratroopers moved out. Taylor hoped they might achieve another, bigger Cannae.

German plans

That same day Reinhard continued to be worried about the gap created by the advance of XII Corps and he personally oversaw the relief of *Kampfgruppe Zuber* by the *245. Infanterie-Division*.⁸³¹ This division, commanded by *Generalleutnant* Erwin Sander, was the fourth from *15. Armee* to reach the mainland safely. On 20 September it was only just arriving in Tilburg. The division was weakened, since it had to give up units and the men were exhausted as they had been on the run, fighting rearguard actions, for almost three weeks. In addition they had travelled for 250 kilometres, most of it on foot. Any attack was therefore bound to end in a disaster. Still, their morale was still good and the division should be able to handle a purely defensive task provided it was given sufficient time to organise, and provided it received support from armoured units in the shape of *Sturmgeschütze*.⁸³² However, the main question for the moment was, would the division get there in time? It was a tense time for Reinhard. Throughout the day he received the most alarming messages about the progress of the 53rd (Welsh) Division. But just as the Welsh appeared to breaking through Zuber's screen, the first elements of the *245. I.D.* arrived in the nick of time. Sander had the divisional headquarters set up in Hilvarenbeek. The troops were in time, but only just. On the left *Grenadier-Regiment 936* blocked the advance at Middelbeers, although it could not prevent the 1st Ox and Bucks (15th Division) from reaching the Wihelminakanaal opposite Oirschot thus completing the screen west of the Corridor. On the right *Grenadier-Regiment 937* did the same at Netersel.⁸³³ For the time being Reinhard could breathe a sigh of relief. But to hold the front –there was still a gap between *GR 937* and Von der Heydte's *FJR 6*– more serious measures were needed. As it happened his superiors had been thinking along the same lines that day.

One glance at the map made it clear to *Generalfeldmarschall* Model, that the bridge at Veghel offered the best opportunity to cut the Allied supply route. Since the start of Market Garden the front had gradually widened until it had roughly assumed the shape of a wine glass upside down. Veghel was the point where the stem and the cup met. Here the Allied Corridor narrowed to the width of one road as far as the river Maas. At a meeting with Student and *Oberst* Eichert-Wiersdorff, Reinhard's

⁸³⁰ To this day the reason for this decision is not clear. Johnson was killed on 4 October 1944 before anyone could ask him why he had moved the attack forward.

⁸³¹ KTB 88 AK, 21.09.44, 08.00 hours.

⁸³² Von Hobe, 33-4.

⁸³³ Second Army Intel Log, 21.09.44, serial 63 and 22.09.44, serial 33.

Chief of staff, Model issued an order accordingly.⁸³⁴ The attack from both directions was aimed at cutting the lifeline to Nijmegen and beyond, more specifically the group attacking from the west was to seize the Veghel bridge and then blow it up. This mission was assigned to the *59. Infanterie-Division*. The rearguard of the *59. I.D.*, including *GR 1035*, arrived in the meantime. What was left of the regiment was commanded by *Major* Huber who had taken over from *Oberst* Schroeder. He was put in charge of the attacking group, now called *Kampfgruppe Huber*.⁸³⁵ Since *Generalleutnant* Poppe's division took a mauling at Best and *Hauptmann* Ewald's battalion seemed to be getting nowhere in Schijndel, *Major* Hans Jungwirth's *Fallschirmjäger* were ordered from 's-Hertogenbosch to assist the *59. I.D.*⁸³⁶ Jungwirth's battalion was quite formidable as it numbered no fewer than 952 men, most of them from the *Fallschirm Ersatz Bataillon* at Aschersleben.⁸³⁷

In addition the *Jagdpanther* of *559* were to be involved. Once again they were to be deployed in a role for which they were not really designed. At 18.30 hours Reinhard ordered Chill to send the three operational *Jagdpanther* via Tilburg to the southeast of Vught for the planned attack of 22 September.⁸³⁸ Later *559* reported back that it had four operational *Jagdpanther*.⁸³⁹ The order prompted the acting *Kommandeur* of *1. Kompanie, Oberleutnant* Seitz, to send in an urgent request to *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps* that day.⁸⁴⁰ He informed Reinhard that his company with the forward workshop and a small staff had been deployed at the Ten Aard bridgehead with four operational *Jagdpanther* while five others were in workshops near Zutphen. He asked to be reunited with the rest of *559* both for tactical and technical reasons. Seitz pointed out that the Belgian-Dutch terrain with its limited visibility was completely unsuitable for the heavy *Jagdpanther* unless they could operate alongside the more mobile *Sturmgeschütze*. The *Jagdpanther* could protect the lighter vehicles from enemy armour while the *Sturmgeschütze* could provide flank cover. Technically it also made sense, Seitz argued, because the forward workshop could only carry out minor repairs. Effectively this meant that most of the *Jagdpanther* which were in repair might never make it back to the front because of Allied air superiority. Finally Seitz said he was out of touch with headquarters which had moved back to Well, a village on the Maas, almost one hundred kilometres to the east of Turnhout. Seitz certainly had a point and *559* would indeed be reunited, just not in the way he had requested.

Since the start of operation Market Garden the remnants of *schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559* had been scattered to the four winds. For a couple of days it seemed as if the unit was gone. *Heeresgruppe B* reported that 'Jagd-Panther-Abt. 559, (...) scheinbar Fallsch.AOK 1 entglitten ist und mit Masse in Wesel steht.'⁸⁴¹ Thereupon the *Heeresgruppe* decided to order it in reserve. However, it was soon

⁸³⁴ KTB 88 AK, 21.09.44, 11.30 hours.

⁸³⁵ Poppe, 5.

⁸³⁶ KTB Dewald, 21.09.44, 12.00 hours.

⁸³⁷ KTB 88 AK, 22.09.44, A 410 and 51st (H) Division, Intel Sum 270.

⁸³⁸ KTB 88 AK, 21.09.44, 18.30.

⁸³⁹ KTB 88 AK, 21.09.44, Tagesmeldung.

⁸⁴⁰ KTB 88 AK, 21.09.44, A 390 and A 394.

⁸⁴¹ KTB H.Gr.B, 27.09.44, 10:05 hours. The indication 86 AK was obviously a typo and should read 88 AK.

discovered that this only applied to the two *Sturmgeschütz Kompanien* which were in Germany and that the *Jagdpanther* were still with *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps* west of the Corridor. One measure which *Oberst* Eichert-Wiersdorff took right away was to order the major workshops in Zutphen to move closer to the front and set up shop in Baarle-Nassau. They were to take the *Jagdpanther* and *Sturmgeschütze* which were under repair along with them and report to *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps*. Around this time Kopka went to fetch orders from *Heeresgruppe B (Generalfeldmarschall Model)* in Garath Castle near Düsseldorf.⁸⁴² There he learned that *559* would be assigned to *15. Armee* (Von Zangen) who had his headquarters in Dordrecht. Before seeing Von Zangen in Dordrecht Kopka and his staff company travelled back to De Bilt, near Utrecht, where some of the workshops had been located since the unit had arrived in the Netherlands on 2 September.

As *Kampfgruppe Huber* began to assemble south of Schijndel and in Wijbosch, the four *Jagdpanther* were clattering along the darkening roads towards their new assembly point at Vught, a distance of well over forty kilometres.⁸⁴³ After they arrived there they moved on to their starting positions. From what happened later it is clear that two must then have gone as far as Wijbosch, between Schijndel and Eerde, villages held by the Americans since midnight, while the other pair went on and joined the rest of Huber's group in the area around Olland, a few kilometres further west. In the same order Model also allowed *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps* to pull back behind the Antwerp-Turnhout as far as Voorheide in order to free forces. As related earlier Eichert-Wiersdorff initially objected, but eventually was overruled. Following this meeting Eichert-Wiersdorff drove to Poppe's headquarters to discuss the impending attack there. He was told that the *107. Panzerbrigade* would start from Gemert at seven a.m. and expected to be in Erp two hours later. From there it would attack towards the bridge at Veghel.⁸⁴⁴ Hopes were high because the operation had a reasonable chance of success. The reported strength of *Kampfgruppe Huber* was three battalions. It was supported by two batteries *sFH* and one 2 cm battery plus the *Jagdpanther*. On the east side of the Zuid Willemsvaart *Kampfgruppe Walther* was a formidable force indeed. It could boast the *107. Panzerbrigade*, one battalion of *Grenadier-Regiment 16*, one *Artillerie-Abteilung* with three batteries, one *Flak-Abteilung* and *Kampfgruppe Heinke*. The attack from Schijndel and surroundings was to start the following morning, 22 September, at 06.30 hours.⁸⁴⁵ The Germans were, naturally, unaware of the plans of their opponents. In fact, the Americans had already started their own attack. Soon the two operations would clash in a spectacular way.

Clashes

It was a dark, moonless night as Kinnard's 1st Battalion 501st marched from

⁸⁴² Kopka, *Missbraucht und Gebeutelt*, 151. Kopka gets his dates mixed up sometimes, hence the caveat.

⁸⁴³ Kershaw, *It never snows*, 258-262, is completely off the mark when he suggests that FJR 6 were involved in this attack. They, like the rest of *Kampfgruppe Chill* would not become involved until two days later (see below). On 22 September II./FJR 6 was still engaged in fighting south of Bladel (cf. KTB 88 AK, 22.09.44, 16.34 hours).

⁸⁴⁴ KTB 88 AK, 21.09.44, 20.35 hours.

⁸⁴⁵ Fernschreiben HGrB to OB West 21.09.44.

Heeswijk to Schijndel.⁸⁴⁶ Without any serious opposition the Paratroopers reached Schijndel shortly after midnight. The Americans dispersed and by 01.50 hours the village was secured. Kinnard also got in touch with the head of the local underground, an energetic and enterprising priest, curate Fred Woestenburg. Kinnard asked Woestenburg to assemble his men. After an hour Kinnard had the first information about the German positions in and around Schijndel. While most of his men were catching a quick nap Kinnard had a word with Woestenburg. He asked the priest to make sure that the people in Schijndel stay indoors the following day. "Pretend we are not welcome," Kinnard said. He knew that the liberation of Schijndel was only temporary and he also knew that the Germans might take revenge if there were any celebrations. Woestenburg passed the message on and there were no reprisals later on.⁸⁴⁷

Meanwhile Ewell and the 3rd Battalion 501st had made less progress. Starting from Eerde the battalion had turned left and followed the railway so that in the darkness they would go in the right direction. However, this brought them close to part of *Kampfgruppe Huber* in Wijbosch and as a result Ewell's men were constantly fired upon from positions near the railway. A few Paratroopers lost touch with the main force and fell into German hands. When dawn broke on 22 September Ewell's battalion finally closed in on Schijndel from the south. His men took up positions north of the railway waiting for the British tanks to arrive. These, B Squadron 44th RTR had spent the night in Eerde as Lieutenant-Colonel Hopkinson did not want to risk losing tanks in the darkness. At 08.30 hours B Squadron joined Kinnard's men in Schijndel.

The American advance had split *Major* Huber's group in two, seriously weakening the attack force in one swift move. Still, *Generalleutnant* Poppe decided that the attack should go ahead as planned. The battalion and a half in Wijbosch, isolated east of Schijndel, would simply have to operate on their own and try to reach the bridge through Eerde. The other, western, half of *Kampfgruppe Huber* would have to make a U-turn and clear Schijndel first.⁸⁴⁸ Now that *Kampfgruppe Huber* was split in two by the American attack at Schijndel, the western half, mainly the bulk of *Grenadier-Regiment 1035* plus Jungwirth's battalion was engaged south of Schijndel where it incurred heavy losses and robbed Huber of his flank protection.⁸⁴⁹ Hence only the eastern half could undertake the assigned mission.⁸⁵⁰ It was supported by two *Jagdpanther* from *1./559*.⁸⁵¹ To make matters worse, the *Kommandeur* of the *Kampfgruppe*, *Major* Huber himself, was unable to get through to this group and command was assumed by *Hauptmann* Mania, the *Kommandeur* of *I./Grenadier-Regiment 1036*.⁸⁵² Approaching Eerde from the north and the west the *Grenadiere* reached the village around noon. The only Allies in Eerde were two armoured cars

⁸⁴⁶ This section, Rapport and Northwood, *Rendezvous with Destiny*, 342-352, Didden and Swarts, *Einddoel Maas*, 75-8.

⁸⁴⁷ Interview Woestenburg 1983.

⁸⁴⁸ Poppe, 5.

⁸⁴⁹ KTB 88 AK, 23.09.44, Tagesmeldung.

⁸⁵⁰ This section KTB 88 AK, 23.09.44, A 424, and Didden and Swarts, *Einddoel Maas*, 79-80.

⁸⁵¹ Second Army Intel Log, 22.09.44, serial 34 and J.A. Pitt-Rivers, *The Story of the Royal Dragoons 1938-1945*, London, n.d., 115.

⁸⁵² 1st Cdn Army, IR PoW 59 ID, 28.09.44. He succeeded a Major Gotthardt.

from the Dragoon Guards and a platoon of Paratroopers. This tiny force could not stop the Germans. At two p.m. Mania's group crossed the road and now came within sight of the bridge. So far they had been lucky, but then things began to go wrong for the small *Kampfgruppe*.

Aware that something was brewing, two Anti-Aircraft Regiments on the way to Nijmegen had momentarily halted at Veghel bridge to let infantry pass. They now joined in the defence of both bridge and town in response to the attack by *Kampfgruppe Walther*. The 123rd Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment (LAA) was already across the bridge and became embroiled in the fighting at Veghel itself during the afternoon.⁸⁵³ Its 40 mm Bofors guns were set up in various positions as Anti-Tank guns. The gunners contributed to holding the key village, but the 123rd LAA incurred serious losses, testimony to the nature of the heavy fighting.⁸⁵⁴ Six tractors were shot up by the *Panther* tanks prowling around the village and one group of the 408th Battery had to spend the night holed up in a house in Veghel, literally holding their breath at times, surrounded as they were by Germans.

On the other side of the bridge the 165th Heavy Anti-Aircraft Artillery Regiment (HAA) had become involved in the struggle against Mania's little band.⁸⁵⁵ Their 3.7 inch guns almost matched the performance of the German 88's and around noon a number of them were set up on the western approach to the bridge, both as anti-tank guns and as artillery. They fired intermittent airbursts over suspected German positions, wreaking havoc among Mania's infantry. The *Jagdpanther* and the 3.7 inch guns exchanged a few shots and the *Jagdpanther* pulled back. Meanwhile the tanks from B and C Squadrons 44th RTR entered Eerde accompanied by gunners from all three Batteries (198, 275 and 317) moving alongside them and acting as infantry. Although communications left much to be desired between the tanks and the gunners (165th HAA unit did have proper infantry radio equipment) the operation was successful in that nearly one hundred Germans were taken prisoner. The tanks of the 44th RTR found the rest of Eerde empty as Mania's *Kampfgruppe* had moved on and two Shermans of C Squadron were on their way back to Veghel. They were spotted by Mania's men who were now being threatened from the rear. Mania decided to abandon the attempt to get through to the bridge and instead cross the road. This was an unfortunate decision as precisely at that moment two battalions from the 327th Glider Infantry Regiment moved up the road from St.-Oedenrode. At four p.m. the American infantry broke through to the bridge and took about seventy prisoners. The few survivors of Mania's group were now between a rock and a very hard place. They fled further south to the hamlet of Zijtaart and hid until it got dark. During the night Mania and a number of his men managed to get back to their own lines. The two *Jagdpanther* of 559 had also pulled back to safety. On the way they got into a firefight with Shermans from C Squadron 44th RTR at Eerde. One *Jagdpanther* was reputedly knocked out and the other withdrew across the heath towards Schijndel around five p.m. Although it was hit from some distance by the Shermans it got away by hiding behind some trees.⁸⁵⁶

⁸⁵³ Details, War Diary 123 LAA, September 1944, Appendices A and B.

⁸⁵⁴ To wit: seven killed, nineteen wounded and six missing.

⁸⁵⁵ Details, War Diary 165 HAA, September 1944, Appendix J.

⁸⁵⁶ War Diary 44th RTR, 16.04. 16.40 and 16.55 hours.

All in all Poppe had lost at least another battalion. On top of that one of his engineers (wrongly) claimed that the Veghel bridge was a concrete construction which meant that it would take at least five hours to prepare it for demolition. Poppe was deeply frustrated and blamed *Kampfgruppe Walther* for the failure of the attack. The available evidence suggests otherwise. After interrogating prisoners-of-war Allied officers made some interesting observations about the two attacking groups. They noted about the *SS*-men in *Kampfgruppe Walther*: 'morale good to excellent'. About Poppe's men at Schijndel, however, they wrote 'Opposition generally much feeble. Chaps trying to get home.'⁸⁵⁷ This was no surprise in view of the fact that one third of the men serving in the *59. Infanterie-Division* were *Volksdeutsche* (non-native Germans living outside the *Reich*) among them no fewer than six hundred Poles.⁸⁵⁸ Still one can understand Poppe's frustration. The attack had come so close to success. Only two kilometres had separated the two *Kampfgruppen*. Because they were not in direct communication they had had no idea where the other was and this had prevented them from linking up. What Poppe did not know was that *Kampfgruppe Walther* had run into problems of its own. These were connected to the advance of VIII Corps.

While Veghel was the focal point of the fighting that day the two Corps on the flanks had not been idle either. The previous night VIII Corps had thrown a bridge over the Zuid-Willemsvaart at Asten. On 22 September they enlarged the bridgehead in spite of attempts by elements from *Kampfgruppe Heinke* and (later) the *7. Fallschirmjäger-division* to stop them. This meant that Walther now had to look over his shoulders while attacking Veghel; in other words he was running out of time and fast. In contrast, west of the Corridor it was clearly noticeable to XII Corps that the enemy defence had stiffened. The arrival of the *245. Infanterie-Division* made itself felt and the advance of the 53rd (Welsh) Division slowed down considerably that day. Bladel and Bijsterveld were occupied, but at Middelbeers and Reusel the *Grenadiere* would not budge an inch. Further north the advance also ground to a halt as the 15th (Scottish) Division tried to take Best. The 2nd Glasgow Highlanders stormed the village in vain. *Kampfgruppe Lenz* met all attempts with murderous fire and only D Company in the centre reached its objective, the church and the monastery. Lieutenant-Colonel P.U. Campbell realised that further progress was impossible and he ordered his companies to consolidate. As the battle at Ten Aard was now over the rest of the Scottish division would soon join them.

Counterattack

Not only was *Kampfgruppe Walther* about to be threatened from the rear by the advance of VIII Corps, cutting Hell's Highway meant that there would undoubtedly be counterattacks from the direction of Nijmegen. With a sinking heart Horrocks (XXX Corps) realised on 22 September that any chance of success for Market Garden was fast slipping through his fingers. He learned of the German breakthrough just as contact had been made with the 1st Airborne Division at Oosterbeek. He understood that there was really no option but to order the 32nd Guards Brigade to make a U-turn and head back down the road.⁸⁵⁹ The order went out at four p.m. Executing it

⁸⁵⁷ Second Army, Intel Log, 23.09.44, serial 46.

⁸⁵⁸ Second Army, IS 100, 12.09.44.

⁸⁵⁹ Horrocks, *Corps Commander*, 121.

took some time as the brigade had to travel all the way back from the Nijmegen area where they had been in support of the US 82nd Airborne Division. Still the 2nd Grenadier Guards made contact with American Paratroopers in Uden only two hours later. Soon after the 5th Coldstream Guards arrived. The village was now packed with stranded Allied vehicles and vaguely resembled a railway station full of forlorn passengers.

Early in the morning of 23 September *Oberst* Walther visited the command post of *107. Panzerbrigade* and ordered Von Maltzahn to make one more effort to break the defences at Veghel.⁸⁶⁰ In pouring rain attacks from two directions, Erp and Mariaheide, converged on Veghel. Soon the *Brigade* lost four *Panther* tanks. During this action both the *Kommandeur* of *Panzer-Abteilung 2107*, Major Hans-Albrecht von Plüskow, and of *Panzergrenadier-Bataillon 2107*, *Hauptmann* Kurt Wildt, were killed. It was a huge blow to Von Maltzahn's unit and testimony to the ferocity of the fighting. Helped by the Shermans of B Squadron 44th RTR the 501st managed to beat off all attacks and by ten a.m. things had quieted down. General Taylor decided it was now time to counterattack. A lot of time was wasted trying to come up with a plan that in the end turned out to be too ingenious for its own good. The idea was that the Coldstream Guards would advance south, on Volkel, to cover the flank of the Grenadiers attacking down the road towards Veghel. General Taylor, rightly or wrongly, felt that the British took too long to implement their plan and his scheme of outflanking *Kampfgruppe Walther* came to nothing. Communication with the British troops was poor, the attack towards Uden started too late and the German forces south of Veghel turned out to be too strong. Still, at 15.20 hours Grenadier Guards and American Paratroopers met just outside Veghel. The important lifeline was open again, but twenty-five precious hours had been lost. For Walther it meant the end of the attacks on Hell's Highway. While the fighting for Veghel raged he saw his biggest fear come true: VIII Corps broke out of the bridgehead at Asten. Although *Kampfgruppe Heinke* resisted fiercely the 11th Armoured Division turned out to be too strong for the *SS*-men and slowly but surely they were pushed back. The British advance was converging on Deurne, a key road centre. This seriously threatened the rear of *Kampfgruppe Walther* and that night it pulled back from Erp to Gemert. It was the end of Walther's involvement in the battle for Hell's Highway.

A new plan

At the end of 22 September Reinhard's *Ia*, *Oberst* Eichert-Wiersdorff, was called time and again by *Major* Berlin at *1. Fallschirmarmee*, inquiring after the progress of the attack on the bridge at Veghel.⁸⁶¹ Eichert-Wiersdorff was unable to make Berlin understand the futility of going on with the attack and the latter simply kept repeating that the orders had to be carried out. Then Eichert-Wiersdorff asked to be put through to his counterpart. Finally, at 22.15 hours *Oberst* Reinhard, Student's Chief-of-Staff, came on the phone. After listening to Eichert-Wiersdorff's arguments Reinhard promised to put the issue to Student. Just before midnight *Fallschirmarmee* called back. Both Student and Model told *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps* to obey the orders they had given. The troops involved were to dig in. They would be provided with

⁸⁶⁰ This section, Rapport and Northwood, *Rendezvous with Destiny*, 359-361, War Diary 44th RTR.

⁸⁶¹ KTB 88 AK, 22.09.44, A 421.

new ammunition on the 23rd and they would have to resume the attack on the bridge the following day. *General* Reinhard was exasperated. He demanded to speak to Student himself. Once again he explained why the *59. I.D.* could not carry on with the attack. Still Student would not relent. When Reinhard told him that there was a yawning gap between the *59. I.D.* and 's-Hertogenbosch Student reiterated that the *Kampfkommandant* there, *Oberst* Dewald, had at least 1,500 men, among them an outstanding battalion commanded by *Major* Ernst Bloch. The discussion continued for a while, but in the end Reinhard failed to change Student's mind.

Clearly news of Reinhard's protests had been passed on towards *Heeresgruppe B*, because very early the following morning, Reinhard received another phone call from *Major* Berlin. He informed the *General* that Model himself had made the two *Kommandierende Generale*, i.e. Reinhard and Von Obstfelder, personally responsible for the attack on Veghel and the Allied lifeline.⁸⁶² An hour later Reinhard was on his way to Poppe at his headquarters in Boxtel to find out what exactly had happened the day before.⁸⁶³ Hearing Poppe's description of the events and the losses he had incurred, confirmed Reinhard's suspicion that the *59. I.D.* was no longer in a position to carry out any further attacks. Reinhard simply had to find another solution to his problem. He then had a brainwave: why not assign the mission to *Kampfgruppe Chill*? Because of the withdrawal behind the Antwerp-Turnhout Canal Chill's troops were now more or less available. The *Jagdpanther* of *1./559* and Chill were once again to be reunited. Reinhard also decided to use the experienced *Fallschirm-Bataillon Bloch*. This was to send two of its four companies to St.Michielsgestel, just north of Schijndel, right away.⁸⁶⁴ After returning to Poppe's headquarters Reinhard contacted Student and told him of his decision. Student agreed that it was the best plan under the circumstances. Reinhard then got in touch with Chill and told him of the new mission. Just before noon Chill arrived in Boxtel and plans were drawn up.

While the bulk of Von der Heydte's men now moved to Schijndel to get ready for the attack on the Allied lifeline, his *II. Batallion* stayed behind. *Hauptmann* Mager's men were to help the *245. Infanterie-Division* (*Generalleutnant* Erwin Sander). Although the division had arrived just in time to take over from *Kampfgruppe Zuber* to prevent a total collapse, *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps* was not out of the woods yet. Reinhard was still seriously worried about a breakthrough in the direction of Tilburg. Although the front was considerably shortened after the withdrawal behind the Antwerp-Turnhout Canal the move of *Kampfgruppe Chill* to Schijndel meant that there were no reserves left. This Reinhard felt, was too risky. Hence he assigned *II./FJR 6* to Sander's division.⁸⁶⁵ Soon the battalion would be involved in one of the bloodiest battles in its history.

When it moved from the area north of Turnhout, via Tilburg and Vught to its new forming up point, *Kampfgruppe Chill* had swollen to a sizeable force.⁸⁶⁶ Apart from the *Jagdpanther* of *1./559* it controlled all of *FJR 6* (apart from *II. Bataillon*), *I./FJR 2*

⁸⁶² KTB 88 AK, 23.09.44, 07.20 hours.

⁸⁶³ This section, KTB 88 AK, 23.09.44, A 424.

⁸⁶⁴ KTB Dewald, 23.09.44, 12.05 hours.

⁸⁶⁵ KTB 88 AK, 23.09.44, Lagebeurteilung.

⁸⁶⁶ KTB 88 AK, 24.09.44, B 311.

(Finzel), *I./Fallschirm Panzer Ersatz und Ausbildungs-Regiment Hermann Göring* plus one battalion of its own troops (mainly *Grenadier-Regimente 1053* and *1054*) under *Hauptmann Ohler*,⁸⁶⁷ the *Kommandeur* of *II./GR 1053*.⁸⁶⁸ The *Kampfgruppe* could now boast six battalions with no less than 3,480 infantry.⁸⁶⁹ In addition it had quite a bit of artillery, in fact no fewer than four batteries with a total of fifteen 10,5 cm *Haubitze*, four batteries with the same number of 8,8 cm *Flak* guns plus nineteen 2 cm guns.⁸⁷⁰ Hence there was a chance that Chill might succeed where Poppe had failed, especially since there was more good news. Recce parties sent out by the *59. I.D.* had discovered that their opponents had pulled back from Schijndel, in fact *Fallschirm-Bataillon Jungwirth* and some units of *GR 1035* were already back inside the village. As darkness fell the various units from *Kampfgruppe Chill* settled down for the night or were still arriving. Chill himself initially set up his headquarters in St.-Michielsgestel, five kilometres north of Schijndel. Later he would move to Schijndel itself. The following day would be crucial for both sides. Chill had divided his command into two separate *Kampfgruppen*. *Oberstleutnant Von der Heydte* was in charge of his own three battalions of *FJR 6* and *Oberstleutnant Dreyer* commanded the other three (*I./FJR 2*, *I./F.Pz.Ers.und Ausb.Regt.HG* and *Btl. Ohler*). That day a new *Kampfgruppe Dreyer* was born, quite different from the one before. The remnants of the two *Flieger Regimenter 51* and *53*, who had fought so gallantly under his command at Geel were now assigned to the *719. Infanterie-Division*.

The attack was to start around nine a.m. the following morning. Although preparations were necessarily made in haste, the order Poppe gave his troops for 24 September underlines the seriousness of the attempt.⁸⁷¹ While Chill's men undertook the main attack from the line St.-Oedenrode-Schijndel to block the bridges at Veghel Poppe's division was to provide continuous reconnaissance and it was to cover the right flank with *Kampfgruppe Huber*. The main task of this group, led by *Major Huber*, the acting *Kommandeur* of *Grenadier-Regiment 1035*, was to contain the enemy which would no doubt try to counterattack.⁸⁷² To maintain contact with Chill a group of fifty men with two *4,7 cm Pak auf Renault R 35 (f)* would follow the left flank of Huber.⁸⁷³ Another thirty infantry would be held in reserve and assigned to Huber if necessary. In addition four *2 cm Flak auf Sfl* and a group of combat engineers armed with anti-tank mines would also be subordinated to Huber. It was

⁸⁶⁷ Second Army Intelligence Log, 30.09.44, serial 23.

⁸⁶⁸ First Cdn Army IR PoW 85 ID, 14.10.44.

⁸⁶⁹ Broken down: *I./FJR 6*: 662, *III./FJR 6*: 549, *IV./FJR 6*: 613, *I./H.Gö*: 579, *I./FJR 2*: 554 and *Btl. Ohler*: 523.

⁸⁷⁰ Namely: 17. and 18./SS- Artillerie Ersatz und Ausbildungsregiment, seven howitzers, four 8,8 cm Flak from *4./925 gem. Flak-Abteilung*, four howitzers from *III./H.Gö*, 19 2 cm guns from *III./H.Gö* and six 8,8 cm Flak from *III./H.Gö*, four howitzers from *III./185*, and five 8,8 cm Flak from *8./185* and *2./925*.

⁸⁷¹ All details from MS B-510. This is one of only three original divisional orders that Poppe found back after the war.

⁸⁷² On Huber: War Diary 7th Armoured Division, Intel Sum 105.

⁸⁷³ They were the only two left from *Panzerjäger-Kompanie 304* which had set off from Calais with nine vehicles only three weeks earlier. On the way six had been destroyed by Allied fighter-bombers and one had stranded in a minefield. First Cdn Army, Interrogation PoW Artillery Army Units, 29.09.44.

hoped that this concentration of troops should do the trick. While preparations were going on other changes had taken place.

Change of command

The discussion about the attack on Veghel was the last one Reinhard had with Student, because from noon 23 September Reinhard's Corps was no longer under *1. Fallschirmarmee*. Instead *15. Armee* from now on commanded *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps*. Now that the Allied breakthrough was solidifying it made more sense to use the Corridor as a natural division. Student's *Fallschirmarmee* would control the area to the east, and Von Zangen the area to the west. The latter was also in command of *LXVII. Armeekorps (General der Infanterie Otto Sponheimer)*, responsible for the front north of Antwerp as far as Merksem while Reinhard's Corps was responsible for the sector east of there. Since Reinhard obviously had too much on his plate now and since the front of the *719. I.D. (Generalleutnant Sievers)* did not appear to be threatened, Siever's division was assigned to Sponheimer's corps the following day.

The new *Oberbefehlshaber, General der Infanterie* Gustav-Adolf von Zangen, was not at all like Student. British interrogators after the war wrote, "His square-jawed, blue-eyed, rather handsome face has the dull and stolid quality of those usually engaged in the business of maintaining law and order."⁸⁷⁴ They hit the nail on the head. After having served as an officer in the First World War, Von Zangen like many other officers had joined the police where he stayed until 1935. He reached a position of considerable authority but with the expansion of the *Wehrmacht* following Hitler's rise to power, he rejoined the armed forces as a lieutenant-colonel. Rising through the ranks he gained his *Ritterkreuz* on 15 January 1942 as *Kommandeur* of the *17. Infanterie-Division* fighting in Russia. In spite of this, his former opponents who described him as a typical policeman, did not consider him a first rate officer, but contributed his high position to both the shortage of officers and his loyalty to the *Führer*. Be that as it may, the new superior to whom *Kampfgruppe Chill* and *559* were now assigned would make skilful use of them.

Probably around this time *Oberleutnant* Franz Kopka must have met Von Zangen.⁸⁷⁵ After learning that *schwere Heeres Panzerjägerabteilung 559* had been assigned *15. Armee* he travelled to De Bilt. From there he drove to Dordrecht and reported to *Oberst* Georg Metzke, *Ia 15. Armee*, who right away got in touch with *Generalleutnant* Hoffmann, Von Zangen's Chief-of-staff. The latter expected Kopka to tell him how many *Jagdpanther* would be available for the attack. Over dinner with Von Zangen they discussed the various possibilities of transporting the heavy *Jagdpanther* to the front without too much wear and tear. According to Kopka Von Zangen offered him the trailers that were used for V-2 rockets. Either Kopka's memory failed him or Von Zangen had never seen such a trailer before, because this suggestion was of little practical use. There was no way in which these so-called *Meilerwagen* could ever carry a 46-ton *Jagdpanther*, even if the trailers had been available.

⁸⁷⁴ Quote and details, Special Interrogation Report, 1.

⁸⁷⁵ This section, Kopka, *Missbraucht und Gebeutelt*, 151-2.

The final attempt

On Sunday 24 September operation Market Garden was like a ship dead in the water, only the captain still hoping to make port. As Lieutenant-General Horrocks (XXX Corps) climbed to the top of Valburg church, it promised to be another typically Dutch autumn day, sunny and not too cold (14° C) but with the occasional shower.⁸⁷⁶ Horrocks took a look across the river Neder Rijn (as the Rhine is known here) to the shrinking bridgehead still occupied by the 1st Airborne Division.⁸⁷⁷ He was determined to make one final effort to get across the Rhine. He felt that it should be possible to put at least one battalion of the 43rd (Wessex) Division across and possibly, if things went well, even cross further west to carry out a left hook and attack the German forces from the rear. After having issued orders he drove back to St.-Oedenrode (still firmly in Allied hands) to meet Dempsey. Dempsey agreed with Horrocks that the so-called left hook should be staged quickly, otherwise the Airbornes were to be withdrawn.

Looking back Horrocks' optimism was as unrealistic as the pessimism that prevailed on the German side.⁸⁷⁸ That day *Generalfeldmarschall* Model, *OB Heeresgruppe B*, reported to the *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (OKW)* that the situation for *15. Armee* and *1. Fallschirmarmee* was deteriorating rapidly every day as they were being threatened in the rear by the enemy who had broken out at Veghel.⁸⁷⁹ He also worried about the slow pace with which *15. Armee* was pouring troops into the province of North Brabant. Two days earlier he had grabbed the phone when his Chief-of-Staff, *General* Hans Krebs, informed him of this. He had urged both the *245.* and the *712. Infanterie-Division* to strengthen his north flank and he had shouted, 'Macht mir den linken Flügel stark!'⁸⁸⁰ Now Model, supported by *OB West*, Von Rundstedt, even went so far as to suggest a gradual withdrawal behind the Maas and Waal. Hitler did not agree with Model's pessimistic assessment and he ordered the two armies to hold their present positions and plug the gap at Veghel through a concentric attack thus allowing the destruction of the Allied forces north of there.⁸⁸¹ That was exactly what *Kampfgruppe Chill* was trying to do that day.

The attack was to begin as early as possible.⁸⁸² At eight a.m. Reinhard joined Chill in his new headquarters in Schijndel.⁸⁸³ He also saw Dreyer and Von der Heydte. The plan was for Dreyer to make a wide hook via Eerde, his left flank (*Bataillon Ohler*) attacking north of the Zuid Willemsvaart, while Von der Heydte's group would advance in a parallel direction further west. *Fallschirm-Bataillon Jungwirth*, still under control of Poppe's *59. I.D.*, would follow closely on their heels to cover the right flank. The four *Jagdpanther* from *1./schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559* were

⁸⁷⁶ KNMI jaaroverzicht 1944.

⁸⁷⁷ This section, Horrocks, *Corps Commander*, 121-3.

⁸⁷⁸ This section, Schramm, *Kriegstagebuch 7/I*, 396.

⁸⁷⁹ Heeresgruppe B, 24.09.44, Ops 7743/44.

⁸⁸⁰ KTB OB West, 22.09.44, 09.30 hours.

⁸⁸¹ Heeresgruppe B, 25.09.44, Ops 839/44.

⁸⁸² This section, War Diary 44th RTR, Rapport and Nortwood, *Rendezvous with Destiny*, 362-371, Didden and Swarts, *Einddoel Maas*, 90-3.

⁸⁸³ KTB 88 AK, 24.09.44, 08.10 hours.

right in the middle, between *I./FJR 2* (Finzel) and *I./FJR 6*.⁸⁸⁴ They were to be held back until a breakthrough was achieved. Once again, as at Beringen and Geel, *schwere Heeres Panzerjägerabteilung 559* was asked to do what it had not been set up for: act as tanks.

As most of the troops were exhausted, they had been on the move since the day before, the attack began later than envisaged. Not until nine a.m. did the first troops set off from Schijndel (Von der Heydte) and Wijbosch (Dreyer). The attack went well the first half hour, but then the leading troops of both *I./FJR 2* and *I./FJR 6* closed in on the village of Eerde. Here all three battalions of Colonel Johnson's 501st had dug in the previous day, after leaving Schijndel. As the morning fog lifted the American outposts along the railway line and among the sand dunes spotted figures approaching from the north. Lieutenant-Colonel Ewell's 3rd Battalion, securely behind the railway line, quite easily managed to stop *I./FJR 2* and the rest of *Kampfgruppe Dreyer* that followed in their wake. However, to their left, where the bulk of *I./FJR 6* attacked, the situation soon became more precarious. The official history of the 101st states that, "the appearance of the 6th Parachute Regiment on the Division front caused elation rather than dismay," remembering how they had virtually wiped out *I./FJR 6* near Carentan in Normandy.⁸⁸⁵ Still, it seems unlikely a feeling of euphoria was the first thing on the Paratroopers' minds as they fought for their lives in Eerde against their old adversaries. As the outposts ran back to alert the rest of the 1st Battalion, shells began to crash down in the village. After a while mortars joined in and for a while the situation was so confusing that it took Lieutenant-Colonel Kinnard twenty minutes before he had a clear idea that a large German force was advancing on Eerde through the sand dunes. Kinnard alerted Johnson who immediately despatched A Squadron 44th RTR from Veghel to Eerde. The first tanks arrived at 10.05 hours. When Colonel Johnson came out of his headquarters in a farm near Eerde to brief the British liaison officer, a shell exploded close by. Johnson was hit by fragments and wounded. Kinnard took over. He realized that the dunes were the key and he decided to launch a counterattack there.

It was now eleven a.m. and pressure on the 1st Battalion and the tankers kept increasing. Within six minutes three Shermans were hit, two in the village of Eerde and one further north at the railway crossing, killing two of the tank commanders, Lieutenants Hooper and Gilbert. Most likely they were hit by the *Jagdpanther* of *1./schwere Heeres Panzerjägerabteilung 559* which were in position near Eerde railway station around that time.⁸⁸⁶ Also around the same time it became clear to *Oberstleutnant* Von der Heydte, that the attack had bogged down. His *III. Battalion* was stuck in the middle of the heath between Schijndel and St.-Oedenrode and his *I. Battalion* was not getting anywhere either at Eerde. Around noon Von der Heydte, who had joined *III./FJR 6* to see for himself, ordered his men to dig in, just as Kinnard was getting ready to counterattack. The American move started at 12.15 hours. Although the *Fallschirmjäger* initially put up a serious fight, the Americans managed to slowly push *I./FJR 6* away and regain the sand dunes. Around 15.30

⁸⁸⁴ KTB 88 AK, 24.09.44, B 314.

⁸⁸⁵ Rapport and Northwood, *Rendezvous with Destiny*, 362.

⁸⁸⁶ War Diary 44th RTR, 10.16 and 10.55 hours.

hours the area was completely in American hands. Johnson's regiment was about to continue the advance beyond the railway and retake Wijbosch when they got alarming news. About two hundred German infantry accompanied by four 'tanks' had been sighted west of the sand dunes.

Success at last

As mentioned above, *Fallschirm-Bataillon Jungwirth* was only supposed to cover the right flank of the attack on Veghel bridge. However, the American success in defending Erde, meant that the centre of gravity began to shift. Instead of Dreyer, who was stuck north of the railway, or Von der Heydte, who was being pushed out of the sand dunes, Jungwirth was now the only one left who might still actually reach Hell's Highway. So the four *Jagdpanther* were assigned to him. We do not know by whom, probably Chill under whose command they were, or exactly when, but just before four p.m. they were observed moving south along the heath south of the railway line.⁸⁸⁷ The one commanded by *Oberleutnant* Seitz, call sign 02, must have lagged behind and lost its way, because it ended up opposite Kinnard's battalion in the sand dunes where it caused heavy losses among A Company. As he wanted to get a closer look at the American positions Seitz opened the hatch and stuck out his head. While peering through his binoculars he was hit by an American sniper and killed instantly. The *Jagdpanther* turned around and went back to the German lines. Once there it assisted the *Fallschirmjäger* by shelling the American positions in Erde.⁸⁸⁸

In the meantime the other three *Jagdpanther* rumbled on. It was now four p.m. and the group began to approach the road, the Allied Centre Line (CL). As soon as the Paratroopers of the 502nd in St.-Oedenrode observed the German party they sounded the alarm. Colonel Michaelis immediately despatched C and H Companies towards Koevering to intercept them. They were too late and arrived seconds after the Germans. Slipping away from the Paratroopers the *Fallschirmjäger* arrived at the road northeast of Koevering where they spotted a British convoy and shot up all the lorries. The two American companies counterattacked, but were repulsed. It was almost an hour later when the lead party, about forty *Fallschirmjäger* and two *Jagdpanther*, crossed the road.⁸⁸⁹ Soon more groups followed, the third *Jagdpanther* among them. Once again, the crucial artery had been severed.

The news created a sense of panic among the Allied commanders and without delay C Squadron 44th RTR sent one troop down the road to deal with 'an SP (...) which was now shooting up 'B' vehicles...'⁸⁹⁰ The Shermans went full throttle across Veghel bridge and just ten minutes later arrived at Logtenburg, a stretch of wood where the Germans were just digging. As the three Shermans rounded the corner they were suddenly confronted by an unexpected adversary, a *Jagdpanther*. Within minutes all three Shermans had been knocked out. They were reported as 'brewed up', but this

⁸⁸⁷ War Diary 44th RTR, 15.43 hours.

⁸⁸⁸ This incident, Kopka, *Missbraucht und Gebeutelt*, 153.

⁸⁸⁹ War Diary 50th (N) Division, 24.09.44, 17.46 hours.

⁸⁹⁰ War Diary 44th RTR, 24.09.44, 16.53 hours.

was in fact not the case.⁸⁹¹ Two Shermans were still operational as the Allies would find out the following day.

The last Allied counterattack of the day was also launched from St.-Oedenrode. This time the 52nd Reconnaissance Regiment RAC (Recce) under Lieutenant-Colonel J.B.A. Hankey, took the lead.⁸⁹² This was done, because, unlike other recce battalions, it had a squadron of tanks. The attack started at 18.15 hours, but as it was getting dark the attack soon bogged down. Around seven p.m. after having advanced about two hundred metres and losing one tank the 52nd Recce decided to call it a day. The situation was too confused to continue.⁸⁹³ As soon as it was really dark, more and more *Fallschirmjäger*, most of them from *9. and 10./FJR 6*, crossed the road and joined the group around Logtenburg.⁸⁹⁴ Altogether around two hundred men established themselves in the woods astride and south of the Allied Centre Line. It is also clear that at least one, but probably more *Panzerjäger* from *Panzerjäger-Kompanie 304* joined in as well.⁸⁹⁵ Finally two or three 8.8 cm *Flak* guns reinforced the *Kampfgruppe* under *Major* Huber.⁸⁹⁶ How the guns reached the wood at Logtenburg is not recorded, probably they were towed there by halftracks, although we do not know for sure since after the battle no such vehicles were found, so they must have returned after dropping off the *Flak*. *Kampfgruppe* Huber's mission was twofold, to block the Allied centre line and to try reach the Veghel bridges.⁸⁹⁷ The first part was difficult enough, with his tiny force, virtually in the middle of Allied territory, the second one was a mission impossible from the start. Still, neither Huber, nor any of his superiors had any choice in the matter as Hitler himself insisted on another attack. His aim: 'die Lücke an den inneren Flügeln der 15. Armee und der 1. Fallschirm-Armee bei Vechel durch konzentrischen Angriff zu schliessen und damit die Voraussetzung für die Vernichtung des Feindes nördlich der Maas zu schaffen.'⁸⁹⁸

That same, fateful day, the remaining divisions of XXX and XII Corps were also finally brought forward. After the bloody battle for Geel the 50th (Northumbrian) Division had had almost a fortnight's rest and recuperation.⁸⁹⁹ Only the 69th Brigade had been in action so far, assisting the Guards at Uden. On the 24th the two other brigades also moved up, the 151st concentrated south of St.-Oedenrode while the 231st went as far as Veghel, just before the German force cut the road. Divisional headquarters were moved to a hamlet, east of St.-Oedenrode, Vechelse Hut, where it had an important guest that night, XXX Corps commander, a very frustrated Lieutenant-General Brian Horrocks. After the conference with Dempsey (Second

⁸⁹¹ Ibid, 17.20 hours.

⁸⁹² 52nd recce was part of 157th Brigade, the sea echelon of 52nd (Lowland) Division assigned to XXX Corps for Market Garden.

⁸⁹³ War Diary 50th (N) Division, 19.00 hours.

⁸⁹⁴ Griesser, *Die Löwen von Carentan*, 195.

⁸⁹⁵ Second Army, Intel Log, 25.09.44, serial 18 mentions six 'tanks', ibid, serial 46 mentions four 'tanks', War Diary 44th RTR, 26.09.44, morning report (see also below).

⁸⁹⁶ Allied sources (Second Army Intel Log 25.09.44, serial 46 and 7th Armoured Div. Intel Sum 106) mention 200 men and two 8,8 cm Flak, KTB 88 AK, 25.09.44, A 464, mentions 2½ companies which comes roughly to 200-250 men, plus three 8,8 cm Flak.

⁸⁹⁷ KTB 88 AK, 24.09.44, Tagesmeldung and 25.09.44, 17.00 hours.

⁸⁹⁸ Schramm, *Kriegstagebuch 7/I*, 397.

⁸⁹⁹ Details, War Diary 50th (N) Division (about Horrocks, 24.09.44, 19.00 hours).

Army) Horrocks had gotten into his car to drive back to his headquarters north of Nijmegen, only to find the road cut again. Because of the confused situation in the dark, he had no option but spend the night with the 50th Division. Following the 50th was the 7th Armoured Division, the famous Desert Rats, commanded by Major-General G.L. Verney. The division was on its way from Eindhoven just as *Kampfgruppe Huber* cut the road. Most of its units would soon be involved in the battle for Hell's Highway.

The end

The German success in blocking the artery to Nijmegen and beyond was the final straw that broke the camel's back for operation Market Garden. On Monday 25 September General Dempsey (Second Army) decided to withdraw the 1st Airborne Division from the bridgehead that night. Their position was no longer tenable. Montgomery agreed and at 09.30 hours he confirmed Dempsey's decision. Finally Horrocks was told. He had spent the night at 50th Division headquarters. Early in the morning, with the help of a carrier platoon from the 9th Durham Light Infantry he made a wide detour of the German blocking position.⁹⁰⁰ Later that morning he was back at his headquarters north of Nijmegen. The atmosphere was gloomy. The 4th Dorsets who had crossed the Rhine the previous night had suffered such casualties that they were unable to reinforce the bridgehead. There was nothing left to do for Horrocks but oversee the withdrawal. Further south, however, the fighting still raged on.

Kampfgruppe Huber had to attack on its own on the 24th since *Kampfgruppe Walther* on the other side of the Zuid-Willemsvaart had been forced to pull back. The advance of VIII Corps (O'Connor) had proceeded so rapidly that by the time Chill's men reached Koevering, Walther's group had already left Erp, south of Veghel, and moved further southeast to protect their rear. Because it was also being threatened from Veghel (and Volkel) by the 231st Brigade of the 50th (Northumbrian) Division, Walther was authorised to pull back even further in a northeasterly direction. There he was to form a semicircle covering the all important Maas bridge at Venlo. This withdrawal had to be completed on the 25 September. O'Connor's corps had done pretty well overall, but on the other side of the Corridor it was a very different story. There Ritchie's XII Corps was in serious trouble.⁹⁰¹ The attack by the 53rd (Welsh) Division against the *245. Infanterie-Division*, supported by Von der Heydte's *FJR 6*, which had caused Reinhard so many headaches earlier on, had completely bogged down. Also, at Best, *Kampfgruppe Lenz*, the improvised battle group formed around *I./SS-Polizei-Sicherungs-Regiment 3* and *I./GR 723* still clung on for dear life. The job of taking the village should have been a piece of cake, first for the American Paratroopers then for the 15th (Scottish) Division, but it had turned into a nightmare. Best had become a sponge soaking up the blood of the units involved and even on 25 September the Scots remained stuck just outside the village. Again Scottish losses were appalling and gains were negligible. But the eyes of the Allied commanders were focused elsewhere. The one overriding priority was to clear the Allied Centre Line. And it would turn out to be a tough job, even though the enemy was just a

⁹⁰⁰ War Diary 50th (N) Division, 25.09.44, 11.25 hours.

⁹⁰¹ This section, Didden and Swarts, *Einddoel Maas*, 94-5.

small *Kampfgruppe*, not the 'considerable forces astride the road' as Montgomery claimed after the war.⁹⁰²

The second day

While it was still dark both sides prepared for battle. There was no need for fancy plans. Huber's mission was simple: block the road and take Veghel bridge by attacking through Eerde, while Poppe's 59. I.D. covered the right flank by attacking St.-Oedenrode. For the Allies the task was not very complicated either, it was 'to get the road open again'.⁹⁰³ From the southwest units of the 7th Armoured Division, i.e. the 1/7th Queens Royal Regiment and the 5th Dragoon Guards, together with two companies from the 502nd Parachute Infantry Regiment would advance north. At the same time the 506th, supported by the Shermans of B Squadron 44th RTR would advance from the northeast. This force of five battalions plus, roughly equivalent to 5,000 men, should be enough to remove the blockade by a few German companies, at least in theory.

In the pouring rain German and Allied soldiers got ready for combat. The Germans were the first to set off. At seven a.m. two hundred infantry (among them two companies from *Fallschirm Battalion Bloch*) supported by five SPs (probably *Pak* of 59. I.D.) crossed the railway line south of Schijndel.⁹⁰⁴ The diversionary attack on St.-Oedenrode had begun. The force managed to reach the Damianen College halfway on the road between Schijndel and St.-Oedenrode, just like three days before, but that was the extent of their success. The 8th King's Royal Irish Hussars and the 1/5th Queen's of the 7th Armoured Division, drove Von der Heydte and Jungwirth's men from the heath.⁹⁰⁵ Efforts by *Kampfgruppe Chill* to drive the 501st from Eerde also failed miserably. It was a rock upon which every wave of attackers broke. Hence the main German success that day was claimed by *Kampfgruppe Huber* in the wood near Koevering.

The Anglo-American attack from St.-Oedenrode began at 07.30 hours. But C Company of the 1/7th Queen's and A and B Companies of the 502nd, supported by a few Cromwells of 5th Dragoon Guards failed to make much progress. In fact, they managed to clear only a few hundred metres before they were stopped outside Koevering.⁹⁰⁶ As the southern attack force did not manage to make much progress the pressure was now on the 506th (Colonel Robert F. Sink) coming from Veghel.⁹⁰⁷ The 1st Battalion (Major James L. LaPrade) was to advance on the right (northern) side of the road, the 3rd (Major Oliver M. Horton) on the left while the 2nd (Lieutenant-Colonel Robert L. Strayer) was held back to exploit a breakthrough. The

⁹⁰² Field Marshal the Viscount Montgomery of Alamein, *Normandy to the Baltic*, London 1946, 146.

⁹⁰³ Rapport and Northwood, *Rendezvous with Destiny*, 371.

⁹⁰⁴ War Diary 44th RTR, 25.09.44, 07.20 hours; the SPs were no doubt converted French types since s.H.Pz.Jg.Abt. 559 did not have any operational Sturmgeschütze on the 25th (cf. Chapter 10).

⁹⁰⁵ They also captured fifteen Fallschirmjäger. Feldwebel Lemke, in charge of the party, was an experienced parachutist of nine years' service, who had fought in Crete, Sicily, Cassino and Leningrad. But even he admitted the futility of the struggle when he saw the materiel the Allies had and he concluded that the war would not last for much longer. 7th Armoured Division, IS 105.

⁹⁰⁶ Foster, *History of the Queen's Royal Regiment Volume VIII 1924-1948*, Aldershot 1953, 393, War Diary 50th (N) Division, 25.09.44, 17.00 hours.

⁹⁰⁷ This section, Rapport and Northwood, *Rendezvous with Destiny*, 371-2.

3rd was to be supported by B Squadron 44th RTR (Major Hales). The plan was for the combined group first to advance south along a sandy track, away from the main road, and then turn sharply once they were level with Logtenburg and sweep northwest to link up with the 501st.⁹⁰⁸ The attack started at 08.30 hours and initially it went fairly well. LaPrade's 1st battalion slowly advanced down the main road while Horton's 3rd battalion walked down some sandy lanes, the Shermans of No.2 and No.4 Troops of the 44th RTR in support. As this force was getting closer and closer to the wood at Logtenburg small arms fire rapidly increased in volume. The advance began to slow down. At about 11.30 hours the leading Shermans of No.4 Troop were fired on by one of the *Jagdpanther* of 1./schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559 on the southern edge of the wood. The first tank brewed up, killing three crew members. Two more *Jagdpanther* were spotted and No.4 Troop was effectively pinned down. A foot reconnaissance was made which confirmed that it would be impossible for the American Paratroopers to cross the road either, owing to the large amount of small arms fire which the Germans could send directly up the main road.⁹⁰⁹

This forced Colonel Sink to come up with another plan. He decided to try a repeat of the attack which had led to the capture of Eindhoven a week earlier. Strayer's 2nd Battalion was to proceed down the same sandy track as 3rd Battalion. However, instead of turning right when they were level with Logtenburg, they would proceed another kilometre along it before turning west. Hopefully they could outflank the German position in this way. The attack was to be supported by No.5 Troop of the 44th RTR. Without wasting time Strayer's battalion set off. Once they had reached the hamlet of Hoogebiezen the Paratroopers turned right. It was now 12.30 hours.⁹¹⁰ All the time the Americans were subjected to withering small arms fire. Still, determined as ever, the Paratroopers entered the woods to clear them. The three British tanks drove on in search of targets. Sergeant Newman's tank, moving to the left of the wood, turned a corner and found itself facing a *Jagdpanther*. The gunner immediately fired and scored a direct hit, but with absolutely no effect. The gunner of the *Jagdpanther* responded just as quickly and the 88 shell penetrated the co-driver's seat. Still, the driver managed to reverse the tank back into cover only to receive two more direct penetrations in the turret. The Sherman caught fire and three crew members, Sergeant Newman among them, were killed while the other two were wounded. The other two tanks, trying to help, faced some steep dunes which they could just climb, but once at the top they found that they could not depress their guns sufficiently to engage the Germans and so they remained where they were.

The use of two captured Shermans by the Germans added considerably to the confused nature of the fighting that day. Time and again English and American soldiers held their fire because they thought that they were dealing with friendly tanks. But at the end of the day at least one of the captured Shermans was returned

⁹⁰⁸ War Diary 44th RTR, 25.09.44, 08.15 hours.

⁹⁰⁹ Ibid, 11.30 hours. The *Jagdpanther* are alternately referred to as Panther, Tiger or simply SP.

⁹¹⁰ The following section: *ibid*, 12.35.

to its rightful owners.⁹¹¹ The day continued to be confusing and it was not until 18.30 hours that some Shermans of 5th Dragoon Guards and a carrier patrol of the 1/7th Queen's finally made contact with Paratroopers of the 2nd Battalion 506th at Koeveringse Molen.⁹¹² A quarter of an hour earlier Colonel Sink's Paratroopers had also crossed the road and made contact with their comrades of the 501st near Eerde.⁹¹³ The noose had been drawn and *Kampfgruppe Huber* was now completely surrounded.

Back again

All of this meant that although they were still blocking Hell's Highway, *Kampfgruppe Huber* and the three *Jagdpanther* of *1./schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559* at De Koevering were now cut off.⁹¹⁴ It must have been extremely frustrating for Huber to have had the same experience twice within three days. At five p.m. Reinhard phoned Von Zangen to inform him of the latest developments. He said that Huber was now isolated and could only hold on for a limited period of time since his troops could no longer be provided with ammunition. Von Zangen told Reinhard that if it turned out to be impossible to hold the present line, Huber was to be pulled back to the northwest but only after a proper defensive position had been prepared there. In spite of this setback, Chill was still under orders to take first the railway and then the road bridge at Veghel.⁹¹⁵ The order was a pipe dream, of course, as the nearest unit, *Batallion Ohler*, was still one hundred metres away from the railway and completely stuck.⁹¹⁶ Reinhard realised this when he visited both Chill and Poppe after his phone call to Von Zangen. Both divisional commanders convinced Reinhard that at least two companies were needed to re-establish contact with Huber. Since the fighting had been pretty intense that day Chill and Poppe had incurred serious losses, a total of no fewer than 107 casualties.⁹¹⁷ With no reserves left, the only thing Reinhard could do was pull the plug. He ordered Huber to withdraw during the night.⁹¹⁸ At the same time he warned Chill and Poppe that after these troops had rejoined them, any further withdrawal was strictly forbidden. Chill, meanwhile, was reminded that he was still to try and reach the bridge and blow it up.⁹¹⁹

In the darkness of the early hours of 26 September *Kampfgruppe Huber* finally withdrew towards Wijbosch. It was an extremely tricky manoeuvre, surrounded as it was on all sides by enemy units. But Huber's men successfully extricated themselves. The *88 Flak* guns were towed back by the three *Jagdpanther* of *559* from the blocking positions around Koevering.⁹²⁰ One of the *Panzerjäger, 4,7 cm Pak (f) auf Renault R 35(f)* of *Panzerjäger-Kompanie 304* had to be left behind and caused a

⁹¹¹ This incident, Donald R. Burgett, *The Road to Arnhem, a screaming eagle in Holland*, Novato 1999, 96-7.

⁹¹² Second Army, Intelligence Log 25.09.44, serial 66.

⁹¹³ War Diary 44th RTR, 25.09.44, 17.00 and 18.15 hours.

⁹¹⁴ KTB 88 AK, 25.09.44, 16.10 hours and A 464.

⁹¹⁵ KTB 88 AK, 25.09.44, 17.00 hours.

⁹¹⁶ KTB 88 AK, 25.09.44, A 461.

⁹¹⁷ KTB 88 AK, 25.09.44, A 462; broken down: 5 killed, 92 wounded and 10 missing.

⁹¹⁸ KTB 88 AK, 25.09.44, 17.20 hours.

⁹¹⁹ KTB 88 AK, 25.09.44, A 466.

⁹²⁰ KTB 88 AK, 26.09.44, A 473.

brief halt to the Allied mopping up operation.⁹²¹ Around ten a.m. all the German troops reached the assembly area in Wijbosch, southeast of Schijndel. The idea was for them to turn around, attack southwards and take up a new defensive line halfway between Schijndel and St.-Oedenrode.⁹²² However, the British acted first. A combined tank-infantry group of the 8th Hussars and the 1/5th Queen's managed to advance a few kilometres towards Schijndel. The attack which began at one p.m. caused a bit of a panic because it hit the boundary of Poppe's 59. I.D. and *Kampfgruppe Chill*. This meant that *Fallschirm-Bataillon Jungwirth* caught the full brunt of the attack which only came to a halt a few hundred metres south of the railway line. Immediately the other two companies of *Fallschirm-Bataillon Bloch* were ordered to Schijndel by Chill.⁹²³ Contact between Jungwirth and Von der Heydte had to be re-established.

The *Jagdpanther* of 559, which were still officially with the 59 I.D. that morning, could not help out as they were not operational temporarily.⁹²⁴ To add to their misery *Kampfgruppe Huber* and the *Jagdpanther* of 559 found themselves under attack by RAF Typhoons during the afternoon.⁹²⁵ Eight Typhoons from 182 Squadron bore down on the village of Wijbosch, where the *Kampfgruppe* was concentrated, destroying part of the village including the church, with their rocket projectiles. Miraculously, only one German vehicle was hit. Meanwhile 247 Squadron, also with eight Typhoons, strafed the area between Olland and St-Oedenrode.⁹²⁶ Because of the British attack *FJR 6*, still on the heath west of Eerde, was in danger of being outflanked and received permission to pull back. But Reinhard added a warning, instructing his commanders to be careful. 'Es kommt darauf an, dass die Bewegungen unter straffer Führung in der Dämmerung und in der Nacht so durchgeführt werden, dass die Truppe in der Hand der Führer bleibt und Absetzbewegungen vom Feinde nicht bemerkt werden.'⁹²⁷ Eventually 1./559 with its three *Jagdpanther*, pulled back to the hamlet of Heikant, ten kilometres west of Schijndel, as part of the reserve of *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps*.⁹²⁸

Meanwhile the 5th Dragoon Guards, the 1/7th Queen's and the 2nd/506th continued to follow the main body of *FJR 6* back north. It was a slow and tedious job during which Von der Heydte's men had to be pushed back every step of the way. Not until dusk was the area north of Hell's Highway finally cleared of Germans. Still, even after *Kampfgruppe Huber* had left their blocking position at Koevering the Allied Centre Line could not be used right away. The *Fallschirmjäger* had left behind many mines which needed to be lifted and it was not until 14.30 hours that the 5th Dragoon Guards finally reported back the opening of the road.⁹²⁹ The heaviest fighting was

⁹²¹ War Diary 44th RTR, 26.09.44, early morning report.

⁹²² KTB 88 AK, 26.09.44, 08.12 hours.

⁹²³ KTB Dewald, 26.09.44, 15.40 hours.

⁹²⁴ KTB 88 AK, 26.09.44, 12.35 hours.

⁹²⁵ Second TAF, Daily Log, 26.09.44, 1600 hours.

⁹²⁶ One Typhoon was lost and the pilot, Flight Sergeant Barwise, became a PoW only four hours after he had joined the squadron. C. Shores and C. Thomas, *2nd Tactical Air Force, Volume two, Breakout to Bodenplatte, July 1944 to January 1945*, Crowborough 2005, 305.

⁹²⁷ KTB 88 AK, 26.09.44, 18.00 hours.

⁹²⁸ KTB 88 AK, 27.09.44, 16.00 hours and 28.09.44, 10.50 hours.

⁹²⁹ Second Army, Intelligence Log, 26.09.44, serial 45.

now over although the British tried to push back the Germans closer to Schijndel, but fierce resistance by *Fallschirm-Bataillon Jungwirth* supported by at least six *88* guns prevented the 8th Hussars and the 1/5th Queen's from advancing further along the road from St.-Oedenrode.⁹³⁰ The main line of resistance would stay for the next month roughly where it now was, partly south of and partly along the railway line running to Veghel. This line was only achieved after *Kampfgruppe Dreyer* (Chill's left wing) had closed up on the railway between Wijbosch and the Zuid-Willemsvaart on 27 September. In the process the two remaining battalions of *Fallschirm Panzer Ersatz und Ausbildungs-Regiment Hermann Göring* suffered badly. The acting *Kommandeur* of *I. Bataillon*, *Hauptmann* Westphal, was taken prisoner while his counterpart of *III. Bataillon*, *Major* Werner Kraemer, was killed.⁹³¹ Westphal was succeeded by *Hauptmann* Pauls, a former company commander in the *85. I.D.*⁹³² This meant that *Fallschirm Panzer Ersatz und Ausbildungs-Regiment Hermann Göring*, which had fought their opponents at Hechtel and Ten Aard so successfully, was virtually annihilated after only two weeks in combat. It was the price of slowing down the advance of an enemy force far superior in numbers and it is a good illustration of the attrition inflicted on the *Wehrmacht* at this stage of the war.

Kampfgruppe Huber had put up a magnificent performance. They had blocked the Allied main artery for forty-four hours. This was no mean feat for such a tiny force. It is clear that the support by the three *Jagdpanther* of *schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559* was a key ingredient to this success. As a reward for this *Oberleutnant* Franz Kopka as acting *Kommandeur* was awarded the *Deutsches Kreuz in Gold* three months later.⁹³³ For once, *559* was able to operate exactly as it had been designed, i.e. support friendly infantry against enemy armour. The position at Koevering and Logtenburg was ideal for this. Although the small wood was potentially a mouse trap, which it eventually became, it provided the ideal position from which to cover the open terrain surrounding it. The British armour was restricted to the few sandy roads which could easily be covered by the *Jagdpanther*. Together with the two captured Shermans which provided just enough confusion it enabled the small group to hold out for so long. But it was the final gasp on this battle front. In clearing the Centre Line and driving the Germans back to Schijndel, the Screaming Eagles had fought their last battle along Hell's Highway, which had more than lived up to its nickname. From now on the Corridor, to use the British name, was no longer under direct threat from German attacks. One of the reasons was that the German commanders correctly surmised that the main threat had now shifted elsewhere, against the town of 's-Hertogenbosch.⁹³⁴ That would soon be the next focal point for Reinhard to keep an eye on.

⁹³⁰ War Diary 7th Armoured Division, 26.09.44, Wireless Log, 14.08 hours.

⁹³¹ 7th Armoured Division, IS 107, Fullriede, 5.

⁹³² First Cdn Army, IR PoW Para Bn and Training Rgt Hermann Göring 31.10.44. His name is also erroneously given as Paulus (I Corps, IS 86, 26.10.44). Pauls is first mentioned in KTB 88 AK, B 276, 14.09.44. Later, during the winter fighting, Pauls was erroneously reported to be in command of II. Bataillon (XIX Corps, G-2, 27.12.44), he was, in fact still in charge of I. Bataillon.

⁹³³ Kopka, interview 27 November 2009. He received the DKG on 13.12.44.

⁹³⁴ KTB 88 AK, 26.09.44, Tagesmeldung.

Post Market Garden

While the struggle for Koevering was still raging a new unit came under the command of *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps*. On Sunday 24 September *Generalleutnant* Friedrich Neumann, commanding the *712. Infanterie-Division*, had arrived at *Korps* headquarters to report to Reinhard.⁹³⁵ The same day Von Zangen ordered the division to go to 's-Hertogenbosch, which he considered the 'wichtigsten Eckpfeiler des grossen Brueckenkopfes suedlich der Maas,' adding 'Er musste daher bis zum aeussersten gehalten und stark gestuetzt werden...'⁹³⁶ Even then Von Zangen was already worried that an attack across this town, the provincial capital, would cut off his whole *15. Armee*. Ordered to counterattack east, without proper preparation or support, the *712. I.D.* suffered badly and had to be content to hold the line just outside Nuland. Then activities gradually ground to a halt in a semi-arc east of 's-Hertogenbosch. For the next three weeks the front would remain static here, too. Market Garden was definitely over. The result was a long, thumb-like stretch of territory leading nowhere.

Conclusion

Although he was probably the only one, Montgomery himself did not really consider Market Garden a total failure. Montgomery thought that the operation had been 'ninety per cent successful'.⁹³⁷ An interesting conclusion, which he explained by pointing out that the Allies now had crossings over four major water obstacles. Still Montgomery conceded that the operation had at least partly failed. He saw two principal reasons for this, one was the weather, the other was the 'surprising' concentration of forces the Germans had managed to put together.⁹³⁸ Many books have been (and are still being) written about both aspects, but a general discussion of the merits and demerits of Market Garden and to what extent it failed is beyond the scope of this study. However, *Kampfgruppe Chill*, certainly did play a crucial part in the ultimate failure and this needs to be examined. The author of a recent book about Market Garden has a strong case when he claims that during World War Two airborne operations on the whole were not very successful.⁹³⁹ The reasons for this: they were expensive, they were often characterized by high casualties and mission failure, or only partial success, and successive airlifts proved to be very problematic to set up.⁹⁴⁰ Hence, Market Garden had only a slim chance of succeeding, but only if 'the airborne could be promptly relieved by conventional ground forces'.⁹⁴¹ The problem was that the ground troops had to rely on a single road initially. A widening of the flanks by VIII and XII Corps should have alleviated the situation gradually, but these operations failed in their objective and for a week one road, the Corridor, Hell's Highway, was all that led to Nijmegen and beyond. It is the contention of this author therefore that the attacks on this one artery, starting on the second day when the *59. Infanterie-Division* and the *107. Panzerbrigade* tried to make contact at Son were

⁹³⁵ KTB 88 AK, 24.09.44, 19.00 hours.

⁹³⁶ Von Boetticher, 52.

⁹³⁷ Montgomery, *Normandy to the Baltic*, 149.

⁹³⁸ Ibid.

⁹³⁹ Sebastian Ritchie, *Arnhem, Myth and Reality, Airborne Warfare, Air Power and the Failure of Operation Market Garden*, London 2011, 1-2.

⁹⁴⁰ Ibid, 83-4.

⁹⁴¹ Ibid, 259.

crucial to the failure of the operation.⁹⁴² Both attacks were unsuccessful, but they forced the Allies to divert considerable resources to deal with them. After two days the attacks moved further north, to the bridge at Veghel, but again the two attacking parties did not manage to establish contact. It was then that Reinhard turned to *Kampfgruppe Chill* to try and cut the Allied line of communication. This attack was successful and for forty-four hours all contact between the base and the head of the operation was severed. Operation Market Garden was already dead in the water by that time, but this counterattack dashed all hopes either Horrocks or Montgomery may have had and effectively helped finish off the operation. By first seeking the weak spot in the Allied defences and then quickly setting up an all-round defence in a location ideally suited for that, *Major* Huber had managed to keep the Allies occupied for nearly two days before slipping away and pulling back to safety. It was the first time the *Kampfgruppe* was called upon to act as an *Eingreifreserve*, but it would not be the last.

Following this nerve wracking period the *Kampfgruppe* dug in along a frontline running from Schijndel to the Zuid-Willemsvaart Canal opposite Dinther, following the canal for five kilometres and then, on the other side of the canal, covering a stretch around Berlicum.⁹⁴³ To the left (north) in front of 's-Hertogenbosch was the *712. Infanterie-Division*, to the right (west), as far as Oirschot, was the *59. Infanterie-Division*. Here, for over three weeks the front remained static, but Chill's battle group would only be allowed a week there, since further west a new crisis had developed in the meantime.

3.5. Goirle (27 September – 10 October 1944)

'My real task was to move quickly from one trouble spot to the next. Student called me his Feuerwehr, or Fire Brigade. For me it was a good assignment. I had only to attack – and I got everything I wished. If I said, I can't attack, without this and this, the next day I got it. To attack is more interesting and it is not so difficult as to defend.'⁹⁴⁴

Allowing *15. Armee* to escape cost the Allies dearly in the end. Not only was Von Zangen's army able to intervene in operation Market Garden, it also meant an extended and extremely bloody autumn campaign for Montgomery's Twenty-First Army Group. While Montgomery's ambitious operation was first unfolding and then slowly grinding to a halt, north of Antwerp the Germans still held the original line along the Albert Canal at the end of September. That was about to change and *Kampfgruppe Chill* and *schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559* would find themselves once more in the thick of the fighting.

A temporary lull

At the end of September the Allied struggle to expand the Corridor was beginning to slow down. The Allied effort to seize 's-Hertogenbosch had failed as a result of the

⁹⁴² An idea shared e.g. by C.P.M. Klep in Klep and Schoenmaker, *De Bevrijding*, 156.

⁹⁴³ KTB 88 AK, 02.10.44, A 541.

⁹⁴⁴ Von der Heydte in a personal interview with Whitaker, quoted in W.D. Whitaker and S. Whitaker, *Tug of War*, Toronto 1984, 167-8.

stubborn defence put up by *Kampfgruppe Chill* and Neumann's *712. Infanterie-Division*. It was at this point that the size of the *Kampfgruppe* reached an all time high despite the losses it had occurred. During this brief lull in the fighting Chill commanded an impressive array of troops.⁹⁴⁵ On 29 September, in addition to the only battalion that was left of the *85. Infanterie-Division, Battalion Ohler* (composed of infantry from *1053. and 1054. Grenadier-Regiment*), he had no fewer than eleven other battalions under his command: *I. and III./ Fallschirm Panzer Ersatz und Ausbildungs-Regiment Hermann Göring, I., III. and IV./ Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 6* (Von der Heydte), *I./ Fallschirmjäger Regiment 2* (Finzel) plus five *Fallschirm Lehr und Ausbildungs Bataillone* (Bloch, Gramse, Wittstock, Weller and Hanke). More infantry came from what was left of *Flieger Regiment 53 (Einheit Jürgens)*, various border guard and airfield companies (*Einheit Koch* and *Einheit Rötcher*). In addition Chill had three anti-tank companies, two equipped with light *Flak*⁹⁴⁶ and he commanded eight batteries with twelve 10.5 cm *leFH 18*, two 15.5 cm *sFH 18* and fifteen 8.8 cm *Flak* guns. This meant that with the addition of staff, mine clearing and engineer units Chill commanded 10,800 men.⁹⁴⁷ Effectively his improvised *Kampfgruppe* was now the size of an inflated *Wehrmacht* type 1944 division, although the latter had less infantry (seven battalions instead of twelve), but more artillery (forty-eight pieces instead of twenty-nine).⁹⁴⁸ Soon the armoured vehicles of *schwere Heeres Panzerjägerabteilung 559* would be added. However, that unit was the Cinderella of this impressive array of troops.

On the very day that *Kampfgruppe Chill* was at its strongest, *559* was at its weakest, in fact as a fighting force it was temporarily out of the game altogether. After being continuously in combat for three weeks it had suffered horrendous losses. All in all eight *Jagdpanther* and twenty *Sturmgeschütze* had been lost through enemy action. Others were out of action because of mechanical failure. At the end of September all that was left of *1. Kompanie* were the three *Jagdpanther* with *15. Armee*, which would not be operational until the first week of October, plus six *Jagdpanther* in workshops for short-term repairs. On 29 September the three that were still with Chill were ordered to Breda, where there were some major workshops.⁹⁴⁹ All *2. and 3./559* had left were eight *Sturmgeschütze*, none of them operational, but every single one in short-term repair. The unit was also short eighty-one men.⁹⁵⁰ This meant that the *Abteilung* was in no state to be deployed at the front. Moreover it was still geographically split up and its units were over a hundred kilometres apart. While *2. and 3. Kompanie* were near Wesel on the Rhine, *1. Kompanie* was in Breda.⁹⁵¹ At first, on 27 September, *Heeresgruppe B* ordered all of *559* to move to Zutphen, to be rebuilt as reserve for the army group itself, but two days later it changed its mind. The *Abteilung* was assigned priority status, 'bevorzugter Instandesetzung'⁹⁵² and was told to link up with *Sturmgeschützbrigade 280* which

⁹⁴⁵ KTB 88 AK, 03.10.44, C 256.

⁹⁴⁶ Namely 1./185, 3. (Fla)/Pz.Jg.Abt.170 and 3. (Fla)/Pz.Jg.Abt.344.

⁹⁴⁷ KTB 88 AK, 03.10.44, C 255.

⁹⁴⁸ Harrison, 236-7.

⁹⁴⁹ KTB 88 AK, 29.09.44, 19.15 hours.

⁹⁵⁰ KTB H Gr B 29.09.44, Ia 7969/44.

⁹⁵¹ KTB OB West, 27.09.44, 10.05 hours.

⁹⁵² KTB H Gr B, 29.09.44, Ia 7982/44.

only a week before had been battling it out with the British Airbornes at Arnhem and Oosterbeek.⁹⁵³ This *Brigade*, a somewhat euphemistic name for seven *Sturmgeschütze* and three *Sturmhaubitze*, really no more than one *Kompanie*, was commanded by *Major* Kurt Kühme. It had fought on the Eastern Front until February 1944 and was then sent to Denmark during the summer to be refitted. It was on its way to Aachen when, like the *107. Panzerbrigade*, it was diverted because of operation Market Garden, in this case to Arnhem. There its arrival had tipped the scales in favour of the German defenders. After the ferocious fighting there the *Brigade* had only four serviceable vehicles left.⁹⁵⁴ Now, on 28 September, *Heeresgruppe B* ordered *1. Fallschirmarmee* to hand over *Sturmgeschützbrigade 280* to *15. Armee*.⁹⁵⁵ Eventually, partly because of the distance and the perceived threat from Allied fighter-bombers, it would take a couple of days before *280* joined Von Zangen's army. Originally it was to cover the left flank at 's-Hertogenbosch, but with the new Canadian threat developing it was to go to the area north of Antwerp (see below) and so it unloaded at the railway station in Breda.⁹⁵⁶

In the meantime *559* was to prepare at least one *Kompanie* of twelve *Sturmgeschütze* and one *Kompanie* of *Jagdpanther* for action.⁹⁵⁷ To do this new vehicles were needed to make up for the losses. This was organised by *Panzerstützpunkt Nord*. It assigned *559* ten brand new *Jagdpanther* on the 27th. However, it is clear that they never arrived with *559* for some reason, because the total number of *Jagdpanther* continued to dwindle steadily throughout October and November. As for the *Sturmgeschütze*, three days earlier, seventeen new ones had been assigned to *Sturmgeschützbrigade 280*.⁹⁵⁸ Now that *559* was to link up with *280* that was changed, too. On 4 October *Heeresgruppe B* reported that *Sturmgeschützbrigade 280* would receive only four new *Sturmgeschütze*, (giving it a total of fifteen SPs for the time being) and that the remaining twelve were to go to *559*.⁹⁵⁹ That day *559* also had three operational *Jagdpanther* and five operational *Sturmgeschütze* plus six *Jagdpanther* and four *Sturmgeschütze* in workshops. Even after it received the twelve new SPs it would still only have about two-thirds of the number of vehicles with which it went into action. In view of the Allied build-up, this did not bode well for the forthcoming battles.

⁹⁵³ Details about actions 280: Marcel Zwarts, *German Armored Units at Arnhem, September 1944*, Hong Kong 2001, 26. In addition: CO was Major Kühme, Adjudant was Leutnant Meining, CO 1. Zug Hauptmann Woerner, 2. Zug Leutnant Larisch, 3. Zug Leutnant Baender (First Canadian Army, IS 102, 10.10.44).

⁹⁵⁴ First Cdn Army, IR PoW Miscellaneous Artillery Units, 8.10.44.

⁹⁵⁵ KTB OB West, 28.09.44, 01.50 hours.

⁹⁵⁶ KTB OB West, 29.09.44, 23.00 hours.

⁹⁵⁷ KTB H Gr B, 29.09.44, Ia 7982/44.

⁹⁵⁸ On 24. September 1944 Heereszeugamt Krugau despatched 17 StuG III to the Westfront. They were really intended for H.Stu.Gesch.Brig. 280. Gen.d.Pz.Tr. West reported that they arrived in Düren on 26 September, were accepted by Pz.Stützpunkt Nord and then transferred to H.Stu.Gesch.Brig. 280. (Via Martin Block).

⁹⁵⁹ KTB H Gr B, 04.10.44, Ia 8154/44. It is unclear where the one missing StuG went.

On 28 September Kopka as acting commander of *schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559* wrote an after-action report.⁹⁶⁰ The first part, devoted to an analysis of what had gone wrong at Beringen, has already been discussed (Chapter 3.1). But Kopka also looked at the broader picture and he put his finger on the sore spot when he wrote that 'there were always large problems in freeing the armoured forces from the infantry in order to engage other enemy concentrations. The infantry commander's strong concern for his unit's security resulted in him always holding the armoured force back even if they were not located in the correct location (*Schwerpunkt*). Since this is backed by the higher command, it leads to a scattering of our armoured force with the result that success is not achieved and our own losses are unnecessarily high.'⁹⁶¹ If one remembers the actions described above, at Beringen, but more particularly at Geel, Lommel and Joe's Bridge, Kopka certainly appears to have a point here. He also pointed out another aspect of the relentless battles. The *1. Kompanie* with its *Jagdpanther* had been kept in action for far too long, Kopka felt and 'the Panther-Kompanie, which must absolutely be serviced after driving 250 kilometres, drove a stretch of over 600 kilometres without any maintenance halts (...) resulting in decreased unit combat capability.' He also made a number of recommendations. 'First, concentrated employment of the entire Abteilung under the direction of its own commander. Second, subordination of infantry units in the Abteilung sector or close coordination with them. Third, actions of the schwere Panzerjäger and infantry must be aligned with the tactics of the Panzerjäger and not the reverse. The entire operation must be built on this principle. Fourth, after every action, immediately pull the Panzerjäger out and create a mobile reserve behind the assigned sector.' All these recommendations were in line with the official guidelines for the *Jagdpanther* and were examples of good practice as well as common sense. Whether they would be followed under the circumstances remained very much to be seen. Anyway, the time for reflection was abruptly cut short as further west, near Antwerp, another storm was brewing and once again *Kampfgruppe Chill* was asked to play a crucial role. The origins of the Allied attack go back to the instructions Montgomery issued on 14 September.

The Canadians arrive

As mentioned earlier, the front north of Antwerp was no longer the responsibility of *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps*. On 12 September *General der Infanterie* Hans Reinhard handed the sector over to *LXVII. Armeekorps* (*General der Infanterie* Otto Sponheimer), the first corps of the *15. Armee* which escaped being trapped against the Belgian Northsea coast.⁹⁶² Sponheimer, Chill's erstwhile divisional commander, cut a less imposing figure than Reinhard. British interrogators wrote that 'As a personality General Otto Sponheimer is most unimpressive. Short and very thin, with a small, gentle face, made more paternal by a tiny moustache and white hair, General Sponheimer looks and talks like a village school teacher...'⁹⁶³ The transfer of Sponheimer's Corps was only possible because the German commanders had correctly deduced that for the moment the Allied effort was shifting away from

⁹⁶⁰ Jentz, *Jagdpanther*, 86-7. Unfortunately Jentz could not locate the original document or remember where he had it from and so far the author has been unable to find it either.

⁹⁶¹ Ibid.

⁹⁶² KTB 88 AK, 12.09.44, C 220.

⁹⁶³ Special Interrogation Report Sponheimer, 1.

Antwerp. For the first time in a week they felt comfortable enough to leave that sector in the hands of just two divisions, one very weak, the *711. Infanterie-Division* (*Generalleutnant* Josef Reichert), and one of average strength, the *346. Infanterie-Division* (*Generalleutnant* Erich Diestel).⁹⁶⁴ Von Zangen was not too sure that these divisions were strong enough to ward off any serious attacks. He knew that the *346 I.D.* which had four infantry battalions was the more reliable of the two. Moreover, in addition to its own two regiments (*GR 857* and *GR 858*) it also controlled *Grenadier-Regiment 1018* (from the *70. I.D.*). Its leadership was solid, but it lacked anti-tank weapons. He feared more for the *711. I.D.* with its three infantry battalions which he described as 'abgekaempft, geringe Kopfstaerke, nicht gefestigte Kampfmoral.'⁹⁶⁵ Diestel's division dug in near the Beveland isthmus as far away from the enemy as possible. The *711. I.D.* was responsible for the sector from Lillo, a few kilometres west of Antwerp, to Merksem. There it linked up with the *719. I.D.*, for the time being still under *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps*. Then Operation Market Garden was launched and on the Allied side, too, new divisions began to arrive. After the 11th Armoured had left Antwerp the 53rd (Welsh) Division took over during 8 and 9 September. One week later, between 16 and 19 September, the Canadian 2nd Infantry Division in turn took over from the 53rd. First Canadian Army under Lieutenant-General Henry Crerar had arrived. He put his II Corps under Lieutenant-General Guy Simonds in charge of the front near Antwerp.⁹⁶⁶ All these changes had to do with decisions at the highest level.

While Second Army was fully occupied preparing for Operation Market Garden, Montgomery outlined the goal for First Canadian Army when he wrote, "the whole energies of the Army will be directed towards operations designed to enable full use to be made of the port of ANTWERP [capitals in original]."⁹⁶⁷ The problem was that the Canadian Army which commanded only five divisions had more than enough on its plate at the time the order was issued. In addition to Antwerp it was also involved in the capture of various Channel ports as well as chasing *15. Armee* which by then had reached the relative security of the Leopold Canal and was in what came to be known as the Breskens pocket. The two northernmost divisions, the 4th Canadian Armoured Division and the 1st Polish Armoured Division, in fact soon became bogged down in that struggle. The problem was that Crerar's other divisions were still heavily engaged at the various Channel ports. His 3rd Canadian Infantry Division had to finish the capture of Boulogne and Calais and the 49th (West Riding) Division had only just taken Le Havre -together with the 51st (Highland) Division- and was badly in need of a few days' rest and refitting, while the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division was still besieging Dunkirk. Montgomery decided to relieve the Canadians of the task of capturing Dunkirk and Crerar ordered the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division, commanded by Major-General Charles Foulkes, to pull up their stakes and take over in Antwerp.⁹⁶⁸ The first Canadians arrived in Antwerp on 16 September and within three days the whole division had settled in and outside the port. For the next few

⁹⁶⁴ Details divisions: KTB H Gr B, 16.09.44, Ia 6101/44.

⁹⁶⁵ Von Zangen, 4. In addition one of the infantry battalions was composed of the survivors of Ost-Bataillon 630 and Nordkaukasische Bataillon 835, which were not known for their fighting spirit.

⁹⁶⁶ Stacey, *Official History*, 360.

⁹⁶⁷ Directive M 525, paragraph 10.

⁹⁶⁸ Stacey, *Official History*, 360.

days the Canadians were engaged in what they referred to as a 'Streetcar War' where war was literally just a tramcar ride away from the fleshpots of the town.⁹⁶⁹ The name also reflected a somewhat surreal situation where Belgians who lived in Merksem took the tram as far as the Albert Canal, got off, crossed the canal on foot and resumed their journey in a tram on the other side.⁹⁷⁰ But this surreal war would soon turn into a very real one. A week later Crerar ordered I Corps under Lieutenant-General John Crocker to take over the sector east of Antwerp with the 49th (West Riding) Division. On the 26th Crocker also assumed temporary command of the 2nd Canadian Division.⁹⁷¹

One bridgehead

Now that the whole of his 2nd Division was deployed at Antwerp, Foulkes decided to try and establish a bridgehead over the Albert Canal, soon followed by another one of the Antwerp-Turnhout Canal. If the plan succeeded the division would be in an excellent position to outflank the German defences north of Antwerp.⁹⁷² The first step was a crossing in the early hours of 22 September by the 5th Canadian Infantry Brigade. Brigadier W.J. 'Bill' Megill ordered the Black Watch to send in a patrol in the area of Wijneghem, five kilometres east of Merksem.⁹⁷³ Although this was not hugely successful and even led to the sacking of the CO, Lieutenant-Colonel Frank Mitchell, it was followed by the Calgary Highlanders crossing via a damaged lock gate. By six a.m. three companies were across, partly obscured by ground fog which made it difficult for the opposing side, *II./Grenadier-Regiment 743* under *Major Otto Neubauer*, to use their artillery. By the end of the morning the bridgehead had been expanded considerably in spite of German efforts to drive the Calgary Highlanders back. In the attempt Neubauer was killed and the regimental commander, *Oberst Bosselmann*, took over himself.⁹⁷⁴ During the afternoon German mortar and shellfire ceased to the amazement of the Canadians and the engineers proceeded to construct a bridge which was ready by seven p.m. In spite of suffering serious losses, fifteen dead and thirty-four wounded, the Calgarians had successfully completed their mission.⁹⁷⁵ A few hours later the next battalion, *Le Régiment de Maisonneuve*, moved across. The reason for the sudden German silence lay, of course, in the decision made earlier on the 21st to pull back behind the Antwerp-Turnhout Canal, among others to free *Kampfgruppe Chill* for the attack on the Corridor. As the artillery needed to be in position the following morning it had already left by noon which is why the Canadians could build the bridge undisturbed. The big question was whether they could pull off this trick a second time at the next canal.

Saturday 23 September was dismal and wet. A steady drizzle poured down all day as the Régiment de Maisonneuve (Lieutenant-Colonel J. Bibeau) exploited the

⁹⁶⁹ Zuehlke, *Terrible Victory, First Canadian Army and the Scheldt Estuary Campaign: September 13 – November 6, 1944*, Vancouver 2007, 67.

⁹⁷⁰ War Diary 2nd Can. Inf. Div., 24.09.44.

⁹⁷¹ Stacey, *Official History*, 361 and 367.

⁹⁷² War Diary 2nd Can. Inf. Div., 19.09.44.

⁹⁷³ This section, unless otherwise specified, Zuehlke, *Terrible Victory*, 93-100.

⁹⁷⁴ KTB 88 AK, 22.09.44, 11.15 hours.

⁹⁷⁵ Zuehlke, *Terrible Victory*, 99.

bridgehead and found the Germans gone. Soon the Maissies were joined in the area, just abandoned by the *719. Infanterie-Division*, by the 6th Canadian Infantry Brigade and, on their right, by the 49th (West Riding) Division. This division, commanded by Major-General E.H. Barker, had come up from France where a week earlier it had liberated Le Havre together with the 51st (Highland) division. The 49th crossed at Herentals and by the end of the day had liberated Turnhout. First contact with the retreating enemy was at 20.30 hours when patrols from *Kampfgruppe Buchholz* clashed with troops of the 4th Lincolnshire Regiment two kilometres north of Oostmalle.⁹⁷⁶ Buchholz' unit was composed of *Luftwaffe* and naval personnel, border security troops and even two so-called *Magen Kompanien* i.e. soldiers suffering from stomach complaints. This was one of the hodgepodge of units of which the *719. I.D.* was composed by now. After having given up *Grenadier-Regiment 723*, first to Chill and then to Poppe, and *II./GR 743* to *245. I.D.*, the division, commanded by *Generalleutnant* Karl Sievers, only had three battalions left of its original units, *I.* and *III./GR 743* plus *FEB 1719*. No wonder that the *719. Infanterie-Division* was described as a 'pawn shop'.⁹⁷⁷ In compensation it had been assigned scores of companies, but unfortunately all of them consisted of poorly trained *Luftwaffe*, navy and security personnel.⁹⁷⁸ The only other reliable unit attached was *II./SS-Landstorm Nederland*. It very much remained to be seen whether this weak and improvised force would be able to stop the Allied advance. Reinhard was ordered to hand over the *719. I.D.* to *LXVII. Armeekorps* (*General* Sponheimer) so it was no longer his problem. But he certainly believed the division could hold the line and he did not expect an attack on this front.⁹⁷⁹ He was in for a rude awakening.

And another

On 24 September two attempts were made to cross the Antwerp-Turnhout Canal. The first one was undertaken by two battalions of the 6th Canadian Infantry Brigade under Brigadier J.G. Gauvreau.⁹⁸⁰ Foulkes had stressed the need for speed and the two battalions went across at the same time, Les Fusiliers Mont-Royal (Major J.M.P. Sauvé) to the right of the blown bridge at Lichtenberg (these days part of the town of Sint-Job-in-'t-Goor), the South Saskatchewan Regiment (Lieutenant-Colonel V. Stott) on the right. This sector was defended by *Grenadier-Regiment 857* of the *346. I.D.* The attack began early in the morning and the Fusiliers managed to reach the crossroads where they dug in. The South Saskatchewan, however, found themselves unable to cross the canal because of heavy small-arms fire. This changed after the artillery laid down a barrage at one p.m. Within an hour the South Saskatchewan crossed closer to the bridge and went into Lichtenberg. However, by then the Germans had begun to infiltrate the Fusiliers' positions. At five p.m. *Generalleutnant* Diestel sent in his *Panzerjäger-Abteilung 346* (*Hauptmann* Von

⁹⁷⁶ KTB 88 AK, 23.09.44, 20.30 hours, and Delaforce, *The Polar Bears*, 152, PAJVD.

⁹⁷⁷ Special Interrogation Report Schwalbe.

⁹⁷⁸ In detail: K.Gr.Buchholz (ten companies from Stab Sicherungsrgt.35, Ldsch.Batl.484b, Mar.Flakschule and two companies MagenBatl.), K.Gr. Stein (Stab Fl. Rgt. 51, eleven companies from Fl.Rgt.51 and 53), II./136 (400 men under Hauptmann Ribbe, but at least 70 a day reported sick), Sicherung Batl.772 (4 companies), Fliegerhorst Kp.224/L and 1./1201. KTB 88 AK, 23.09.44 A 426, A 455 and B 292.

⁹⁷⁹ KTB 88 AK, 23.09.44, Lagebeurteilung.

⁹⁸⁰ This section, Stacey *Official History*, 366-7 and Zuehlke, *Terrible Victory*, 104-114.

Obstfelder) and the Canadians were attacked by at least twelve light *Panzerkampfwagen 35R 731(f)* Renault tanks and about two hundred *Grenadiere*. Since the bridgehead was still too small no anti-tank guns could be brought across and the Fusiliers were slowly driven back towards the canal. At seven p.m. Foulkes and Gauvreau agreed to order the troops to withdraw. The failure to cross had cost the brigade 113 casualties, two thirds suffered by the Fusiliers. It was a sign of things to come.

Further east, the British were more successful.⁹⁸¹ The previous day the 49th Division had found, unsurprisingly, all the major bridges across the canal blown. Originally Major-General E.H. Barker had wanted the 146th Infantry Brigade to force a crossing in the area of the main bridge from Oostmalle to Rijkevorsel. However, a reconnaissance found that Lock 7 near a brickworks offered a better bridging site since the gap here was only thirty feet instead of one hundred. So the plan was changed and the 4th Lincolnshire Regiment (Lieutenant-Colonel F.P. Barclay) crossed at two a.m. in driving rain during a dark night. Rain covered the attack and two hours later three companies had taken up positions in a horseshoe defence around the lock. At 03.30 hours the engineers were told that they could start building a Class 40 bridge which opened for traffic at six a.m. on 25 September. It was called Plum. During the building the engineers were not disturbed, but as soon as they had finished the Germans opened up with shells and mortars. But by then it was too late. The CO of the 146th Infantry Brigade, Brigadier J.F. Walker, ordered the 1/4th King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry (Lieutenant-Colonel T.W.A. Harrison-Topham) to seize Rijkevorsel, two kilometres north of the canal.⁹⁸² The leading companies were soon in the village square, but then German resistance stiffened and they became stuck. Throughout the day *Kampfgruppe Buchholz* tried to dislodge the 1/4th KOYLI, but they were unsuccessful. Although at times they were about to overrun the village and even took a complete section prisoner, they were pushed back every time. An 88 scored a hit on the village church in which the 1/4th KOYLI had an observation post and all in all it was a day of fluctuating fortunes. In the end it was the 1/4th KOYLI that emerged victorious, taking no fewer than 134 Germans prisoner. Moreover, the bridgehead had been widened and the Hallamshire Battalion York and Lancaster Regiment (Lieutenant-Colonel T. Hart Dyke) had come up on their right in order to advance east to Merksplas. The Hallams soon found that they were unable to break out from Rijkevorsel itself, so they went back to the brickworks and made a detour to the main road to try and move east from that position.⁹⁸³ As night fell they were joined by 1/4th KOYLI whose positions in Rijkevorsel had been taken over by the 2nd Essex Regiment (Lieutenant-Colonel G.G. Elliott).

Countermeasures

Monday 25 September was not a particularly good day for *LXVII. Armeekorps*. Not only was Rijkevorsel captured by the British, it was also the very day that *Generalleutnant* Sievers, commanding the *719. Infanterie-Division*, reported in sick.

⁹⁸¹ This section, Delaforce, *The Polar Bears*, 154-5 and *Royal Engineers Battlefield Tour*, 92-3.

⁹⁸² This part, G.F. Ellenberger M.C. M.A., *History of the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry Volume VI 1939-1945*, Aldershot 1961, 141-2.

⁹⁸³ Don Scott, *Polar Bears from Sheffield*, n.p. 2001, 276-283.

His successor, *General* Felix Schwalbe, would not arrive until that evening. This could explain why the counterattacks were not coordinated properly and achieved so little. *General* Sponheimer was now in dire straits and he had to come up with something, and soon. As his Korps did not have any reserves he decided to order the *711. Infanterie-Division* to plug the gap that was threatening to open up.⁹⁸⁴ Von Zangen concurred with this decision. At noon Sponheimer called *Generalleutnant* Josef Reichert and ordered him to leave his current positions, load his division into trucks and take over the Rijkevorsel sector right away. Although his division was weak, Reinhard had full confidence in Reichert whom he considered a 'Frische, bewegliche, positive eingestellte Persönlichkeit. Gerader, anständiger Character. Einsatzbereit und tapfer'.⁹⁸⁵ *Kampfgruppe Buchholz* would come under his command. He was told to leave one of his two regiments behind. *Grenadier-Regiment 744* (*Major* Hoffmann) would have to hold the line northwest of Antwerp on its own. Moreover, Reichert was to counterattack the same night without any delay. Reichert ordered *Grenadier-Regiment 731* (*Oberst* Von Limburg-Hetlingen) to attack from Gammel the following morning and try and push the British out of Rijkevorsel.

The attack which went in without any proper preparation or reconnaissance, amazingly, met with some degree of success and one of the battalions, *III./GR 731*, under *Hauptmann* Liessmann, even managed to get into Rijkevorsel itself. However, Lieutenant-Colonel Elliott called in help from the Sherbrooke Fusiliers (Canadian 27th Armoured Regiment under Lieutenant-Colonel M.B.K. Gordon) which had come under command of the British division the previous day.⁹⁸⁶ A and B Squadrons were in support. The armour tipped the balance in favour of the 2nd Essex and only one Sherman tank was lost to a *Panzerfaust*. The following day saw a repeat performance and at the end of 27 September the bridgehead was still there. After a four-day slogging match around the bridgehead the 49th (West Riding) Division had taken 1,119 prisoners, most of them from *Kampfgruppe Buchholz*.⁹⁸⁷ The British and Canadians were amazed at the multitude of units the soldiers came from and commented on their ages. Eleven men from *Landeschützenbataillon 484* were found to be between 40 and 47 years old.⁹⁸⁸ Still the British and Canadian top commanders knew from experience that the fighting would only get tougher as the enemy tried to prevent them from breaking out at any price since this would eventually threaten the German units west of the Corridor. Reichert suddenly noticed that a new threat was developing elsewhere. While he was focused on his own division's counterattacks towards Rijkevorsel, which were successful in so far that they prevented Barker's division from breaking out to the northwest, he had neglected his left (east) flank. There British soldiers and Canadian tanks managed to cross the Blakheide area and get as far as Dépot de Mendicite which was the responsibility of the *719. I.D.*, now under Schwalbe. Once again the *719. I.D.* was in serious danger.

⁹⁸⁴ This section, Reichert, 13-8.

⁹⁸⁵ Personalakten Reichert, 20.12.44 assessment by Reinhard. Reichert would live up to Reinhard's expectations and on 9 December 1944 was awarded the Ritterkreuz for his achievement during the autumn campaign.

⁹⁸⁶ Details from War Diary 27th Can.Arm.Rgt.

⁹⁸⁷ War Diary 27th Can.Arm.Rgt., 28.09.44, 23.30 hours.

⁹⁸⁸ Ibid.

This advance meant that it was now useless for Reichert to try and push the Allies out of Rijkevorsel. He ordered his division to go over to the defence and it would remain undisturbed by and large in their positions for almost a month. The next day the 2nd Gloucestershire Regiment (Lieutenant-Colonel F.W.A. Butterworth) doubled back towards the canal from Rijkevorsel to expand the bridgehead, thus enabling the engineers to construct a second Bailey bridge after clearing the wreckage of the old bridge.⁹⁸⁹ The battle now shifted away from Rijkevorsel and once again this had to do with decisions at the highest level.

New plans

After the failure of operation Market Garden Field-Marshal Montgomery needed to rethink his strategy. On 27 September he formulated his new plans in directive M 527. In it he stated that Second Army's main task was to 'operate strongly with all available strength from the general area Gennep-Nijmegen against the N.W. corner of the Ruhr.'⁹⁹⁰ As in the earlier directive First Canadian Army was to secure the use of Antwerp, but it was assigned an extra mission. I Corps, under Lieutenant-General John Crocker, was to 'thrust strongly northwards on the general axis Tilburg-Hertogenbosch and so free Second Army from its present commitment of a long flank facing west'.⁹⁹¹ Montgomery added, 'This thrust should be on a comparatively narrow front and it is important it should reach Hertogenbosch as early as possible.'⁹⁹² This new directive shows that Montgomery still hoped to enter Germany before winter set in. Getting over the Rhine remained his first priority. It also shows that he still did not appreciate the importance of Antwerp. Although he paid lip service to freeing the docks he failed to understand that First Canadian Army could never do the job on its own, particularly not now that he had assigned it an extra mission. Moreover, it sent I Corps off at a tangent, making operations more difficult than they already were. This is a clear case where means and operational goals were not geared to one another. This unfortunate decision on Montgomery's part would soon come back to haunt him.

Montgomery's intentions were translated in the orders issued by Lieutenant-General Guy Simonds who was acting commander since Crerar had been on sick leave since 27 September. Simonds ordered I Corps to 'thrust North Eastwards on Hertogenbosch' while at the same time 'direct 2 Cdn Inf Div to clear the area North of Antwerp and close the Eastern end of the Zuid Beveland isthmus...'⁹⁹³ This went against the basic military tenet of concentrating one's forces, but there was little Simonds could do about it given Montgomery's orders. In addition his II Canadian Corps had to clear the Breskens pocket and tackle the problem of Walcheren. In accordance with Simonds' instructions the operations of I Corps developed in two different directions after 27 September. First the fighting on the right flank, the Tilburg-'s-Hertogenbosch operation, will be described before turning back to the left flank, the Woensdrecht operation. This makes sense for two reasons. First of all this is the chronological order in which *Kampfgruppe Chill* and *schwere Heeres*

⁹⁸⁹ RE Battlefield Tour II, 93.

⁹⁹⁰ Ellis, *Victory II*, 80.

⁹⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹⁹² Stacey, *Official History*, 379.

⁹⁹³ Stacey, *Official History*, 380.

Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559 were to become engaged in both operations. In addition, the climax of the fighting at Woensdrecht followed immediately after the conclusion of the fighting near Tilburg. But not only on the Allied side were new plans being drawn up.

The bridgehead at Rijkevorsel was a major headache for Von Zangen.⁹⁹⁴ His *15. Armee* was now under pressure in three different places at the same time (Rijkevorsel, Reusel and 's-Hertogenbosch) and he had absolutely no reserves to plug any gap that might occur. He therefore asked *Heeresgruppe B* (*Generalfeldmarschall* Model) for reinforcements. He was promised the *256. Volksgrenadier-Division*, although the exact date of deployment was not yet known, for at present the division was still assembling in Königsbrück near Dresden.⁹⁹⁵ It would be on its way to the Netherlands as soon as possible, but for the moment it was of no use to Von Zangen. His biggest nightmare was a two pronged attack from the east across 's-Hertogenbosch and from the south which would catch his army in the middle. The only way to prevent being caught south of the Maas, Von Zangen felt, was a timely withdrawal. He asked for permission, but was expressly forbidden even to explore this scenario. Instead Model urged Von Zangen to try and attack east from 's-Hertogenbosch and re-establish contact with *1. Fallschirmarmee!* Von Zangen pointed out that not only could his army never influence the battle east of 's-Hertogenbosch in any way with its weak divisions, fit only for defensive tasks, eventually it would crumble under the weight of the Allied onslaught which was inevitably heading his way. He asked Model if he could at least start preparing a withdrawal 'unter Aufrechterhaltung des Abwehrkampfes s. der Maas' [underlined in the original].⁹⁹⁶ However, that request was also turned down. But Von Zangen was no fool and preparations went ahead in secret and he had officers make contact with the *Kriegsmarine*.⁹⁹⁷ He also realized that the next few days might be crucial for the future of *15. Armee* and he must have watched with apprehension as a truly multinational force got ready to attack *Grenadier-Regiment 743* in Merksplas. In an attempt to bolster the defences, *20. Flakbrigade* was ordered to sent ten 8.8 cm *Flak* guns from *Heeres Flak-Abteilung 291*, currently in position on the Beveland isthmus, to Breda forthwith.⁹⁹⁸ It was hoped that they would arrive in time.

Breakout

On 28 September about half of the 1st Polish Armoured Division began to cross the Antwerp-Turnhout Canal at Rijkevorsel and squeezed in next to the 49th (West Riding) Division which was already there.⁹⁹⁹ The Polish Division, made up of Polish expats, had arrived in Normandy between 20 July and 5 August and first saw action three days later.¹⁰⁰⁰ It had been engaged in several extremely bloody battles, most notably around Chambois which was the very point where German units tried to escape from the Normandy pocket. There it had fought, among others, Chill and his

⁹⁹⁴ This section, Von Zangen, 23-6.

⁹⁹⁵ H. Mijland and J. Trommelen, *De Bevrijding van Tilburg*, 1969, 91.

⁹⁹⁶ Von Zangen, 26.

⁹⁹⁷ KTB Admiral der Niederlanden, 28.09.44.

⁹⁹⁸ KTB 88 AK, 28.09.44, 03.50 hours.

⁹⁹⁹ Operational Report 1st Polish Armd Div, 28.09.44.

¹⁰⁰⁰ Thom Peeters, *De Eerste Poolse Pantserdivisie in Nederland, 'Operatie Breda'*, Breda 1978, 32.

85. Infanterie-Division and, as mentioned in Chapter 2.4, it was fighting the Poles that had earned *Hauptmann* Von Hütz his *Ritterkreuz*.¹⁰⁰¹ The divisional commander was Major-General Stanislaw Maczek who had fought the Germans before, both in Poland in 1939 and in France in 1940. He was a charismatic and well-loved leader and the Poles fought ferociously under his command. His division had just captured Terneuzen and was now ready for its next task. Like other divisional commanders Maczek had begun to appreciate the value of mixed tank-infantry groups. He therefore assembled a task force composed of the 3rd Infantry Brigade (Colonel F. Skibiński) minus the 8th Battalion, but reinforced with the Cromwell tanks of the *recce* regiment, *10 Pulk Strzelów Konnyck (PSK* or Regiment of Mounted Rifles) under Major J. Wasilewski, plus the Shermans of the *24th Ulanów* (Lancers) under Lieutenant-Colonel J. Kański. This combined tank-infantry force should be strong enough to break the German crust. The plan was to split up the task force and advance on Merksplas over two axes, the northern one commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Z. Szydłowski, the CO of the 9th Rifles, the southern one by Lieutenant-Colonel K. Complak, the CO of the 1st Podhalanski Rifles. In the middle would be two British infantry battalions, the 1st Leicestershire Regiment (Lieutenant-Colonel F.W. Sandars) and the Hallamshire Battalion (Lieutenant-Colonel T. Hart-Dyke), supported by 49th Recce and B Squadron The Sherbrooke Fusiliers.¹⁰⁰²

The attack began at 10.30 hours on 29 September and soon *10 PSK* led the way to the next village, Merksplas. However, before getting there they hit the enemy who were ensconced in the *Dépot de Mendicite* with infantry and anti-tank guns.¹⁰⁰³ The Poles lost one tank and soon the armour was stuck. The *Dépot*, then, as today, was a combined prison and mental institution. It not only looked like, but was actually as strong as a fortress and a deep moat surrounded the complex. There was no way around it as the road to Merksplas ran through the *Dépot de Mendicite*. It was no job for armour on their own and two British infantry battalions were assigned to assault the mini-fortress.¹⁰⁰⁴ They were to be supported by B Squadron The Sherbrooke Fusiliers. The troops went to their Forming Up Points at four a.m. Two hours later the attack began. The ten companies of *Kampfgruppe Stein* were the usual mixed bag of *Wehrmacht*, *Luftwaffe* and *SS*-troops.¹⁰⁰⁵ Still they put up a stiff fight and it took the two British battalions all day to crack the tough nut that the *Dépot de Mendicite* presented. How tough the battle was can be judged from the fact that the leading company of the 1st Leicesters was nearly wiped out. Also, it was during the battle for the *Dépot* that Corporal J.W. Harper won his Victoria Cross, unfortunately as is so often the case, posthumously. Harper led his platoon over the wall of the institution by covering his men single-handedly. At the end of the day the fortress was occupied. British losses had been substantial, the three battalions involved having suffered 117 casualties altogether. In return they took 157 prisoners and

¹⁰⁰¹ Lodieu, *La Massue*, 82-5.

¹⁰⁰² War Diary 27th Cdn Armd regt, 29.09.44.

¹⁰⁰³ Operational Report 1st Polish Armd Div, 29.09.44.

¹⁰⁰⁴ This section, Hughes, 33 and Delaforce, *The Polar Bears*, 158-160.

¹⁰⁰⁵ Composition of K.Gr.Stein: Fl. Rgt. 51 and 53, Flak-kampftruppen, Fl.Horst Kp 224/XI, Kp Baumann, Kp Hinrichsen and II./SS-Landstorm Nederland (KTB 88 AK, A 455).

killed 49, mostly from *Grenadier-Regiment 743*.¹⁰⁰⁶ After the capture right away the Polish task force proceeded past the *Dépot de Mendicite* on to Merksplas. The following day, 30 September, they took the village. Just north of Merksplas the Poles captured all three batteries of *II./AR 1719*.¹⁰⁰⁷ The nine 15.5 cm *K414 (f)* guns carried the Polish eagle on their barrels which meant that they must have been captured during the Polish campaign.¹⁰⁰⁸ The following day their first time owners turned the guns 180 degrees and the guns once more fired on German troops. In all the Poles took 409 prisoners in two days in addition to the 200 taken by the 49th (West Riding) Division.¹⁰⁰⁹ It was a serious blow to the *719. Infanterie-Division*.

General Schwalbe's division (*719. I.D.*) was in real trouble now as its right flank had been torn wide open. Von Zangen realized that his whole army might be cut off by a swift advance towards 's-Hertogenbosch. He also feared that once the gap had widened *LXVII. Armeekorps* might become completely isolated north of Antwerp. So, the gap had to be plugged. The centre simply had to hold together or his army was doomed.¹⁰¹⁰ The only reserves Von Zangen had there were what was left of *I./SS-Polizei Sicherungs Regiment 3* who had finally been pulled out of their old battleground at Best, and *II./FJR 6* which had just been told to assemble and get some rest in Helvoirt after having retaken Reusel.¹⁰¹¹ For obvious reasons Von Zangen decided on the *Fallschirmjäger*, although they were exhausted after the intense fight for Reusel. But *Hauptmann* Mager's troops were granted no respite. That evening they were told to assemble post-haste and to travel to Baarle-Nassau in lorries and report forthwith to the headquarters of the *719. I.D.*¹⁰¹² Not surprisingly, Von Zangen's analysis of the situation was shared by his opposite number, Lieutenant-General Crocker, whose comment on the most likely German response was that, "Again the alternatives of the encirclement or withdrawal are beginning to loom up, and if withdrawal it is to be, then the threat [on] 's Hertogenbosch is likely to be the most severely [sic] contested since it would have to be the pivot for the whole manoeuvre".¹⁰¹³ This was a remarkably astute analysis, which, in fact, almost predicted what was going to happen south of the river Maas next.

Crossing the border

During the early hours of 1 October the village of Zondereigen, close to the Dutch border, was a hive of activity. Lorry after lorry arrived to drop off *Hauptmann* Mager's *Fallschirmjäger*. The SPs of *Panzerjäger-Abteilung 1719*, eight ex-French Lorraine *Marder I* anti-tank guns (official designation: *7,5cm Pak 40/1 auf GW Lorraine Schlepper(f), Sd Kfz 135*) as well as *8,8 cm Flak* guns from *Heeres Flak-Abteilung 291* just arriving, would provide the necessary back-up for the defence.

¹⁰⁰⁶ War Diary 49th WR Div, 05.10.44, Immediate Report Attack by 1 Leicesters on 29 Sep 44. In detail: 1st Leicesters: 71, Hallams: 23 and 7th DWR: 19 casualties.

¹⁰⁰⁷ KTB 88 AK, 16.09.44, B 275, Kriegsgliederung 719.ID. This shows the Regiment then still possessed eleven guns.

¹⁰⁰⁸ Stefan Komornicki, *24 Pułk Ułanów, Zarys Historii 1920-1947*. 1976, 340.

¹⁰⁰⁹ Operational Report 1st Polish Arm Div, 29 and 30.09.44.

¹⁰¹⁰ Von Zangen, 31.

¹⁰¹¹ KTB 88 AK, 29.09.44, 17.55 hours. It should be noted that *II./FJR 6* never joined the rest of Von der Heydte's regiment, but fought independently, first with 88 AK and then with 67 AK.

¹⁰¹² KTB 88 AK, 30.09.44, 18.45 hours.

¹⁰¹³ I Corps IS 70 (quoted in War Diary 27th Arm Rgt, 30.09.44).

The Polish attack began in thick fog and on the right the mixed task force, which had crossed the canal the afternoon before, became stuck at the railway crossing on the Dutch border at Noordbosch, due north of Turnhout. The mixed group on the left had just as difficult a time against *II./FJR 6* in Zondereigen. It took them all day to capture the village. The arrival of the *Fallschirmjäger* had certainly slowed down the Polish advance, but it was unclear whether that was enough to halt it altogether. An attack to retake Zondereigen was ordered for the following morning.

The Poles had their own concerns now that the attack was slowing down. In an attempt to break the deadlock Maczek ordered the brigade to try a left hook the following morning. The whole of the divisional artillery would be in support.¹⁰¹⁴ The attack by the 3rd Infantry Brigade which began at eight a.m. on 2 October rapidly turned into a nightmare. The *24th Ułanów*, for example, lost one Sherman after another and soon No.1 Squadron was reduced to just one operational tank. The deadliest fire came from the 8.8 cm *Flak* guns of *Heeres Flak-Abteilung 291*. The guns fired from such a great distance (the *88* had a maximum range of 12,000 meters)¹⁰¹⁵ that the Poles could neither hear nor observe the flashes when they were being fired on.¹⁰¹⁶ At one p.m. the Poles called in air strikes just as the German counterattack was starting. The Poles halted for the moment to allow Second Tactical Air Force to do its work.¹⁰¹⁷ Early in the afternoon sixteen Typhoons from 164 and 183 Squadrons (123 Wing) arrived over the target area. They fired a total of 126 projectiles.¹⁰¹⁸ Gradually German mortars and artillery fell silent as rockets screamed down and more and more positions were hit. The counterattack slowly petered out. Meanwhile the 10th Armoured Cavalry Brigade on the right only got as far as the railway station and the customs house near Noord-Bosvenheide. In fact, German resistance by *II./FJR 6*, *Grenadier-Regiment 743* and what was left of *Kampfgruppe Stein* was so fierce that the Poles commented that it was 'worth [sic] of admiration'.¹⁰¹⁹ Still, admirable or not, when night fell the resistance was finally broken and the Shermans crossed the border into the Netherlands. The Polish division now regrouped for the next stage, the attack on Baarle-Nassau. Further to the right, the 49th (West Riding) Division also halted for the moment until a Bailey bridge was finished at the main road bridge to Tilburg, north of Turnhout. This job was completed just before noon and the first companies of the 11th Royal Scots Fusiliers (Lieutenant-Colonel D.A.D. Eykyn) were soon across and established a bridgehead without opposition.¹⁰²⁰

On Tuesday 3 October the attack by the Polish division started at 08.30 hours. From two sides the Poles approached the twin villages of Baarle-Nassau and Baarle-Hertog. On the left the 3rd Infantry Brigade slowly advanced on the centre of Baarle-Nassau. On the right the 10th Armoured Cavalry Brigade (Colonel T. Majewski) first took Schaluinen, then turned right and proceeded in a northeasterly direction

¹⁰¹⁴ Operational Report 1st Polish Arm Div, 01.10.44.

¹⁰¹⁵ Hogg, *The Guns*, 159.

¹⁰¹⁶ Komornicki, *24 Pułk Ułanów*, 342.

¹⁰¹⁷ Second Army, Intel Log, 02.10.44, serial 22, and I Corps, GS Log, 03.10.44, serial 702.

¹⁰¹⁸ Second TAF, Daily Log 02.10.44. The pilots reported N.M.S. (No Movement Seen).

¹⁰¹⁹ War Diary I Corps, GS Log, 03.10.44, serial 734.

¹⁰²⁰ War Diary 49th WR Div and Second Army Intel Log 02.10.44, message 25.

towards the eastern edge of Baarle-Hertog. Three Polish Cromwell tanks slugged it out for a while with an SP which had taken up position near the railway line at blockhouse 25, just south of Baarle, probably one of the *Marder I* from *Panzerjäger-Abteilung 1719*.¹⁰²¹ The first Cromwell was hit, the second pulled back and the third rammed the *Marder* because of a misunderstanding between the driver and the commander of the Cromwell. The two opponents then started firing at each other from zero range, but the German gunner, probably still –literally– shaken by the crash missed three times and the *Marder* was brewed up by the Polish gunner.¹⁰²² The advance continued and the Polish troops entered Baarle in pouring rain. It took some time to drive off the last German defenders from *Kampfgruppe Müller*. This unit, named after *Sturmbannführer* G. Müller, was another mixed bag formed of his own *II./SS-Landstorm Nederland* plus *Flieger-Regiment 53*, *II./GR 743*, *III./GR 743* and *II./FJR 6*.¹⁰²³ Still, at 19.15 hours the Poles had captured the two villages.¹⁰²⁴ Meanwhile the 146th Infantry Brigade of the British 49th (West Riding) Division crossed the canal north of Turnhout and took Ravels and Weelde.

Response

Although the *719. I.D.* had done everything in its power to stem the advance of the Polish and British divisions, the Allied advance slowly but surely widened the gap between *LXXXVIII.* (Reinhard) and *LXVII. Armeekorps* (Sponheimer). This meant that the *245. Infanterie-Division* (still southeast of Tilburg) was now increasingly being threatened from the rear. There was nothing else to do but order it to pull back to a new frontline just north of Hilvarenbeek, screening Tilburg.¹⁰²⁵ At the same time it was to give up one battalion (*I./GR 937*) to form the new *Korps* reserve.¹⁰²⁶ This move was executed during the early hours of 3 October. To *Generalleutnant* Sander's immense relief the 53rd (Welsh) Division did not immediately follow their movements so that cohesion could be maintained among his units.¹⁰²⁷ The Allied advance also meant that the danger for *15. Armee* was still acute. That evening Reinhard was called by *Oberst Metzke, Ia* at *15. Armee*.¹⁰²⁸ He ordered Reinhard to create an immediate reserve by pulling *Kampfgruppe Chill* out of the line near Schijndel, starting that very night. The *Kampfgruppe* was to assemble southeast of 's-Hertogenbosch 'zu anderweitiger Verwendung' so that *15. Armee* could send it to block the threat developing south of Tilburg if necessary.¹⁰²⁹ Chill was told to leave *Fallschirm-Bataillone Bloch* and *Gramse* behind near Schijndel.¹⁰³⁰ The two battalions

¹⁰²¹ J. Festraets, *Baarle in de Branding, Herinnering aan de bange oktoberdagen van 1944*, 1980, 43 and 109-111, where the *Marder* is erroneously described as a *Ferdinand* (sic) by Captain Zygmunt Klodzinski, the CO of 1 Squadron 10th Dragonow.

¹⁰²² Ibid.

¹⁰²³ Second Army Intel Log, 05.10.44, serial 2; I corps, GS Log, 03.10.44, serial 760 and I Corps IS 80, 14.10.44.

¹⁰²⁴ War Diary I Corps, GS Log, 04.10.44, serial 773.

¹⁰²⁵ KTB 88 AK, 02.10.44, 20.40 hours.

¹⁰²⁶ KTB 88 AK, 03.10.44, 08.15 hours.

¹⁰²⁷ Von Hobe, 38.

¹⁰²⁸ KTB 88 AK, 03.10.44, 23.15 hours.

¹⁰²⁹ KTB 88 AK, 03.10.44, B 355.

¹⁰³⁰ KTB 88 AK, 03.10.44, 23.15 hours and B 355.

were to be united under *Major Jungwirth*.¹⁰³¹ The decision to take *Kampfgruppe Chill* out of what until now had been considered one of the key sectors was a calculated gamble on Von Zangen's part. Should the Allies put more pressure on 's-Hertogenbosch the troops there could at least pull back to the next canal line whereas a successful attack through Tilburg would mean that his left flank, i.e. the whole of *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps*, would be caught in a 'bag'. But it was still a gamble, calculated or not, and the next few days would be of crucial importance for *15. Armee*.

During 4 October tension began to mount at *15. Armee* headquarters in Dordrecht as the Allies continued their slow, but seemingly unstoppable, advance in the direction of Tilburg. The Poles received reports about a German force assembling in a wood (Goordonk) northwest of them and there was clearly still a strong German presence in a triangular wood (Het Oud Heiveld) to the east of Baarle-Nassau which had to be taken care of.¹⁰³² Attempts by the 3rd Infantry Brigade to advance further northeast were met by another *Marder I* firing the occasional shell from behind a farmhouse along the road to Ulicoten. Shermans were sent to deal with this nuisance and they succeeded in knocking out the SP. This duel also had another effect. The alarm was sounded at *711. Infanterie-Division*. Reichert had zero reserves left after the fighting in Rijkevorsel to deal with this perceived threat to his right flank. In sheer desperation he sent the divisional brass band to the front-line near Ulicoten.¹⁰³³ A group of just one officer and twenty-six other ranks, armed with rifles and *Panzerfäuste*, had to deal with the Polish armour.¹⁰³⁴ Reichert must have been enormously relieved when the Polish attack halted a few kilometres away from his right flank. Meanwhile part of the 49th (West Riding) Division also moved up. On the left of the Polish Division the 147th Infantry Brigade was holding the line opposite the *711. I.D.*, while on the right the 146th Infantry Brigade was ordered to capture Poppel two kilometres south of the Dutch-Belgian border. The brigade was supported by the armoured cars of the 49th Recce and the Sherman tanks of A and B Squadron of the Sherbrooke Fusiliers (Canadian 27th Armoured Regiment).¹⁰³⁵ At the end of the afternoon both the Hallams and 1/4th KOYLI took the village of Poppel, three kilometres from the border and only nine kilometres from Tilburg.¹⁰³⁶ The slow pace of the advance worried Crocker (I Corps). An attack towards Tilburg was still on the agenda, but the lack of speed meant a rethinking of the route there. He ordered the 1st Polish Armoured Division to advance through Alphen the following day while the 49th (West Riding) Division would attack from Poppel. Depending on the results, the Poles were to swing either northeast, towards Tilburg, or northwest towards Gilze.¹⁰³⁷ In the event, neither would happen. By now, Von Zangen was determined to block the Allied threat to his army, whatever the cost.

¹⁰³¹ 51st (H) Division, Intel Sum 271 and PoW interrogation WO 208/3605. Poppe, 9 (Poppe could not remember Jungwirth's name and refers to 'ein Major der Fallschirmjaeger'). In the middle of October Jungwirth also took over what was left of GR 1035 after Major Huber fell ill.

¹⁰³² I Corps GS Log, 04.10.44, serials 788 and 819, Komornicki, *24 Pułk Ułanów*, 343.

¹⁰³³ Reichert, 23.

¹⁰³⁴ Kriegstärkenachweisung Inf. Div. 44, Seite e.

¹⁰³⁵ War Diary 49th WR Div, 03.10.44, Op Instr 49.

¹⁰³⁶ I Corps, GS Log, 04.10.44, serial 822 (18.50 hours).

¹⁰³⁷ War Diary 49th WR Div, 04.10.44, Op Instr 50.

It was obvious to Von Zangen that the time had come to take serious action if he was to prevent the two Allied divisions from steamrolling Schwalbe's division. At 16.45 hours Reinhard received another phone call from *Oberst* Metzke at *15. Armee*, telling him to expect an order concerning *Kampfgruppe Chill* within the next two to three hours. In fact Reinhard did not have to wait that long. Half an hour later Von Zangen's Chief-of-Staff, *Generalleutnant* Hofmann called to inform Reinhard that the *Kampfgruppe* was to join *LXVII. Armeekorps* to be deployed south of Tilburg.¹⁰³⁸ This town was to be held at all costs. Orders came from the very top.

Generalfeldmarschall Von Rundstedt, *OB West*, ordered *15. Armee* to hold the line Antwerpen-Tilburg 's-Hertogenbosch with every possible means.¹⁰³⁹ During the rest of the night and the following morning frantic phone calls were made by both *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps* and *15. Armee* to inquire after the relief near Schijndel, a clear sign of the nervousness at the higher levels.¹⁰⁴⁰ In fact Von Zangen himself phoned early the next morning to complain that only two battalions were on the move. Von Zangen feared that if this process continued they would be committed piecemeal ('*verzettelter Einsatz*'). He complained about Reinhard's caution and insisted that he should take the risk, because the counterattack by *Kampfgruppe Chill* was also in the interest of his *Korps*.¹⁰⁴¹ Another measure Von Zangen had taken meanwhile was to order the new reserve, *I./GR 937* under *Major* Stadelbauer, to move to Goirle and form a backstop behind the right flank of the *245. I.D.*¹⁰⁴² He hoped this would suffice.

The fire brigade arrives

On 5 October at nine a.m. the 4th Lincolns resumed their advance towards Tilburg, supported by A Squadron The Sherbrooke Fusiliers. The last Germans were pushed out of Poppel and the tanks clattered along the cobbled road to Goirle. The tanks dealt with some 2 cm *Flak* guns which had knocked out two armoured cars the previous night, before the leading units arrived at the bridge over the Lei river one kilometre south of Goirle. Then they ran into more serious trouble. Alarmed by news of the advance Reinhard sent in *I./GR 937* to restore the situation. Its mission was both to screen the assembly of *Kampfgruppe Chill* and to secure the right flank of the *245. I.D.*¹⁰⁴³ Stadelbauer's battalion assembled on the Breeheese Heide and at 14.30 hours began their attack in a south-westerly direction.¹⁰⁴⁴ The attack got under way, but it was slow going and it was not until 20.20 hours that the battalion reached its goal, kilometre marker 9, just north of the border.¹⁰⁴⁵ It was clear that *Kampfgruppe Chill* had arrived in the nick of time. Its orders for the following day were 'Lage Ostfluegel des Korps durch Stoss auf Poppel zu bereinigen u. unter tiefer Staffelung rechts Luecke Nordostw. Baarle-Nassau zu schlieszen.'¹⁰⁴⁶ The *Kampfgruppe* was not

¹⁰³⁸ KTB 88 AK, 04.10.44, 16.45 and 17.20 hours and 05.10.44, B 362.

¹⁰³⁹ KTB H Gr B, Op Bef. 04.10.44, 8877/44

¹⁰⁴⁰ E.g. KTB 88 AK, 04.10.44, 20.10, 21.45 hours and 05.10.44, 07.30, 08.15, 08.20 and 09.00 hours.

¹⁰⁴¹ KTB 88 AK, 05.10.44, 07.30 hours.

¹⁰⁴² KTB 88 AK, 04.10.44, Tagesmeldung.

¹⁰⁴³ KTB 88 AK, 05.10.44, A 589, 9.

¹⁰⁴⁴ KTB 88 AK, 05.10.44, 12.15 hours and A 589, 10.

¹⁰⁴⁵ KTB 88 AK, 05.10.44, A 589, 13.

¹⁰⁴⁶ KTB 88 AK, 05.10.44, B 362.

alone, because once more *schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559* joined the 'fire brigade', or at least part of it did.

The following morning *15. Armee* ordered *559* to join up with *Schnelle Abteilung 505*, in order to support the counterattack by the *719. I.D.* north of Alphen. *Schnelle Abteilung 505* was originally an independent battalion of cyclists, but during the long retreat from France it had suffered serious losses and the *Kommandeur, Major Fürst Rupprecht Eberhard von Urbach* (who claimed to be related to King George V) had been taken prisoner. In early September the remnants of the unit were assigned to the *245. Infanterie-Division*.¹⁰⁴⁷ It merged with *Aufklärungs Abteilung 245*, the reconnaissance battalion of the *245. I.D.* under *Hauptmann Ott*.¹⁰⁴⁸ On 1 October it became part of the new reserve for *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps* near Goirle.¹⁰⁴⁹ The two *Sturmgeschütz* companies of *559*, which had now returned from Germany were to join Chill at Goirle.¹⁰⁵⁰ The Allies reported the arrival of fifteen 'tanks' driving through Riel on their way to Baarle.¹⁰⁵¹ This probably referred to the total number of tracked vehicles of *schwere Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559* which travelled from the workshops in Breda that morning. Since it is known that six *Sturmgeschütze* and one *Jagdpanther* arrived north of Terover in the early afternoon to assist the *719. I.D.*, it appears that Kopka's combined *2. and 3. Kompanie* on 5 October consisted of another eight *Sturmgeschütze*, which took up position south of Goirle to help *Kampfgruppe Chill*.¹⁰⁵² The solitary *Jagdpanther* was commanded by *Leutnant Heinrich Koch, Führer of 3. Zug*.¹⁰⁵³

Kopka himself established his headquarters in the vicarage at Goirle, alongside Chill, to whom he was again assigned.¹⁰⁵⁴ The *Abteilung* was now a mere shadow of the once mighty unit it had been only a month earlier. But at least from now on all the vehicles would operate together, so in that sense the requests made by Seitz on 22 September and by Kopka six days later were finally granted. The *Sturmgeschütze* of *559* at Goirle soon clashed with the Canadian tanks advancing towards them. For once the SPs could do what they were best at. They formed a semi-circle and waited, heavily camouflaged, for the Canadian armour to approach.¹⁰⁵⁵ The tactic was successful and Kopka's *Sturmgeschütze* knocked out four or five of the Sherbrooke Fusilier's Shermans (one may have been hit by a 5 cm *Pak*) and the advance was momentarily halted.¹⁰⁵⁶ Being out on a limb, so far ahead of the rest of the division, the 4th Lincolns and the Canadian tanks supporting them, pulled back to a more secure position in the woods straddling the Dutch-Belgian border. After they had

¹⁰⁴⁷ Von Urbach was taken prisoner on 10 September, near Moerbrugge, by the New Brunswick Regiment (War Diary, 10.09.44),

¹⁰⁴⁸ Von Hobe, 3.

¹⁰⁴⁹ KTB 88 AK, 01.10.44, 08.30 hours.

¹⁰⁵⁰ KTB 88 AK, 05.10.44, C 263.

¹⁰⁵¹ Second Army Intel Log, 05.10.44, serial 26.

¹⁰⁵² KTB 88 AK, 05.10.44, 16.55 hours and A 589, 8 and 12. This also ties in with a letter from Model in which he announces the arrival of eight Stugs from 559 for 15. Armee (KTB HGrB, 05.10.44).

¹⁰⁵³ If he was driving his own vehicle it would have carried the number 131. It has not been possible to ascertain this.

¹⁰⁵⁴ Kopka, *Missbraucht und Gebeutelt*, 331.

¹⁰⁵⁵ Kopka, *Missbraucht und Gebeutelt*, 157.

¹⁰⁵⁶ War Diary 27th Can. Armd Rgt reports one Sherman hit by 50 mm Pak.

withdrawn the Germans blew up the bridge over the river Lei.¹⁰⁵⁷ The first attempt to reach Tilburg had failed. But had the Poles to the left fared any better that day?

Once again Colonel Majewski's 10th Armoured Cavalry Brigade took the lead. Maczek ordered it to take Alphen, five kilometres north of Baarle-Nassau. Meanwhile the 3rd Infantry Brigade would clear the woods south of the village.¹⁰⁵⁸ The attack began at eleven a.m. but soon ran into trouble.¹⁰⁵⁹ After half an hour the two leading battalions, the 9th Rifles and the 2nd Armoured, reached the hamlets of Nachtegaal and De Roos. Here they hit the main line of resistance. Well-hidden *Fallschirmjäger* from *II./FJR 6* and *Pak* fired on the Shermans. Eventually the RAF was called in again and between eleven a.m. and one p.m. eighteen Spitfires from 308 and 317 Squadrons (131 Wing) screamed down on Alphen and surroundings dropping a total of twenty-eight 250 and twenty-one 500 pound bombs while sixteen Typhoons from 257 and 266 Squadrons (146 Wing) fired a total of 107 rocket projectiles on suspected German positions.¹⁰⁶⁰ The left group, *24th Ulanow* in the lead, in the meantime reached Terover and just beyond that the open terrain of the Rechte Heide. In short order the battalion lost another three Shermans. They blamed the losses on *Pak*, but the tanks were probably hit by the seven *Sturmgeschütze* from *schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559*, which had earlier taken up position two kilometres north of there, at Oudelandse Hoef.¹⁰⁶¹ In return *24th Ulanow* claimed to have knocked out two of the SPs.¹⁰⁶² Whoever was to blame for the Polish losses, at four p.m. the attack had become completely bogged down and the RAF was called in for a second time. A quarter of an hour later sixteen Typhoons from 123 Wing left their basis at Merville in Northern France.¹⁰⁶³ However, weather conditions rapidly deteriorated as the planes neared the front line and the four Typhoons from 164 Squadron were unable to find their target area in time. The other fighter-bombers, eight from 183 Squadron and four from 198 Squadron, did reach the area and fired a total of 62 rocket projectiles, four aircraft having to abort at the last minute because of a ground haze coming up.¹⁰⁶⁴ This intervention had the desired effect and the Shermans of the 2nd Armoured got moving again, infantry from the 9th Rifles Battalion riding along on top of the tanks. As dusk fell the leading tanks finally entered Alphen. The Polish division had reached its goal for the day, although it had incurred heavy losses on the way there. The bravery displayed by *Hauptmann* Rolf Mager's *Fallschirmjäger* was certainly recognised by their superiors and *II./FJR 6* was recommended by *15. Armee* for the skilful way in which it had handled the tank

¹⁰⁵⁷ War Diary 4th Lincolns, 06.10.44.

¹⁰⁵⁸ Operational report 1st Polish Armd Div, 05.10.44.

¹⁰⁵⁹ This section, Komornicki, *24 Pułk Ulanow*, 346-8.

¹⁰⁶⁰ Second TAF, Daily Log, 05.10.44; pilots from 257 Squadron reported attacks on tanks resulting in one flamer and one smoker. In addition twelve Spitfires from 310 Squadron (145 Wing) attacked an ammo dump south of Goirle and another twelve from 485 Squadron (135 Wing) did the same south of Gilze.

¹⁰⁶¹ KTB 88 AK, 05.10.44, A 589, 13.

¹⁰⁶² Komornicki, *24 Pułk Ulanow*, 347.

¹⁰⁶³ Shores and Thomas, *Breakout to Bodenplatte*, 285.

¹⁰⁶⁴ Second TAF, Daily Log, 05.10.44. The four Typhoons that had to abort were from 183 Squadron.

attacks.¹⁰⁶⁵ In addition Mager, who had led from the front, was awarded the *Ritterkreuz* on 31 October for his part in preventing a breakthrough to Tilburg.¹⁰⁶⁶

The fierce resistance which had slowed down the Allied advance had an additional effect. The delay, coupled with the fact that from Alphen to Rijkevorsel he now only had a lightly covered fifteen-mile left flank, caused Lieutenant-General Crocker (I Corps) to reconsider his original plan. On top of that, on 4 October Montgomery had issued a new directive to cover the regrouping of his forces for the operations outlined in the direction ordered on the 27th (see above).¹⁰⁶⁷ A short halt was therefore inevitable and both the 1st Polish Armoured and the 49th (West Riding) Divisions were told to remain on the present line for 6 October.¹⁰⁶⁸ But simply holding the line was not what the German commanders had in mind.

Counterattack

In the early morning of 6 October the British frontline practically ran along the Dutch-Belgian border north of Poppel.¹⁰⁶⁹ To the left, the Hallams were in Aerle, to the right 4th Lincolns had dug in south and north of the customs building. In between and slightly ahead was C Squadron 49th Recce Regiment. In line with Crocker's orders to halt the advance and regroup, the only activity planned that day was for the Hallams and the 4th Lincolns to take over the forward positions from 49th Recce. The Hallams under Lieutenant-Colonel Trevor Hart-Dyke would send troops to the hamlet of Nieuwkerk (basically no more than a cluster of farms), while the 4th Lincolns under Lieutenant-Colonel F.P. Barclay, were to take over the Recce's position along the Goirle road about four hundred metres ahead of them. After C Company had taken over in Nieuwkerk, Hart-Dyke inspected the area. He decided to take no risks and ordered B Company to join C Company that afternoon. This should be enough, he hoped. The Germans soon forced him to act. The first signs of an impending German attack was the shelling which started at 10.30 hours and was kept up throughout the morning. Around noon it was clear that serious trouble was brewing, just as Barclay ordered his carrier platoon to move up the road to begin the relief. Because of the increased machine-gun fire up ahead he decided to send C Company instead.

As the British battalions were relieving the Recce squadron, *Kampfgruppe Chill* was getting ready for the big counterattack in the woods and heath north of the border.¹⁰⁷⁰ Chill had ordered Von der Heydte with *I.* and *III./FJR 6* to attack along and east of the Goirle-Poppel road and for two of Dreyer's battalions, *I./ Fallschirm Panzer Ersatz und Ausbildungs-Regiment Hermann Göring* (commanded by Major Horst Pohl (*Füsilier-Bataillon 85*) since the previous *Kommandeur* had been taken prisoner on 27 September) and *Bataillon Ohler*, to attack west of the road, while his third battalion, *I./FJR 2* (Finzel), was kept in reserve. Reinhard himself, visiting the

¹⁰⁶⁵ KTB 88 AK, 06.10.44, C 265.

¹⁰⁶⁶ Ritterkreuzträger der Luftwaffe, 168.

¹⁰⁶⁷ Ellis, *Victory II*, 83 and 101.

¹⁰⁶⁸ War Diary 49th WR Div, 05.10.44, Op Instr 51.

¹⁰⁶⁹ This section, unless otherwise noted, War Diary 49th WR Div, Immediate Report, German counter-attack on 146 Bde 6 and 7 Oct 44.

¹⁰⁷⁰ German side, KTB 88 AK, 06.10.44, A 595.

forward troops, urged *Major Stadelbauer (I./GR 937)* to assist the attack from Gorp should Von der Heydte become stuck. The attack began at two p.m. It came along the road and across the Braacken heath. It first struck the 4th Lincolns. The artillery fire should have alerted the British troops but still at least two hundred *Fallschirmjäger* managed to crawl across the heath unseen and straight away the British troops near the road were in trouble. This was not all their fault and was partly due to the alacrity with which the Recce Squadron moved out from this position just as C Company 4th Lincolns were relieving them.¹⁰⁷¹ This, no doubt, encouraged Von der Heydte's men to redouble their effort, thinking that the British troops were about to withdraw. The effect was that C Company came under increasing pressure. Then followed the first 'white flag incident'.

A group of *Fallschirmjäger* indicated that they would like to surrender. Two of their comrades were wounded. A corporal with some stretcher bearers went forward to investigate, but he arrived at the same time as a German NCO with some men who had also witnessed the incident. They shook hands, had a friendly conversation and the NCO told the corporal and his escort that they were 'English Chentlemen'. However, they were not allowed to take back the potential POWs and he had to leave the two stretchers behind. As he was outnumbered and outgunned the Corporal could only comply and return to his own lines empty-handed and furious. A second white flag followed soon after. In this case the white flag was simply a ruse by the *Fallschirmjäger* to infiltrate between two platoons. The ruse worked and No.15 Platoon became completely isolated, but eventually two-and-a-half sections (out of three) made it back. The situation became more and more threatening. *Sturmgeschütze* were reported further up the road, although none showed up, and at 15.50 hours B Squadron plus one troop C Squadron the Sherbrooke Fusiliers were ordered to assist the 4th Lincolns.¹⁰⁷² The Sherman tanks arrived just in time to break up the second attack by *FJR 6* which went in at 17.30 hours. Together with the divisional artillery this meant that the German attack ended as dusk approached and C Company received permission to pull back through their old lines while the tanks went back to harbour at the road junction south of Maerle for the night.¹⁰⁷³ A Company was now out in front. While beating off the attack some *Fallschirmjäger* fell into British hands and it became clear to them that most of their problems had been caused by *I./FJR 6* led by *Hauptmann Peiser*.¹⁰⁷⁴

The Hallams in Nieuwkerk were also in trouble by now. The Germans had infiltrated between the Hallams and the Lincolns, helped by the terrain, which Hart-Dyke described as 'jungle like in the thickness of the trees and shrubbery'.¹⁰⁷⁵ This meant that the detachment in Nieuwkerk were now unprotected on their right. Snipers and mortar fire made life in the hamlet increasingly uncomfortable and by the end of the afternoon C Company had suffered 23 casualties. Hart-Dyke called for a DF task which eased the situation, but only temporarily. The hayrick in the centre of the

¹⁰⁷¹ War Diary 49th WR Div, Immediate Report, German counter-attack on 146 Bde 6 and 7 Oct 44, 2.

¹⁰⁷² War Diary 27th Can Arm Rgt, 06.10.44.

¹⁰⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷⁴ War Diary 49th WR Division, 06.10.44, where he is constantly, but erroneously referred to as Paisel (cf. PAJVD).

¹⁰⁷⁵ War Diary Hallams, 06.10.44.

village started burning as a result of sniping and the carriers and three six-pounder anti-tank guns had to be moved under heavy fire. Throughout the afternoon Second Tactical Air Force tried to intervene on the battlefield, but on all three occasions Typhoons from 257 and 266 Squadrons (146 Wing) and from 609 Squadron (123 Wing) were unable to do so because there was no red smoke to indicate the enemy locations. At the end of the afternoon Spitfires from 66 and 127 Squadrons (132 Wing) dropped twenty-four 500-pound bombs on the woods west of Nieuwkerk.¹⁰⁷⁶ As dusk fell the shelling abated, a sure sign that German patrols were out. Hart-Dyke considered he should do no less and what followed was a confused night with patrols from both sides sometimes moving along the same ditch, but in opposite directions.¹⁰⁷⁷

The second day

The fighting continued throughout the night and into 7 October as *FJR 6* tried to push the British troops back even further.¹⁰⁷⁸ For A Company 4th Lincolns, who were now at the tip of the line it was a true nightmare. The men were tired, they had had no sleep for two nights now, and noises could be heard from the woods around them. *Fallschirmjäger* continued to infiltrate and in the darkness it was impossible to tell who was who. As the Lincolns' after action report said, the noises 'were enough to strain the nerves of all but the coolest head.'¹⁰⁷⁹ At 04.30 hours the proverbial balloon went up. *Fallschirmjäger* popped up everywhere and soon the three platoons of A Company were being forced back. As a result a six-pounder and a seventeen-pounder anti-tank gun were left behind. The crew of the smaller gun had managed to remove the breech plate, but the seventeen-pounder was still fully intact. A counterattack by C Company an hour later was blocked by Von der Heydte's men. Fearing that his opponents might turn the seventeen-pounder gun on them, the A Company commander had it knocked out with a PIAT bomb. As soon as it got light the cavalry arrived and the old positions of A Company were recaptured by eight a.m. Half an hour later the German attack began to falter and the *Fallschirmjäger* in front of the 4th Lincolns started to dig in. Now that the German positions had been located deadly mortar and artillery fire (273rd Battery) was unleashed on *FJR 6*.¹⁰⁸⁰ Throughout the day screaming could be heard and ambulances were seen carrying off the wounded. In fact, one of these ambulances strayed too close to the Allied lines, but was still allowed to depart in one of those all too rare cases of decency that sometimes occur on a battlefield.¹⁰⁸¹ Around the same time the Hallams were coming under increasing pressure in Nieuwkerk.

While the 4th Lincolns were being attacked in the early hours, the Hallams in Nieuwkerk were subjected to barrage after barrage. *Kampfgruppe Chill* made a renewed attempt to reach Poppel. This time *Artillerie Gruppe Übel (I./AR 347)* with

¹⁰⁷⁶ Second TAF, Daily Log, 06.10.44. Fifteen bombs landed in the target area.

¹⁰⁷⁷ War Diary Hallams, 06.10.44.

¹⁰⁷⁸ This section is also based on War Diary 49th WR Div, Immediate Report, German counter-attack on 146 Bde 6 and 7 Oct 44.

¹⁰⁷⁹ Ibid, 3.

¹⁰⁸⁰ F.K. Hughes, *A Short History of the 49th West Riding and Midland Infantry Division*, Barnet 1957, 34.

¹⁰⁸¹ War Diary 27th Can Arm Rgt, 07.10.44.

its ex-French 15.5 cm guns was to be in support. From its positions near Moergestel it was to change direction so that it could cover the new target area.¹⁰⁸² An earlier German attack at seven a.m., from the east, had been easily beaten off, but the next one could not be halted so easily. The attack, by *Kampfgruppe Dreyer* supported by the *Jagdpanther* of *1./schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559*, started at 08.30 hours and came in from the northwest. For some reason *Leutnant Koch's Jagdpanther* was in the lead.¹⁰⁸³ An hour before this second attack went in Hart-Dyke had sent out a call for help to the Sherbrooke Fusiliers. The RAF also spotted the 'Tiger' approaching Nieuwkerk and four Typhoons from 609 Squadron roared down and fired their guns and a total of 31 rocket projectiles. Through the smoke they could not observe the result, which was nil anyway.¹⁰⁸⁴ Brigadier J.F. Walker (146th Infantry Brigade) told the Canadians to send one troop of tanks to Nieuwkerk straightaway and the other three to Aerle where the rest of the Hallams were still in position. Hart-Dyke also requested DF fire as C Company reported enemy approaching from the west, but the advance could not be stopped and German troops entered the hamlet. They got behind a standing patrol on the bridge, crossed the stream, fired some light machine-guns into the trees and generally made the situation of C Company most uncomfortable if not critical. Then a *Sturmgeschütz* and a *Jagdpanther* approached. The *Jagdpanther* stopped at the tiny crossroads next to the bridge across the Poppelse Leij, no more than a stream really, within a few metres of C Company headquarters.

Disaster was looming for the Hallams, but then fate intervened in the form of two Canadian Shermans that rounded the corner of the sandy road that very moment. However, a *Jagdpanther* was a tall order even for two Shermans. But then fate intervened a second time. Spotting the first Sherman the *Jagdpanther* rushed to the attack. The Sherman backed off the road at high speed firing as it went. The *Jagdpanther* carried on. However, there was a six-pounder anti-tank gun next to a building at the crossroads. It had been left there because the crew thought that it was faulty. It certainly was not, because when the *Jagdpanther* pulled up right in front of it Sergeant W. Newton fired at the SP from nine metres. The shell hit and stopped it. The *Jagdpanther* apparently tried to turn in order to fire back but the barrel hit a tree and Sergeant Newton put four more rounds into it from point blank range, upon which it caught fire. The crew, some of them badly burned, bailed out and were taken prisoner, except for the commander, *Leutnant Koch*. He was rescued by the accompanying *Fallschirmjäger* and taken back to a dressing post. From there he went to a military hospital in Utrecht where he died the following day.¹⁰⁸⁵

One of the crew reported to the Hallams that there were four more 'tanks' in the woods north of Nieuwkerk and soon the area was plastered by medium guns.¹⁰⁸⁶ Knocking out the *Jagdpanther* meant that the *Fallschirmjäger* following it, stopped in their tracks. An immediate counterattack, supported by the Canadian tanks soon

¹⁰⁸² KTB 88 AK, 06.10.44, B 364.

¹⁰⁸³ Next section, War Diary 49th WR Div, Immediate Report, German counter-attack on 146 Bde 6 and 7 Oct 44, War Diary Hallams, 07.10.44, and Scott, *Polar Bears*, 295-6.

¹⁰⁸⁴ Second TAF, Daily Log, 07.10.44.

¹⁰⁸⁵ PAJVD.

¹⁰⁸⁶ War Diary Hallams, 07.10.44.

restored the situation. Still, the position was far too exposed and Hart-Dyke was told that he could pull back the two companies to rejoin the rest of the battalion in Aerle. The withdrawal was effected around noon. The Hallams in Aerle had also been under some threat. At least two *Sturmgeschütze* reared their heads to the northwest and some infantry popped up. But DF tasks were put down by the British artillery and no attack materialised. The *Sturmgeschütze* drove off unharmed, no doubt to rejoin the rest of 559 further north. One carrier, One Dingo scout car and one Sherman had to be left behind in Nieuwkerk and fell into German hands. The following day they were proudly displayed to the people of Tilburg.¹⁰⁸⁷ The Dingo was kept by *Oberleutnant* Franz Kopka to be used by 559, the carrier went to Chill while the Sherman was passed on to *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps*.¹⁰⁸⁸

Von Zangen could be content. The attack by *Kampfgruppe Chill* had not yet reached Poppel, but it had achieved its primary goal, to plug the gap between *LXVII.* and *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps*. The success for the time being effectively neutralized the threat to the inner flank of *15. Armee*.¹⁰⁸⁹ Von Zangen now hoped that this success could be exploited by pushing the Allied forces back across the Belgian border. In his own analysis Chill was less sanguine.¹⁰⁹⁰ He pointed out that the British artillery in particular posed a major problem. That day at least 10,000 shells had been fired on his sector (his *Ia*, *Oberstleutnant* Schuster, estimated the number to be 8,000).¹⁰⁹¹ If there was to be any chance of success for a continued attack on Poppel, he wrote, he needed *Panzerjäger* and more ammunition for his artillery. Little could he know that the next day events elsewhere would make his request redundant. The same day on which one Allied advance was blocked by *15. Armee*, another one, sixty kilometres further west, was about to materialize. A month after the capture of Antwerp the Allies were finally approaching the Beveland isthmus. More of that in the next chapter.

On the move again

On Sunday 8 October there was a reshuffling of forces. On the Allied side both the 1st Polish Armoured and the 49th (West Riding) Divisions stayed put. The two battalions which had been in continuous action for five days were taken out of the line. The Hallams in Aerle were relieved by the 2nd Gloucestershire Regiment and the 4th Lincolns along the border swapped places with the 1/4th KOYLI. The attack which was originally planned for the following day was postponed indefinitely i.e. until I Corps had decided on the next step.¹⁰⁹² A bigger move was made by their opposite number. About to launch another attack Chill received a phone call early that morning that must have sounded very familiar.¹⁰⁹³ He was told by *15. Armee*

¹⁰⁸⁷ Mijland and Trommelen, *De Bevrijding van Tilburg*, 40.

¹⁰⁸⁸ Kopka, *Missbraucht und Gebeutelt*, 158.

¹⁰⁸⁹ KTB 88 AK, 07.10.44, Tagesmeldung.

¹⁰⁹⁰ KTB 88 AK, 07.10.44, B 366.

¹⁰⁹¹ KTB 88 AK, 07.10.44, 17.00 hours and KTB Adm in der Niederlanden, 08.10.44, 18.00 hours.

¹⁰⁹² War Diary 49th WR Div 08.10.44.

¹⁰⁹³ The call must have come early on the 8th since the evening report from Chill to 88 AK on the 7th mentions the continuation of the attack towards Aerle and Maerle (KTB 88 AK, 07.10.44, B 366). In the afternoon of the 8th the relief was underway (KTB 88 AK, 08.10.44, A 617) and by nightfall Von der Heydte had at last arrived (KTB 88 AK, 08.10.44, C 269).

that he and his men were desperately needed at Hoogerheide. There an Allied breakthrough towards Woensdrecht was imminent and *LXVII. Armeekorps* was unable to block it with the forces at its disposal. The previous evening General Sponheimer had called *15. Armee* asking for help and Von Zangen had promised to send his 'fire brigade'. Obviously he could not take the whole *Kampfgruppe* out of the line right away, but something needed to be done and fast. Hence Von Zangen ordered Chill to pull only half of his *Kampfgruppe* out. Von der Heydte and his battalions plus *I./FJR 2* were to go to Hoogerheide while Chill himself with the remaining two battalions would stay at Goirle. Their sector was to be taken over by *Grenadier-Regiment 935*, without any further delay.¹⁰⁹⁴ The whole manoeuvre was to be covered by the *Sturmgeschütze* of *559*.¹⁰⁹⁵ Again Von Zangen was forced to take a calculated risk.

Because of this unexpected turn of events the idea of an attack towards Poppel was abandoned. The whole day was a repeat of three days before and Chill must have suffered from a sense of déjà-vu as once again the frantic phone calls inquiring after the relief came in.¹⁰⁹⁶ Still Reinhard was immensely relieved when the Allied drive on Tilburg did not materialise. Another change was that *Kampfgruppe Chill* south of Tilburg once more reverted to *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps*. This made sense as Chill now needed to work closely together with Sander's *245. Infanterie-Division*, one of Reinhard's two divisions. Early the following morning the relief was completed and Von der Heydte's men were on their way to their new battleground.¹⁰⁹⁷ As a result, on 9 October the front north of Poppel and Alphen was largely quiet. In fact it was so quiet that Reinhard himself used the opportunity to inspect the forward positions of both *Bataillon Pohl (I./Fallschirm Panzer Ersatz und Ausbildungs-Regiment Hermann Göring)* and *Bataillon Ohler*, north of Nieuwkerk during the morning.¹⁰⁹⁸ Since *Kampfgruppe Chill* had had to give up no fewer than five battalions and to avoid breaking up the regiment that day Chill got tactical command over *Grenadier-Regiment 935*. At the same time the whole of *schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559* was taken away from *Kampfgruppe Chill* and ordered to place itself at the disposal of *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps*. The *Abteilung* was to take up position west of Tilburg.¹⁰⁹⁹ It was told that it should be able to move quickly at all times. In view of the situation at Hoogerheide and nearby Woensdrecht this could be any minute. As it turned out, *Kampfgruppe Chill* and *schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559* would only get two days' rest.

The following day *General* Reinhard wrote a glowing report to Von Zangen recommending that Chill receive mention in a special despatch at the end of one of the daily war reports issued by the *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (OKW)*, the so-called *Wehrmachtsberichte*.¹¹⁰⁰ His arguments were that through Chill's actions on 5 September he had personally prevented the enemy from continuing his advance.

¹⁰⁹⁴ KTB 88 AK, A 615.

¹⁰⁹⁵ Kopka, *Missbraucht und Gebeutelt*, 158.

¹⁰⁹⁶ E.g. KTB 88 AK, 08.10.44, 14.55, 15.07, 15.46, 16.25 hours etc.

¹⁰⁹⁷ KTB 88 AK, 09.10.44, 07.30 hours.

¹⁰⁹⁸ KTB 88 AK, 09.10.44, 08.30 hours.

¹⁰⁹⁹ KTB 88 AK, 09.10.44, B 375.

¹¹⁰⁰ KTB 88 AK, 10.10.44, B 378.

Also, during the following weeks his unit had been put into action in many crucial places and had delayed the advance of enemy units which far outnumbered him. It was thanks to Chill, Reinhard felt, that the enemy had not reached Eindhoven in early September.¹¹⁰¹ Reinhard's wish would soon be granted. Just over a week later, on 18 October, the whole of Germany heard his name when Chill was personally mentioned in the *Wehrmachtsbericht*. The report said that, 'Generalleutnant Chill, Kommandeur der 85. Infanteriedivision, hat östlich Antwerpen mit einer Anzahl aus eigenem Entschluss zusammengeraffter kleinerer Verbände den Engländern den Stoss auf den Albert-Kanal verwehrt und in den darauffolgenden schweren Kämpfen mit diesem Verband den vielfach überlegenen Feind immer wieder zurückgeschlagen'.¹¹⁰² *Kampfgruppe Chill* had indeed acted as a 'fire brigade' on more than occasion. But the job was far from over. By the time the German *Rundfunk* broadcast the report, Chill had just finished dealing with another potentially lethal Allied penetration at Woensdrecht.

Conclusion

Chill's battlegroup had triumphed once more. It had done so by first making maximum use of the potential offered by the *Sturmgeschütze* and *Jagdpanther* (which could knock out the average Sherman from a distance of 1,371 and 1,829 metres respectively¹¹⁰³) to deal with the Allied armour, and then by counterattacking together with the infantry. As before (Geel and Schijndel) the infantry counterattacked and infiltrated the enemy lines, supported by armour, looking for the weak spots before an effective defensive system could be in place, then cutting off parties of Allied soldiers, forcing the rest to pull back. Not only did the *Kampfgruppe* block the advance towards Tilburg (and eventually 's-Hertogenbosch) and plug the gap between *LXVII.* and *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps*, but it even stood poised to capture Poppel and push back the Allies even further when the plans were interrupted by *15. Armee* which needed their 'fire brigade' to halt another potentially disastrous Allied advance at Woensdrecht.

By its prompt actions south of Tilburg *Kampfgruppe Chill* blocked the Canadian advance in the general direction of 's-Hertogenbosch. This advance would have caught the bulk of *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps* in a bag and as a result should have enabled Second Army to ignore its left flank (as Montgomery had planned) and break out from the Nijmegen area to 'operate against the N.W. corner of the Ruhr'.¹¹⁰⁴ Chill's successful defence prevented this scenario from unfolding and it again vitiated Montgomery's ambitions to continue the operations into the industrial heart of the Reich and hence had far reaching consequences. But it was not before the *Kampfgruppe* inflicted another bloody defeat on the Canadian troops under his command that Montgomery finally woke up to the realities of the autumn campaign.

¹¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰² *Die Wehrmachtsberichte*, Band 3, 297.

¹¹⁰³ John Buckley, *British Armour in the Normandy Campaign 1944*, London 2004, 126.

¹¹⁰⁴ M 527, 27.09.44, TNA WO106/4356.

3.6 Woensdrecht (24 September – 19 October 1944)

"... the monumental task of attacking these strongpoints on a one-man front, dyke by wretched dyke, without respite. This was bad enough, but when it had to be done in cold, driving rain, through ankle-deep mud, with little hope of a change of dry clothes or a warm place to sleep, not knowing from one moment to the next if you would be dead or alive, it was a new form of hell. This was polder warfare."¹¹⁰⁵

"Do you know what it's like? Of course you don't. You have never slept in a hole in the ground which you have dug while someone tried to kill you. It is an open grave – and yet graves don't fill up with water."¹¹⁰⁶

The next battlefield for *Kampfgruppe Chill* would be the scene of some of the bloodiest fighting for any Allied troops during the autumn campaign of 1944. The struggle to take Woensdrecht and surroundings was the indirect result of Montgomery's failure to order the 11th Armoured Division to carry on north of Antwerp after the town had been captured on 4 September. It was the Canadians who were to pay the price for this error. The story begins at Rijkevorsel where the 49th (West Riding) Division had established a bridgehead on 25 September (see 3.5).

The initial stage

After Lieutenant-General Guy Simonds had taken over First Canadian Army from Lieutenant-General Henry Crerar because the latter was on sick leave, he called for a conference on 29 September. He made it clear to the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division that he wanted a bridgehead over the Antwerp-Turnhout Canal before the meeting convened. A second failure, after the Lochtenberg operation (see previous chapter) was not an option as far as he was concerned.¹¹⁰⁷ Now that Simonds, a favourite of Montgomery's, had moved up there were other changes in command. His place as II Corps Commander was taken by Major-General Charles Foulkes, who in turn was replaced at the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division by Brigadier R.H. Keebler. Hence it now fell to Keebler to come up with a successful plan for a crossing. In view of the earlier failed attack at Lochtenberg, Keebler decided on a two-pronged affair.¹¹⁰⁸ He sent his 5th Canadian Infantry Brigade (Brigadier W.J. Megill) to Rijkevorsel where it would use the same bridgehead from which the Poles and the 49th Division had hit north and east. Megill's Brigade was told to turn sharply to the left after crossing the Antwerp-Turnhout Canal and advance alongside the canal until it reached a point near Lochtenberg. While the Germans had their hands full warding off the 5th Brigade, the 6th Canadian Infantry Brigade (Brigadier J.G. Gauvreau) would cross successfully it was hoped this time. The two brigades would link up establishing the bridgehead Simonds wanted. But, as always, plans are one thing, the actual execution another.¹¹⁰⁹

¹¹⁰⁵ Whitaker and Whitaker, *Tug of War*, 250.

¹¹⁰⁶ Whitaker and Whitaker, *Tug of War*, 306.

¹¹⁰⁷ Zuehlke, *Terrible Victory*, 124.

¹¹⁰⁸ Next section, unless otherwise specified, Zuehlke, *Terrible Victory*, 124-133.

¹¹⁰⁹ Next paragraphs about advance to Woensdrecht, unless otherwise specified, Johan van Doorn, *Slag om Woensdrecht, bevrijding van de Zuidwesthoek*, Willemstad 1995, 25-33, and Zuehlke, *Terrible Victory*, 124-154 and 171-188.

Early on 28 September, another cold and wet day, the lead battalion of the 5th Canadian Infantry Brigade, Le Régiment de Maissoneuve (under Lieutenant-Colonel J. Bibeau), crossed the bridge at Rijkevorsel. To prevent a repeat of the disaster that befell the Fusiliers Mont-Royal at Lochtenberg, the Maissies were supported by A Squadron the Fort Garry Horse (one of the three regiments in the 2nd Armoured Brigade) and a troop of armoured cars from the recce unit, the 14th Canadian Hussars. The CO of the Fort Garry Horse, Lieutenant-Colonel Eric Mackay Wilson, was unhappy about the battle plan which had the armour in the lead, and his misgivings turned out to be justified. A few hundred yards from Oostbrecht an 8.8 cm *Flak* gun opened up and the lead Sherman was immediately disabled. The infantry lagged behind and were unable to help out. Soon other *Pak* guns joined in and at the end of the day only eight tanks were still operational although the Maissies did manage to drive the German defenders out of the village. Since Oostbrecht was on the boundary between two divisions, some were from *Grenadier-Regimente 857* and *858* of the *346. Infanterie-Division*, others were from *Grenadier-Regiment 731*, the left wing of the *711. Infanterie-Division*. For once there had clearly been none of the usual rivalry about who was responsible. By now it was dark and Lieutenant-Colonel Bruce Ritchie did not like to attack what was apparently a strongly held position, but Brigadier Megill nevertheless insisted that the Black Watch carry out the plan and seize the next village, St.-Lenaarts. This was defended by the *346. Infanterie-Division* although some units of the *711. I.D.* remained involved in some houses on the northern edge. The Black Watch would be supported by B Squadron Fort Garry Horse. It was midnight before the attack got underway.

Again German resistance was fierce and again farmhouse after farmhouse had to be cleared in the chaos so typical of night actions. The Canadians slowly advanced on the village centre. At one point *3./Grenadier-Regiment 858* counterattacked, supported by two *Renault* SPs (*4,7 cm Pak (t) auf Pz.Kpfw.35R (f)*), most likely from *Panzerjäger-Kompanie 346*, and one platoon from B Company even found itself surrounded.¹¹¹⁰ However, during the attack *Leutnant* Schwarzelt's men ran out of MG ammunition and a renewed Canadian effort broke the encirclement. The tables were definitely turned and in the end seventy-four Germans surrendered. In fact Schwarzelt's company, originally 110 strong, had been wiped out. By mid-morning on 29 September the Canadians were in control of most of St.-Lenaarts.¹¹¹¹ The battle for the village had been bloody. At the end of the day about eighty Germans and twelve Black Watch had lost their lives while many *Grenadiere* had been taken prisoner.¹¹¹² In addition forty-three Canadian soldiers had been wounded. At noon Brigadier Megill decided to push his third battalion, the Calgary Highlanders, through to exploit, but not as far as Brecht, which had been the plan at first. In view of the stiff German resistance he was wary of pushing the Calgarians out too far. Moreover the original plan, to link up with the 6th Brigade further west, was out of the window

¹¹¹⁰ First Cdn Army, IS 96, 04.10.44. Details on 3./858: First Cdn Army IR PoW Misc. Commands and Units, 03.10.44.

¹¹¹¹ The capture of the village was not reported until 17.00 hours (Second Army Intel Log, 29.09.44, serial 29).

¹¹¹² Wally Schoofs, *De Slag om Brecht 1940-1945*, Brecht 2005, 150 and 327-331, gives 49, Van Doorn (PAJVD) has found between 30-40 DOW (died of wounds) who need to be added to this.

because that same day the South Saskatchewan had been unable to cross at Lochtenberg. The Calgarys were now to seize another stretch of canal about two kilometres west so that the engineers could construct a bridge there which the 6th Canadian Infantry Brigade could use instead to join the advance.

The operation started late on the 29 September and lasted throughout the night. The Germans broke off the action early the following morning and pulled back closer to Brecht. In fact the *346. Infanterie-Division* had little option in view of the high number of casualties. *Generalleutnant* Diestel was now in dire straits. If the Canadian attacks continued at this pace his division could be annihilated within a few days. Von Zangen had no real reserves and eventually he decided that the *70. Infanterie-Division* under *Generalleutnant* Wilhelm Daser, which was assigned to hold Walcheren, was to come to the rescue.¹¹¹³ The '*Magendivision*' (Stomach Division) had received this nickname as 85% of its soldiers suffered from stomach ailments, sometimes caused by wounds from other fronts. The men were attached to this division until they were reclassified as fit for more active duties and thus the turnover was nearly a thousand in three months. Hence there was little group cohesion and morale was very low.¹¹¹⁴ But it was all Von Zangen had. The division was to give up one of its three regiments. Diestel decided to assign *Grenadier-Regiment 1018* commanded by *Major* Hiller a sector in between his own two regiments.¹¹¹⁵ Thus it ended up in the area around Maria-ter-Heide, where it would catch the brunt of the Canadian attack. The first soldiers began to arrive north of Antwerp on 29 September. They would arrive too late to stop the first stage of the Canadian breakout.

Breakout

On 1 October the 5th Canadian Infantry Brigade kept pushing west to expand the bridgehead.¹¹¹⁶ Initially the Calgarys were in the lead. They started their attack in darkness and heavy rain. Once the start line was secured, after some squabbling, the Black Watch took over at eight a.m. After a short, but bloody fight, they managed to push the German defenders (*I./* and *II./Grenadier-Regiment 857, I./GR 858* plus *II./GR 743*) out of Brecht around noon. After that the third battalion, the Cameron Highlanders, took over. They managed to expand the bridgehead up to a point close to Lochtenberg. The way was now clear for the 6th Canadian Infantry Brigade to follow, push through and link up with the 4th Canadian Infantry Brigade which was to come out of Antwerp the following day. All in all 135 Germans were taken prisoner that day.¹¹¹⁷ For the Canadians this boded well for the next stage. The Germans were in deep trouble. In a desperate attempt to stem the Canadian advance Diestel decided to take a risk. He pulled back three newly arrived companies (*2., 3.* and *6./Grenadier-regiment 1018*) from their current positions around Brasschaat and formed them into an ad-hoc battalion. This improvised unit under *Hauptmann* Feil

¹¹¹³ Von Zangen, 25 and Rehm, 32.

¹¹¹⁴ Special Interrogation report of Leutnant Obermeit, TNA WO 208/1199.

¹¹¹⁵ According to a PoW who served in 1018, *Hauptmann* Theobald was the *Kommandeur* (TNA WO 208/3608, SIR 1319).

¹¹¹⁶ This section, unless otherwise specified, Zuehlke, *Terrible Victory*, 139-154.

¹¹¹⁷ War Diary 2nd Cdn inf Div, message 01.10.44, 24.00 hours.

was to seal the gap now developing along the anti-tank ditch running from Lochtenberg to Maria-ter-Heide.¹¹¹⁸

The first goal of the 4th Canadian Infantry Brigade (Brigadier F. Cabeldu) on 2 October was Merksem, the Antwerp suburb which had been the scene of the first action of *schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559* about a month before and which had eluded the 11th Armoured Division then. The weather improved slightly and once again Second Tactical Air Force helped out on a massive scale.¹¹¹⁹ During the early morning twelve Spitfires of 127 Squadron (131 Wing) swooped down on German guns north of Antwerp and half of the bombs fell within the target area. For good measure gun positions were also strafed. The Spitfires all returned safely to Lille/Nord just before ten a.m. After refuelling they took off again together with five other squadrons and the combined might of fifty-seven Spitfires plastered a wide area from north of Antwerp as far north as Brecht.¹¹²⁰ In fact 332 Squadron flew two additional missions. A total of seventy-nine 500-pounders were dropped on buildings, guns and known ammunition dumps. Finally, at the end of the afternoon all forty-eight Spitfires of the four squadrons in 145 Wing attacked woods north-east of Antwerp dropping another forty-six 500-pounders on suspected targets.¹¹²¹

In spite of all the fireworks, Cabeldu opted for caution and he decided on an attack from two different directions. He ordered the Royal Regiment of Canada (Lieutenant-Colonel R.M. Lendrum) supported by Belgian volunteers to go in first, across the Albert Canal, while the Essex Scottish (Lieutenant-Colonel J. Pangman) would come in from the west. The Royals' canal crossing went surprisingly well, because it went undetected and it was not until the Belgian volunteers, all 150 from the Antwerp resistance and led by 'Colonel Harry' (Eugene Colson), went across that the German defenders woke up.¹¹²² The Belgians suffered horrendous losses, eleven men were killed and thirteen were wounded, but still the Canadians managed to form a bridgehead although smaller than originally intended. The Royals went ahead and they soon reached the town centre. Here a sharp counterattack developed, but it was broken up by the Canadian artillery. The attack by the Essex Scottish had also gone off to an auspicious start, although Groenendaal Castle looked like it might be a tough nut to crack. Amazingly the defenders left it as soon as the Essex attacked. At the end of the day the Canadian advance ended just north of the town at the anti-tank ditch. All in all *Grenadier-Regiment 1018* had been pushed out of Merksem before it could really dig in there. Forty-three of their number were taken prisoner (in addition to a score of Belgian SS-men).¹¹²³ Worse was to come for the *Grenadiere*.

Just as the *Grenadiere* tried to take up position between *Grenadier-Regiment 857* and *858* the Canadian advance was gaining momentum. That same day, as planned,

¹¹¹⁸ Captured order in War Diary 2nd Cdn Inf Div, IS 14, 22.10.44.

¹¹¹⁹ Details actions 2 TAF, Daily Log 02.10.44.

¹¹²⁰ 131 Wing: 302 and 317 Squadrons, 132 Wing: 127, 332 and 349 Squadrons and 135 Wing: 222 Squadron.

¹¹²¹ Namely 74, 329, 340 and 341 Squadrons.

¹¹²² Stappaerts, *Kolonel Harry*, 149-157.

¹¹²³ War Diary 2nd Cdn Inf Div, G Intel log, 03.10.44, 03.30 hours. Zuehlke, *Terrible Victory*, 146, gives forty-four.

the 6th Canadian Infantry Brigade broke out of the bridgehead and headed towards their comrades breaking out of Antwerp. The South Saskatchewan Regiment (Lieutenant-Colonel V. Stott) supported by B Squadron the Fort Garry Horse advanced alongside the canal, while the Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders of Canada (Lieutenant-Colonel E.P. Thompson) and C Squadron the Fort Garry Horse proceeded northwest towards Maria-ter-Heide. *Hauptmann* Feil's improvised battalion fought back as well as they could, but the Germans were seriously outnumbered and it remained to be seen how much they could do. The dense woods helped to delay the advance, but at the end of the day the South Saskatchewans took their objective, Lichtenberg. There they came across the bodies of their comrades who had fallen in the failed crossing eight days before (see Chapter 3.5). The Camerons, however, failed to reach their objective for the day. Both poor tank-infantry cooperation on their part and fierce resistance by Feil's men meant that Thompson was forced to reorganise for the following day.

On Tuesday 3 October the 6th Canadian Infantry Brigade continued their advance. The Camerons met with hardly any resistance this time and Kamp de Brasschaat and Maria-ter-Heide were occupied by 12.30 hours. The South Saskatchewans were also quite successful and they advanced another three kilometres and liberated the town of Brasschaat to the usual scenes of cheering civilians. Again *Grenadier-Regiment 1018* bore the brunt of the attack and this time 121 were taken prisoner.¹¹²⁴ Meanwhile the 4th Canadian Infantry Brigade had its hands full taking the heavily defended marshalling yards at Oorderen. This job fell to the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry (Lieutenant-Colonel D. Whitaker). Using a feint as well as a creeping barrage Whitaker managed to get one company behind the Germans and at 06.30 hours the marshalling yards were taken. The last Germans at Merksem were driven off and Colson's group of resistance fighters was finally relieved, not until after another five had been killed. They had fought bravely alongside the Allies for one month since the capture of Antwerp and they had suffered hugely in the process.¹¹²⁵

Canadian patrols found that the next town, Eekeren, was still firmly held by German troops and that as far as Cabeldu's 4th Brigade got that day. As the two Canadian brigades were now just three kilometres from each other, the Germans in between, in particular a small group of Germans inside Fort de Schooten, risked being trapped. The Canadians had no idea how many Germans were inside the old fortress and they decided to take no chances.¹¹²⁶ It was thought that maybe the group was amenable to propaganda using loudspeakers. The script was prepared, but due to technical difficulties the idea could not be carried out. Unbeknownst to the Canadians about half of the German defenders used this lull to slip out during the night. The following morning a company from the Calgarys entered the fort to take the rest, thirty-four, prisoner.¹¹²⁷ It was then found that the whole group, *Kampfgruppe Wittenberg* (*Hauptmann* Wittenberg), had been composed of a mere sixty to seventy men from *Grenadier-Regiment 1056* (*89. Infanterie-Division*).¹¹²⁸

¹¹²⁴ War Diary 2nd Cdn Inf Div, G Intel Log, 04.10.44, 02.00 hours.

¹¹²⁵ Stappaerts, *Kolonel Harry*, 200-203 .

¹¹²⁶ Story Fort de Schooten. War Diary 2nd Cdn Inf Div, 03. and 04.10.44.

¹¹²⁷ War Diary 2nd Cdn inf Div, G Intel Log, 03.10.44, 17.20 hours.

¹¹²⁸ First Cdn Army, IS 95, 03.10.44.

Plain sailing

Bolstered by this success the Allies were fooled into thinking that the breakthrough towards the Beveland isthmus was finally about to happen. The intelligence officers felt that the losses inflicted on the Germans meant that 'enemy resistance on the Northern shore of the Scheldt may not after all be as prolonged or as stubborn as expected...'¹¹²⁹ In other words, hopefully it would be plain sailing from now on. The loss of the canal line meant that *General/Von Zangen (15. Armee)* now had no natural features to fall back on. So retreat was the only option. From Antwerp northwards until north of the Dutch border, where there was an area of higher ground the so-called 'Brabant Wal', it was all flat polder land which offered little opportunity for defence. Another reason to pull them back was that Von Zangen wanted to prevent his troops from being trapped.¹¹³⁰ His biggest headache was still the attack towards Tilburg since that could tear open his whole defensive line. Von Zangen could only look for *Kampfgruppe Chill* to stop this impending disaster. Coupled with the serious losses incurred by the *346. Infanterie-Division* and the fact that there were no other reserves he again asked *Heeresgruppe B* for permission to prepare to pull back his army behind the river Meuse. Again permission was refused. Von Zangen therefore decided on a gradual withdrawal north.

On 4 October, a bright and cool day, the 4th and 6th Canadian Infantry Brigades finally formed a continuous front north of Antwerp. It was a day of steady progress as the Canadian troops followed the German withdrawal closely. The ultimate goal for Cabeldu's 4th Brigade was Woensdrecht, the key to the Beveland isthmus. Things finally seemed to be going well that sunny day as the Essex Scottish (4th Canadian Infantry Brigade) took Eekeren and then Stabroek with its vital bridge across the Opstalbeek. That same day the Fusiliers Mont Royal (6th Canadian Infantry Brigade) occupied Capellen. All in all another 268 Germans were taken prisoner.¹¹³¹ The Division's intelligence officers correctly deduced that the enemy was fighting a delaying action to cover (...) limited withdrawal towards new line...¹¹³²

The following day saw the continuation of the Canadian advance. The Essex Scottish proceeded northeast for another five kilometres until they came upon the Dutch border at the village of Putte. There German resistance stiffened and Canadian losses soon began to mount. The lead company (B) was down to just forty men when it reached the central square. The defenders, largely from *5. and 7. Kompanie Landeschützbatallion 484*, had only that morning arrived from Merksplas to bolster *Grenadier-Regiment 858*. No sooner had the Essex taken Putte than a counterattack began which could be beaten off after some fierce fighting. Meanwhile, to the left of the Essex, the Royal Regiment of Canada had struck out in a more northerly direction, towards Berendrecht, B Squadron 14th Canadian Hussars leading the way. There around twenty-eight *Grenadiere* from *5. and 8./Grenadier-Regiment 744* surrendered to the Daimler armoured cars without putting up much of a fight.¹¹³³

¹¹²⁹ Second Army, IS 121, 03.10.44.

¹¹³⁰ This section, Von Zangen, 31-2.

¹¹³¹ War Diary 2nd Cdn Inf Div, G Intel Log, 04.10.44, 02.00 hours.

¹¹³² Ibid.

¹¹³³ Zuehlke (*Terrible Victory*, 176) gives a hundred, but the G Intel Log for 5 October (23.00 hours) gives 28.

During that night's briefing Cabeldu told his battalion commanders that the brigade would advance on the axis Ossendrecht – Calfven and that the next stop was to be Hoogerheide while the ultimate goal was Korteven. If that was captured the road between the Zuid Beveland peninsula and Bergen op Zoom would be completely cut off, isolating the island of Walcheren and all the German troops there. The attack was to start the following morning.

Diestel's *346. Infanterie-Division* was now in a real trouble, losing a company or more every day and the lack of armour and mobile anti-tank guns made itself felt. In an effort to remedy this *Generalfeldmarschall Model, Oberbefehlshaber Heeresgruppe B*, on the same day announced that *15. Armee* was to be reinforced by *Sturmgeschützbrigade 667* (in addition to *Sturmgeschützbrigade 280* and the eight *Sturmgeschütze* from *schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559*), *Sturmgeschützbrigade 244* and the *256. Volksgrenadier-Division*. These units were expected to arrive on the 10th (*667*) or the 12th (*244* and the *256 V.G.D.*).¹¹³⁴ But that was still a few days away and for the time being *559* had its hands full south of Tilburg. At least *Sturmgeschützbrigade 280* was available so all of its operational *Sturmgeschütze* were sent on their way to Hoogerheide that very day from the station at Breda where they unloaded.¹¹³⁵ Every day the Allied advance was held up was a day that denied the vital port of Antwerp to the Allies. At a conference with Eisenhower and Montgomery that day the British Chief of the Imperial Staff, Field-Marshal Sir Alan Brooke, reached the conclusion that 'access to Antwerp must be captured with the least possible delay'.¹¹³⁶ It was a clear sign that a storm was brewing at the highest levels, just beyond the horizon for the moment, but one which would have momentous consequences for the current campaign.

The advance continues

Friday 6 October was a continuation of the previous two days. The Royal Hamilton Light Infantry (Rileys) started off from Putte and crossed the border into the Netherlands expecting a stiff fight. But they discovered a vulnerable spot in the network of enemy rearguards and advance elements slipped through to just east of Ossendrecht.¹¹³⁷ Lieutenant-Colonel D. Whitaker hoped to overtake the Germans before they could set up a new defensive line and he ordered A Company to mount the Shermans of A Squadron the Fort Garry Horse so they could move faster. His hope was dashed when the group came across an extensive roadblock after only three kilometres. Eventually the obstacle was overcome and the Rileys got as far as Het Puts Molentje en Jagersrust, the latter place, an inn, only a few kilometres from Hoogerheide and Woensdrecht. That same day the Royals on the left advanced on Ossendrecht which they hoped to take by entering it from two different directions. However, this time the German defenders failed to be impressed by the armoured

¹¹³⁴ KTB H.Gr.B, Nr. 8222/44, 05.10.44 and 8441/44, 10.10.44.

¹¹³⁵ Not as is incorrectly reported in various books, *Sturmgeschützbrigade 255*. This mistake stems from Rehm, 42, and Warning, 22, who mention this unit, but had to write from memory. Contemporary sources (II Cdn Corps IS 65, 09.10.44 and First Canadian Army IS 102, 10.10.44) all point to 280. Interestingly Stacey already correctly deduced this in his ground breaking book (*Official History*, 368).

¹¹³⁶ Alanbrooke, 601.

¹¹³⁷ First Cdn Army IS 98, 06.11.44.

cars of the 14th Canadian Hussars and a concealed *Renault SP (4,7 cm Pak (t) auf Pz.Kpfw.35R (f))* opened fire on them. The defence of Ossendrecht had been assigned to *Major* Friedrich Oesterheld of the *346. Infanterie-Division* who was in charge of the usual motley crew from this division and from *Grenadier-Regiment 743 (719. I.D.)* as well as *Bataillon Nick* from *Grenadier-Regiment 744 (711. I.D.)*, *Kampfgruppe* Lammert (or Lambert) with *6. and 1./GR 861* plus units from the *Kriegsmarine*.¹¹³⁸ Diestel hoped that he would be able to put a stop to the Canadian force bearing down on Ossendrecht, but all they could do was slow them down. Accurate artillery fire knocked out the *Renault* and broke a German counterattack. Oesterheld himself was mortally wounded (he died the following day) and at the end of the day the Royals were in full possession of Ossendrecht. About fifty Germans lost their lives. Unbeknownst to the Canadians, the lead Shermans had gotten to within a few metres of the headquarters of *Grenadier-Regiment 744*.¹¹³⁹ The scene was now set for the final all-out assault on Hoogerheide, Korteveen and the Beveland isthmus. That job was assigned to the 5th Canadian Infantry Brigade. After five days it was to go the final stretch to Woensdrecht. Once they possessed that village the Canadians would in effect have severed the link between Walcheren, Zuid-Beveland and the mainland. Somewhat optimistically the divisional war diarist noted 'There are definite indications of enemy withdrawal in the direction of Bergen op Zoom.'¹¹⁴⁰

While it was heading for the Woensdrecht area the right flank of the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division was getting more and more extended. There were simply no Allied units available to plug the potential gap. This development was, of course, a direct result of Montgomery's focus on the Rhine (see Chapter 3.5) and the resulting orders to I Corps which led to two divergent lines of attack, a sin against basic military principles. As the 49th and the Polish 1st Armoured Divisions still had more than enough on their plates in the struggle south of Tilburg, there were basically no troops to fill the gap which was beginning to open up between the two main lines of attack. Both to draw defenders away from Woensdrecht and to prevent the Germans from exploiting this gap Brigadier Keebler, the acting divisional commander, ordered the 6th Canadian Infantry Brigade to attack towards Kalmthout. This task fell to the Fusiliers Mont Royal (still at Capellen) plus four troops from the Fort Garry Horse, a squadron from the 14th Canadian Hussars and some supporting units. Their attack would start the following morning at ten a.m.¹¹⁴¹

Meanwhile Von Zangen had his own worries. Both the *OKW* and Model pointed out the operational necessity of defending the area on the general line Antwerp – Tilburg – 's-Hertogenbosch, stating that it was 'bis zum Äussersten zu halten.'¹¹⁴² But how? Von Zangen was becoming ever more anxious about the way the situation was developing for the *346. I.D.* and he was running out of troops. Eventually he decided to send *Sturmbataillon AOK 15*, also known as *Sturmbataillon Armee Waffenschule*

¹¹³⁸ This section, Van Doorn, *Woensdrecht*, 30. Data Germans: 2 Cdn Corps, IS 69, 17.10.44. Re Lambert: First Cdn Army IR PoW 347 ID, 10. and 18.10.44.

¹¹³⁹ Rehm, 38-9.

¹¹⁴⁰ War Diary 2nd Cdn Inf Div, 06.10.44.

¹¹⁴¹ War Diary 6th Cdn Inf Bde, 06.120.44.

¹¹⁴² KBT H Gr B, 8244/44, 06.10.44.

15.¹¹⁴³ This unit, which was not really intended for front-line duty, was originally formed in Essen, Belgium, in September 1943. It was made up of a headquarters company, three rifle companies (1.-3.) and one heavy company (4.) armed with mortars and 2 cm *Flak*. In addition the battalion had four horse drawn 10.5 cm *LfH 18 (m)* field guns.¹¹⁴⁴ The battalion was sent to Soissons in February 1944 to serve as a demonstration unit at the *15. Armee Waffenschule*. Except for *1. Kompanie*, which was left at Dordrecht to guard the army headquarters, the *Sturmabteilung*, about two hundred infantry plus guns, led by *Hauptmann* Hühne,¹¹⁴⁵ was sent to Hoogerheide where it arrived during the afternoon of 7 October.¹¹⁴⁶

Blocked

On 7 October, another rainy day, a clear indication that autumn had finally come, the 5th Canadian Infantry Brigade started what it hoped would be the last push to Woensdrecht. The Calgary Highlanders and le Régiment de Maisonneuve took the lead while the Black Watch were held in reserve. The Calgarians started from Ossendrecht, supported by five tanks from C Squadron the Fort Garry Horse. First stop was Hoogerheide, next and final stop was Woensdrecht. As the name implies ('hoger' means higher) Hoogerheide dominates the surrounding countryside. It was built on a sandy ridge twenty-two metres above the flat polders surrounding it. It was higher, too, than Woensdrecht. In fact, the pinnacle of St. Joseph's, the Roman Catholic church tower in Woensdrecht was on the same level as the floor of Our Lady's Ascension in Hoogerheide. Clearly the latter village was the key to a successful advance on Woensdrecht.

Initially the advance went off to a fine start.¹¹⁴⁷ Progress was good as the Calgarians moved north through the woods east of the road. Things began to heat up as the leading platoon emerged from the woods. Stiff resistance had to be overcome, but helped by the Shermans from the Fort Garry Horse the Calgarians soon entered the southern part of Hoogerheide. From four p.m. the first prisoners began to pour in. They were mainly from *Sturmabteilung AOK 15*. The Calgarians' war diary described the surprise of the Canadians when they saw their new opponents, 'Contrary to what we had expected, they were not all old, sickly men, but rather young, fairly well-built men. (...) some of them spoke English and informed us that it was the first battle for many of them.'¹¹⁴⁸ Eventually sixty-two would be taken prisoner. The main reason for this high number is that the German soldiers had been told to attack, which they 'thought rather a poor idea' since they only had rifles and the Canadians had armour. Hence they were only too willing to surrender.¹¹⁴⁹ Still, their appearance stalled the Canadians' advance and fighting became more and more chaotic as night fell. At one

¹¹⁴³ There is confusion as to who was its Kommandeur. *Dritter Befehl FJR 6 (10.10.44)* suggests that it was Major Ebsen, but the Canadian sources (see following note) insist it was Hauptmann Huehne.

¹¹⁴⁴ Kommandeure: 2. Kp Leutnant Frommhagen, 3. Kp Oberleutnant Sachs and Arti Zug Oberleutnant Schur (First Cdn Army IR PoW Misc. Arty Units).

¹¹⁴⁵ First Cdn Army, IR PoW Miscellaneous Artillery Units, 08.10.44, 11.10.44, 18.10.44 give both Hühne and Höhne.

¹¹⁴⁶ First Cdn Army, IS 104, 12.10.44 and War Diary 2nd Cdn Inf Div, G Intel Log, 09.10.44, 01.15 hours.

¹¹⁴⁷ This section, unless otherwise specified, Zuehlke, *Terrible Victory*, 180-4.

¹¹⁴⁸ War Diary Calgary Highlanders, 07.10.44.

¹¹⁴⁹ First Cdn Army, IR PoW Misc. Arti Units 08.10.44.

point the commander in one of the Shermans thought he could see a *Panther* rumbling towards him.¹¹⁵⁰ In the darkness the Sherman slugged it out with the German 'tank'. The Canadian gunner managed to set the opponent ablaze although the Sherman had received a round through its final drive, disabling it. The chaos in Hoogerheide went on for a long time, but when the fighting died down the Calgarians were in possession of the all-important crossroads. The Maissies on their right had not been so successful. Their attack along the Putte-Hoogerheide road from early on had become bogged down at a roadblock which could not be circumvented because of anti-tank ditches next to the road and it was not overcome until the German defenders pulled out to avoid being trapped at the end of the afternoon. The Maissies captured sixty-three prisoners, but they had only covered a mile that day.¹¹⁵¹

The diversionary attack to secure the extended right flank on 7 October failed miserably. The ill-conceived attack soon got stuck at a roadblock and the Fusiliers barely made it past the starting line. At five p.m. Brigadier Gauvreau decided to call off the 'show'.¹¹⁵² He decided to put more weight behind the attack. The Fusiliers would now be supported by two squadrons of tanks instead of a few troops. The whole force was to be called Saint. The goal was now even more ambitious: Saintforce was to capture Achterbroek (just east of Kalmthout) and from there carry out a circular sweep taking it as far as Wuustwezel and back again). The object was to create confusion and give the Germans the impression that they were 'completely surrounded by tanks'.¹¹⁵³ The same day there was a change of command and control over the operations north of Antwerp also fell to II Canadian Corps. The new boundary with I Corps ran from Achterbroek to Essen.¹¹⁵⁴

Despite the limited success the Canadians had that day *LXVII. Armeekorps* was clearly in serious trouble. As the Chief of staff, *Oberst* Elmar Warning put it, 'Die Lage entwickelte sich immer bedrohlicher. Reserven, um eine weiteres Feindvorgehen zu verhindern, standen nicht mehr zur Verfügung. Das Generalkommando musste sich mit der Bitte um unverzügliche Hilfe an die Armee wenden.'¹¹⁵⁵ Von Zangen looked around and he realised that the only thing he could do was call in his trusty old 'fire brigade', *Kampfgruppe Chill*.¹¹⁵⁶ The tragedy was that they would have to bail Sponheimer's corps out in the middle of a potentially successful attack of their own towards Poppel (previous chapter). However, beggars cannot be choosers and as Von Zangen put it, 'Es kommt jetzt darauf an, dass die Landverbindung nach Walcheren möglichst lange in eigener Hand bleibt.'¹¹⁵⁷ Von der Heydte was highly surprised when he received the order, 'I realized the urgency of the mission: it was the first time in the whole war I had been ordered to break off

¹¹⁵⁰ This was Sergeant Eno. War Diary The Fort Garry Horse, 07.10.44 and Zuehlke, *Terrible Victory*, 183-4.

¹¹⁵¹ War Diary 2nd Cdn Inf Div, 07.10.44, serial 656.

¹¹⁵² War Diary 6th Cdn Inf Bde, 07.10.44.

¹¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹¹⁵⁴ War Diary 2nd Cdn Inf Div, Ops Log, 08.10.44, serial 698.

¹¹⁵⁵ Warning, 21.

¹¹⁵⁶ Oddly Zuehlke (*Terrible Victory*, 172-3) dates Chill's involvement to as early as 4 October which is clearly impossible.

¹¹⁵⁷ Von Zangen, 35.

a successful attack mid-battle'.¹¹⁵⁸ For the moment all that the *346. Infanterie-Division* could do was to try and delay the Canadian advance until the *Fallschirmjäger* arrived.

New arrivals

On 8 October Saintforce moved towards Kalmthout. However, visibility was down to thirty-five to forty metres. In the dense fog an 8.8 cm *Flak* gun opened up fire and the attack ground to a halt.¹¹⁵⁹ Once the fog lifted the tanks could locate and break enemy resistance and around two p.m. the lead elements reached Kalmthout. Next they came across a new obstacle at a bridge which was not overcome until five p.m. Opposition was stiffening and it was clear that the idea of a circular sweep would have to wait another day. Then Keebler received a message that spelled the end of Saintforce. The Fusiliers were to consolidate at Kalmthout, but the Sherman tanks were urgently needed at Hoogerheide. There, serious trouble was brewing.

The operation to capture Hoogerheide had started off well and by mid-morning the Calgary Highlanders had cleared most of the village. The Maissies to their right had also caught up by then. Now that Hoogerheide was firmly in Canadian hands it was time for the third battalion of the 5th Canadian Infantry Brigade, the Black Watch, to pass through on their way to Korteven and the brickworks there.¹¹⁶⁰ They would bypass Woensdrecht and cut the route into the Beveland isthmus. Battalion commander Lieutenant-Colonel Bruce Ritchie told his officers that conditions were not very good and it soon became clear that this was an understatement as even the start line had not been secured. His companies, supported by a troop of Shermans from the Fort Garry Horse, had to fight their way forward just to get there. D Company managed to advance as far as Zandfort just a kilometre from where they had started. They dug in around the crossroads. Further attempts to push on failed in the face of enemy mortars, machine-guns and artillery shells and D Company was forced to pull back to their start line. The fierce resistance was a last ditch attempt to stem the Canadian advance by the usual motley of troops from the *346. Infanterie-Division* including *Sturmabteilung Armee Oberkommando 15*.¹¹⁶¹ It seemed as if the day would end in a stalemate. Early in the evening, however, German soldiers wearing different uniforms and with a different type of helmet appeared on the scene. Small groups of *Fallschirmjäger* began to infiltrate the lines of all three battalions in and around Hoogerheide. *Kampfgruppe Chill* had arrived on the scene. The attackers became the defenders.

As related at the end of Chapter 3.5, half of *Kampfgruppe Chill* had begun to move to the west of Brabant early that Sunday morning. Leaving *Oberst* Dreyer back with just two battalions, *Batallion Pohl (I./Fallschirm Panzer Ersatz und Ausbildungs-Regiment Hermann Göring)* and *Batallion Ohler*, to cover the line, the other five battalions under *Oberstleutnant* Von der Heydte moved west. Their sector was taken over by *II./Grenadier-Regiment 935* and *I./Füsilier Batallion 937*, which were

¹¹⁵⁸ Whitaker and Whitaker, *Tug of War*, 185. Whitaker accidentally dates this order to 5 October.

¹¹⁵⁹ Section Saintforce: War Diary 6th Cdn Inf Bde, 08.10.44.

¹¹⁶⁰ Section on the Black Watch: War Diary Black Watch 08.10.44.

¹¹⁶¹ War Diary 2nd Cdn Inf Div, G Intel Log, 09.10.44, 01.15 hours.

temporarily assigned to Chill.¹¹⁶² A long column of lorries and buses drove from Tilburg through Breda to Bergen op Zoom six kilometres north of Korteven where they were unloaded. First to arrive on the scene was the *Kampfgruppe's* reserve unit, *Battalion Finzel (I./Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 2)*, followed by *III./ Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 6*, then parts of *I./FJR 6*.¹¹⁶³ While loading up it was found that *I./FJR 6* did not have 280 men as had been reported earlier, but 530, so that out of the blue extra lorries needed to be found somewhere to take the other 250 men to Bergen op Zoom. It all took a very long time and in fact the last soldiers did not reach their destination until the morning of 9 October.¹¹⁶⁴

The arrival of this large group of *Fallschirmjäger*, their number was estimated by the Allies at 2,000 (which was quite accurate), did not go unnoticed. Civilians (probably resistance fighters from the Albrecht Group who specialized in reporting on German units) managed to cross the lines and informed the Calgary Highlanders of the new German force which together with eight 'tanks', clearly the five *Sturmgeschütze III* and two or three *Sturmhaubitzen 42G* of *Sturmgeschützbrigade 280* under Major Kühme, was moving into Bergen op Zoom that morning.¹¹⁶⁵ This number means that on that date *280* had only seven vehicles in repair. The Calgarians passed the news on to higher echelons with a request to act on this information. Later that day further reports came in about the whole German group moving south to the woods just north of Mattemburg.¹¹⁶⁶ It was in this beautiful country house, nicknamed the 'white house', that *Oberstleutnant* Von der Heydte established his headquarters. It was an ideal location. On the estate was a brickyard which offered an excellent observation post. Later he remembered, 'I would make my customary evening stroll and could walk just a thousand metres away, to the houses over at the top end of the ridge overlooking Woensdrecht.'¹¹⁶⁷ Less ideal was the discovery, after one of his men had inadvertently stepped on a mine and died, that the area immediately south of Mattemburg was strewn with thousands of mines of all types, both *Teller* and anti-personnel *Schuhminen*. Von der Heydte had not been provided with a map and had to call upon the *719. Infanterie-Division* to provide him with one as the mines had all been laid during the summer by *2./Pi 719*.¹¹⁶⁸ The problem was soon solved, but precious time was lost while Von der Heydte decided to explore the battlefield for himself. While his companies were getting ready for the counterattack, Von der Heydte, who liked to lead from the front, decided to go on a recce trip. As he did not have a clear idea where the enemy was and did not trust official reports Von der Heydte decided to see for himself.¹¹⁶⁹ He left Mattemburg in his *VW Kübelwagen*.¹¹⁷⁰

¹¹⁶² KTB 88 AK, 08.10.44, C 270 and KTB 88 AK, 09.10.44, 10.07 hours.

¹¹⁶³ War Diary 2nd Cdn Inf Div, G Intel Log, 11.10.44, 15.30 hours and KTB 88 AK, 07.10.44, B 366. At some point *IV./FJR 6*, the heavy battalion, must also have arrived, because they too were involved in the fighting.

¹¹⁶⁴ KTB 88 AK, 09.10.44, 07.30 hours.

¹¹⁶⁵ War Diary Calgary Highlanders 08.10.44 and 2nd Cdn Inf Div, Ops Log, 08.10.44, serial 778.

¹¹⁶⁶ *Ibid*, serial 779, 15.45 hours.

¹¹⁶⁷ Whitaker and Whitaker, *Tug of War*, 185.

¹¹⁶⁸ Von der Heydte, *Muss ich sterben*, 169 and Minefield Clearance Certificate (archive CID Netherlands Army). The mines were all cleared at the end of August 1945

¹¹⁶⁹ This incident Van Doorn, *Woensdrecht*, 41.

While in Hoogerheide he was nearly captured by the Canadians. However, he got away safely and personally oversaw the attack on Hoogerheide. It was set for six the following morning. That afternoon a battery of six 10.5 cm *Feldhaubitze* from *Artillerie-regiment 70* also arrived to provide the necessary artillery support for the coming attack.¹¹⁷¹

Worried about the development north of Hoogerheide the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division at 17.15 hours sent out a call to Second Tactical Air Force for Typhoons to attack immediately and without prior tactical reconnaissance as it would soon be too dark.¹¹⁷² For once the request was granted. This was not an automatic thing as the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division had to take the backseat to their comrades of the 3rd Division (who had just started Operation Switchback) as far as air support was concerned.¹¹⁷³ In an attempt to disrupt *Kampfgruppe Von der Heydte's* preparations at 18.30 hours eight Typhoons of 257 Squadron (146 wing) swooped down. In spite of intense *Flak* fire they pressed home until almost zero feet and fired a total of fifty-four rocket projectiles on to the target area.¹¹⁷⁴ They could not observe the results in the dense woods and the gathering dusk. The *Flak* hit one of the planes and 22-year old W/O J.R. Powell was killed when his plane dove into the ground not far from Von der Heydte's headquarters.¹¹⁷⁵ The results, however, were better than expected. The attack not only inflicted damage and casualties but line communications were disrupted to such a degree that the various units found themselves unable to coordinate their attacks properly afterwards. (Five days later, when POWs revealed this information, Keefler would express his thanks to the RAF for their contribution.)¹¹⁷⁶

Nevertheless, the danger for the Canadians was far from over. The *Fallschirmjäger* approaching Hoogerheide that evening were well armed. On average each company had nine *MG 42's* and a similar number of *Panzerschreck*.¹¹⁷⁷ It was a formidable force indeed, as the three Canadian battalions in Hoogerheide, all of them seriously understrength by then, would soon find out. The Calgarians, were in the western half of Hoogerheide while the Black Watch were in the eastern half. To their right Le Régiment de Maisonneuve held a line from the airfield in a south-easterly direction covering the road to Putte. Prior to the attack the *Fallschirmjäger* began to probe the Canadian lines. Something else they did was to clear the civilians out of Woensdrecht and Hoogerheide, as they (rightly) feared that some of them might pass on intelligence to the Canadians. The civilians ended up in Bergen op Zoom. The measure, though not taken for humanitarian reasons, nevertheless in the end saved many Dutch lives.

¹¹⁷⁰ Van Doorn had a personal meeting with Von der Heydte in November 1989 in which he described the incident. Griesser, *Die Löwen von Carentan*, 207, also describes the story but with very different details.

¹¹⁷¹ Warning, 22.

¹¹⁷² War Diary 2nd Cdn Inf Div, Ops Log, 08.10.44, serial 786.

¹¹⁷³ War Diary 2nd Cdn Inf Div, Ops Log, 08.10.44, serial 806.

¹¹⁷⁴ Second TAF, daily log 08.10.44.

¹¹⁷⁵ 84 Group, 08.10.44, Van Doorn, *Woensdrecht*, 41, Shores and Thomas, *Breakout to Bodenplatte*, 326.

¹¹⁷⁶ 84 Group, 13.10.44.

¹¹⁷⁷ War Diary 2nd Cdn Inf Div, G Intel Log, 11.10.44, 15.30 hours.

The first attack on Hoogerheide

As the night wore on the pin prick attacks kept coming. The Black Watch beat them off, inflicting serious casualties on the attackers, but the *Fallschirmjäger* did not give up. The CO of the Calgarians, Lieutenant-Colonel D. MacLaughlan became increasingly worried. First he asked for tank support, then he looked for assistance from the 4th Canadian Infantry Brigade. He was told that neither would be coming. He would have to make do with what he had. The Calgarians braced themselves. They could clearly hear Germans digging in, talking, shouting, even the clanking of tracked vehicles and the sound of engines was audible.¹¹⁷⁸ After an extremely fretful night the German force finally struck Hoogerheide in earnest. It was six a.m. on Monday 9 October. It was clear that the Calgarians were in for a hard time.¹¹⁷⁹ Even before the main blow was struck A Company, at the vital crossroads, was in serious trouble and it was not until the CO, Major Del Kearns, called in artillery fire that the German attackers were driven off. Nevertheless the company found itself still unable to reorganise thanks to the confusion. Amazingly, they still managed to take some prisoners among the *Fallschirmjäger*. Later that morning Kearns was wounded and had to be evacuated. Eventually the company, now led by Lieutenant Munro, had to pull back to the southernmost house of the Raadhuisstraat, near the church.

Other companies began to suffer too from the mortaring and infiltrations. Because the focus was on the left of the Calgary positions D Company in particular came under a lot of pressure and only beat off the attackers by putting up a determined stand and its CO, Major Bruce MacKenzie, also became a casualty and had to be sent to the rear. Only B Company, not under direct attack, scored a minor success. Their CO, Major Ellis, ordered No.11 platoon together with a troop from C Squadron the Fort Garry Horse to clean out a small wood southwest of Hoogerheide where some *Fallschirmjäger* had established an Observation Point. The attack was highly successful. The Shermans put intense fire on the wood for ten minutes after which the Calgarians went in and found the OP. They returned with thirty-four prisoners. But the attacks on Hoogerheide did not diminish in intensity, nor did the hail of fire that rained down on the village.

Things got decidedly worse for the Canadians when a couple of *Sturmgeschütze* of *Sturmgeschützbrigade 280* poked their armoured snouts into the streets of Hoogerheide. One actually ended up in the middle of the positions of the Black Watch. So far Lieutenant-Colonel Ritchie's battalion had been spared the worst of it. Now disaster seemed to strike as the SP rolled down the street towards C Company. Because of the proximity of their own troops the Canadian artillery could not intervene. Neither could the Shermans of the Fort Garry Horse because the built-up area made them too vulnerable. At that moment a Canadian soldier inched his PIAT over the window sill of an upstairs window and fired a bomb, which immediately put the *Sturmgeschütze* out of action.¹¹⁸⁰

¹¹⁷⁸ War Diary Calgary Highlanders, 09.10.44.

¹¹⁷⁹ This section, War Diaries, Calgary Highlanders, Black Watch and Régiment de Maisonneuve 08.10.44, Van Doorn, *Woensdrecht*, 41-43, Zuehlke, *Terrible Victory*, 192-200.

¹¹⁸⁰ Tank recognition obviously was not one of the strong point of the Canadians as the War Diary of the Black Watch described it as a 'Ferdinand'. However, the nearest Ferdinands were thousands of kilometres away in Italy.

At the end of the day casualties were rapidly mounting, for both sides. Among the dead that day were nineteen Calgarians, four Black Watch plus eighteen Germans, from *Fallschirmjägerregiment 6* and *Sturmbataillon Armee Oberkommando 15*.¹¹⁸¹ Coupled with the fact that the number of fatalities was higher than that of the wounded is testimony to the ferocity of the fighting in this small village.¹¹⁸² The armour had suffered too and C Squadron the Fort Garry Horse was down to just nine Shermans, half of their normal strength. Unfortunately for the men on the ground, this was not the end of the bloodletting in this small 'corner of a foreign field', in fact, it was merely the beginning. Because of weather conditions, and to their own annoyance, Second Tactical Air Force was unable to help out; the only mission flown in support of the army was an attack on two observation points on Zuid-Beveland.¹¹⁸³ The night of 9-10 October was a repeat of the previous one. Again the Calgarians in particular could hear movements all around them as well as the rattle of tracks and again they got very little sleep. It was not until five a.m. that things began to quiet down for a while.¹¹⁸⁴

During the night there was an O group at the 5th Canadian Infantry Brigade headquarters in a farm near Ossendrecht. The farm was really too small for a brigade headquarters and the war diarist complained that 'the Ops-Int room is more like Grand Central Sta[tion] on a Sunday night...'.¹¹⁸⁵ In addition, the proximity of six regiments, three field artillery and three anti-aircraft, which were constantly firing either singly or together, created so much noise that it was hard to concentrate on what Keebler, the divisional commander, was saying. However, his message was loud and clear. He told his subordinates that he wanted the battalions to attack again. Megill explained to Keebler that this was absolutely impossible in view of what had gone on that day and Keebler eventually relented. He agreed that there was to be no further attack for the next forty-eight hours. Moreover, it was to be carried out by the 4th Canadian Infantry Brigade on 11 October while the 5th would go into reserve. Keebler did insist, however, that the Calgarians retake the vital crossroads at Hoogerheide.

Stalemate

Lieutenant-Colonel MacLauchlan, whose nerves were completely frayed by this time, ordered D Company (Captain Bob Porter) to try and fulfil this mission impossible.¹¹⁸⁶ But there was no way the company could pull it off under the prevailing circumstances. Incredibly Porter's men managed to push Von der Heydte's *Fallschirmjäger* slowly back up the Raadhuisstraat in Hoogerheide. They reached the Antwerpsestraatweg at 07.30 hours which was halfway. That was as far as they would get. Fighting became so intense then that sometimes it was not just the houses, but rooms within houses that were contested. 'Im Haus Nr. 19 sind Kanadier in die Küche eingedrungen – Schlafzimmer ist noch in unserem Besitz,' said a report

¹¹⁸¹ Van Doorn, *Woensdrecht*, overzicht gesneuvelden in Woensdrecht.

¹¹⁸² Van Doorn, *Woensdrecht*, 43.

¹¹⁸³ 84 Group, 09.10.44. and First Canadian Army IS 101, 09.10.44.

¹¹⁸⁴ War Diary 2nd Cdn Inf Div, Ops Log, 10.10.44, serial 931.

¹¹⁸⁵ War Diary 5th Cdn Inf Bde, 10.10.44.

¹¹⁸⁶ This section, War Diary Calgary Highlanders, 10.10.44.

sent to *Oberstleutnant* Von der Heydte.¹¹⁸⁷ The Canadians could not reach their objective. Enemy snipers were still very active and a high-velocity gun, possibly an *88* or a *Sturmgeschütz*, controlled the crossroads. The Black Watch meanwhile reported that they had reached the crossroads. This was clearly a mistake and the CO of A Squadron the Fort Garry Horse said that 'no infantryman could have crossed that street alive'.¹¹⁸⁸ Back at brigade headquarters the long afternoon dragged on, but in the end Brigadier Megill realised that D Company was never going to make it to the crossroads and it was allowed to pull back. After this had been decided Major Ross Ellis took over command of the Calgarians from MacLauchlan who went on a much needed leave. Second Tactical Air Force did not enter the fray that day, both because the weather still was not too good, but also because the majority of the 105 sorties that were flown were aimed at assisting operation Switchback (clearing the Breskens pocket south of the Scheldt) which had just started.¹¹⁸⁹

The fighting in Hoogerheide slowly died down as darkness fell on 10 October. Both sides began to dig in. The men were utterly exhausted because of the intense and confused fighting. Again casualties were high, the Black Watch alone suffered eighty-one casualties in two days at Hoogerheide. Most of the village itself was reduced to rubble, over 400 houses were destroyed and another 235 damaged. Hardly a house was untouched by the fighting. Fortunately for the inhabitants they had been evacuated by the Germans and so in the end very few civilians lost their lives in the fighting. Von der Heydte rearranged his troops. He ordered Finzel with *I./FJR 2* to take over the line between *III./FJR 6* north of Hoogerheide and *Kampfgruppe Ebsen* (i.e. *Sturmabteilung AOK 15*) at Eiland, just west of Huijbergen.¹¹⁹⁰ Meanwhile the *Fallschirmjäger* of *I./FJR 6* were desperately needed elsewhere. The German line at Woensdrecht was now being threatened from the west as well. A new battalion joined the fray around the two key villages. The Royal Regiment of Canada (Lieutenant-Colonel R.M. Lendrum) was trying to cut the connection to the Beveland isthmus by advancing through the polders southwest of Hoogerheide.¹¹⁹¹

The ishtmus

On Saturday 7 October the Royals reorganised after clearing Ossendrecht which resulted in the capture of thirty POWs from *Grenadier-Regiment 1018 (70. Infanterie-Division)* and almost every battalion of the *346. infanterie-Division*. Lendrum decided to explore west. This was never going to be an easy assignment as the Germans had flooded the polders west of Ossendrecht and his men could only use the one available higher road which any German unit might easily cover. But, fortune favours the bold and the march out of Ossendrecht in the early morning of 8 October started off well. D Company (Major Tim Beatty) followed by A Company did not meet any resistance initially. It was not until 13.45 hours that Beatty's company stumbled on the first enemy unit in the Nieuw Hinkelenoord Polder. It was a group of thirty soldiers with a 2 cm *Flak* gun (probably from *Grenadier-Regiment 1020*). After

¹¹⁸⁷ Griesser, *Die Löwen von Carentan*, 210.

¹¹⁸⁸ War Diary FGH.

¹¹⁸⁹ 84 Group, 10.10.44.

¹¹⁹⁰ Dritter Befehl.

¹¹⁹¹ This section, War Diary 4th Cdn Inf Bde, 07-10.10.44, War Diary RRC, 07-10.10.44 and Van Doorn, *Woensdrecht*, 44-5.

a brief burst from the Royals the Germans quickly pulled back. The Royals continued their advance until eight p.m. when D Company reached a point about three kilometres from the railway which they could see in the distance. There they dug in with A Company a few kilometres behind them. The railway and the road running beside it formed the link between the Brabant mainland and Zuid-Beveland and Walcheren. It looked as if it was finally to be severed. But the easy part was over for the Canadians. As they paused reinforcements arrived on the other side in the form of one *Sturmgeschütz* from *Sturmgeschützbrigade 280* and infantry from *Füsilierbataillon 70*.

The new German troops made their presence felt the following day and 9 October was a day of frustration for Beatty and his men. He, too, received reinforcements in the form of four 3.7 inch guns of 1st Heavy Anti-Aircraft Regiment Royal Marines, part of the Antwerp air defence system. Initially the airbursts fired by the AA guns did not seem to make much impression on the enemy, but later in the day they became useful when the Germans, from various units of the *70. Infanterie-Division*, counterattacked. This was successfully beaten off, but when the Royals wanted to take a group of fifty Germans prisoner it turned out to be a trap and the Royals had to move back quickly under cover of smoke. At the end of the day D Company had moved a bit further west and captured the sluice gate in the Völcker Polder taking a number of prisoners from *27. Pionier Bataillon*.¹¹⁹² But the Canadians were no closer to the railway than the day before. On 10 October it was the turn of C Company (Major E. Ryall) to try and push through, their intermediate goal being the Hoofdweg in the Damespolder, a few hundred metres from the railway. After an opening barrage the attack went in at 14.17 hours. Two platoons marched along parallel roads in a northeasterly direction. Within an hour C Company reached its goal and they even captured a 7.5 cm *Pak 40* and its crew in the process. Ryall's company was now within firing range of the road and the railway. Alarm bells went off at the headquarters of *LXVII. Armeekorps* when the news reached them. Something had to be done and quickly.

As there were no reserves the only option was to send two companies from *Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 6* who had just been fighting in Hoogerheide for two days. Von der Heydte decided to send *Leutnant* Erich Hosp's *1. Kompanie* and *Leutnant* Carl Werner 'Charly' Wiegand's *16. Kompanie*. The latter was the regiment's *Aufklärungs (recce) Kompanie*. Hosp and his men were to block the road into Woensdrecht and Wiegand was to proceed further west and counterattack from the railway embankment. His band of fifty men was to be supported by two *Sturmgeschütze* from *280*.¹¹⁹³ It was now five p.m. However, the Royals spotted them and a hail of shells rained down on the *Fallschirmjäger* as they were assembling. Ryall also asked for anti-tank weapons which arrived in due course. These fired at the *Sturmgeschütze* and managed to knock one out with a 7.5 cm *Pak* gun which the Canadians had captured earlier. The other SP tried to get away but as a result got stuck in the mud and became immobilised.¹¹⁹⁴ The German attack

¹¹⁹² War Diary 2nd Cdn Inf Div, Ops Log, 10.10.44, Serial 1007.

¹¹⁹³ Griesser (*Die Löwen von Carentan*, 221) repeats the old mistake of naming the unit as StuGBde 255, he also says there were three *Sturmgeschütze*.

¹¹⁹⁴ *Dritter Befehl* (PAJVD).

faltered. Meanwhile B Company (Major T.F. Whitley) moved further north and was now just a hundred metres from the railway. They were prevented from getting any closer by Wiegand's men. The road remained in German hands, but Canadian artillery prevented normal traffic from using it. It seemed success was at last within reach for the Royals. All that was needed was to actually close the neck. Lendrum ordered A Company to accomplish this task the following day. The attack was to be launched from the so-called five roads position.

The attack by A Company started at 15.30 hours on 11 October after what should have been a devastating barrage. However, as soon as the leading platoons crossed the road ready to charge up the embankment the *Fallschirmjäger* who had come through relatively unharmed in their foxholes on the reverse slope of the dyke, opened fire and inflicted heavy casualties on the attacking Canadians. During the night further reinforcements from *FJR 6* had arrived which made the German line virtually impenetrable. Mortars joined in and the *Fallschirmjäger* even counterattacked. The nut proved too hard to crack for the Royals especially as the few roads in the polders were in full view of the Germans along the railway embankment. The flat polders had been turned into killing zones. A Company had no option but to fall back and withdraw through C Company. Further west Wiegand's men attacked B and C Companies using flamethrowers, but the Canadians would not be driven off. The Canadian attempt to seize the railway had failed. After well over a month there was still a link between the mainland and Walcheren, even though it was a tenuous one. Canadian divisional headquarters staff were a bit premature therefore when they concluded that 'they had managed a goodly force across both road and railway'.¹¹⁹⁵ The result, as at Hoogerheide, was a stalemate and the night passed relatively quietly as both sides sank down, completely exhausted. Further east, major changes had taken place in the meantime.

Moving troops

As night fell on 10 October *Sturmgeschützbrigade 280* had only four operational *Sturmgeschütze* left.¹¹⁹⁶ Now that the *Fallschirmjäger* were also needed to block the Canadian advance up the Beveland isthmus *FJR 6* was like butter spread too thin. Von Zangen realized that the rest of *Kampfgruppe Chill* had to join them quickly although he was aware that this meant of course that there was now an increased risk of a breakthrough at Tilburg, which had only just been prevented. It was only a matter of time before the front here collapsed.¹¹⁹⁷ But he felt that there was no other option. His opponents agreed with his analysis that the Beveland isthmus was the 'keystone' for *15. Armee* and that losing it meant 'the beginning of the end of the battle for Antwerp'.¹¹⁹⁸ So, for the third time in a fortnight Chill had to execute the tricky manoeuvre of extricating his own troops while waiting for the relief to take over, all without the enemy being aware of what was going on. It must have sounded depressingly familiar to him as he got the phone call from *15. Armee* that evening to speed things up. The Canadians correctly assessed their enemy's

¹¹⁹⁵ First Canadian Army, IS 103, 11.10.44.

¹¹⁹⁶ Second Army Intel Log, 10.10.44, serial 28.

¹¹⁹⁷ Von Zangen, 40.

¹¹⁹⁸ First Canadian Army, IS 105, 13.10.44.

weaknesses and strengths when Lieutenant-Colonel P.E.R. Wright, GSO I (chief intelligence officer) at First Canadian Army, wrote about *15. Armee* 'This has meant that reinforcement of a threatened sector can only be achieved by withdrawing troops from a quiet part of the front'.¹¹⁹⁹ In view of the Allies' correct assessment of the German problems one is left to wonder why the Allies did not use this intelligence to exert more pressure at Tilburg and renew the drive there. After the war *Oberst* Warning complained that this moving around of troops was a result of the fact that *LXVII. Armeekorps* no longer had the freedom to carry out a 'beweglichen Verteidigung', because higher command's (i.e. the *OKW* and Hitler) insistence to halt the enemy whatever the cost.¹²⁰⁰

Wednesday 11 October was a day on which both sides were reorganising in order to be ready for battle again. Chill was told that his troops needed to leave the area south of Tilburg before eight p.m. if the weather was bad, if the weather was good (meaning a greater risk of fighter-bombers spotting them) he was given two extra hours to do the job. The last units were to arrive in Bergen op Zoom no later than the following morning. The sector now held by Chill, or more accurately the two battalions commanded by *Oberstleutnant* Dreyer, was to be taken over by *Grenadier-Regiment 935* under *Major* Stadelbauer (*245. Infanterie-Division*). At the same time Chill received the welcome news that *schwere Heeres Panzerjägerabteilung 559* which had only just been put under *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps* as a mobile reserve, was once more assigned to him.¹²⁰¹ To make up for the loss of this valuable unit Reinhard was promised that his *Armeekorps* would receive one of the two *Sturmgeschützbrigaden* (*244* and *667*) that were on their way from the *Reich* and Denmark at that moment and were expected to arrive within a few days.¹²⁰²

Only that morning *schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559* arrived in Udenhout, a village northeast of Tilburg. The five (or six) *Sturmgeschütze* and (one or) two *Jagdpanther* startled the inhabitants who were afraid that their village was going to find itself in the middle of a ferocious battle.¹²⁰³ But the crew members assured the civilians that they had nothing to worry about, as they had just been told that they were leaving for Bergen op Zoom that afternoon. And anyway, they added, their machines broke down about every other day.¹²⁰⁴ Little did the men of Kopka's unit know that they were on their way to one of the bloodiest engagements in this campaign. The *Abteilung* was the only unit that left the Tilburg area on time. The others were delayed which caused a lot of anxiety higher up.

¹¹⁹⁹ First Canadian Army, IS 102, 10.10.44.

¹²⁰⁰ Warning, 24.

¹²⁰¹ KTB 88 AK, 11.10.44, C 276.

¹²⁰² As it turned out he got one, but only for a few days and both would eventually go to Sponheimer's LXVII. Armeekorps.

¹²⁰³ I arrive at this figure as the diary of Kees van Iersel (*Over d'n oorlog*, 198) mentions seven tanks ('huge monsters') entering the village (and leaving at 6 p.m.) and as KTB 88 AK mentions five to six *Sturmgeschütze* (11.10.44, 16.55 hours). A PoW from 7./1053 GR (1st Cdn Army IR PoW 85. I.D. 16.10.44) remembered seeing four *StugS* and six 'Panthers' which is not confirmed by another source. The number of *Jagdpanther* is obviously far too high.

¹²⁰⁴ *Over d'n oorlog*, 198.

When the new chief-of-staff of *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps*, *Oberstleutnant* Karl-Heinz von Prittwitz und Gaffron, phoned Chill at five p.m. to express his concern that the relief was taking much too long.¹²⁰⁵ Transport was waiting in Goirle, where were the troops? Chill was completely unruffled. It had nothing to do with him as it was all Sander's responsibility, he retorted. Sander had promised him that the relief would take place in time and it was not his fault that the *245. I.D.* would not meet its obligation. Prittwitz agreed that there were always problems with the *245. I.D.*¹²⁰⁶ Chill had learned from his new masters at *LXVII. Armeekorps* that he was to be ready no later than four a.m. the following day so that he could attack at six. If there were more delays he would never be able to meet this deadline, he added. Ten minutes after this conversation a missing battalion was found and as darkness began to fall all of Chill's troops were on their way west. The first to leave (after *559*) was *Bataillon Ohler*, followed by *I./ Fallschirm Panzer Ersatz und Ausbildungs-Regiment Hermann Göring*. Besides these two battalions Chill also took along two extra companies. That morning *Generalleutnant* Rudolf Hofmann, chief-of-staff *15. Armee*, had ordered Reinhard to send along another battalion of at least two strong companies. It was an impossible request for Reinhard as his forces were spread too thin already. In the end he decided to order Poppe's *59. Infanterie-Division* to release two companies. When Poppe suggested he could send 91 rested men instead he was told that was not an option. Eventually Poppe decided to take two companies away from *Kampfgruppe Jungwirth* (one from *Bataillon Bloch* one from *Bataillon Gramse*, together two officers and 160 men). The new group was to be commanded by *Hauptmann* Balzereit.¹²⁰⁷ Earlier Balzereit had been engaged in the fighting at Erde and Koevering where his unit had suffered huge losses.¹²⁰⁸

The Dutch resistance spotted *schwere Heeres Panzerjägerabteilung 559* on its way to Bergen op Zoom and it reported twenty 'heavy tanks' moving from Breda to Roosendaal between midnight and early morning.¹²⁰⁹ In the early hours of 12 October the *Kampfgruppe*, now three battalions strong, arrived in the woods around Huijbergen which were defended by *gemischte Flak-Abteilung 252* and *MG Bataillon 14*.¹²¹⁰ Chill set up his headquarters in Rouwmoershoeve, a redemptorist convent school in a wood just west of Essen. He was to stay there for almost a week.¹²¹¹ Chill planned to attack the Canadian precisely where they had feared the Germans might

¹²⁰⁵ This section, KTB 88 AK, 11.10.44, A 640. Prittwitz had taken over from Eichert on 30 September.

¹²⁰⁶ See also next chapter.

¹²⁰⁷ Precis of KTB Bloch, I Corps, IS 94, 02.11.44. Their presence would puzzle Canadian intelligence officers later on when a few of the men were taken prisoner and they wondered whether the men really belonged to the unit or the company carried the name Bloch 'for deliberate confusion' (War Diary 2nd Cdn Inf Div, Intel Log, 15.10.44, 01.00 hours). The two companies were commanded by Leutnant Mittenmeyer and Leutnant Skau (SIR 13.10.44, First Cdn Army, PAJVD).

¹²⁰⁸ Fallschirmjäger-Suchdienst, Suchliste 1/1968, 3 (via Peter Vandermissen).

¹²⁰⁹ War Diary 2nd Cdn Inf Div, G Log, 13.10.44, 24.00 hours, and War Diary 4th Can Armd Div, IS 21, 17.10.44.

¹²¹⁰ Rehm, 55, and Van Doorn, *Woensdrecht*, 51. 252 gem. Flak Abt was at Ostend for a lot of the war. In October it was probably under 20. Flak Brigade which was under 16. Flak Division. The Kommandeur of 14 MG Btl was first Hauptmann Hildebrand and then Leutnant Wiedenbergh (First Cdn Army IR PoW Misc. Commands and Units, 11.09.44).

¹²¹¹ L. Vercammen, *Eiland in het Groen, beknopte historiek Rouwmoershoeve klooster – college*, Essen 1986, 32.

strike for the last few days, along their extended right flank. But, by the time Chill arrived his opponent, Keebler, had made some changes, too.

That day the Black Watch and the Calgary Highlanders left Hoogerheide and the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry and the Essex Scottish took over.¹²¹² The 4th Canadian Infantry Brigade was now in command of the entire sector and Keebler had assigned both Le Régiment de Maissoneuve and The South Saskatchewan Regiment to Brigadier Cabeldu. The Maissies were at Ossendrecht and the South Saskatchewans (Lieutenant-Colonel V. Stott) were committed east of Hoogerheide, exactly where Chill was planning to attack. But the *Kampfgruppe* had not yet arrived when the South Saskatchewans started their own attack at three p.m. on the 11th. The Canadians therefore only faced a motley crew from the *346. Infanterie-Division*, the bulk of which was formed by *Grenadier-Regiment 858* under *Hauptmann* Scheue, but which also included *gemischte Flak-Abteilung 252* and *MG Bataillon 14*.¹²¹³ The goal of the South Saskatchewans was to advance up the Abdijlaan until somewhere halfway. In this way they would provide flank protection for the rest of the Brigade in Hoogerheide. After a barrage on Huijbergen the attack went in as scheduled, met no resistance and pretty soon B Company (Major F. Lee) had reached its objective. Stott then decided to explore further and eventually the South Saskatchewans advanced along the main road to Huijbergen until they arrived at a crossroads about a kilometre from the village itself where they came under heavy machine-gun fire.¹²¹⁴ This wooded area dotted with farmhouses was called Eiland (Island). It was to be the scene of some extremely bitter fighting during the next three days.

Chill attacks

When dawn broke on 12 October the leading platoon of the South Saskatchewans at the crossroads came in for a nasty surprise.¹²¹⁵ Crawling along a ditch intending to occupy three houses near the crossroads they came under fire from a machine-gun, but this was quickly neutralised. Then Germans appeared shouting 'Kamerad! Kamerad!' The moment Canadian soldiers exposed themselves they were fired on by one of the 2 cm *Flak* guns of *gem. Flak-Abteilung 252*. The Saskatchewan platoon at once lay down in a ditch, but the shells grazed it, exploding on both sides and causing nine casualties. The Canadians crawled back. From then on they had to stay put as the Germans sniped and mortared the position throughout the day. It was a sign of things to come. Still, *Kampfgruppe Chill* did not attack, not yet at least.

Chill's orders were to attack in a westerly direction from south of Huijbergen in the Canadians' flank and from there push on to the Scheldt west of Ossendrecht thus cutting off the Canadian troops in Hoogerheide from their supply base. This was exactly what the Canadians had feared might happen all along. If the attack was successful first *Grenadier-Regiment 858* and then *Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 6* and

¹²¹² This section, unless otherwise noted, Van Doorn, *Woensdrecht*, 51-6, and Zuehlke, *Terrible Victory*, 292-300.

¹²¹³ Van Doorn, *Woensdrecht*, 51, and 2nd Cdn Corps, Intel Sum 65, 09.10.44. The latter also says that I./858 was under Lt. Lehner and II./858 was under Lt. Prehm.

¹²¹⁴ War Diary South Saskatchewans, 11.10.44.

¹²¹⁵ This incident, War Diary South Saskatchewans (SSR), 12.10.44.

Sturmgeschützbrigade 280 were to follow up.¹²¹⁶ It was an ambitious plan with an extremely slim chance of success especially since Chill had little artillery available because his own batteries had stayed behind near Tilburg to cover the relief there.¹²¹⁷ He could only count on *2./Artillerie-Regiment 170* with its three *leichte* (10.5 cm) and three *schwere* (15 cm) *Feldhaubitze*.¹²¹⁸ Moreover, the area around Eiland was extremely difficult fighting terrain. It was marshy in places, provided lots of cover for defenders and was also very undulating. It took Chill most of the 12th just to organize things. This is not surprising if we bear in mind that he and his staff were now suddenly responsible for the whole sector west of Huijbergen as far as the Beveland isthmus. The new divisional boundary with the *346. Infanterie-Division* ran from Putte via Vossenbergh (two kilometres northwest of Kalmthout) to Essen. Thus, not only the counterattack, but the whole of the defence of this crucial area required his attention. It is no wonder that preparations for the attack took so long. Rather, it is amazing that it went in at all at the end of the same afternoon.

The first sign that something was about to happen was when A Company of the South Saskatchewan (Major Ken Williams), who were on the Staartse Heide heath, north of a lake called Grote Meer, at 15.45 hours reported that they saw a 'tank' in the woods and that fifteen enemy soldiers attempted to infiltrate their lines.¹²¹⁹ Just over two hours later they called in again. They now had the 'tank' firing HE shells at point blank range into their OP there while they were also attacked by two sections of infantry.¹²²⁰ In fact it was two *Sturmgeschütze* from *schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559* that were trying to break through the Canadian lines. The South Saskatchewan managed to drive them off.¹²²¹ The two *Sturmgeschütze* were right behind one another. The commander of the lead one was hit and the vehicle stopped. Accidentally the driver hit reverse and the second *Sturmgeschütz* slammed into the first one. The crew jumped out and ran back. Later they returned, covered by a group of *Fallschirmjäger*, to retrieve the SPs. Amazingly the engine of the first vehicle was still running. Two 19-ton *Famo Sd Kfz 9/1 schwere Zugkraftwagen* halftracks then came up to recover both *Sturmgeschütze*. They were ready for action two days later. This was not the end of the fighting that day, however.

The houses in which B Company South Saskatchewan had taken up position at the crossroads were attacked at 22.30 hours by a force of about thirty-five to forty men.¹²²² The first inkling B Company had of the attack was when grenades were thrown through the windows. The South Saskatchewan, after the initial shock wore off, managed to hold on and beat off the attack with just a few casualties. While the attack was taking place Major Lee sent an SOS to C Company to send two platoons to assist them. However C Company itself now came under attack by heavy machine-

¹²¹⁶ Rehm, 50.

¹²¹⁷ Warning 27.

¹²¹⁸ War Diary 2nd Cdn Inf Div, Intel Log, 15.10.44, 01.00 hours.

¹²¹⁹ War Diary 2nd Cdn Inf Div, Ops Log, 12.10.44, Serial 1186.

¹²²⁰ War Diary 2nd Cdn Inf Div, Ops Log, 12.10.44, Serial 1198. Oddly enough neither attack is mentioned in the War Diary of the SSR.

¹²²¹ This section, Kopka, *Missbraucht und Gebeutelt*, 158-9.

¹²²² This section, War Diary SSR 12 and 13.10.44.

guns, mortars and 2 cm *Flak*. Eventually D Company sent a platoon and by three a.m. peace more or less returned.

Black Friday

In the early morning of Friday 13 October the war diarist of the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division noted drily, 'all front quiet except definite attempt to penetrate S SASK R posn...'.¹²²³ Unfortunately for the Canadians it was to be the proverbial quiet before the storm. Throughout the day the front did, indeed seem quiet and during the afternoon the South Saskatchewan received permission from the 4th Canadian Infantry Brigade to pull B Company back from its exposed position at seven p.m. Before that manoeuvre could take place, however, *Kampfgruppe Chill* put in their third attack. It went in at five p.m. and again *schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559* joined the fray.

Lieutenant-Colonel Stott received an SOS from A Company who were again attacked by 'tanks' and infantry.¹²²⁴ A Company held their position and beat off the enemy. At the same time a *Jagdpanther*, probably commanded by *Unteroffizier* Günter Runge, appeared on the right flank of A Company, drove on another kilometre and then proceeded to demolish the South Saskatchewan Command Post west of the Abdijlaan (Vluchtheuvel these days). After receiving five direct hits and several near misses Lieutenant-Colonel Stott had had enough. He called in a smoke screen which was apparently interpreted by Runge as signs of an impending Canadian attack. He fired off a few more random shots and then drove back. Even so the Command Post was moved back a few hundred metres to Jagersrust where the Abdijlaan and the Putseweg met. Runge's *Jagdpanther* then suffered a cable burning through so he could no longer use the electrical aiming system, the Achilles heel of this tank hunter. It needed to be hauled back all the way to workshops in Roosendaal.¹²²⁵ Runge was wounded and out of action for the next few weeks while his vehicle was taken to the *Abteilung* workshops back in De Bilt, near Utrecht, by *Leutnant* Redlich whose responsibility that was. The same day *Hauptmann* Finzel (*I./FJR 2*) was also seriously wounded. His place was taken over temporarily by *Hauptmann* Bauer.¹²²⁶

The fourth attempt to push back the Canadians by *Kampfgruppe Chill* was made at seven p.m. that day when B and A Companies of the South Saskatchewan were again attacked by infantry with a high percentage of automatic weapons.¹²²⁷ Three *Sturmgeschütze* drove along the road to Huijbergen from west to east firing on B Company. One was engaged and hit and all of the crew were killed.¹²²⁸ It was the largest loss of life that *559* had suffered in forty-eight hours so far. Still the battle raged on. *Kampfgruppe Chill* managed to surround A Company and cut it off from

¹²²³ War Diary 2nd Cdn Inf Div G Log, 13.10.44, 01.30 hours.

¹²²⁴ This section, War Diary SSR and Kopka, *Missbraucht und Gebeutelt*, 159.

¹²²⁵ Kopka has Runge's *Jagdpanther* attacked by fighter-bombers in Roosendaal, however, there is no evidence for this in 2 TAF daily log.

¹²²⁶ First Cdn Army IR Battle Groups, 14.10.44. I Corps IS 86, 25.10.44 and First Cdn Army IR PoW 2 Para Div, 27.10.44 name him as Oberleutnant Bauer.

¹²²⁷ War Diary 2nd Cdn Inf Div, G Log, 14.10.44, 01.15 hours.

¹²²⁸ War Diary 2nd Cdn Inf Div, Ops Log, 13.10.44, Serial 1301. Amazingly this is not recorded in the War Diary of the SSR either. Oddly this is not mentioned by Kopka. Losses confirmed, PAJVD.

the rest of the battalion. The commanding officer, Major Williams was taken prisoner on his way back from battalion headquarters. Sergeant-Major Don Allan took over temporary command. All through the night A Company kept as quiet as the proverbial church mice in order not to alert the enemy, mainly from *I./Fallschirm Panzer Ersatz und Ausbildungs-Regiment Hermann Göring*. Stott drew up plans to liberate A Company. The action was to start the following morning.

Further west things had gone even worse for the Canadian troops. The day before, 12 October, the 5th Canadian Infantry Brigade (Megill) had drawn up plans for the final attack on the embankment, starting from the positions west of Woensdrecht.¹²²⁹ The Black Watch were to seize intersections on the northern side of the railway embankment. The operation, code-name Angus, was to start on 13 October at 06.15 hours. Lieutenant-Colonel Ritchie was unhappy about it. His battalion had suffered serious losses in the fighting in Hoogerheide and should have been given time to recuperate. Lieutenant-Colonel Denis Whitaker of the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry, who were to support this operation by an attack out of Hoogerheide, was not best pleased either. He persuaded Brigadier Cabeldu to give him one day's reprieve. However, Brigadier Megill was not to be persuaded and the Black Watch would be going in, whether they were ready or not. The results were almost predictable especially as the brigade staff had misjudged the capability of the German troops. Ritchie later said, 'We were misinformed; we had no idea the Germans would be so good. We really were up against the crème de la crème'.¹²³⁰ It was a tragedy waiting to happen.

Things went wrong almost from the word go. C Company was late so that the effect of the preceding barrage was lost. Nevertheless, they got as far as the first objective but then got stuck at the dyke. As this was about six metres high Von der Heydte's *Fallschirmjäger* on top could lob grenades at will and with deadly effect. B Company tried to follow, but both companies lost their commanders in the first fifteen minutes. The fighting was savage, but there were also moments of chivalry and German stretcher-bearers carried away the Canadian wounded. (A temporary truce requested by the Black Watch was reported to *15. Armee*.¹²³¹) Even an air raid around noon could not break the deadlock.¹²³² Ten Typhoons from 197 Squadron (146 Wing) dropped twenty 500-pounder bombs and eleven Spitfires from 74 Squadron (145 Wing) dropped eleven on other suspected positions.¹²³³ It was all to no avail. Ritchie ordered both companies back while trying to come up with a new plan. An O Group was held at three p.m. and Ritchie decided to use A Company and a section of three Wasps (flame-throwing carriers) to gain the first objective and D and B Company would follow. C Company, which now consisted of just fifteen men, would provide covering fire. The attack went in two hours later. D Company, furthest to the west, took its objective suffering heavy casualties and B Company got as far as the bend in the dyke. A Company was slaughtered as it pushed forward and only nine men came back. In these circumstances Ritchie had just one option: to pull his battalion back.

¹²²⁹ This section, Van Doorn, *Woensdrecht*, 57-8, War Diary RHC Black Watch, Account by Lt. Shea.

¹²³⁰ Whitaker and Whitaker, *Tug of War*, 175.

¹²³¹ KTB 88 AK, 13.10.44, C 284.

¹²³² War Diary 2nd Cdn Inf Div, Ops Log, 13.10.44, serial 1167.

¹²³³ Second TAF, daily log, 13.10.44.

At the end of the day the Black Watch had lost all of their company commanders, a sad record in the number of men killed in one day. In all they had suffered 183 casualties of which 58 were fatal, higher than the usual ratio. It was a bloodbath reminiscent of the worst fighting during World War One. The day would enter Canadian military history as 'Black Friday'. The reasons for the disaster that day were threefold: determined German resistance, great natural defences and the poor quality of the reinforcements. As Major-General Chris Vokes told Defense Minister J.L. Ralston when the latter visited Europe, 'Trained men have a seventy-five per cent chance of survival. Untrained men none.'¹²³⁴ It was to be an ever growing problem for the Canadians in Europe and one which would never be properly solved.¹²³⁵ Nevertheless, there was to be no let up and the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division was to going to give it one more try the following day.

Once more into the breach

Keefler decided on one further effort on 14 October. In order to achieve this the division again regrouped. The 5th Canadian Infantry Brigade took over the left sector in the isthmus area still held by the Royals (who were now relieved by the Calgary Highlanders) and the 4th Canadian Infantry Brigade moved into the right sector to prepare for an attack on Woensdrecht itself. However, the South Saskatchewan (also under the 4th Brigade) still had a mission to fulfil. After an introductory barrage they counterattacked across the Staartse Heide at eleven a.m. in order to rescue A Company who had spent the night surrounded by the *Fallschirmjäger* of *I./Fallschirm Panzer Ersatz und Ausbildungs-Regiment Hermann Göring*.¹²³⁶ Assisted by C Company of the Essex Scottish (who had moved in to the left of the South Saskatchewan) and two troops from A Squadron the Fort Garry Horse the attack was a resounding success. The position of A Company was reached and it was then pulled out. In all seventy POWs were taken in the early afternoon.¹²³⁷ Fifty of them were from *Bataillon Bloch*, which effectively meant that this company was annihilated.¹²³⁸ A pleasant surprise for Lieutenant-Colonel Stott was the sudden appearance of Major Williams, A Company's commanding officer, who had made his escape from the Germans while the Canadian artillery laid down a barrage. The German counterfire was intense too and many of the shells fell on the houses in which Stott had established his headquarters and for a while he believed he was facing certain death. After surviving the barrage Stott moved his HQ and expressed the hope that he would never again get a command post as hot as this one.

Even though the South Saskatchewan had now restored the situation, Chill was not going to take things lying down. At the end of the afternoon he decided on one more push. The fifth and final attack by *Kampfgruppe Chill* across the heath began at five p.m. as it had done the day before, possibly because they had just seen the company of the Essex pull out and move back. Again it was A Company of the South

¹²³⁴ Whitaker and Whitaker, *Tug of War*, 228. Vokes took over from Foster on 1 December 1944.

¹²³⁵ For an in-depth description of this tragedy, Whitaker and Whitaker, *Tug of War*, Chapter 10, 212-235.

¹²³⁶ This section, War Diary SSR, 14.10.44.

¹²³⁷ The War Diary of SSR gives the number as 106 which seems way too high as the total number for the division that day was 96 (Intel Log 15.10.44, 01.00 hours).

¹²³⁸ War Diary 2nd Cdn Inf Div, G Log, 14.10.44, 18.00 hours.

Saskatchewanans that got the worst of it. North of Grote Meer four *Sturmgeschütze* from *schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559* and about a hundred infantry closed in on the Canadian lines. A few *Sturmgeschütze* got to within forty metres of A Company's positions and plastered them with HE fired from point blank range. The attack completely disorganised A Company and Major Williams ordered his men to withdraw which they managed successfully, at least up to a point. Casualties were light, considering the circumstances, fifteen men were wounded and eight were missing. The attack gradually petered out and as night fell the Royals took over while the South Saskatchewanans moved north to new positions east of Hoogerheide, to provide flank cover for the Rileys inside the village. This was not quite the end of the battle around Grote Meer, however. *Kampfgruppe Chill* still held the old A Company position north of the lake and somewhat belatedly at 20.30 hours a Mike Target was fired on it, followed by an Uncle Target half an hour later.¹²³⁹ This meant that first 7th Canadian Medium Regiment (sixteen 5.5 inch howitzers) fired, followed half an hour later by all the guns of the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division. So at nine p.m. all three Field Regiments were concentrated on this single target. The effect of seventy-two 25-pounders firing at once was devastating. D Company reported hearing numerous groans and the South Saskatchewanans concluded that 'the arty had done a good job'.¹²⁴⁰ It was the end of Chill's attempts to attack and drive back the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division. From now on the focus was on maintaining a solid defence line from Zuid-Beveland to Essen.

Fortunately for *schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559* they were gone by the time the hail of shells rained down on the unfortunate *Fallschirmjäger*. Now that *Kampfgruppe Chill* switched from attack to defence all of 559 (three *Jagdpanther* and four *Sturmgeschütze*) left the battlefield that same night. The *Abteilung* was brought together in the area of Zundert in reserve. It was the last time the unit fought alongside the *Kampfgruppe*. Near Zundert the *Abteilung* would provide a sort of backstop for the 245. *Infanterie-Division* which was to take over there once the 256. *Volksgrenadier-Division* took over their sector around Tilburg during the next few days. At the same time the newly arriving *Sturmgeschützbrigade 667* was to join 15. *Armee* as army reserve near Rijen.¹²⁴¹ General Von Zangen realised the hopelessness of the situation his army was in. Shifting forces all the time was not a proper solution and all the reinforcements did was to buy him extra time to delay the inevitable. Once again he asked *OB West* for permission to start moving units behind the river Maas and once again permission was refused.¹²⁴² Von Zangen was only able to switch forces anyway because I Corps had wound down all of its operations south of Tilburg as it had too few troops on the ground. That was soon to change. His opponents accurately guessed von Zangen's problems'. Back at Second Army the G.S. I wrote 'He is constantly contending against the risk of being embagged and the danger is accentuated on the present occasion when the enemy has put most of his available reserves into the place furthest from the way out.'¹²⁴³ The analysis was

¹²³⁹ War Diary 2nd Cdn Inf Div, Ops Log, Serials 1397 and 1399. War Diary SSR 15.10.44. states three Field Regiments and two Medium Regiments.

¹²⁴⁰ War Diary SSR, 15.10.44.

¹²⁴¹ KTB 88 AK, 14.10.44, C 285.

¹²⁴² Von Zangen, 40-1.

¹²⁴³ Second Army, IS 134, 14.10.44.

spot on, but for the moment Von Zangen had no choice but to put his reserves near Woensdrecht, particularly as the Canadians were just about to renew their drive there.

One final push

The Canadians spent Sunday 15 October preparing for the attack on Woensdrecht. This time the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry wanted to leave nothing to chance. Lieutenant-Colonel Whitaker was extremely thorough and he and his company commanders even flew over the lines in a light Auster OP plane to observe the battlefield for themselves. The Rileys would start the following morning from a line running from the Braakseweg to Onderstal. Their goals were Woensdrecht and Nederheide and height 19.7 from which the surroundings could be dominated. As part of the preparations there was also an air attack on Von der Heydte's headquarters in Mattemburg. During the morning eleven Spitfires of 127 Squadron (132 Wing) took off from Grimbergen (north of Brussels). The weather was fine and they soon spotted the 'white house' in the woods. Undeterred by the *Flak* fire they peeled off one by one and screamed towards the target. Each Spitfire dropped a 500-pounder bomb some of which hit the house. The *Flak* managed to damage one Spitfire and shoot down another, killing the pilot, F/O G.W. Davies.¹²⁴⁴ Von der Heydte and his staff were not hurt. The air attack was a clear indication that something was brewing and the last civilians left in Woensdrecht were evacuated by the Germans and sent to Bergen op Zoom.

That day *Sturmgeschützbrigade 280* was officially assigned to the *346. Infanterie-Division* which was now responsible for an eight-kilometre sector between Essen to Achtmaal.¹²⁴⁵ However, before it could be moved east it had to come to the assistance of Von der Heydte's *Fallschirmjäger* one more time. At 02.30 hours Von der Heydte was woken up.¹²⁴⁶ Forward observers sent word that something unusual was going on. Von der Heydte decided to see for himself. His intention was to assess the situation and if an attack was impending he would withdraw his men to the pre-arranged line of resistance. It was a tactic that Von der Heydte had used before. When he had to defend a certain line he always had a second line prepared that the *Fallschirmjäger* could fall back on. The idea was for the attackers to spend their energy clearing this vacuum after which they could be ejected in a counterattack. It was a tactic that had worked before, so hopefully it would do the trick again. But he received a shock as he arrived. The Canadians had already begun their attack, it was 03.30 hours.¹²⁴⁷

Street fighting

The Rileys were supported by the Shermans of B Squadron the Fort Garry Horse. The attack was preceded by a massive barrage of no fewer than the divisional artillery (three Field Regiments) plus three Medium Regiments (7th Canadian, 84th and 121st), 115th Heavy Anti-Aircraft Regiment, one troop of an Anti-Tank Regiment and

¹²⁴⁴ Second TAF, daily log, 15.10.44, and Shores and Thomas, *Breakout to Bodenplatte*, 328.

¹²⁴⁵ Captured document mentioned in War Diary 4th Can Arm Div, IS 23, 22.10.44.

¹²⁴⁶ This story, Whitaker and Whitaker, *Tug of War*, 187.

¹²⁴⁷ The next section, War Diary RHLI, Account by officers of RHLI, and Van Doorn, *Woensdrecht*, 67-73.

one troop of Light Anti-Aircraft Artillery. In all some 150 guns laid down a hailstorm of steel on Woensdrecht and Nederheide. Not surprisingly, in view of the barrage, after the Rileys left the starting line initial progress was good and by 05.15 hours the first prisoners came in. While advancing up the streets of Woensdrecht about seventy German soldiers surrendered. Seeing the attack unfold Von der Heydte had given the order to retreat to those of his men that he could find. It appeared that he had located all of them and his *Fallschirmjäger* had pulled back to the second line of defence. This explains why nearly all of the POWs were from *743. Grenadier-regiment* and *I./Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 2* (Finzel).¹²⁴⁸ By mid-morning the Canadians seemed to be running out of steam. This was what Von der Heydte had been waiting for and at ten a.m. *Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 6* counterattacked.¹²⁴⁹

Major H.L. Hegelheimer, commanding A Company, from his headquarters in the Doelstraat was the first to spot the camouflaged figures approaching. He saw a *Sturmgeschütz* and thirty infantry moving towards him down the Doelstraat from the east.¹²⁵⁰ The SP fired at the house and blew it to smithereens. As Hegelheimer's platoons were dispersed he could not get through to them right away which meant that he was temporarily out of control. Within half an hour A Company was reported to be overrun and had to be pulled back behind C Company which was mopping up in Nederheide. The fighting was ferocious. Wiegand and his men of *16. Kompanie* had to resort to their bayonets to get the last Rileys out as their ammunition was virtually spent. As they moved from A to C Company the *Fallschirmjäger* used the weapons they had taken from captured and fallen Canadians.¹²⁵¹ They took about thirty Canadians prisoner and some Rileys panicked. Lieutenant-Colonel Whitaker and his staff had to pull their side arms and halt a few soldiers that were on the run. Hegelheimer informed Major Joe Pigott of C Company that his HQ had just been blown to pieces by an enemy SP. In fact there were three *Sturmgeschütze* heading towards Nederheide and Woensdrecht.¹²⁵² When Major Pigott looked out of the window he also saw a *Sturmgeschütz* and infantry in front of him.¹²⁵³ The SP fired and demolished C Company's HQ. Pigott's position was desperate and had only one option left, to call for artillery support. He ordered his men to get down in their slit trenches and then requested a so-called Victor Target, meaning that he asked for all of II Corps guns to fire on his own position. It was a concentration seldom duplicated in World War Two. About fifty tons of high explosives screamed down and the barrage had the desired result. It slaughtered the *Fallschirmjäger* who were out in the open and were either killed instantly or pulled back wounded. Amazingly only one Riley in C Company was wounded. Another effect was that the *Sturmgeschütz* pulled back about 250 metres. Pigott, now wounded, personally directed an anti-tank gun forward into a position from which it was able to destroy the SP.

Casualties in C Company were very severe and in the end Pigott had only twenty able men left. But he managed to rally them, moving from one platoon to another

¹²⁴⁸ War Diary 2nd Cdn Inf Div, G Log, 16.10.44, 12.55 hours and Intel Log 17.10.44, 00.30 hours.

¹²⁴⁹ Van Doorn, *Woensdrecht*, 71.

¹²⁵⁰ Doelstraat is erroneously indicated as 'Doolstraat' on Allied maps.

¹²⁵¹ Griesser, *Die Löwen von Carentan*, 223.

¹²⁵² War Diary 2nd Cdn Inf Div, Ops Log, 16.10.44, Serial 1140

¹²⁵³ Story C Company, Whitaker and Whitaker, *Tug of War*, 194-6.

under constant fire, and they stayed put and drove off the German attackers with Brengun and rifle fire. Pigott was to receive the DSO for his actions that day. *Leutnant* Wiegand pulled back to the Doelstraat with his *Fallschirmjäger*, of which there were only nineteen left. On the edge of Woensdrecht village D Company under Major E.L. Froggett was doing alright until the Germans counterattacked.¹²⁵⁴ The Germans attacked in two columns, *Obersteutnant* Von der Heydte personally led the right hand one while the one on the left was carried out by *3. Kompanie (Leutnant Helmut Müller)*.¹²⁵⁵ One Canadian platoon was completely wiped out by the ferocious attack. Other platoons came under so much pressure that Froggett had no option but to fall back a few hundred metres. The *Fallschirmjäger* retook their old positions and leapt into their old foxholes. Most of Woensdrecht was once again firmly in German hands. Fortunately for the Rileys, B Company of the Essex Scottish arrived in the nick of time and took up position to the right of D Company. This prevented a complete withdrawal and enabled the Rileys to hang on the edge of Woensdrecht.

In the afternoon the Second Tactical Air Force tried to help break the deadlock. The Royal Air Force put in its biggest appearance since 2 October on the front of the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division. All four squadrons of 132 Wing (66, 127, 331 and 332) took off from Grimbergen. A total of 46 Spitfires dropped the same number of 500-pound bombs in the Target Area, Nederheide and the Doelstraat. They observed hits on what they suspected was a command post in the copse in the northeast corner.¹²⁵⁶ It had little impact on the fighting although at 18.20 hours Whitaker reported the situation near Woensdrecht finally under control.¹²⁵⁷ However, that message was a bit premature, for what followed was another restless night with *Fallschirmjäger* infiltrating D Company's position followed by a more serious attack at 02.15 hours.¹²⁵⁸

Stalemate

The following day, 17 October, the struggle continued and around noon *Fallschirmjäger* were still resisting around the Doelstraat and the Steenstraat.¹²⁵⁹ Another thirteen German soldiers were captured, nearly half from *Sturmabteilung Armee Oberkommando 15* and only one from *FJR 6*.¹²⁶⁰ Apart from continuous attempts to infiltrate the Canadian lines the fighting gradually began to die down at the end of the day. After Black Friday the Rileys now had their own Black Monday. The Rileys had managed to advance about five hundred metres at a cost of 167 casualties of whom 21 had been fatal.¹²⁶¹ German losses had not been light either with thirty-five killed.¹²⁶² Amazingly, in view of their losses, Whitaker's battalion were told to hold on to their positions for another five days in spite of constant sniping, mortaring and shelling. They were finally relieved by the Queen's Own Cameron

¹²⁵⁴ Whitaker and Whitaker, *Tug of War*, 197, and van Doorn, *Woensdrecht*, 73.

¹²⁵⁵ Müller was killed one week later.

¹²⁵⁶ Second TAF, daily log, 16.10.44.

¹²⁵⁷ War Diary 2nd Cdn Inf Div, Ops Log, 16.10.44, Serial 1584.

¹²⁵⁸ Ibid, Serial 1629, and 17.10.44, Serial 1639.

¹²⁵⁹ War Diary 2nd Cdn Inf Div, G Log, 17.10.44, 13.00 hours.

¹²⁶⁰ Ibid, 17.10.44, (23.30 hours?)

¹²⁶¹ Whitaker and Whitaker, *Tug of War*, 198.

¹²⁶² Van Doorn, *Woensdrecht*, list of casualties.

Highlanders of Canada late on Saturday 21 October. There were no more attacks for the time being. Both sides were completely exhausted by the ferocious fighting that had lasted for over a week. This state of utter exhaustion is reflected in the war diary of the 5th Canadian Infantry Brigade where the diarist, somewhat uncharacteristically, noted 'We are getting fed up here having been in this area for nearly a month now. Cannot understand why they do NOT put more tps in the area and finish the job once and for all instead of playing about shifting first one Bn and then another.'¹²⁶³ If the diarist had known what lay ahead he would no doubt have been even more scathing in his comment.

Reinforcements

The Canadian operations north of Antwerp had ended in a stalemate. They were on the edge of Woensdrecht and the Beveland isthmus, but the Germans still held these key positions. In the middle of October the German side was badly in need of reinforcements. Two examples to illustrate this point. Finzel's first company for example (*1./FJR 2*) led by *Leutnant* Ackermann, which had arrived on 6 September with a hundred and fifty men had just fifty left.¹²⁶⁴ Likewise *Sturmataillon AOK 15* on 16 October only had sixty-nine men left out of an original two hundred.¹²⁶⁵ Von Zangen actually received some reinforcement on the day the Rileys tried to capture Woensdrecht and Nederheide. On 16 October, six days later than promised, two armoured units finally arrived. The liaison officer of *Sturmgeschützbrigade 667*, *Hauptman* Rübbig, reported on behalf of his commanding officer, *Major* Ludwig Knüpling, to *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps* in Herpt on the river Maas, where it had set up its new headquarters the day before.¹²⁶⁶ This *Brigade* had a full complement of nineteen *Sturmgeschütze III* and twelve *Sturmhaubitzen 42G*, a welcome addition indeed. Meanwhile *3./Sturmgeschützbrigade 244* under *Hauptmann* Friedrich Jaschke arrived with *LXVII. Armeekorps* in Breda with seven *Sturmgeschütze III* and three *Sturmhaubitzen*.¹²⁶⁷ It had taken the *Brigade* a long time to travel after it had been ordered to the Western front almost three weeks earlier on 29 September.¹²⁶⁸ Four days later the other two *Kompanien* of *244* arrived with another mix of thirty-one *Sturmgeschütze* and *Sturmhaubitze*. They unloaded in Dordrecht.¹²⁶⁹ Both Knüpling and Jaschke were experienced commanders and veterans from the Eastern Front. Knüpling had assumed command of his *Brigade* on 15 August and was rated by his superiors because he had shown himself to be an 'überlegter, taktisch gut geschulter Führer und Kommandeur seiner Sturmgeschützbrigade.'¹²⁷⁰ Jaschke, who had commanded his brigade since 5 August was rated equally highly. About him it was said, 'Vor dem Feind zeigte er sich als schneidiger Draufgänger, der durch den rücksichtslosen Einsatz seiner Person seinen Untergebenen stets Vorbild war und schwungvoll mitriss.'¹²⁷¹ Both units would play key roles in the battles to come.

¹²⁶³ War Diary 5th CIB, 16.10.44.

¹²⁶⁴ First Cdn Army, IR PoW Battle Groups Infantry, 18.10.44.

¹²⁶⁵ First Cdn Army, IR PoW persons collated for interrogation by interrogation teams, 22.10.44.

¹²⁶⁶ KTB 88 AK, 16.10.44, 11.00 hours.

¹²⁶⁷ War Diary 34th Tank Brigade, IS 39, 23.10.44.

¹²⁶⁸ Schramm, *Kriegstagebuch 7/I*, 399.

¹²⁶⁹ Kriegstagebuch Hans Geng.

¹²⁷⁰ Personalakten Knüpling, 01.03.44, NARA RG 242.

¹²⁷¹ Personalakten Jaschke, 04.05.1943, NARA RG 242.

At the end of the same day the vehicles of *2./schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559* that had been in short-term repair finally joined the rest of the *Abteilung* which had now arrived in the Zundert – Essen area to rest and refit.¹²⁷² The next day Chill abandoned Rouwmoershoeve convent headquarters and moved to Mattenburg.¹²⁷³ Also on 17 October *Sturmgeschützbrigade 244* moved further west to Rosendaal to form the new mobile component for *Kampfgruppe Chill* now that Kopka's *Abteilung* and *Sturmgeschützbrigade 280* were gone.¹²⁷⁴

Conclusion

The intervention of first half and then all of *Kampfgruppe Chill* at Woensdrecht and Hoogerheide had been a close call. Had Von der Heydte's *Fallschirmjäger* together with *Sturmgeschützbrigade 280* arrived even a day later, the Canadians would have taken the heights near Woensdrecht, entered the Beveland isthmus and isolated *70. Infanterie-Division* even earlier, advancing the operations to clear the north banks of the Scheldt by two to three weeks. The Germans managed to prevent this by recapturing part of Hoogerheide and taking up excellent defensive positions behind the railway line running to Beveland and Walcheren. On 12 October the rest of the *Kampfgruppe* joined Von der Heydte's men and Chill immediately organized a counterattack across the Staartse Heide on the right flank of the Canadians aimed at cutting off their troops in Hoogerheide. The attacks (five in all) failed, mainly because of the Canadians' resilience, the poor terrain and because Chill lacked artillery, which had stayed behind near Tilburg. Chill then ordered his men to switch to the defence and effectively roped off the Canadian advance. A point of criticism raised by professor Terry Copp, one of Canada's leading historians on the campaign, needs to be addressed here.

Copp feels that instead of tackling Hoogerheide and Woensdrecht head on, *Kampfgruppe Von der Heydte* should have tried to outflank the Canadian defences and attack the weak, extended right flank of the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division southeast of there.¹²⁷⁵ Although this sounds perfectly reasonable, there are a few objections to this. First of all Von der Heydte with just three battalions simply did not have enough soldiers both to block the Canadian advance from Hoogerheide and attempt a flanking attack. It was either the one or the other. Starting from the woods north of Woensdrecht blocking the direct route was the most logical choice. Moreover, the Staartse Heide which was marshy, hilly and wooded, did not favour a flanking attack from the east as the rest of *Kampfgruppe Chill* found out when they tried an attack on the vulnerable Canadian right flank a few days later. In view of the terrain the attack was necessarily funnelled north of the Grote Meer and hence relatively easy to block. Also, *Kampfgruppe Von der Heydte* was not nearly mobile enough to circle around the Staartse Heide and use the other obvious choice, the road from Essen via Kalmthout to Kapellen. Finally, the flanking attack by the Royals

¹²⁷² KTB 88 AK, 16.10.44, 16.30 and 19.56 hours, also Second Army Intel Log, 22.10.44, Serial 11.

¹²⁷³ Vercammen, *Eiland in het Groen*, 33.

¹²⁷⁴ KTB 88 AK, 17.10.44, C 288.

¹²⁷⁵ Terry Copp and Mike Bechthold, *The Canadian Battlefields in Northwest Europe, 1944-1945, A Visitor's Guide*, Waterloo 2005, 72, and Terry Copp, *Cinderella Army, The Canadians in Northwest Europe 1944-1945*, Toronto 2006, 137.

through the polders west of Woensdrecht required Von der Heydte to send a battalion there as well, which meant that he had even less room for manoeuvre. Fancy tactics were alright if possible, but under the prevailing circumstances Von der Heydte could have done little else. What is more, he and the rest of *Kampfgruppe Chill* did succeed in halting the Canadian advance short of their objective, which is what counted in the end. In the final analysis of the battle for Woensdrecht it is clear that the terrain had favoured the defenders, that *Kampfgruppe Chill* had arrived in the nick of time, had fought tenaciously, and that the equally brave Canadian troops had been too few and far between to break the iron German grip on Woensdrecht and surroundings.

After having done the same as at Goirle, *Kampfgruppe Chill* once again was able to block an attack thus effecting the planned course of the operations. By preventing the Canadians from seizing the heights near Woensdrecht and isolating the German troops on Walcheren, Chill ultimately forced Montgomery to reconsider his whole operational plan which since early September had been focused on one thing and one thing alone: to attack the Ruhr area and isolate it from the rest of Germany. The repeated failures of his plans, for which *Kampfgruppe Chill* bore a direct responsibility, opened his eyes to the new reality on the battlefield. The frustrations about the continued delay to open Antwerp also, finally, made it clear to Eisenhower and others that Montgomery had been on the wrong track for some time and that the time had come to remind him of his priorities. Montgomery was not immediately convinced, however, and for a while the issue remained unresolved, but on 15 October things finally came to a head and the Field-Marshal was rudely woken up and finally forced to abandon his earlier battle plans.

3.7. Western Brabant (20 October – 9 November 1944)

‘Diese wurden stets a[n] Brennpunkt d[er] Kämpfe eingesetzt u[nd] nach Erfüllung ihrer Aufgabe wieder als K[orps] od[er] Armeeres[erve] herausgezogen. Sie waren d[ie] ‘Feuerwehr’.¹²⁷⁶

‘Der Einsatz der Sturmgeschütze im Rahmen der Nachtruppe ist zweckmässig. Ihr Einsatz gibt der Truppe grossen Auftrieb und Sicherheitsgefühl.’¹²⁷⁷

The failures of British and Canadian forces at Goirle and Woensdrecht to achieve a breakthrough made it clear that post Operation Market Garden the Allied strategy was definitely on the wrong track. Pushing *15. Armee* back towards the river Maas and away from Antwerp was taking far too long. East of the Corridor meanwhile the fighting during the same period had been equally bloody and protracted. There VIII Corps (Lieutenant-General O’Connor) had had the same frustrating experience of failing to push a determined enemy out of well-prepared positions. Starting on 22 September for a whole month this Corps, consisting of the 3rd Division and the 11th Armoured Division, three crack units, reinforced with the American 7th Armoured Division had in vain tried to drive the Germans behind the river Maas. *LXXXVI*.

¹²⁷⁶ Reinhard, 31

¹²⁷⁷ Buhr, 30.

Armeekorps (General Hans von Obstfelder), the core of which was still formed by *Kampfgruppe Walther*, successfully stalled the Allied advance resulting in ferocious fighting at Overloon, a tiny village on the northern edge of the Peel marshes. Montgomery's strategy of Second Army advancing into Germany while First Canadian Army was developing operations to free the use of the port of Antwerp had patently failed. At this rate it would take forever before Allied forces reached the Maas. It was becoming rapidly clear that something needed to be done, and soon. Even Montgomery himself admitted as much immediately after the war when he wrote about this stage of the campaign, 'Great successes had been achieved, but we had nowhere been strong enough to secure decisive results quickly'.¹²⁷⁸ In his memoirs, which were published twelve years later, he was even franker, 'I must admit a bad mistake on my part – I underestimated the difficulties of opening up the approaches to Antwerp so that we could get the free use of that port. I reckoned that the Canadian Army could do it while we were going for the Ruhr. I was wrong'.¹²⁷⁹ The breakthrough in Montgomery's thinking came on 16 October, the same day that the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry tried to take Woensdrecht and failed. Montgomery issued a new directive that day. What had preceded this change of heart and his post-war insight?

Rethinking strategy

It all started eleven days earlier, on 5 October, when Field-Marshal Sir Alan Brooke, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff had a meeting with General Eisenhower, Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force, and all the Army Group commanders at Versailles.¹²⁸⁰ Afterwards he noted in his diary 'I feel that Monty's strategy for once is at fault, instead of carrying out the advance on Arnhem he ought to have made certain of Antwerp in the first place'.¹²⁸¹ At that stage Montgomery himself had no idea he was on the wrong track and he was still holding on to the operational directive that he had issued on 27 September (M 527). Three days later he had a meeting with Lieutenant-General Omar Bradley (Twelfth Army Group) and Lieutenant-General Courtney H. Hodges (First Army) to discuss the command arrangements. General George C. Marshall, the US Army Chief of Staff, was also present. Afterwards Montgomery asked if he could see him in private. Montgomery then complained about Eisenhower's way of running the operations, he was too far from the front, he had to control too much at the same time, his strategy was wrong. He did not have a good word to say about his superior and his conclusion was that the Allies had gotten themselves into a real mess. He wanted one, unified land command. There is no record of what Marshall said (very little according to Montgomery in his Memoirs) or thought, but he must have been flabbergasted. Apart from the fact that it was not very gentlemanly to criticise Eisenhower behind his back. Still, Montgomery persisted and two days later he wrote a letter to Lieutenant-General Walter Bedell Smith, Eisenhower's Chief-of-Staff. Just a day earlier Montgomery had issued a new directive in which he insisted that First Canadian Army

¹²⁷⁸ Montgomery, *Normandy to the Baltic*, 160.

¹²⁷⁹ Montgomery, *The Memoirs of Field-Marshal the Viscount Montgomery of Alamein K.G.*, London 1958, 297.

¹²⁸⁰ This section, Ellis, *Victory II*, 83-92, and MacDonald, *Siegfried Line Campaign*, 213-5.

¹²⁸¹ Alanbrooke, 600.

finally resolve the Antwerp affair while Second British Army drive the enemy back towards the river Maas south of Nijmegen (M 528). In other words, he was still trying to achieve two objectives at the same time. That same day, 9 October, Eisenhower sent Montgomery a telegram in which he underlined the importance of Antwerp as a supply base, particularly now that heavy autumn gales had wrecked most of the installations back at Cherbourg. Still the penny would not drop.

The change in Montgomery's thinking did not come until Eisenhower read the letter he had sent him through Bedell Smith on the 10th. In this letter Montgomery repeated the criticism he had vented to Marshall and in no uncertain words he blamed Eisenhower for being too far away and for not getting a firmer grip on things as Supreme Commander. The relationship between Eisenhower and Montgomery, often a troubled one, especially since Eisenhower had taken over as land commander, had reached a new low. This time Eisenhower had had enough. He sent Montgomery a reply on 15 October that was equally plain and left no room for doubt. He emphasised two points. He dismissed Montgomery's complaint about his not keeping enough 'battle grip' by pointing out that 'This is no longer a Normandy beachhead!' He also made it quite clear that Montgomery was to focus all his attention and energy on freeing the port of Antwerp which he felt was 'the real issue now at hand'. He even promised him reinforcements in the form of the 104th US Infantry Division.

Montgomery was finally forced to face the facts. On the same day Eisenhower wrote to him he cabled Brooke, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, that 'it does seem enemy is endeavouring to delay us all he can in Antwerp area'.¹²⁸² The following day he replied to Eisenhower's letter and promised that he would stop griping about the subject of command and that he would give 'Antwerp top priority in all operations in 21 Army Group and all energies and efforts will be now devoted towards opening up that place'. Montgomery was as good as his word and that same day he issued a new directive to Twenty-First Army Group. In hindsight it is easy to see that Montgomery had been in a kind of post-Normandy euphoria for too long. He was too much focused on forcing an entry into Germany and had not yet woken up to the new realities on the battlefield. Still, it would not be right to put all of the blame on Montgomery's shoulders as Eisenhower let the time pass until 9 October before giving any indication that he was dissatisfied. Even stranger is the fact that the Royal Navy did not insist more strenuously except for Admiral Sir Bertram Ramsay who had pointed out as early as 3 September how important Antwerp was as a supply port. The truth of the matter is that neither Eisenhower, nor Montgomery, nor any of the other naval authorities had sounded the alarm bell. Montgomery's new directive was to put all this right. Since it determined the operations for the next three weeks it is worth looking at it in some detail.

Battle plans

In directive M 532 Montgomery described the new operational goals and how Twenty-First Army Group was to achieve them.¹²⁸³ The opening two paragraphs

¹²⁸² M280 (TNA WO 106/4367).

¹²⁸³ M 532 (TNA WO 106/4356).

revealed that the message from Eisenhower had finally come across. They stated that 'the free use of the port of Antwerp is vital to the Allied cause' and that 'operations designed to open the port will therefore be given complete priority'. That these instructions this time paid more than mere lip service became clear from paragraph 3 where, after acknowledging the Canadian efforts, he wrote that 'The whole of the available offensive power of Second Army will now be brought to bear also.' This meant that while First Canadian Army continued to focus on freeing the port of Antwerp by taking the banks of the Scheldt, concerning Second Army 'The whole available offensive power of the Army will be employed in a strong thrust westwards on the general axis Hertogenbosch-Breda, with the right flank on the Meuse.' First Canadian Army was to head for Bergen op Zoom and Roosendaal while Second Army pushed westward from a line between 's-Hertogenbosch and Best. As a final point Montgomery wanted to impress on his two Army commanders, Simonds and Dempsey, a sense of urgency. The attack was to start no later than 20 October. The operations, he wrote, 'must be begun at the earliest moment; they must be pressed with the greatest energy and determination; and we must accept heavy casualties to get quick success.' Time would tell if his commanders and those who had to do the actual bloody work had gotten the message. To do the job there was to be some reorganisation and there would be some reinforcements as well. So who were involved?

The two operations, which in effect would enable the attack on Beveland and drive *15. Armee* behind the river Maas or, even better from the Allied perspective, encircle it south of that river, were to be carried out by I Corps (Lieutenant-General John Crocker) and XII Corps (Lieutenant-General Neil Ritchie).¹²⁸⁴ I Corps code-named its operation 'Suitcase' while XII Corps called it –quite appropriately in view of the season- 'Pheasant'. For Suitcase Crocker had the 4th Canadian Armoured Division, arriving to the right of the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division at Hoogerheide, thus finally removing the danger to the extended right flank (see previous chapter), the 49th (West Riding) Division around St.Lenaarts and the 1st Polish Armoured Division which had taken over from the 49th south of Tilburg. In addition Crocker had two independent armoured units, the 34th Tank Brigade and the 2nd Canadian Armoured Brigade. Finally he would receive an as yet untried unit, the 104th U.S. Infantry Division (Timberwolves). Unfortunately for Crocker this division was expected to arrive after Suitcase had already begun. This made Crocker's corps a truly international force with Englishmen, Canadians, Poles and Americans fighting alongside each other. Being on the left or outer flank the 4th Canadian Armoured and 49th Divisions were to strike the first blows. For XII Corps Ritchie had four divisions under his command, among them two of the most famous divisions in the British army, the 7th Armoured Division (the Desert Rats) and the 51st (Highland) Division, plus the 15th (Scottish) and 53rd (Welsh) Divisions as well as the Dutch Prinses Irene Brigade. His corps was also supported by independent armoured units, the 4th and 33rd Armoured Brigades and the 6th Guards Tank Brigade. All in all the two corps had nine divisions (the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division was involved in the initial stages), one infantry brigade and five armoured brigades to carry out Montgomery's operational directive. It was an impressive force, equal to twelve

¹²⁸⁴ This section, Didden and Swarts, *Einddoel Maas*, 152, War Diary I and XII Corps.

divisions, that should be able to fulfil the mission. But no Allied commander, in view of the recent battles, can have been under any illusion it would be a walk-over, even if they outnumbered the German forces facing them.

The German position

Interestingly, while the leading Allied commanders became aware of Antwerp rather late in the game, the Germans, had realised the importance of the Belgian port as early as 4 September, the day it was captured. Hence the fanaticism with which *15. Armee* had defended its bridgehead position south of the river Maas ever since. Still, there was to be some reorganisation there, too, and Von Zangen would also welcome reinforcements. On 16 October, the day Montgomery issued his new directive, von Zangen had two corps under his command with a total of six weak divisions and one *Kampfgruppe*. Sponheimer's *LXVII. Armeekorps* controlled *Kampfgruppe Chill*, the *346. Infanterie-Division*, the *711. Infanterie-Division* and the *719. Infanterie-Division*, while Reinhard and *LXXVIII. Armeekorps* could boast the *245. Infanterie-Division*, the *59. Infanterie-Division*, and the *712. Infanterie-Division*. Basically these were the same weak divisions that had been delaying the Allied advance since the conclusion of operation Market Garden at the end of September.

On the eve of the new Allied offensive the German divisions on average had a strength of 6,452 men.¹²⁸⁵ The Allied divisions on the other hand officially numbered 18,347 and 14,964 each for infantry and armoured divisions respectively.¹²⁸⁶ However, we need to take into account that the infantry in particular had suffered serious losses since D-Day that had not been completely replaced. In fact, as mentioned above, the Canadian and British armies had a serious man power problem. There are no definitive figures, but it seems reasonable to assume –in view of what is recorded in the war diaries for example- that in the middle of October most infantry battalions were down to 60-70% of their nominal strength. Discounting Corps and Army troops on both sides this means that the Allied force could field at least 125,000 men against 52,000 Germans, a ratio of 1:2.4. Where artillery was concerned the Germans were definitely worse off. On average the German divisions had about 20 artillery pieces each and each Corps could muster another 30. This meant that all of *15. Armee* had about 200 guns on 20 October. The Allied Field, Medium and Heavy Regiments together (divisional artillery plus Corps artillery) had 1,028 guns, a ratio of 1:5.¹²⁸⁷ As for armour the situation was even worse for the Germans and resembled conditions on the Eastern Front. By the middle of October three *Sturmgeschützbrigaden* had reinforced *15. Armee* but, except for *667*, these were not up to full strength and it remained to be seen whether the total number of about sixty plus *Sturmgeschütze* and the occasional two or three operational *Jagdpanther* were strong enough to withstand the Allied onslaught that was coming. The Allied forces opposing them had roughly 1,600 tanks between them, a staggering disparity of 1:25 in favour of the attacker. The difference in air support (or in the case of the Germans, the lack thereof) is not even worth mentioning. So,

¹²⁸⁵ KTB 88 AK, 3.10.44, C 255, gives the strengths of 59, 245, 85 and 712.

¹²⁸⁶ Forty, *British Army Handbook*, 162 and 165.

¹²⁸⁷ Besides the divisions there were sixteen Medium Regiments, two Heavy Regiments and six Field Regiments, about two-thirds of what 21st Army Group had.

even though the terrain favoured the defender since it included a number of waterways, the Allied offensive could only have one outcome. The one remaining question for the German commanders was: when would it happen? Von Zangen's tactics therefore were basically the same they had been since the middle of September, to save his army. The only way to do that was by pulling it back behind the river Maas, and beyond that, the river Waal. As mentioned before, as early as 21 September he had begun to look into the possibility of a withdrawal behind the Maas and Waal.¹²⁸⁸

The first real preparations started on 7 October at a meeting between *Oberst* Lehnert, the *Pionier-Führer* of *15. Armee*, and the chief naval officer, *Admiral in den Niederlanden* Gustav Kleikamp.¹²⁸⁹ The meeting was conducted in a somewhat acrimonious atmosphere. Lehnert emphasised that the army did not have enough personnel to carry out the withdrawal behind the two rivers and he required 117 captains, 105 sailors and 122 engineers. Kleikamp took the opportunity to point out that had *15. Armee* not used some of his sailors as infantry to plug gaps in the frontline, a task for which they were neither trained nor equipped, some of these could now be used to man the ships! In addition the navy also lacked sufficient qualified personnel because all over the Netherlands sailors had been enlisted by the army and the *SS*. (He quoted the example of 150 trained sailors who had been involved in the fighting at Arnhem and had still not been returned.) Moreover, he added, ferrying units across rivers was basically the task of *15. Armee* itself. After having thus cut Lehnert down to size, Kleikamp grudgingly agreed that, of course, the navy would help out in an emergency, provided he received clear, written requests. Three days later Kleikamp made good on his promise. He ordered 300 sailors coming from the *Reich* to be available for the new task. He also instructed *Korvetten Kapitän* August Hermann Becker, *Flotillenchef Flussräumflotille in Amsterdam*, to supervise the operation.¹²⁹⁰

Becker took up his task energetically and efficiently. On 13 October he had his first meeting with Lehnert and two days later he had set up seven different sectors each with its own commanding officer.¹²⁹¹ The army, for its part, on the same day ordered *Arko 119* with its headquarters to supervise the traffic to and from the ferries.¹²⁹² Protection of the sites was to be provided by *Flakregiment 100 (mot)* with no fewer than eighteen mixed batteries of 8.8, 3.7 and 2 cm guns.¹²⁹³ Thus, when operations Rebound and Pheasant burst upon *15. Armee*, everything was in readiness to bring the troops back in safety behind the two major rivers quickly. In view of the achievement when his army had to be ferried across the Westerscheldt well over a month before, Von Zangen knew that he could rely on the navy to deliver. The other good news for him was that the promised reinforcement, the *256. Volksgrenadier-Division* was finally about to arrive. It was the last serious reinforcement Von Zangen

¹²⁸⁸ KTB OB West, 21.09.44, 17.45 hours.

¹²⁸⁹ KTB Admiral in den Niederlanden, 08.10.44, Allgemeines 4.

¹²⁹⁰ Ibid, 10.10.44, Anlage 1.

¹²⁹¹ KTB Sonderstab Becker, 15.10.44.

¹²⁹² KTB 88 AK, 15.10.44, B 397.

¹²⁹³ KTB 88 AK, 04.10.44, C 2261. The fourteen batteries were from gem. Abteilungen 1.-3./113, 1./369, 1.-4./469, 1.-4./601 and 602

would receive south of the rivers. Even though Von Rundstedt himself requested more the *Führer* turned it down. Even his top commanders did not know at the time that *15. Armee* in the near future would no longer command major forces as these were already being assembled in the *Reich* for the forthcoming offensive in the West, the future Ardennes Offensive.¹²⁹⁴

On 15 October the first units of the *256. Volksgrenadier-Division* finally arrived near Goirle to take over from the *245. Infanterie-division* which was now moved west to take up position in the exposed 'balcony' between the *346.* and the *711. Infanterie-Division*, by now mere shadows of their former selves. The *Kommandeur* of the *256. V.G.D.*, *Oberst* Gerhard Franz, was eager to prove himself, because of an unfortunate incident earlier in the war. In August 1942 he had been court-martialled, together with his superior officer, *General* Georg Stumme, and sentenced to two years in prison because one of their staff officers had been shot down behind Russian lines while carrying top-secret documents concerning '*Fall Blau*'. The execution of the sentence was postponed until after the end of the war and so Franz was given command of the *256. V.G.D.* on 1 September 1944.¹²⁹⁵ The British found him "eager to learn, of more than average intelligence and with a strong dislike for the Nazi-regime."¹²⁹⁶ The phenomenon of the *Volksgrenadier-division* was another invention on the part of the German army to camouflage that it was fighting a losing war.¹²⁹⁷ They were created in the summer of 1944, at first set up as elite formations because they were supposed to be equipped with the latest weapons and because administratively they were under the command of the *Reichsführer SS* Heinrich Himmler. In reality these divisions were nowhere near anything like elite formations. They were not given enough time to train and weld together, and with a complement of 10,070 men they were smaller than the average 1944 German infantry division which was supposed to have a complement of 12,352 men. This reduction was mainly achieved by assigning each regiment two instead of the regular three battalions. Still, apparently the arrival of this new division whetted Reinhard's appetite for action. Three days later (19 October) he ordered *Sturmgeschützbrigade 667* on a recce mission in the direction of Alphen, Poppel and Hilvarenbeek to explore the possibility of a counterattack there by the *256. V.G.D.*¹²⁹⁸ But the impending Allied operations prevented this idea from coming to fruition. Moreover, his superiors soon had other plans for the *Sturmgeschütze*.

Suitcase begins

On Friday 20 October Operation Suitcase began. The operation was to begin in a staggered way i.e. the two 'outer' divisions, the 49th and the 4th Canadian Armoured, would start first while the 'inner' division, the 1st Polish Armoured, pinned the German forces opposite down and served as a kind of pivot. Depending on developments this division, together with the 104th US, which was still to arrive,

¹²⁹⁴ Westphal, *Heer in Fesseln*, 270.

¹²⁹⁵ He was very unfortunate, because at the end of March 1945 he was again court-martialled, this time for having lost contact with his troops. Franz thereupon decided to let himself be taken prisoner by the Americans.

¹²⁹⁶ Neitzel, *Abgehört*, 446.

¹²⁹⁷ Info on Volksgrenadier-division: Reinhardt.

¹²⁹⁸ KTB 88 AK, 19.10.44, B 412.

would start their own attack northward later. The attacks by the 4th Canadian Armoured and the 49th (West Riding) Division towards Roosendaal and Breda were launched at the same time. Since 17 October the 49th Division had leapfrogged the Polish 1st Armoured Division and their positions south of Tilburg had been taken over by the 4th Armoured Brigade who at first did not quite know what to make of playing the role of infantry.¹²⁹⁹ The offensive went off to a successful start by and large, mainly because the Allies had correctly deduced that Von Zangen's 'policy of transferring appreciable forces across to the Beveland isthmus area has resulted in a general weakening of the whole central sector'.¹³⁰⁰ The 49th Division, whose own operation was called 'Rebound', struck a very weak spot indeed. This was discovered literally on the eve of the attack. The frontline immediately north of Brecht was defended by *I./Grenadier-Regiment 858* under *Hauptmann* Post and no fewer than eleven deserters told the British interrogators that the three companies between them had only one *Panzerschreck* each. The area around Wuustwezel was defended by *I./Grenadier-Regiment 857* under *Major* Schilling who were hardly better off.¹³⁰¹ Moreover Sponheimer's attention was still focused on his right flank, Woensdrecht and surroundings. Because of this nearly all of the German artillery was in positions from which they could cover this sector, but were out of range to intervene north of Brecht.¹³⁰² This was another reason why, almost everywhere, the operation went according to plan on the first day.¹³⁰³

German reaction

The Allied breakthrough along two major roads out of Antwerp meant that *General* Sponheimer's *LXVII. Armeekorps* had the biggest crisis yet on its hands.¹³⁰⁴ The initial response was to ask *15. Armee* for permission to pull back the *711. Infanterie-Division* a few kilometres as it was now in an extremely exposed position. Von Zangen forbade this right away and instead ordered Sponheimer to organise a counterattack. Fortunately for Sponheimer that very day the first Regiment of the *245. Infanterie-Division* was arriving in the area of Zundert, ready to take up position between the *346.* and *711. Infanterie-Division*. Sponheimer hoped that *Grenadier-Regiment 936* could mount the counterattack and restore the line. There was plenty of armour to support such an ambitious scheme. As noted above, four days earlier *3./Sturmgeschützbrigade 244* and *Sturmgeschützbrigade 667* had arrived to reinforce *15. Armee*. Moreover the *346. I.D.* still had *Sturmgeschützbrigade 280* under command. Finally there was Kopka's unit, *schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559*, south of Zundert. The big question now was where and how to attack. Here the generals had very different ideas.

Generalmajor Walter Steinmüller had swapped places with Diestel as *Kommandeur* of the *346. I.D.* just four days earlier (until then he had commanded *331. I.D.* which

¹²⁹⁹ Wake and Deeds, *Swift and Bold*, 266-7.

¹³⁰⁰ First Canadian Army, IS 112, 20.10.44.

¹³⁰¹ War Diary 49th Inf Div, Message Log, 19.10.44, no time.

¹³⁰² War Diary 34th Tk Bde, IS 37, 21.10.44.

¹³⁰³ This section unless otherwise specified, War Diary 34th Tk Bde, war Diary 56th Inf Bde and War Diary 49th Inf Div.

¹³⁰⁴ This section, Von Hobe, 43, and Warning 34-6.

Diestel now commanded).¹³⁰⁵ He felt that the Canadian threat to Essen was the more dangerous of the two attacks. The main reason was probably that if the advance there continued at this pace *Kampfgruppe Chill* would be cut off. Therefore Steinmüller favoured a counterattack from Zundert in the general direction of Kalmthout to take the advancing Canadians in the flank. From there, if possible, the attacking force could carry on and clear up the situation south of Hoogerheide. Steinmüller's plan obviously did not take into account that there were very few roads (metalled or otherwise) in the open heath his men would have to cross. Whatever the reason, Steinmüller was overruled by his *Kommandierende General*, Sponheimer, who ordered an attack in a more southerly direction aiming straight for Wuustwezel. Once that had been reached the attacking forces were to turn right and head for Kalmthout. Moreover, Sponheimer insisted that the attack take place the following day with whatever units from the *245. Infanterie-Division* had arrived.¹³⁰⁶ Von Zangen, who in accordance with the German principle of *Auftragstaktik* did not control the details of the counterattack, was not aware of Sponheimer's decision until afterwards. He was scathing in his comment. He felt that 'Eindrehen im Angriff bei Wuustwezel auf Calmpthout war 'in den Feind hineindisponiert.' Es trug (...) dem Schwerpunkt der feindlichen Angriffsrichtung zu spät Rechnung und musste (...) zum Aufreissen des Anschlusses zum linken Nachbarn (711. I.D.) führen.'¹³⁰⁷ This difference of opinion between Steinmüller and Sponheimer might explain why *schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559* was first sent to Essen and later moved back to Zundert because the attack was to begin from there.¹³⁰⁸

While the German force was getting ready their opponents had not been idle either. Clarkeforce¹³⁰⁹ (Brigadier C.S. Clarke) had only one mission: to punch a hole in the German lines and not bother about its flanks or rear. Hence all units remaining in and around Wuustwezel had to leave as soon as possible. The troops in the key position around Stone Bridge were relieved by the 1st Leicesters (three companies only since D Company stayed with Clarkeforce). By ten a.m. the German attack on Wuustwezel was well underway and it was A Company on the left (around the bridge) and C Company on the right who took the brunt of the attack.¹³¹⁰ The defenders did not crumble under the German onslaught and the the intense artillery fire forced the *Grenadiere* to go to ground time and again. The German SPs slugged it out with the Churchill tanks of the 147th RAC, both sides losing a few vehicles. The fight continued the following day and the end of it *559* and *667* had lost nine vehicles while the 147th RAC had lost ten plus a number of carriers and lorries. It had been a short, sharp battle with a (relatively) large number of armoured vehicles on a small piece of ground. In human terms it had also been a costly battle. At the

¹³⁰⁵ Diestel had the more relaxed job as 331 was being reconstituted south of Rotterdam (Van Hilten maps 18 and 20).

¹³⁰⁶ Hofmann, 43.

¹³⁰⁷ Comment Von Zangen in Rehm, 58.

¹³⁰⁸ War Diary 4th Can Armd Div, IS 23, 22.10.44.

¹³⁰⁹ A highly mobile force which consisted of one tank battalion, the 107th RAC, the 49th Division recce regiment, one troop of Crocodiles of the 1st Fife and Forfar Yeomanry, one infantry company (D) from the 1st Leicestershire Regiment, one anti-tank troop (248 Anti-tank Battery) and one machine gun company (D) from the 2nd Kensington Regiment and engineers, under the command of the CO of the 34th Tank Brigade.

¹³¹⁰ This section, War Diaries, 49th Inf Div, 147 Brigade, 1st Leicesters and 147 RAC 21.10.44.

end of the two-day battle the 1st Leicesters had suffered an appalling 111 casualties of whom 24 had been fatal.¹³¹¹ In total British losses were between sixty and sixty-five dead while German losses amounted to at least fifty killed.¹³¹² The counterattack had failed and all Sponheimer could now do was order the *254. Infanterie-Division* back and hope that the line would hold. All of *schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559* pulled back to the Liesbosch convent of the Sisters of Saint Joseph near Breda that evening to recuperate. Its strength was down to two *Jagdpanther* and six *Sturmgeschütze*, not all of them operational.¹³¹³

The next step

On 22 October operation Suitcase continued on its way northwest.¹³¹⁴ The previous evening Lieutenant-General Crocker (I Corps) had urged Major-General Foster (4th Canadian Armoured Division) to push on. Crocker knew that the following day Second Army would start its offensive, Pheasant. He hoped that Suitcase and Pheasant together might spring a trap for *15. Armee* south of the river Maas and that is why he urged the 4th Canadian Armoured Division to step up its speed. Besides having to provide flank protection for the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division it had now had the added responsibility of applying pressure on the southwest corner of the trap. Foster therefore ordered both brigades to carry on their advances during the night. Night attacks were always tricky affairs, however, even at the best of times. On the other hand, they were usually a surprise to the Germans. This time was no different and the gamble paid off. On the left the 4th Canadian Armoured Brigade pushed north through the woods south of the Dutch-Belgian border and reached the vicinity of Essen very quickly. On the right the 10th Canadian Infantry Brigade were temporarily held up at a bridge over the Wildertse Beek but at 06.15 hours the Algonquins entered Essen and overran the town.

The rest of 22 October was spent mopping up. The surprise effect of the night attacks was also evident from the large number of prisoners taken during the advance. No fewer than 450 were rounded up. Most were the usual suspects, various units of the *346. Infanterie-Division*, but also reinforcements like *I./Grenadier-regiment 743* and, most surprising to the Canadians, a few from *II./Fallschirmjäger-regiment 6*, Mager's battalion were captured.¹³¹⁵ The success left the troops on the ground eager to go on. Little could they know that the next step would be far more difficult. Clarkeforce to the right of the Canadians during the same night established contact with them and at first light sent patrols out of Nieuwmoer.¹³¹⁶ Progress was very slow. Neither *Hauptmann Mager's Fallschirmjäger* nor the various *Sturmgeschütze* from *Sturmgeschützbrigade 244* were willing to give way and it took the force half a day to get to the next village, Vissenhoek. The resistance was fierce despite the problems Jaschke's *Brigade* now had. The supply situation was so bad that at one point three *Sturmgeschütze* were towed into action to conserve

¹³¹¹ War Diary 1st Leicesters, 22.10.44 gives 26 killed, 47 wounded and 38 missing.

¹³¹² PAJVD.

¹³¹³ Second Army IS 142, 24.10.44.

¹³¹⁴ This section War Diary 4th Cdn Armd Div, 21 and 22.10.44.

¹³¹⁵ War Diary 4th Cdn Armd Div, IS 23, 22.10.44.

¹³¹⁶ War Diary 34th Tk Bde, Narrative of events.

petrol!¹³¹⁷ During the afternoon about a hundred audacious Germans who had been bypassed in a wood south of Nieuwmoer decided to take the initiative themselves. They captured several soft-skinned vehicles of the 107th RAC and took some prisoners. The following day A Squadron 49th Recce was sent to deal with them. They cleared the woods and took thirty POWs.¹³¹⁸

Woensdrecht again

While it achieved a great success on 22 October, the 4th Canadian Armoured Division's advance that day had an even bigger impact further west, at Woensdrecht. There the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division had resumed the attack.¹³¹⁹ The plan for 22 October was simple. Two brigades were to clear the Woensdrecht area. On the left the 5th Canadian Infantry Brigade would take the isthmus, preparatory to beginning operations against Zuid Beveland, and on the right the 6th Canadian Infantry Brigade was directed on the old goal of Korteveen which had eluded the Rileys a week earlier. The attack on Woensdrecht and surroundings went in at seven a.m. after a devastating barrage, but it was the old story. As soon as the Canadian infantry left the start line they were met by a hail of small-calibre and mortar fire. All three battalions of Gauvreau's 6th Brigade failed to make any headway and history seemed to repeat itself.

On the left the Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders of Canada were to take Woensdrecht and their CO, Lieutenant-Colonel E. Thompson, at twenty-two the youngest battalion commander in the Canadian Army, was confident they could succeed where the Rileys had failed. He had under his command about 150 Belgian volunteers led by 'Colonel' Colson, whom we have met earlier at Antwerp.¹³²⁰ The Camerons went off to a good start and took forty prisoners. But then the attack stalled and the shell and mortar fire became so intense that the whole battalion, except for D Company, had to move back to where it started. Les Fusiliers Mont-Royal, in the centre, were supposed to take Korteveen. They got nowhere near the village. Von der Heydte's *Fallschirmjäger* were too well dug in and after a few hundred metres the Fusiliers were stuck. At eleven a.m. they had no option but dig in and hope for reinforcements. The South Saskatchewanans on the right tried to advance in country that the war diarist described as 'ideal for snipers'.¹³²¹ They, too, only managed to get a few hundred metres before the attack bogged down. At around three p.m. Brigadier Gauvreau himself inspected the forward lines. He had to admit defeat and concluded that his men could get no further that day. Once again *Fallschirmjäger-regiment 6* had triumphed and with little loss to themselves at that, the biggest loss being that of the *Kommandeur* of *3. Kompanie, Leutnant Müller*, who went missing that day.

Meanwhile the 5th Canadian Infantry Brigade had fared little better initially. The Calgary Highlanders found the going extremely tough and in fact two companies advanced straight into the same network of dug-in machine-guns which had nearly

¹³¹⁷ First Cdn Army, IS 117, 25.10.44.

¹³¹⁸ Richard Doherty, *Only the Enemy in Front, The Recce Corps at War 1940-1946*, Miami 2008, 199.

¹³¹⁹ This section, Van Doorn, *Woensdrecht*, 74-84, and Zuehlke, *Terrible Victory*, 371-8.

¹³²⁰ Whitaker and Whitaker, *Tug of War*, 202.

¹³²¹ War Diary South Saskatchewanans, 23.10.44.

annihilated the Black Watch ten days before. In the end the losses were horrendous (69 casualties), but A Company did manage to creep to the railway undetected and Major W. Lashner, the CO, had his men outflank a German position and in this way drove off the *Fallschirmjäger*, just as night was falling. The Canadians now had a toehold on the other side of the railway. But it was to be their right hand neighbours who indirectly would finally help break the deadlock at Woensdrecht.

The next hurdle

Elated by the success of their night attack and the capture of Essen the 4th Canadian Armoured Division was eager to press on against what appeared to be a weakened enemy force.¹³²² Studying the map the divisional commander, Major-General Harry Foster, realised that to get to Bergen op Zoom he could either try to force his way through the woods or take the road running through the village of Wouwse Plantage. Since the latter route made more sense he ordered Brigadier R. Moncel (4th Canadian Armoured Brigade) to capture the village on the 23rd. The attack was to be made in two stages. First the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders of Canada, supported by the Canadian Grenadier Guards (22nd CAR), would advance to a point right on the Dutch-Belgian border. After that was cleared of Germans, the Lake Superiors in their Carriers, supported by the Governor General's Foot Guards (21st CAR), would advance as far as Wouwse Plantage.

The Argylls' attack with two companies was to start at eight a.m. on 23 October. It ran into serious trouble right away, even before it had begun. The Germans had obviously spotted the Canadians forming up and they fired a lethal barrage at the Argylls. For almost thirty minutes one concentration after another rained down. When it finally let up the Argylls quickly got up and moved out. On the way they met relatively little resistance, but it still took them more than two hours to reach their objective. By that time they had suffered twenty-nine casualties, most of them due to the shelling at the start. It was eleven a.m. when the Superiors and the Foot Guards took over. The troops they faced were from *Kampfgruppe Dreyer*, the left wing of *Kampfgruppe Chill*, which only a week earlier had been trying to break through to Ossendrecht. It was still composed of *Bataillon Ohler*, and *I./Fallschirm Panzer Ersatz und Ausbildungs-Regiment Hermann Göring (Bataillon Pohl)*. The infantry were supported by *Sturmgeschützbrigade 244* which now finally arrived in full, driving down from Roosendaal.¹³²³

The attack was led by A Company of the Superiors and No 1 Squadron of the Guards. The Canadian group took the direct route to Wouwse Plantage, a country lane known locally as the Mariabaan. Unfortunately for them, this was the most logical choice and hence exactly where Dreyer expected them to attack. No wonder then that within minutes the leading carrier as well as the first three tanks of the Guards were knocked out by *Sturmgeschütze* lying in ambush. But worse was to come. The tank of the Squadron Leader, Major A.G.V. Smith was hit in its idler section. Amazingly it could still drive and Smith found shelter behind some

¹³²² This section, War Diaries 4th Cdn Armd Div, 4th Cdn Armd Bde, 21st RAC and Algonquins 23.10.44. (Summary: Van Doorn, *Woensdrecht*, 93-6.)

¹³²³ Kriegstagebuch Hans Geng.

farmhouses with the two tanks of his headquarters section. Meanwhile the rest of the squadron was being slaughtered and one Sherman after another was hit. However, the Canadians fought back as well as they could. Sergeant K. Morrison of the Superiors scored a direct hit on a *Sturmgeschütz* with his PIAT and set it on fire. Another one was knocked out by Lieutenant E.J. Canavan as it drove on to the road. Although his Sherman had also been put out of action (one of his tracks was blown off), he had ordered his crew to stay put and keep on firing. He and his crew only abandoned their vehicle when the ammunition was spent. The Superiors meanwhile agonizingly slowly moved forward taking prisoners on the way until they were about a kilometre from their objective.¹³²⁴ Without tank support that was as far as they could go. Major Smith decided to break out and try to help the infantry, but the moment the tanks left the farmyard all three were hit by *Sturmgeschütze*. Two were knocked out and again only Smith's tank survived. At six p.m. he gave the order to pull back and as his Sherman limped into regimental headquarters the idler burst into flame. No.1 Squadron had lost all of its eleven Shermans to the *Sturmgeschütze* that day. It was another resounding defensive success for *Kampfgruppe Chill*. The Canadian advance on Wouwe Plantage was to be resumed the following day.

Endgame at Woensdrecht

In spite of the defensive success, the advance on Wouwe Plantage alarmed *General Von Zangen* greatly. He was all too aware that *Kampfgruppe Chill* was increasingly in danger of being outflanked. He therefore ordered Chill to pull back from Woensdrecht and Huijbergen towards Bergen op Zoom, but very slowly and step by step.¹³²⁵ Von der Heydte set up new headquarters in Bergen op Zoom on the 26th while Chill moved to Vrederust, an asylum, northwest of that city.¹³²⁶ The move did not go unnoticed and Canadian patrols reported the withdrawal. When the 6th Canadian Infantry Brigade resumed the attack the following morning (24 October) they noticed that the resistance was clearly 'softening'.¹³²⁷ Twelve *Fallschirmjäger* were taken prisoner around eight a.m. They were all newcomers from the *Ersatz Kompanie of FJR 6*.¹³²⁸ At the end of the day another forty-two *Fallschirmjäger* had become POWs and the Canadians had captured most of Woensdrecht and Nederheide.¹³²⁹

In effect that day *15. Armee* gave up on the *70. Infanterie-Division* on Walcheren and Zuid-Beveland. The daily report of the *Wehrmachtführungsstab* drily noted that 'Der Feind stieß NW Hoogerheide bis zum Damm 3 km NNW Woensdrecht durch und unterbrach damit die Landverbindung nach Walcheren.'¹³³⁰ It was a momentous event, but one that went largely unnoticed amidst the fighting going on. What should have happened on 4 September was finally achieved. The goal which the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division had been striving for was finally realised after seventeen days of slugging it out with a professional and determined enemy who had the

¹³²⁴ War Diary 4th AGRA, Sitrep 23.10.44, 19.00 hours.

¹³²⁵ Von Zangen, 45.

¹³²⁶ Piet Hoedelmans, *Jeeps & Klaprozen*, Bergen op Zoom 1990, 66.

¹³²⁷ War Diary 2nd Cdn Inf Div, G Log, 24.10.44, 15.30 hours.

¹³²⁸ War Diary 2nd Cdn Inf Div, G Log, 23.10.44, 14.30 hours.

¹³²⁹ War Diary 2nd Cdn Inf Div, G Log, 25.10.44, 00.35 hours.

¹³³⁰ Die geheime Tagesberichte 11, 152.

advantage of the terrain. That was evident even that day, because in the end Von der Heydte's men only pulled back two kilometres and Lindonk and Korteven, the Canadians' ultimate goals, were still in German hands at the end of Tuesday 24 October. Trying to occupy the height of Lindonk saw a repeat of the fighting for Hoogerheide and Woensdrecht: the *Fallschirmjäger* who were dug in held every advantage and their machine-guns dominated the lower lying approaches. Time and again the Canadians rushed the height, but the Germans would not abandon this position until three days later in connection with a general withdrawal of *LXVII. Armeekorps*. The struggle for Woensdrecht was at last over to become part of Canadian military history. It was a name that was synonymous with tremendous suffering and would for ever send shivers down the spines of Canadian veterans. While operation Suitcase was running its course and *Kampfgruppe Chill* and *559* were slugging it out with I Corps, further east XII Corps had started operation Pheasant.

Operation Pheasant begins

Although *559* was involved, *Kampfgruppe Chill* was not, so only a summary of operation Pheasant is given here. The focal point of the operation was the medieval town and provincial capital, 's-Hertogenbosch. It was here that the outcome would be decided as well as the fate of all German troops south of the river Maas. The impending attack on this town was exactly what Reinhard (*LXXXVIII. Armeekorps*) and Von Zangen (*15. Armee*) had feared all along since the end of September when the frontline settled there after operation Market Garden had ground to a halt.¹³³¹ The problems Von Zangen had to solve on the eve of operation Pheasant were gigantic. By concentrating on Woensdrecht and surroundings and moving his best forces there he had seriously weakened his left flank. On the eve of operation Pheasant *15. Armee* was weak at 's-Hertogenbosch and strong south and east of Bergen op Zoom. And his opponents noted drily that 'It would have been more reasonable in reverse, and one is tempted to guess the enemy would have preferred it so.'¹³³² Von Zangen and Reinhard did realize that an energetic Allied attack westwards with its right flank on the river Maas might trap the whole of *15. Armee* south of the river. This had to be prevented at all costs. That is why Von Zangen considered 's-Hertogenbosch the 'wichtigsten Eckpfeiler des grossen Brueckenkopfes suedlich der Maas. Es musste daher bis zum aeussersten gehalten und stark gestuetzt werden...'¹³³³ That the outcome of the battle in North Brabant would be decided there was abundantly clear to both sides. That is why it became the scene of a very tough five-day battle in which *schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559* would again be called upon to provide some of the necessary hardware with its SPs. The front at 's-Hertogenbosch since the end of September had been held by *Generalleutnant* Friedrich Neumann's *712. Infanterie-Division*. In the early morning of 22 October, a few hours after the last units of the *245. Infanterie-Division* left Tilburg, *Oberstleutnant* Von Prittwitz und Gaffron, Chief-of-staff of *LXXXXVIII. Armeekorps* got a call from the *712. Infanterie-Division* informing him of a barrage

¹³³¹ Reinhard, 19.

¹³³² First Cdn Army, IS 117, 25.10.44.

¹³³³ Boetticher, 52.

on 's-Hertogenbosch. He wasted no time and immediately called *15. Armee*. His message was brief, 'dass es bei uns anscheinend auch losgeht'.¹³³⁴

Like Suitcase, Pheasant was planned in a staggered way from the outside in.¹³³⁵ It was to be a four-division operation. The first stage on 22 October was for the 53rd (Welsh) Division, Major-General R. Ross, and half of the 7th Armoured Division (the Desert Rats) under Major-General G.L. Verney to advance on 's-Hertogenbosch (Operation Alan), the next day the 51st (Highland) Division (Major-General T. Rennie) would attack towards St.-Michielsgestel (Operation Colin). Once the 7th Armoured had been 'pinched out' it would pass through the 51st and strike west towards the key village of Loon op Zand (Operation Don). Depending on the development of all these attacks, the 15th (Scottish) Division was to clear the triangle Boxtel-St.-Oedenrode-Best (Operation Eric).¹³³⁶ Finally, Lieutenant-General Ritchie admonished the divisional commanders that 'The essence of the all ops must be speed.' It would not be easy to achieve. The problem for the attackers was the terrain, flat as a pancake, but crisscrossed with ditches, canals and few metalled roads so that there was usually only one avenue of approach.

Still, the first blow seemed to be successful. Although Major-General Ross sent up part of his force too late in the day, his division still managed to crack the German front open and push the *712. Infanterie-Division* back as far as Rosmalen, just outside 's-Hertogenbosch. The following day a German counterattack failed and the 53rd Division inched closer to their main prize. South of there on the 23rd the Germans suffered an even more serious defeat when the 51st Division cracked open the lines of Poppe's *59. Infantry-Division*, captured Schijndel and St.-Michielsgestel and established a bridgehead across the Dommel. Help was now urgently needed to prevent a total collapse of *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps* and *schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559* was ordered to Vught, where it was expected to arrive sometime during the night. Now that the front near 's-Hertogenbosch also threatened to collapse *General* Reinhard had to make a difficult decision. Should he send *559* to Neumann or to Poppe? In the end he decided to send the *Jagdpanther* to Neumann.¹³³⁷ Instead Poppe received *Panzerjäger-Kompanie 1363* which had just arrived on the Western Front with twelve brand new *Sd. Kfz. 138/2 Jagdpanzer 38 (t) Hetzer*.¹³³⁸

The next day the Scots advanced to the next river line only to find all bridges blown in their faces while the Welsh Division tried to trap the German troops in 's-Hertogenbosch. Ross had ordered the 1/5th Welch to seize the Dieze bridge at the northwestern edge of the town in a coup de main during the night, but the attempt

¹³³⁴ KTB 88 AK, 22.10.44, 06.40 and 06.45 hours.

¹³³⁵ This section, War Diary XII Corps, Op Instr No. 17, 20.10.44.

¹³³⁶ The letter B was reserved for Operation Bob, which would only take effect if 51st H Div did not succeed in which case 15th Sc Div would take over part of Colin.

¹³³⁷ KTB 88 AK, 23.10.44, 20.55 hours.

¹³³⁸ Mail Martin Block and 51st H Div, IS 272, 26.10.44. On 13.10.44 the unit had left Milau for Deventer, Netherlands (KTB H Gr B, 6973/44). The parent unit, 363 VGD had arrived in the Netherlands on 01.09.44 and joined 1. Fs. Armee two days later to fight the Allied troops near Nijmegen (geheimen Tagesberichten, 86, 92). In KTB 88 AK it is also indicated as 2./Pz.Jg.Abt. 363.

failed although a bridgehead was established in the southwest of 's-Hertogenbosch. Meanwhile the 15th (Scottish) Division had started Operation Eric, passing through Best and Oirschot. That same 24 October also saw a spectacular attack on Von Zangen and his staff which has led to a myth persisting to this day in British publications.¹³³⁹ The operational headquarters of *15. Armee* in Dordrecht were targeted by most of the Typhoons in 146 Wing led by their commanding officer, Group Captain Denys 'Kill 'Em' Gillam, himself. In all forty-eight Typhoons left Deurne airfield for Merwestein Park.¹³⁴⁰ Half of the Group, 193, 197 and 263 Squadrons were to attack *Flak* positions and make a feint attack on the nearby railway bridge, and 257 and 263 Squadrons would bomb the main target. The attackers found their objective, although as usual the three inch rocket projectiles landed over a wide area, and there were a fair number of duds. All the Typhoons made it back to base. The attack appeared to be a resounding success and local resistance reported that two generals and over fifty other officers had been killed, a claim which has been repeated in all British histories and many other books since. However, the truth was more sobering. It was the civilians in Dordrecht who suffered most, sixty-nine losing their lives, and only one German officer and eight other ranks were killed in the raid.¹³⁴¹ Moreover, in spite of claims from Second Tactical Air Force to the contrary, *15. Armee* continued to function as before, the only result of the raid being a brief interruption of telephone traffic.¹³⁴²

Breakthrough

The following day saw mixed results for XII Corps. The 53rd (Welsh) Division cleared most of 's-Hertogenbosch while the 51st (Highland) Division found their way forward blocked, among others by the *Hetzer* SPs of *Panzerjäger-Kompanie 1363* who had set a deadly trap for the 1st Black Watch (Lieutenant-Colonel J.A. Hopwood) and the supporting Shermans of No.3 Troop (Lieutenant Margetts) of B Squadron Northamptonshire Yeomanry.¹³⁴³ The 15th (Scottish) Division captured Moergestel and closed in on Tilburg. The big breakthrough came on the 26th. That day the 7th Armoured Division, passing through the 51st, punched a huge hole in the German front, leaving Poppe's division in tatters, and advanced as far as Udenhout. Poppe requested permission to pull back behind the Afwateringskanaal immediately. This was denied, but throughout the afternoon there was frantic consultation between *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps* and *15. Armee* about some kind of withdrawal. Naturally for such a drastic move *Armee* needed to consult *Heeresgruppe B*, who in turn had to ask *OB West* and it was not until nine p.m. that *Generalleutnant* Hoffmann, *Chef 15. Armee*, called Von Prittwitz und Gaffron at *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps* to say that permission for the whole of *15. Armee* was granted. Both *LXVII.* and *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps* were to withdraw to *Stellung II*. Again rearguards were to hold up the

¹³³⁹ E.g. Shores and Thomas, *Breakout to Bodenplatte*, 344-5.

¹³⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹³⁴¹ C. Weltevrede, *Geschiedenis van het Bombardement op Park Merwestein, oud-Dordrecht, 2004, nummer 3*, 40-53, gives a good analysis of the (disappointing) results of this raid in his article, Johan van Doorn found the definitive casualty figures (PAJVD).

¹³⁴² Shores and Thomas, *Breakout to Bodenplatte*, 34 for 2 TAF, and Von Zangen, 46-7, for 15. *Armee*.

¹³⁴³ For a vivid description of this action: Tout, *To Hell with Tanks!*, London 1992, 49-53.

Allied advance as long as possible.¹³⁴⁴ The move went smoothly as it had been meticulously prepared beforehand. Nine days earlier all the divisions had been sent an extensive plan laying out the stages of withdrawals, timetable, routes etc.¹³⁴⁵ That night the divisions pulled back to the new front-line running from Bergen op Zoom, Roosendaal, Breda, Dongen, Loon op Zand and the Afwateringskanaal to 's-Hertogenbosch. It was the last stop line before a complete withdrawal behind the river Maas.

The next two days XII Corps gradually pushed back the shattered German divisions, facing stiff opposition in places. To the surprise of German commanders the 53rd (Welsh) Division did not attack westward after taking 's-Hertogenbosch. There were three reasons for this: the terrain in front of Vlijmen, flat polders crisscrossed with ditches, was completely unsuitable for an improvised attack and secondly, further east the Germans had begun a spoiling attack against VIII Corps which caused some alarm at Second Army headquarters and needed to be dealt with. Both the 15th and the 53rd would be diverted there as soon as possible. Thirdly, and most importantly, it no longer made any sense to advance west, since both the 51st (Highland) and the 7th Armoured Divisions expected to reach the river Maas any day. The inevitable course the battle was now running was also evident to the Germans and Reinhard realised that it was time to order the next and final step, the withdrawal behind the river Maas. Von Zangen and Von Rundstedt concurred and that evening Reinhard gave *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps* the order to fall back. Then Hitler himself intervened. He agreed to the order in principle if enemy pressure left the troops no other choice, expecting the troops to hold the new line, but he added a caveat. He ordered *15. Armee* to *wenigstens grosse Brückenköpfe südlich der Maas halten*.¹³⁴⁶ Consequently Von Zangen had no choice but tell Poppe's *59. Infanterie-Division* to stay behind the relative security of the Afwateringskanaal.

On 30 October patrols of the 51st (Highland) Division reached the river Maas. This move was a major event and it had a huge impact on *15. Armee*. From then on its two constituent *Korps* no longer fought side by side. While all the headquarters, artillery, armour and second line services pulled back behind the rivers Maas and Waal, two *Jagdpanther* of 559 were ordered to stay near Geertruidenberg to assist in the defence of the Moerdijk bridge area.¹³⁴⁷ This order, to remain south of the river, also had something to do with the fact that *15. Armee* had a new master, *Heeresgruppe H* under *Generaloberst* Student. There were two reasons for this change.¹³⁴⁸

First of all, as early as 12 October, *Generalfeldmarschall* Von Rundstedt, *OB West*, had indicated that *Heeresgruppe B* was in charge of too extended a front, 370 kilometres of sea and 630 kilometres of land.¹³⁴⁹ Von Rundstedt argued that a new *Heeresgruppe* should be created and on 27 October this request was granted. The

¹³⁴⁴ Schramm, *Kriegstagebuch 7/I*, 411 and KTB 88 AK, 26.10.44, 21.10 hours and 27.10.44, C 299.

¹³⁴⁵ KTB 88 AK, 17 and 18.10.44, C 288a.

¹³⁴⁶ Schramm, *Kriegstagebuch 7/I*, 411.

¹³⁴⁷ Kopka, *Missbraucht und Gebeutelt*, 166.

¹³⁴⁸ This section, unless otherwise indicated, De verdediging, 13-5.

¹³⁴⁹ This argument, Schramm, *Kriegstagebuch 7/I*, 414.

new *Heeresgruppe H* was to be in charge of *15. Armee*, *1. Fallschirm-Armee* and *Wehrmachts-Befehlshaber für die Niederlande (WBN)*, in other words, the whole of the Netherlands. Two days later Von Rundstedt was told by the *OKW* to put Student in charge of *15. Armee* as well as his own army under the name *Armeegruppe Student*. General Albert Schlemm would take over as commander of *1. Fallschirm-Armee*. On 10 November the *Armeegruppe* was officially renamed *Heeresgruppe H* and included responsibility for *WBN*.¹³⁵⁰ But a second, equally important, reason was that preparations were starting for what would ultimately be the Ardennes offensive (operation *Wacht am Rhein*) and *Generalfeldmarschall* Model was to be in charge of this major offensive. In order to do this he needed to be relieved of some of his responsibilities. The assignment given to *Heeresgruppe H* was to set up a '*nachhaltender Verteidigung*', a permanent defence, behind the major rivers (Maas, Waal and Rhine) in the Netherlands, while maintaining and/or creating as many bridgeheads as possible south of them. Basically Student wanted to retain three bridgeheads on the left bank of the rivers Rhine and Maas. One was south of Arnhem, one west of Venlo and one south of Moerdijk.¹³⁵¹ It is possible that this decision was another reason why Kopka and his little band had to stay behind. The consequences of this strategy would soon become clear to the troops on the ground, including *Kampfgruppe Chill*.

When operation Pheasant was concluded on 31 October it could be labelled a success because it had achieved its main goal, to clear the area south of the Maas. It was also a failure, since the Germans still possessed a large bridgehead behind the *Afwateringskanaal*, but especially because *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps* had been allowed to pull back largely intact. Although losses had been horrendous the German divisions were ready for a second (in some cases third) life. It had taken Ritchie's XII Corps with all its armour a long time (nine days) to drive a demoralised and weakened force back an average distance of about twenty kilometres. The German troops had created roadblocks, sown mines and generally made very skilful use of the terrain, the waterways in particular. The celerity, the sense of urgency, emphasised by Ritchie in the operational plan had often been lacking during the advance. Now it is time to see what happened to *Kampfgruppe Chill* in its battles against I Corps. To do that it is necessary to go back to 24 October when Chill's men were beating back the 4th Canadian Armoured Division at Wouwse Plantage and fighting a delaying action against the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division at Lindonk, north of Woensdrecht.

New opponents

While *schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559* became involved in the battle at 's-Hertogenbosch, eighty kilometres to the west *Kampfgruppe Chill* was fighting a new opponent, the 4th Canadian Armoured Division, a direct result of Operation Suitcase, the advance towards Bergen op Zoom and Roosendaal by I Corps. As described above, the Operation had gone off to a mixed start on 20 October, followed by a sudden breakthrough to Essen, but had slowed down again as the Canadians failed

¹³⁵⁰ Later *15. Armee* would leave the theatre and move to the Roer and *25. Armee* (Gen. D. Flieger Christiansen) was created in its place.

¹³⁵¹ Manuscript Van Hilten, 13-4.

to take the key village of Wouwse Plantage on 23 October and the Governor General's Foot Guards (21st CAR) along the Mariabaan lost a whole squadron of Shermans to the *Sturmgeschütze* of *Sturmgeschützbrigade 280*. The following day, Tuesday 24 October, was the day that the 53rd (Welsh) Division stood poised to enter 's-Hertogenbosch and the Highlanders got stuck at the next waterline. That same day the Canadians for the second time tried to pry loose the iron grip *Chill* still had on the wooded area northeast of Woensdrecht

The second attempt

As dawn broke on 24 October the disposition of *Kampfgruppe Chill* by and large had not changed. His right wing was still under control of *Kampfgruppe Von der Heydte* (I., III., and IV. /*Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 6* and I./*Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 2*, Finzel) and his left under *Kampfgruppe Dreyer* which consisted of *Bataillon Ohler* (*Grenadiere* from 1053. and 1054. *Grenadier-Regiment*), *Bataillon Pohl* (I./ *Fallschirm Panzer Ersatz und Ausbildungs-Regiment Hermann Göring*) plus *Bataillon Bauer* (possibly the remnants of *Flieger-Regimente 51* and *53*). *Hauptmann* Bauer, like Ohler, was one of Dreyer's former battalion commanders and had previously been in charge of *II./GR 1053*.¹³⁵² He was wounded at the end of October and replaced by a *Hauptmann* Melchak or Milzak.¹³⁵³ *Chill* could also make use of *Sturmgeschützbrigaden 667* and *280*. The *Kampfgruppe* was heavily outnumbered, especially in armour, but the terrain, heavily wooded, and the extremely wet autumn weather, making the ground soggy and impassable thus restricting attacks to the roads, both favoured the defence. Because of this the Canadians were unable to utilize the fact that they had such a relatively large number of tanks. Moreover, the Germans had heavily mined the area with anti-personnel and anti-tank mines as part of the so-called *Atlantikwall* in the area of Bergen op Zoom. Both types would take their toll.

The attack by the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders of Canada, supported by two troops of the Canadian Grenadier Guards (22nd CAR) and the Scout Platoon of the Lake Superiors should have gone in at three a.m. The idea was that the first streaks of dawn would find the attackers on the edge of Wouwse Plantage, ready to assault when it was light enough. However, as before, things went badly wrong, right from the start.¹³⁵⁴ The night was pitch black and a cold rain fell, making it difficult for the infantry to reach the forming-up positions. The road had been churned up by the tanks and the rain, but the soggy ground on either side was also virtually impassable. Therefore the lead platoons moved up nearly two hours late, at 04.45 hours when Lieutenant-Colonel J.D. Stewart finally issued the codeword Mabel. A devastating barrage by eight Medium, six Field and two Heavy Anti-Aircraft Regiments plastered the German positions for fifteen minutes. Soon Stewart's men covered the first 400 metres and it looked as if this time a surprise had been

¹³⁵² First Cdn Army, IR PoW 85 ID, 14.10.44.

¹³⁵³ A *Kampfgruppe* Bauer was first reported at Geel on 11 September (Second Army IS 100, 12.09.44). On his successor: I Corps, IS 95, 03.11.44 (Milchak) and First Cdn Army, IR PoW 2 Para Division, 07.11.44 (Milzcak).

¹³⁵⁴ This section, unless otherwise noted, War Diaries AS and H of C and Cdn Grn Gds. (Summaries, van Doorn, *Woensdrecht*, 95, and Zuehlke, *Terrible Victory*, 384-7.

achieved. Then things –again- began to go wrong. All along the line the Germans opened fire and the attack bogged down some 600 metres from the village.

The Shermans of the Grenadier Guards were unable to assist. The first tank rumbling along the Mariabaan had to stop at the *Sturmgeschütz* knocked out the previous day. In an attempt to bypass it, the Sherman became bogged down in the ditch. At the same time many houses were ablaze, because of all the firing going on and the attacking force became clearly silhouetted. Three Shermans managed to slither past the roadblock, but soon two were knocked out, one by a *Sturmgeschütz*, another by a *Panzerfaust*. At four p.m. the Argylls tried to cross the open ground one more time, but a mortar concentration caused horrific losses and forced the Canadians to the ground. Stewart decided his men had had enough. They were exhausted by the nightmarish fighting at the start and the constant battering by mortars. He asked for and was given permission to pull back. Their place would be taken by two companies from the Lincoln and Wellands. This battalion had tried to outflank the German positions from the northeast, supported by Shermans of the British Columbia Regiment and six Crocodiles of A Squadron Fife and Forfar Yeomanry. It also failed to reach its objective. Here it was the *Grenadiere* from *Bataillon Ohler (Kampfgruppe Dreyer)* who put a spanner in the works.¹³⁵⁵

On the way to the wood which held the German position, one troop of the Fifes and Forfars flamed it, expecting to subdue the German defenders. What it did, however, was start the battle.¹³⁵⁶ Heavy mortars and anti-tank fire greeted the attackers. Progress was extremely slow. One Crocodile was hit four or five times, but the crew remained inside and fought with their turret weapons. Once again the Germans discovered that the 'super heavy' tanks, as they described the Churchills, were not as easy to put out of action as the Shermans which they had nicknamed the 'Tommy cooks'. However, the attack got nowhere and the Lincoln and Wellands withdrew, covered by a smoke screen. The crew of the knocked-out tank were brought back, but they neglected to destroy it and eventually the Canadian artillery had to do the job of blowing it up. The Lincolns were hit hard, suffering nine killed, twenty-four wounded and eleven being taken prisoner by Ohler's men. That day the Argylls also suffered appalling losses in the second attempt to take Wouwse Plantage: thirteen killed and twenty wounded. There was virtually no air support to help the ground troops. That day, besides the spectacular, but useless, raid on *15. Armee* headquarters in Dordrecht, 84 Group mainly focused on rail interdiction and weather reconnaissance missions. Only the Spitfires of 131 Wing strafed targets near Roosendaal, but that was still some six kilometres from the contested village.¹³⁵⁷ The defenders at Wouwse Plantage, mostly from *Bataillon Pohl (Hermann Göring-Regiment)*, and some of them in battle for the very first time, had managed to hold on to this key position for the second day running.¹³⁵⁸

¹³⁵⁵ Second Army Intel Log, 25.10.44, Serial 12.

¹³⁵⁶ Details: R.J.B. Sellar, *The Fife and Forfar Yeomanry, 1919-1956*, Edinburgh 1960, 69-70.

¹³⁵⁷ Second TAF, Daily Log and No. 84 Group IS 75. Oddly, the latter mentions Roosendaal, the former Oosterhout as targets for 131 Wing.

¹³⁵⁸ Analysis defenders: First Cdn Army, IS 116, 24.10.44, IS 117, 25.10.44 and 21st Army Group Cositintrep 204, 25.10.44.

Moving up

However, the Canadians did score a minor success that day when they occupied Huijbergen which had been given up by Chill in order to straighten his lines.¹³⁵⁹ At 13.45 hours the Sherman tanks from C Squadron the South Alberta Regiment found the village clear of enemy and Lieutenant-Colonel G. Wotherspoon ordered his whole battalion to concentrate in and around the village. One troop seized an intersection north of Huijbergen. From there two roads branched off, one going to Bergen op Zoom, one to Wouwe Plantage. Excited about the possibility of a rapid advance to Bergen op Zoom, Wotherspoon went to Brigade headquarters. Brigadier J. Jefferson (10th Canadian Infantry Brigade) liked the idea and he asked Division for permission to proceed. But Major-General Harry Foster's attention was focused on Wouwe Plantage and he ordered Jefferson to concentrate on that village instead. Wotherspoon was disappointed. Instead of going for the main prize, the South Albertas were directed to support the Algonquins who were to close in on Wouwe Plantage from the direction of Huijbergen.

Further east the divisions of I Corps troops began to shift positions because of the arrival of new troops. The 104th US Division, nicknamed the Timberwolves, joined I Corps that day. They moved in between the 49th (West Riding) and 1st Polish Armoured Divisions, finally filling the thinly held line there. The Americans concentrated in an area north of Wuustwezel, so hotly contested only a few days before. The brand-new division was commanded by Major-General Terry de la Mesa Allen, a veteran of the war, but also a somewhat controversial one. 'Terrible' Terry had performed well when he commanded the 1st Division in North Africa, but eventually Bradley had him relieved as he felt that Allen was too little in control of his men when they ran amok in rear echelon rest areas. Officially it was said, somewhat politely, that Allen mistakenly believed that the interests of the Big Red One were identical to those of the whole army.¹³⁶⁰ Still, being 'relieved for cause', a pejorative word in the military for being fired, usually meant the end of a military career. However, since Allen had performed so well Eisenhower decided to give him a second chance, a rare opportunity. In October 1943 he took over the 104th at its training camp in Oregon. Allen once more proved an inspirational leader and he was keen to show the 104th would do well. The division trained 30-35 hours a week, three to four times what was required. Allen also insisted on training in night fighting tactics, correctly believing as it turned out, that there lay the key to success. As a result of this reinforcement all of I Corps divisions now began to shift westward and the 56th Brigade (49th West Riding Division) took over the responsibility for Essen from the 10th Canadian Infantry Brigade. The Canadians could now concentrate on Bergen op Zoom while the British division aimed for Roosendaal. Plans were drawn up by Major-General Barker for the next stage. This operation, called Thruster, was to begin two days later.¹³⁶¹

¹³⁵⁹ This section, unless otherwise indicated, War Diary South Albertas 24.10.44, and Donald E. Graves, *South Albertas, a Canadian Regiment at War*, Toronto 1998, 219-221.

¹³⁶⁰ Weigley, *Eisenhower's Lieutenants*, 354.

¹³⁶¹ War Diary 49th WR Div, 24 & 25.10.44.

The only real advance in this sector on 24 October was undertaken by Bobforce, a mixed group composed of the 89th Light Anti-Aircraft (LAA), 102nd LAA and 62nd Anti-Tank Regiments under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel 'Bob' Cory of 89th LAA.¹³⁶² This composite force with its light guns, whose main task since 5 October it had been to patrol as infantry and fill the gap between the 49th and 1st Polish Armoured Divisions, advanced as far as Hoogstraten which had been abandoned by the *711. Infanterie-Division* (*Generalleutnant* Josef Reichert) a day earlier. The withdrawal, ordered by *LXXVII. Armeekorps* and necessary to shorten the frontline, had not been noticed by the British troops.¹³⁶³ Also as a result of this withdrawal, Clarkeforce was finally able to take the village of Schanker (southeast of Essen) against little opposition, whereas a day earlier it had still been fiercely defended by *Sturmgeschützbrigade 244* (*Hauptmann* Jaschke) and *II./FJR 6* (*Hauptmann* Mager).¹³⁶⁴

Success at last

Wednesday 25 October Wouwse Plantage was to be seized.¹³⁶⁵ In fact, Brigadier Moncel had issued a deadline to his commanders. He ordered the village to be taken by two p.m. This time the German stronghold was to be attacked from three sides. The Lake Superiors A and C Companies were to work forward through a brickworks on the southern outskirts, while A and B Companies of the Lincoln and Wellands were to drive up the main road; their Scout Platoon was to try and outflank the German positions to the northeast. Support was given by the Shermans from the Governor General's Foot Guards (21st CAR) and the 15th Anti-Tank Regiment and flame throwing Wasps. The attack went in at eleven a.m. and gradually *Kampfgruppe Dreyer* had to give way to the superior force. Fighting was ferocious and some Germans were literally burnt out of their foxholes. Three *Sturmgeschütze* tried to intervene around two p.m. and once more halted the attack along the Mariabaan. One Sherman was knocked out, another bogged down and one had a jammed turret. For a moment it seemed as if the operation was going to be a repeat of the previous two days. But the attacking infantry managed to move around the German position.¹³⁶⁶ The Lincolns penetrated the village from the southeast and the Superiors managed to bypass the brickworks (which were left to two companies of the Argylls coming up from Huijbergen). At 15.30 hours the village was finally taken. The cost of the three-day battle had been high. The Canadians had suffered 310 casualties (eighty dead) against at least 170 (seventy dead) for *Kampfgruppe Dreyer*.¹³⁶⁷

Meanwhile, to their left, C Squadron of the South Albertas explored along the Huijbergschebaan towards Bergen op Zoom.¹³⁶⁸ Around noon the Albertas were told

¹³⁶² I Corps Intel Log, 24.10.44, Serial 153 (which erroneously gives 87th instead of 89th LAA) and Hughes, *The 49th West Riding*, 34.

¹³⁶³ Reichert, 26.

¹³⁶⁴ War Diary 49th Div, 24.10.44, I Corps Intel Log, 25.10.44, Serial 218.

¹³⁶⁵ This section, War Diaries Lincs and Wellands, Lake Superiors; Van Doorn, *Woensdrecht*, 96, Zuehlke, *Terrible Victory*, 387-8.

¹³⁶⁶ I Corps, Intel Log, 25.10.44, Serial 290.

¹³⁶⁷ Van Doorn, *Woensdrecht*, 96.

¹³⁶⁸ This section, War Diary South Albertas, 25.10.44.

by civilians that there were no more Germans in Bergen op Zoom.¹³⁶⁹ Wotherspoon ordered the squadron to take prisoners to confirm the news.¹³⁷⁰ He then sent on the support troop to pick up D Company of the Lincoln and Wellands in an attempt to exploit the seemingly favourable situation, seemingly being the operative word. As the infantry were beginning to clear the woods on either side of the road, the three troops had already moved on in the direction of Bergen op Zoom. Initially the group made excellent progress along the sandy track until they reached a crossroads at Heimolen, about four kilometres from Bergen op Zoom. On the way they took a total of twenty-six prisoners. Then the atmosphere soured as the squadron came under deadly fire from the rear. It was clear to the tankers that they had been ambushed. The *Fallschirmjäger* had let the tanks penetrate their first line of defence and proceed some distance before closing the trap. In the battle that followed the Canadians fought for their lives as they tried to extricate themselves from the ambush. They knocked out six *Panzerfäuste*, but lost six Shermans before they managed to pull back as far as C Squadron headquarters at Heihoefke, four kilometres north of Huijbergen. At the end of the day the war diary noted bitterly 'if the higher command had been quick enough to exploit this initial breakthrough made by C Sqn there would have been little difficulty in dislodging the enemy completely from this area and pushing on to BERGEN OP ZOOM [capitals in original].'¹³⁷¹ Whether that is really true in the light of the German resistance, must remain an open question.

That same day the Timberwolves had their first real taste of combat. The keyword for their operations was 'speed'. It all began during a meeting at divisional headquarters at Hogeheide (near St.Job in 't Goor) where both Field-Marshal Montgomery (Twenty-First Army Group) and Lieutenant-General Crocker (I Corps) emphasised that the Germans should be pursued without delay. As Crocker put it, 'The Boche is softening all around, and we don't want to miss an opportunity.'¹³⁷² As it was, Allen had already ordered his three regiments (the third was only now arriving) to secure a line just beyond the Dutch-Belgian border. Advancing along the road from Antwerp to Breda the American troops east of the road hit the boundary between the 245. and the 711. *Infanterie-Division*, which was always a weak spot in a defence line. This explains why the American advance went off to a smooth start. Except for some exchange of fire there was no serious fighting and the lead troops soon reached a point near Wernhoutsebrug. At the end of their first day in combat they could be quite content. As one of the soldiers put it, 'We learned more in one day on the Belgium-Holland border than we had in all those months of manoeuvring in Oregon and California.'¹³⁷³ But they were not done yet. In view of the insistence on celerity, Allen ordered his troops to continue the advance until they reached an imaginary line B, two-and-a-half kilometres further on. The attack started at 22.30 hours. It was pitch black and the three regiments advanced slowly towards their

¹³⁶⁹ Division had already learned the same thing during the night (G Log, 25.10.44, 0135 hours, Serial 3).

¹³⁷⁰ The prisoners were from *I./FJR 6* and *14./Fallschirm Panzer Ersatz und Ausbildungs-Regiment Hermann Göring*. 4th Cdn Armd Div, G Log, 25.10.44, Serial 101.

¹³⁷¹ Capitals in original.

¹³⁷² Hoegh and Doyle, *Timberwolf Tracks*, 1946, 62.

¹³⁷³ Hoegh and Doyle, *Timberwolf Tracks*, 60.

targets. Many ditches had to be crossed and soon most soldiers were soaking wet. German resistance gradually stiffened and the 413th Regiment (the Seagulls) in particular drew heavy fire from the Goorkens wood where their opponents, *Grenadier-Regiment 731 (711. Infanterie-Division)* had set up a strongpoint.¹³⁷⁴ In view of the stubborn German resistance the advance was to continue as soon as it got light. Meanwhile the 49th (West Riding) Division was getting ready for operation Thruster which would be launched that night.

Farewell

That Wednesday there was a major command change on the German side.¹³⁷⁵ After having set up a new command post north of Bergen op Zoom, Von der Heydte issued his last daily order to *FJR 6*.¹³⁷⁶ Two days before, on 23 October, he received a telegram with mixed news. It congratulated him on being awarded the *Eichenlaub zum Ritterkreuz* (Oak Leaves to his Knight's Cross) on 30 September and at the same time informed him that he had to relinquish command of his regiment as he was to become the commander of the new *Waffenschule* (training centre) *der Fallschirmarmee* in Aalten, the Netherlands. His new job was to train young *Fallschirm*-officers. The Regiment lost one of its most experienced commanders at a crucial moment. His successor –until the end of the war- was *Major* Fritz Hencke, until then the *Kommandeur* of the *14. (Flak) Kompanie*. Von der Heydte, who had been in charge of *FJR 6* since it was newly raised in Cologne on 15 January 1944, was saddened by the promotion. This was reflected in the last daily order he issued to his men.¹³⁷⁷ First he emphasised that the award was not just for him, but for the achievements of the whole Regiment, first in Normandy and then in the Netherlands. He then wrote that 'Meine Freude über die Auszeichnung mit den Eichenlaub wird leider wesentlich beeinträchtigt durch einen Befehl des Fallschirm-Armee-Oberkommandos, der mich von der Führung des Regiments zu anderer Verwendung abberuft.' Von der Heydte found it hard to be parted from the Regiment which he himself had established, trained and led in battle. His period as *Kommandeur* of the Regiment, he added, 'gehört zu der schönsten meines militärisches Lebens. Von der Heydte ended with a purple passage, entirely in the spirit of the day in which he said that, 'Wenn alles zusammenbricht und Welle über Welle über unserem Volk zusammen schlägt, dann wird noch ein Fallschirmjäger meines Regiments dem Schicksal trotzen und im Sturm und Ungewitter die Fahne hoch über die Fluten halten, auf der ein Wort in leuchtenden Buchstaben steht: „Grossdeutschland“- und dieses Wort (...) wird er hineinrufen in das Toben des Sturmes...' After having despatched his last message Von der Heydte left for Berlin. Earlier Göring himself had awarded him the Oak Leaves. After the award ceremony Göring suggested that he ask Hitler for permission to allow *FJR 6* to wear a cuff band with the name of the *Führer* himself. Von der Heydte managed to dissuade him from this somewhat inane idea which was potentially hazardous to a soldier wearing it when captured. However, he gladly accepted Göring's second suggestion, namely that each and every member of *FJR 6* receive the *Nahkampfspange* (Close Combat Badge) in silver.

¹³⁷⁴ Reichert, 27, Skizze 6, and Von Hobe, Anhang 4.

¹³⁷⁵ This section, Von der Heydte, *Muss ich sterben*, 171; Griesser, *Die Löwen von Carentan*, 227-9.

¹³⁷⁶ The new post was in a villa on the road to Halsteren, Villa Bergina, property of the Lijnkamp family who moved to a suite in Hotel de Draak, Hoedelmans, *Jeeps & Klaprozen*, 54.

¹³⁷⁷ PAJVD.

It was an honour unique to the Regiment. Back in the Netherlands the *Fallschirmjäger* no doubt had other things on their mind. They were bracing themselves as the Canadians prepared to storm their positions once more.

Thwarted again

Now that most of Wouwse Plantage was finally in their hands, the 4th Canadian Armoured Division could aim for the next major objective, Bergen op Zoom. In fact Montgomery himself had emphasised during his visit the day before that the town needed to be taken by the 27th, to which Foster could only reply 'I'll try'. In view of the progress made the day before the expectations were high. After all the Germans had lost a key village and the South Albertas had come within a few kilometres of Bergen op Zoom. Maybe one more push was all it would take. However, it soon became clear that the *Fallschirmjäger* would need more than a push and that 26 October would be no different from the preceding two days. In Operational Instruction Number 13 Foster's orders were for the 10th Canadian Infantry Brigade to capture Bergen op Zoom while the 4th Canadian Armoured Brigade was to protect the right flank by occupying Wouwse Hil and the village of Vijfhoek. As one historian cynically put it, 'It all looked good in theory'.¹³⁷⁸ The move by the armoured brigade to cut the main Bergen op Zoom – Roosendaal highway should not have been a huge problem as this was only a few kilometres from Wouwse Plantage, but the flank operation got stuck right from the start even though Brigadier Moncel himself remained at headquarters to oversee things. The main problem were three anti-tank ditches around Wouwse Plantage, the biggest blocking the road to Wouwse Hil. Until these were cleared and bridged, the entire armoured fist was forced to stand by. The Lake Superiors had reported that morning that it required 'only a bulldozer to fix'. The reality was quite different.¹³⁷⁹ Although a section from the 8th Canadian Field Squadron worked as fast as they could during the afternoon, in the end the large anti-tank ditch and a crater were not filled until eleven p.m. and then only for tracked vehicles. Wheeled vehicles would not be able to pass until the following morning.¹³⁸⁰ In Wouwse Plantage the Shermans of the Canadian Grenadier Guards (22nd CAR) assembled for the break-out which was postponed until the following morning while the other two tank battalions (21st and 28th CAR) were coming up from the south.¹³⁸¹ The flanking operation on the right was clearly dead in the water, but what about the main attempt by the infantry?

In view of the trap that *FJR 6* had sprung on the South Albertas the previous day it was clear that the woods needed to be thoroughly cleared first.¹³⁸² This job was assigned to A and B Companies of the Argylls, supported by A Squadron of the South Albertas.¹³⁸³ The going was extremely slow and booby traps and accurate mortar fire

¹³⁷⁸ Graves, *South Albertas*, 223.

¹³⁷⁹ 4th Cdn Armd Div, G Log, 26.10.44, Serial 6.

¹³⁸⁰ Ibid, Serial 61 and War Diary 4th Cden Armd Bde 26.10.44.

¹³⁸¹ I Corps, G Log, 27.10.44 Serial 304.

¹³⁸² This section based on War Diaries South Albertas, Algonquins, Lincoln and Wellands and Argylls; also Graves, *South Albertas*, 223-7 and Zuehlke, *Terrible Victory*, 407-412.

¹³⁸³ Now commanded by Major Stockloser as Lieutenant-Colonel Stewart was to undergo an operation Most likely Stewart was also temporarily relieved of command by Brigadier Jefferson for refusing to order his exhausted men forward once again (Zuehlke, *Terrible Victory*, 408).

from small groups of *Fallschirmjäger* impeded progress and the job took all day. Meanwhile the main effort along the Huijbergse Baan was to be made by C Squadron of the South Albertas with C and D Companies of the Lincoln and Welland Regiment. Crocodile flamethrowers of the 1st Fife and Forfar Yeomanry would assist. The column set off at a steady pace along the road. Hearts began to beat faster as the tanks neared the place of the previous day's ambush, Heimolen. The lead tanks under Lieutenant William McLeod drove past that point and everyone breathed a sigh of relief when all of a sudden a *Panzerfaust* round went across the bow of Lieutenant McLeod's tank. He had seen that the missile had been fired from a bunker and McLeod immediately signalled the Crocodiles to flame the bunkers, but the British misunderstood. They thought he was just cheering them on and bore right past McLeod's troop. After just fifty metres a second *Panzerfaust* hit the first Crocodile and the crew bailed out. The second Crocodile did not need to be told what to do and it 'blasted the hell out of the bunkers on both sides of the road'. The South Albertas pushed on a few hundred metres, but Major D. Curry, the Squadron commander decided to call the lead tanks and infantry back and firm up just north of Heimolen. But the story was not over yet. At the end of the day an Armoured Recovery Vehicle (ARV) together with a Churchill tank came up to try and bring back the damaged Crocodile of the 1st Fife and Forfars. The attempt misfired spectacularly.¹³⁸⁴ The ARV probably struck one of the large demolition charges with long-delay igniters that the *Fallschirmjäger* had planted everywhere and it blew up with a loud bang. The explosion must have been heard for kilometres since it ripped the thirty-nine ton Churchill ARV apart, killing all three crew members.¹³⁸⁵ To make matters worse, the Churchill accompanying it was damaged by heavy fire. Still, the engineers managed to get the flame gun out of the Crocodile. The road to Bergen op Zoom was now littered with knocked-out tanks and other vehicles and from then on was known as 'Hulk Alley'.¹³⁸⁶

To the east things had gone even worse for the 10th Canadian Infantry Brigade. The clearing of the brickworks by A and C Companies Algonquins took less than two hours and at 11:30 hours the job was done. However, B Company, which had struck out from Centrum the previous day and dug in at a crossroads two kilometres north of there was in dire straits. Supporting it were four Shermans of the South Albertas. Instead of advancing towards Zoomvliet, about two kilometres north, the Canadians got stuck rightaway. They found that *Fallschirmjäger*, trained in working independently in small groups, had infiltrated the woods all around them and laid more mines. D Company (with another troop) trying to reach them from Centrum ran into trouble when the lead tank was knocked out by a *Panzerfaust*. B Company came under increasing pressure as soon as it became light when *Kampfgruppe Dreyer* attacked down the road from Zoomvliet supported by *Sturmgeschütze*, which fired on the Canadians from very close range sometimes.¹³⁸⁷ After two hours a cry for help went out to Division, informing that all officers had become casualties, that the FOO from the 15th Field Artillery Regiment (Captain Jack Forbes) was now in charge and

¹³⁸⁴ Details: Sellar, *Fife and Forfar*, 72.

¹³⁸⁵ PAJVD, two KIA, one DoW the following day.

¹³⁸⁶ Graves, *South Albertas*, 227.

¹³⁸⁷ I Corps, G Log, 26.10.44, Serial 289 and 4th Cdn Armd Div, G Log, 26.10.44, Serial 22.

that two Shermans had already been knocked out.¹³⁸⁸ Not much later all four tanks were out of action. Forbes calmly directed fire against any Germans he could see, even though his own Sherman tank was hit no less than three times. He knew that the wireless in the tank was the only link to the outside and therefore to survival. Artillery support meant that the defenders could hold the position for the time being, but it was clear something needed to be done to help the beleaguered unit. Lieutenant-Colonel R. Bradburn ordered B Company to withdraw. But even that was impossible under the circumstances and eventually the Carrier Platoon of C Company advanced across country under a hail of small arms fire. Quickly picking up the survivors the platoon dashed back to Wouwse Plantage.

All in all, it had been a most disappointing day for Harry Foster's division in general and for the South Albertas, who had lost no fewer than twelve tanks, in particular. *Kampfgruppe Chill* had once more skilfully used the terrain, effectively blocking the Canadian advance from Lindonk to Wouwse Hil. To the Canadians on the ground it must have appeared as if the deadlock would never be broken. But, they were in for a pleasant surprise the following day. Moreover, for the rest of I Corps things had taken a slightly more positive turn.

Thruster

For Major-General Barker's 49th Division, 26 October saw the beginning of operation Thruster.¹³⁸⁹ It was another typical autumn day with a persistent mist shrouding everything. During the opening stage of the operation the 56th Brigade (immediately to the right of the Canadians) would take Nispen, whereupon Clarkeforce (now consisting only of headquarters of the 34th Tank Brigade, the 49th recce and the 107th RAC) would exploit to the northwest and cut the Bergen op Zoom – Roosendaal road. The operation began with a night attack by the 2nd South Wales Borderers who were to seize a wood (Honingsbossen) southwest of Nispen. However, the Borderers were unable to flush out the wood they were supposed to clear and so the 2nd Essex had to fight their way forward from the start at seven a.m. after a thirty-minute barrage.¹³⁹⁰ The barrage impressed the Germans who felt that their opponent apparently had an endless supply of ammunition.¹³⁹¹ The attack by the Essex over open terrain, assisted by B Squadron of 9th RTR and a Troop of flame-throwing Crocodiles of C Squadron 1st Fife and Forfar Yeomanry, again demonstrated what proper infantry-tank cooperation was capable of and made rapid progress. A slight setback was that the crews of the Crocodiles in No.4 Troop discovered that only two tanks were capable of flaming because the other two had leaks due to mortaring the previous day. Nevertheless, these two helped the Essex by covering the attack over the railway using guns as well as flames.¹³⁹² After two hours the Essex were on their objective, west of Nispen and at 09.30 hours Barker launched Clarkeforce.

¹³⁸⁸ 4th Cdn Armd Div, G Log, 26.10.44, Serial 32.

¹³⁸⁹ This section, unless otherwise indicated, War Diaries 49th WR Div, 56th Brigade, 34th Tank Brigade.

¹³⁹⁰ T.A. Martin, *The Essex Regiment 1929-1950*, Brentwood 1951, 218.

¹³⁹¹ Diary Hans Geng.

¹³⁹² Sellar, *Fife and Forfar*, 72.

The combat group steamed ahead along the Bergsebaan, were temporarily held up by harassing fire from two *Sturmgeschütze* (probably from *Sturmgeschützbrigade 667*), then proceeded until they came to two blown bridges across a stream (Rissestroom) which had been converted into an anti-tank ditch. In fact, it was the same ditch that was holding up the Canadian armoured brigade north of Wouwe Plantage at its western end. Efforts to expand the base were hampered by fire from mortars and *Sturmgeschütze* and just before three p.m. the 1st Leicesters were attached to Clarkeforce to provide the much needed infantry. The Leicesters arrived at the end of the afternoon and at eight p.m. Major-General Barker himself came up for a conference with Brigadier W.S. Clarke. The orders were unequivocal: the next day Clarkeforce was to cross the ditch, proceed to Wouw and cut the Bergen op Zoom – Roosendaal road.

While the Essex punched a hole in the German line west of Nispen, the 2nd Gloucestershires and C Squadron 9th RTR went into the village itself just before noon. At one p.m. they reported the village taken. When the Glosters tried to exit the town, however, they found their way to the north blocked by *II./FJR 6* (Mager) and at least two *Sturmgeschütze* from *Sturmgeschützbrigade 244*.¹³⁹³ Two tanks in C Squadron were damaged and the bridge over the Moolenbeek was blown. But this was a minor setback and the 49th (West Riding) Division had achieved most of its objectives for the first day as well as taking 166 prisoners, most of them from various units of the *346. Infanterie-Division*, but also from *II./Grenadier-Regiment 937* of the *245. Infanterie-Division*.¹³⁹⁴ After leaving the Tilburg sector *Oberstleutnant Nass'* whole Regiment had been sent as a reinforcement to the *346. Infanterie-Division*.¹³⁹⁵ Eventually *I.* and *III./GR 937* were designated Corps reserve near Roosendaal.¹³⁹⁶ The rest of Sander's division remained south of Breda to face the green troops from the States with whom they had their first clash that day.

The Timberwolves resumed their advance towards Zundert early in the morning, but found the going somewhat difficult.¹³⁹⁷ As on the previous day it was the 413th Regiment on the right that had the toughest fighting on its hands. The German strongpoint in the Goorkens woods initially resisted all attacks. The battle raged all day and light *Flak* in particular was a problem for the Americans who had to cross the open terrain. At six p.m. there was even a counterattack by *Grenadier-Regiment 731 (711. I.D.)*. But that was the proverbial last gasp and after the counterattack was beaten off, the Seagulls captured two 3.7 cm and destroyed three 2 cm *Flak* guns. In this operation the American infantry were supported by the heavy Churchill tanks of No.8 Troop 147th RAC. The Americans managed to clear the woods although the Germans held out in Maxburg castle. About fifty *Grenadiere* were taken prisoner, but the bulk of the force, about 150 men, escaped north. In the middle the 414th (Mountaineers) supported by C Squadron 147th RAC struggled on along on

¹³⁹³ First Cdn Army, IS 119, 27.10.44 and I Corps G Log, 26.10.44, Serial 263.

¹³⁹⁴ Plus *I./1018 GR* and *772 Sich Rgt* (34th Tank Bde, Is 40, 27.10.44.)

¹³⁹⁵ 34th Tank Bde, IS 40, 27.10.44. In Von Hobe's study (MS P-173, 44) he wrongly suggests that GR 937 may at first have been left behind south of Tilburg. Oddly enough Rehm (MS-P-182) in his study about 346. I.D. does not mention GR 937 at all. See also the following note.

¹³⁹⁶ Von Hobe, 46.

¹³⁹⁷ This section, Hoegh and Doyle, *Timberwolf Tracks*, 65-6 and War Diary 147th RAC.

either side of the main road to Zundert. Progress was slow, but about noon the regiment finally reached Line B. To the left the 415th (Old Faithful) also had their hands full. Advancing over open terrain towards Achtmaal they, too, suffered a counterattack, in this case by *Grenadier-Regiment 935 (245. I.D.)*. A barrage beat the German force off, but American losses were also serious. At the end of the day the 104th US Division stood poised to seize Zundert the following day.

To the right of the Americans both Bobforce and the 2nd Canadian Armoured Brigade held the line as far as Baarle-Nassau. The village was the responsibility of the 1st Polish Armoured Division, which was finally also to resume the offensive.¹³⁹⁸ Major-General Maczek was told by Lieutenant-General Crocker that his division was to advance the next day. Crocker ordered Maczek to pin the enemy down in order not to allow him to regroup further west where the main attacks were launched. Crocker did not really expect much from the Poles who had been recuperating for the last three weeks, but were unable to make up for the losses which they had incurred.¹³⁹⁹ Still, Crocker would be in for a surprise once Maczek's men got going. In spite of the achievements that day Lieutenant-Colonel Wright, G 1 at First Canadian Army, warned the divisional commanders not to be overly optimistic. He noted that 'Although the position of Fifteenth Army is no better tonight, it is worth remembering that 64 Division SOUTH of the SCHELDT has held us at bay for three weeks, and has shown that, given proper leadership, and suitable ground, German soldiers can still put up a good show'.¹⁴⁰⁰ It was a correct analysis, accurately predicting that the advance would not be a walk-over.

Pull back

After the speedy advance of the 7th Armoured had punched a huge hole in its main line of defence (see above) Reinhard's *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps* was in serious trouble. General Von Zangen felt that the time had come to pull the whole *15. Armee* back to *Stellung II* during the night. For Sponheimer's *LXVII. Armeekorps* this meant that it had to withdraw to a line running from the southern edge of Bergen op Zoom via Roosendaal and Breda to Dongen.¹⁴⁰¹ At the same time the *Korps* was to send the *719. Infanterie-Division* to the area of Oosterhout as a reserve. Von Zangen also insisted that his two corps maintain contact even though this would make an already difficult manoeuvre even more problematic, especially as the boundary was the Wilhelminakanaal. A second, equally important, caveat was given. 'NACHTRUPPEN HALTEN BISHERIGE HKL MINDESTENS BIS NEUE HKL STEHT UND VERZOEGERN IMMER WIEDER FRONT MACHEND FEINDVORGEHEN GEGEN NEUE HKL MOEGLICHST LANGE, VIEL ZEIT GEWINNEN...' ¹⁴⁰² This part of the order would be followed to the letter by some of Sponheimer's divisions, but not by all.

¹³⁹⁸ Bobforce now also had 4 Lincolns under command; 2nd Cdn Arm Bde at this time consisted of 6th CAR (Hussars) and 27th CAR (Sherbrooke Fusiliers) since 10th CAR (Fort Garry Horse) still supported the 2nd Cdn Inf Div on South Beveland. On the Polish Div: Operational Report by CO 1 Polish armd Div.

¹³⁹⁹ Because of a lack of tank crews the armoured units had an average establishment of 2/3 to 3/5 and the 3rd Infantry Brigade was even worse off.

¹⁴⁰⁰ First Cdn Army, IS 118, 26.10.44.

¹⁴⁰¹ KTB 88 AK, 27.10.44, C 299.

¹⁴⁰² KTB 88 AK, 27.10.44, C 299.

In effect *Kampfgruppe Chill* was now forced to give up some of the positions for which the Canadians had been struggling in vain for the last three weeks, such as the key positions north of Woensdrecht. The *Kampfgruppe* pulled back as far as Bergen op Zoom itself, where it set up a new defensive line behind the river Zoom which cuts right through the town. Helped by minefields and marshy ground, they dug in east of the town, along the railway line to Roosendaal. South of there Chill left strong rearguards, often supported by the *Sturmgeschütze* from *Sturmgeschützbrigade 280*, which meant that, at least in some places, for I Corps the next day still would be a continuation of the by now familiar struggle. When dawn broke on 27 October it was clear that it was going to be another grey, wet and miserable autumn day. The only consolation for the German troops was that this meant no air intervention for the third day running. While *schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559* got into position to launch their final attack on 's-Hertogenbosch, their comrades in *Kampfgruppe Chill* shivered in their foxholes, wondering how soon the Allied troops would reach them.

Take the damned place

The main attack on Bergen op Zoom (which the BBC had already reported liberated several times) was to be undertaken by the tanks of the South Albertas and the infantry of the Lincoln and Wellands, while the two other infantry battalions, the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders and the Algonquins, would clear the rest of the woods east of the town.¹⁴⁰³ Having no idea of the German strength ahead of him, Lieutenant-Colonel Wotherspoon decided to order two squadrons to explore towards the northwest. A Squadron advanced on the right, accompanied by the Argylls, and C Squadron on the left, supported by the Lincoln and Wellands. Not surprisingly, in view of the German withdrawal, only slight opposition was met and at noon both squadrons had advanced about two kilometres. Nearly two hours later C Squadron came across civilians who informed them that the Germans had cleared Bergen op Zoom itself. It sounded too good to be true. Wotherspoon decided to pull A Squadron over from the right to Nieuw Borgvliet, a village south of the main prize. C and D Companies of the Lincoln and Wellands had followed the tanks closely and Wotherspoon consulted the CO of the Lincs, Lieutenant-Colonel Bill Cromb, who had also set up his headquarters near Heimolen. It was clear that a decision had to be made: continue cautiously or take a chance and rush into the town. After debating the issue for some time Wotherspoon looked at Cromb and said, 'Hell, Bill, let's take the damned place.' Cromb agreed. The die was cast. The infantry mounted the tanks and, led by a guide from the Dutch underground, soon reached the central square where they were greeted by cheering crowds, somewhat prematurely, as would soon become clear. Bergen op Zoom was finally declared clear of enemy at 17.45 hours on 27 October.¹⁴⁰⁴

But the enemy had not completely abandoned the town yet. They had merely pulled back to the north bank of the Zoom, the sixteenth century canal running through the

¹⁴⁰³ This section, War Diaries, 10th Cdn Inf Bde, 29th CAR, Lincs and Wellands, Graves, *South Albertas*, 227-230. For summaries: Van Doorn, *Woensdrecht*, 100; Zuehlke, *Terrible Victory*, 414-7.

¹⁴⁰⁴ Second Army, Intel Log, 27.10.44, Serial 73.

northern part of the town which was a formidable obstacle to cross, being on average thirty metres wide with very steep banks. The *Fallschirmjäger* there had no intention of giving up any too soon, because, like their comrades in 's-Hertogenbosch, they held a pivot in the whole German main line of defence. Behind the Zoom were all four companies of *III./FJR 6*, now commanded by the ubiquitous *Ritterkreuzträger Hauptmann* Leopold Von Hütz, who had been in charge of the *Kampfgruppe* bearing his name which had tried to retake Joe's Bridge (Chapter 3.4). He took over from no less of a firebrand, *Oberleutnant* Ulmer, who had led the daring raid on Beeringen bridge on 9 September and was then taken prisoner (see Chapter 3.1).¹⁴⁰⁵ Twenty-six year old Von Hütz must have transferred to the *Fallschirmjäger* at the end of September or in early October. It was an unusual step which he took for reasons best known to himself.¹⁴⁰⁶ This veteran soldier would prove to be a real nuisance for the Canadians over the next few days. As the first Canadian tanks approached the main bridge over the Zoom at the end of the afternoon they heard a loud bang as an AP shot creased one of the Shermans. All hell then broke loose, a smokescreen was laid and the tanks pulled back. It was clear to the Canadian troops in Bergen op Zoom that some stiff fighting was ahead of them. On the right flank that struggle was already being fought that day.

And block the road

The rearguards of *Kampfgruppe Dreyer* who had stayed behind in the old main line of defence on the 27th in effect prevented the 4th Canadian Armoured Brigade from gaining its objective, the main road from Bergen op Zoom to Roosendaal in the area of Vijfhoek.¹⁴⁰⁷ Early in the day all three armoured regiments closed in on Wouwse Plantage, ready for the breakout. On the map they were stacked like a deck of cards, starting with the Canadian Grenadier Guards (22nd CAR) who were in the village itself, followed by the British Columbia Regiment (28th CAR) south of there, while the Governor General's Foot Guards (21st CAR) were beginning to arrive during the day.¹⁴⁰⁸ The operation started fairly well early in the morning as the lead troops, No.2 Squadron of the Grenadiers and C Company of the Lake Superiors, set off from Wouwse Plantage. The first stage was successful and the column cleared the next village, Wouwse Hil, at 07.15 hours.¹⁴⁰⁹ Then B Company of the Superiors came up to occupy the village so that the force could continue west for the next objective, Westlaar. Even before setting off, the force came under heavy fire from mortars and *Flak* guns. It was clear that they had struck the German rearguard, probably from *Bataillon Pohl*. In addition three *Sturmgeschütze* (*Sturmgeschützbrigade 667*) were spotted west of the village.¹⁴¹⁰ Artillery was called down and two *Sturmgeschütze* were reputedly hit.¹⁴¹¹ A Troop of the 12th Manitoba Dragoons (18th CAR), under the

¹⁴⁰⁵ War Diary 49th (WR) Div, IS 71, 24.10.44.

¹⁴⁰⁶ His Personalakten does not provide any answers.

¹⁴⁰⁷ This section, War Diaries, 4th Cdn Armd Bde, 21st, 22nd and 28th CAR and Lake Superiors. Summary, Zuehlke, 416-7.

¹⁴⁰⁸ Zuehlke (*Terrible Victory*, 416) has 21st CAR blocking the Bergen op Zoom-Roosendaal road that day; this is impossible as they were still assembling south of Wouwse Plantage. The attack north took place the following day.

¹⁴⁰⁹ 4th Cdn Armd Div, G Log, 27.10.44, Serial 9.

¹⁴¹⁰ Ibid, Serials 18 and 33.

¹⁴¹¹ Ibid, Serial 28 (although, erroneously they were described as '88 SP').

direct command of I Corps, tried to investigate the suspected SP positions, but withdrew after the troop leader was knocked out.¹⁴¹²

It was a sign of things to come, because as the column left Wouwse Hil just after midday and headed for Vijfhoek, they were met with heavy AP and small arms fire. The attack soon bogged down. After several attempts to break the deadlock, at four p.m. Major C.A. Greenleaf of the Headquarters Squadron of the Grenadiers ordered No.4 Troop to attack the village from the south via a secondary road. Sergeant W.M. Irvine's Troop was also met with devastating fire, but this assault managed to break into the village and half an hour later Westlaar was in Canadian hands. However, they were still two kilometres from their goal and German traffic continued to leave Bergen op Zoom unimpeded. Brigadier Moncel issued two orders. The Grenadiers were told to continue the advance while the British Columbia were to push north and consolidate along the Bergen op Zoom - Roosendaal road.

The advance by the British Columbia started straight away, met no resistance and was soon in Zoomvliet, which had eluded the Canadians a day before. Half an hour after leaving A Squadron, supported by A Company of the Superiors, reached the main road, crossed it and firmed up behind the dyke three hundred metres north. Soon the rest of the British Columbia tanks arrived in the same area. The road Bergen op Zoom – Roosendaal, essential to supply the left wing of *Kampfgruppe Chill*, was finally cut. Meanwhile the Grenadiers and Superiors in Westlaar were preparing for their attack which started at midnight. The attack was preceded by an artillery barrage and, illuminated by the many fires, the force moved northward. Just before dawn on 27 October tanks and infantry rushed forwards, overwhelmed the German defences and at four a.m. cleared Vijfhoek. The Grenadiers and the Superiors crossed the main road, shot up two *Pak* guns and a number of lorries and then dug in, finally having achieved their goal.¹⁴¹³ Over forty prisoners were taken, No.2 Squadron finally got some rest and was relieved by No.1 and 3 Squadrons to secure the blocking position.

Slow going

The rest of I Corps, unsurprisingly, in view of the German withdrawal, was also fairly successful on 27 October. Still, the 49th (West Riding) Division, to the right of the Canadians, during the second day of operation Thruster had to fight part of the same tough rearguards left behind by *Kampfgruppe Dreyer*.¹⁴¹⁴ As day broke the British still faced the stream cum anti-tank ditch at two points, southeast of Haink and one kilometre east of Wouwse Hil where Clarkeforce was to make the main effort to Wouw. But first the ditch needed to be crossed and here the infantry in the form of the 1st Leicesters came in. The attack by B Company under Major A.E. Pollard went in at 08.15 hours and within twenty minutes had captured the objective, two houses on the other side of the ditch. Only then did the German defenders, *I./FJR 2* (Finzel), wake up and try to drive off the Leicesters. The latter would not budge and sixty-

¹⁴¹² Ibid, Serial 34.

¹⁴¹³ 4th Cdn Arm Div, G Log, 28.10.44, Serial 6.

¹⁴¹⁴ This section based on War Diaries 49th WR Div, 34th Tk Bde, 1st Leicesters, and 62 A/Tk.

eight *Fallschirmjäger* were taken prisoner.¹⁴¹⁵ A bulldozer was immediately put to work, covered by the Churchills of the 107th RAC and just before noon a crossing had been effected. It was then found that the west side was not only higher than the east side, but the top was lined with concrete. Two troops, A and B, of the 62 Anti-tank Regiment equipped with M-10 Achilles were sent for. The seventeen-pounders fired at the concrete until it crumbled down and the Churchills could finally cross the obstacle.

While part of the 49th Recce and a composite force with six Achilles M-10s moved to Wouwse Hil, which had been taken by the Canadians earlier that day, Clarkeforce moved north towards Haink which was reached early in the afternoon. From there the Churchills hoped to turn west to Oostlaar. However, *Sturmgeschütze* (*Sturmgeschützbrigade 667*) restricted all movement on the open ground and three Churchills were lost.¹⁴¹⁶ The M-10s were called up and throughout the afternoon engaged the *Sturmgeschütze*. It was a battle of SP against SP. The result was more or less a draw as one Achilles was knocked out and two were bogged down while the British SPs themselves hit one of the *Sturmgeschütze* and forced the others to pull back. A Squadron 49th Recce then found that the German defenders had left the back door open and they managed to get within a few hundred metres of the village. At around the same time the 11th Royal Scots Fusiliers took over from the 1st Leicesters who had reverted to the 147th Brigade. The Fusiliers were rushed to Wouwse Hil and then followed the Recce Squadron into Oostlaar where at last light they were joined by the main force which, by using smoke, had cut west and entered the village without too many casualties. Clarkeforce was ready for its final task, to capture the village of Wouw on the Bergen op Zoom – Roosendaal road. Also during the day the 1st Leicesters cleared the area north of Nispen as far as Tolberg. With the main road leading into Roosendaal cut, it seemed that the town itself (codename: 'Toffee') would fall to the British like an overripe fruit the following day, especially since the right wing of I Corps had advanced a considerable distance.

The 104th US Division also benefited from the German withdrawal.¹⁴¹⁷ Early in the morning, after an introductory barrage, the 413th Regiment, supported by B Squadron 147th RAC, broke into the wooded country southeast of Zundert and slowly advanced almost due north until they came to the Meirseweg, the main road leading into Zundert from the east. As it was evident that the Germans had pulled even further back the Seagulls continued their advance into the town. Because the bridge was blown up, a Bailey bridge was hurriedly constructed to allow the Churchill tanks to continue and at six p.m. Zundert was taken. The 414th, coming up the main road, had to overcome resistance put up by a German rearguard in a stone factory before they could join their comrades in Zundert. The 415th to the left finally managed to get into the village of Achtmaal. However, the biggest success that day was achieved by the 1st Polish Armoured Division. What happened as the Poles went over to the attack on the 27th was nothing less than spectacular.

¹⁴¹⁵ Second Army, Intel Log, 28.10.44, Serial 10.

¹⁴¹⁶ War Diary 34th Tk Bde, Appendix G, 07.11.44.

¹⁴¹⁷ This section, Hoegh and Doyle, *Timberwolf Tracks*, 66-7.

Naprzód

As related above, the main task of General-Major Maczek's division was to pin down the *256. Volksgrenadier-Division* and advance in the general direction of Oosterhout so that *LXVII. Armeekorps* would not be able to shift units westward. The Polish operation started at eight a.m. and was preceded by a very brief ten-minute artillery barrage.¹⁴¹⁸ Then the cry went up, '*Naprzód*', and operation 'Breda' began.¹⁴¹⁹ While the infantry of the 3rd Polish Infantry Brigade began the laborious process of sweeping the woods north and northwest of Baarle-Nassau the tanks of the 10th Armoured Cavalry Brigade roared northwards. In just three hours the Recce regiment, *10 Pułk Strzelców Konnych (PSK)*, advanced ten kilometres, pushing aside the *476 Grenadier-Regiment* in the process and taking Vijfhuizen.¹⁴²⁰ The Cromwells of *10 PSK* raced ahead and at noon had advanced another five kilometres and occupied the village of Gilze. The unit then split up, No.1 Squadron moving on to the airfield which had been abandoned by the *Luftwaffe* in the panic of 5 September, and No.3 Squadron heading for the main road Breda – Tilburg.¹⁴²¹ Still meeting only little resistance the Cromwells rattled on and at two p.m. reached the road. Another important German artery was now severed. Still the Poles would not let up. Major Wasilewski ordered his regiment to continue as far as the Wilhelminakanaal, five kilometres away. The men were in a hurry now as it would soon be dark. Bypassing Rijen, which was obviously defended, the Cromwells were forced to take to the fields. Unexpectedly they had to contend with a new enemy. The ground became softer and softer and after a while six tanks had become completely stuck. Fortunately for the Poles the German troops on the other side had no anti-tank guns and only fired the occasional MG volley. The Cromwells could not be recovered until the following evening. The capture of Reijen was left to the Sherman tanks of *10 Pułk Dragonów* and *24th Ułanów* who had followed close on the metaphorical heels of *10 PSK*.

All in all it had been a heady day for the Poles who covered nearly twenty kilometres. What they had achieved was beyond anyone's expectations. One of the reasons for the unexpected success was that the Poles benefited from some very serious errors made by their German counterparts. First of all they had advanced into a kind of semi-vacuum that had arisen on 26 October when *15. Armee* ordered *LXVII. Armeekorps* to move back its left flank in order to maintain contact with *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps*.¹⁴²² The *719. Infanterie-Division* (*Generalleutnant* Schwalbe) had fallen back almost immediately, but without informing its neighbour, the *711. Infanterie-Division* (*Generalleutnant* Reichert), thus allowing a gaping hole to open up in the German front-line. When he found out, Reichert sent the *Pionier Bataillon* (just two

¹⁴¹⁸ This section, Operational Report CO 1st Pol Armd Div, 40-1, 24 Pulk Ulanow, 51-2, K. Jamar, *With the tanks of the 1st Polish Armoured Division*, Hengelo 1946, 241-4, and Didden and Swarts, *Einddoel Maas*, 178-9.

¹⁴¹⁹ Naprzód means 'forward' in Polish.

¹⁴²⁰ I Corps, G Log, 27.10.44, Serial 320.

¹⁴²¹ Peter Grimm et al., *Vliegvelden in Oorlogstijd, Nederlandse vliegvelden tijdens bezetting en bevrijding 1940-1945*, Amsterdam 2009, 263. Gilze-Rijen would be used by 84 Group, Second TAF as B.77 from 21 November (Grimm et al, *Vliegvelden*, 360).

¹⁴²² KTB 88 AK, 22.10.44, C 291. This section, Didden and Swarts, *Einddoel Maas*, 178-9.

companies) to plug the gap at Rijen.¹⁴²³ This they did, but only in the nick of time. No wonder then that Von Zangen was livid with rage as he saw the left flank of Sponheimer's Corps crumbling to dust. He issued a clear order regarding the task of rearguards.¹⁴²⁴ He also ordered an immediate investigation. If necessary troops that had gone back prematurely were to recapture their old positions. In addition, the new defence line needed to be built in some depth. Each division was to find at least a battalion which could act as a reserve. Most importantly, the rearguards needed to 'gain time' for the rest to set up a proper line of defence.

Von Zangen felt that it was a disgrace that the *711. Infanterie-Division* only found out its left hand neighbour had gone when it was too late to do anything about it. He correctly felt that *LXVII. Armeekorps* should have informed Reichert in time. Interestingly he reserved his biggest blame not for Schwalbe and *719. I.D.*, but for *Oberst* Franz and his *256. Volksgrenadier-Division* who had –probably- neglected to take over the sector assigned to them. Von Zangen was not surprised. He wrote, 'Wahrscheinlich hatte die 256.V.G.D. ihren Auftrag der –onehin kaum noch existierenden – 719.I.D. in der Ausweichbewegung zu übernehmen und Anschluss an LXVII.AK. (711.I.D.) zu halten, zu leicht genommen.'¹⁴²⁵ Whatever the cause, the situation could not be restored and the next few days would reveal how deep the Polish attack had interfered with the German withdrawal plans.

Air support?

On Saturday 28 October the weather finally cleared and for a change Second TAF supported First Canadian Army. The pilots were eager and 84 Group flew a total of 519 sorties to assist the ground troops. Tragically for the men engaged in fierce battle with both elements of *Kampfgruppe Chill* virtually all attacks were made in support of the 2nd and 3rd Canadian Infantry Divisions because the first priority of 84 Group was 'to assist the Army to clear the approaches to Antwerp'.¹⁴²⁶ Basically this meant that neither the 4th Canadian Armoured nor the 49th (West Riding) Division, who could have done with air support received any. Ironically the only two air missions on the mainland were in support of Bobforce which did not really need it. At nine a.m. twenty-four Spitfires of 222 and 349 Squadrons (135 Wing) took off from Merville and flew north. They dropped twenty-one 500-pound bombs on suspected strongpoints (*711. Infanterie-Division*) east of Hoogstraten and then strafed them.¹⁴²⁷ A doubly pointless exercise, as these positions were not where the enemy was offering the most resistance and as they had already been abandoned when they were bypassed on both sides by the advancing Allied troops. But even if they had been more active, fighter-bombers could not have helped the infantry in Bergen op Zoom anyway. To the men on the ground it must have seemed like Woensdrecht all over as they tried to break the German grip on the northern part of the town.

¹⁴²³ Reichert, 29.

¹⁴²⁴ KTB 88 AK, 26.10.44, C 300 and Reichert, 29, footnote by Von Zangen.

¹⁴²⁵ Reichert, 29.

¹⁴²⁶ No. 84 Group, IS 79, 28.10.44.

¹⁴²⁷ Second TAF, Daily Log, 28.10.44.

The problem facing the Allied soldiers was the exact opposite of the one in 's-Hertogenbosch four days earlier. There waterways had made it hard to get into the city, whereas in Bergen op Zoom it was equally difficult to get out for the same reason.¹⁴²⁸ Even though their main lateral line of communication, the road to Roosendaal, was now severed, *III./FJR 6* under *Hauptmann* Von Hütz, still had roads running northward both for supplies and as ways out. Moreover, the *Fallschirmjäger* were dug in behind a natural defence, the Zoom. The main attack was to be undertaken by the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders of Canada, who began to arrive in the town throughout the morning. Even though their acting CO, Major B. Stockloser, considered the canal 'no great obstacle' events were to prove him disastrously wrong. The Zoom canal was in fact twenty feet wide and six feet deep forming a natural tank trap filled with water. Moreover, the Germans had blown all the bridges, except for the main one which they had cratered and blocked with a huge concrete *Panzersperre*, or anti-tank barrier. Undaunted, Major Stockloser decided to tackle the barrier head on. While C Company covered them D Company was to dash across the bridge and seize the buildings on the other end. The Argylls began closing up on the Zoom at two p.m. and immediately ran into trouble. Accurate 88 *Flak* guns firing airbursts, joined by mortars caused havoc in the old city streets. On top of that one Canadian 5.5 shell landed on the rear deck of one of the South Alberta's Shermans causing at least a dozen casualties among the tankers and the Argylls.¹⁴²⁹ Things became steadily worse once the Argylls reached the Zoom and D Company found it was impossible to go beyond the buildings occupied by C Company and cross in broad daylight. Stockloser realised he would have to come up with a new plan.

He decided to send A Company westward to try and cross the Zoom at the coastal neck and get behind the German positions in the centre while the Lincoln and Wellands created a diversion. The operation duly began at 21.30 hours. It, too, failed. Once the Argylls were spotted German machine-guns pinned them down and the attempt had to be abandoned. The diversionary attack by the Lincs was not really successful either. Nevertheless, A Company managed to cross the Zoom, but only thirteen men followed Captain Lambert into a factory on the other side. (Later Lambert was awarded a Military Cross for this dash.) The Lincs hit the sector defended by *10. Kompanie* under *Leutnant* Georg Le Coutre, who had received brand-new *Sturmgewehre 44* only days before.¹⁴³⁰ These powerful semi-automatic guns added enormous firepower to the German defence. Consequently, fighting in the factory buildings was ferocious, neither side willing to give in. At one point both sides were taunting each other, the *Fallschirmjäger* shouting '*Canadian pigs, Canadian swine*', to which the Lincs replied, '*We're in here. Come and get us.*'¹⁴³¹ To break the deadlock, the flame-throwing Crocodiles of A Squadron Fife and Forfars were ordered to assist, but the Scout car containing the CO, Major H.C. Walker, was hit and the support never even made it into the city.¹⁴³² The 4th Canadian Armoured

¹⁴²⁸ This section, War Diaries 10th Cdn Inf Bde, Argylls, Lincs, Zuehlke, *Terrible Victory*, 421-5, and Van Doorn, *Woensdrecht*, 103-5.

¹⁴²⁹ Graves, *South Albertas*, 232.

¹⁴³⁰ Van Doorn, *Woensdrecht*, 104, and Griesser, *Die Löwen von Carentan*, 234.

¹⁴³¹ Graves, *South Albertas*, 233.

¹⁴³² Sellar, *Fife and Forfar*, 73.

Brigade to the east made a little more progress that day, although here, too, German resistance was stiff.

More Sturmgeschütze

After taking Vijfhoek at four a.m. and cutting the main road north of the village the Grenadiers (22nd CAR) had dug in.¹⁴³³ To their left the British Columbia (28th CAR) had been trying to improve their positions along the same road, but had become stuck along the railway embankment. Most of the action that day was reserved for the Governor General's Foot Guards (21st CAR) who, with B Company of the Lake Superiors, were told to fill the gap between the Grenadiers and the British Columbias and perhaps try and cross the road. After passing through Zoomvliet the Shermans headed north, but they got stuck once they reached the road Bergen op Zoom – Roosendaal. The same small groups of *Fallschirmjäger* from I. and IV./FJR 6 who were blocking the British Columbias also prevented the Foot Guards from proceeding any further. As all roads across the railway were blown Lieutenant-Colonel E.M. Smith needed to find another route. Since his left hand neighbours were also stuck, he decided to use the blocking position on his right occupied by the Grenadiers as a new starting line. The Foot Guards retraced their steps to Zoomvliet, No.2 Squadron leading, passed through Vijfhoek, and as darkness fell reached a point a few hundred metres south of Heerle.¹⁴³⁴ The attack on the village proper, together with B Company of the Lake Superiors, was postponed until the following morning. Once again *Kampfgruppe Chill* managed to thwart the Canadian intentions, mainly because it was 'making very astute use of SP equipment causing considerable trouble with his bold tactics'.¹⁴³⁵ Still, in view of the steady Allied pressure, *Generalleutnant* Kurt Chill moved his headquarters back another ten kilometres to the village of Stampersgat that day.¹⁴³⁶

The same clever use of *Sturmgeschütze* also effectively held up the Canadian's right-hand neighbour, the 49th (West Riding) Division which only very slowly inched closer to Roosendaal.¹⁴³⁷ Here they were opposed by *Kampfgruppe Dreyer*, supported by *Sturmgeschützbrigade 244*. Clarkeforce had been ordered the previous day to cut the Bergen op Zoom – Roosendaal road in the Wouw area. During the night patrols of the 11th Royal Scots Fusiliers found the village occupied. It was clear that it would have to be fought over. But battle commenced earlier than anticipated. Like a patient predator one of the *Sturmgeschütze* had been lying up for the night within a hundred metres of the laager of the 107th RAC. Once it was light enough the German SP went into action and destroyed one Churchill and three other vehicles, forcing the others to pull back, covered by M-10s. The British battle group then cleared the village of Akker before moving on to the main goal for the day, Wouw. Although the *Sturmgeschütze* continued to harass the advancing infantry and tanks the village was cleared at three p.m. The Scots Fusiliers had 46 casualties in the process and the Germans were not ready to give up yet. One *Sturmgeschütz*, southeast of the village,

¹⁴³³ This section, War Diaries 4th Cdn Armd Bde, 21st, 22nd and 28th CAR.

¹⁴³⁴ I Corps G Log, 28.10.44, Serial 437.

¹⁴³⁵ War Diary 4th Cdn Arm Bde, 28.10.44.

¹⁴³⁶ J. Dellepoort en Theopiel Nijman, *Bevrijding van Oud-Gastel en Stampersgat, herinneringen uit de oorlogsjaren 1940-1945*, Stampersgat 1950, 24.

¹⁴³⁷ This section War Diaries 49th WR Div and 34th Tk Bde.

managed to knock out another few vehicles and one tank. The German group then pulled back as far as Vinkenbroek, but continued to fire on Wouw. It was the last major action for Clarkeforce which was disbanded the following day. Meanwhile to the right the 7th Duke of Wellington Regiment (147th Brigade) in vain tried to cross the anti-tank ditch south of Roosendaal in two places. Both attacks had to be broken off and the 7th DWR was pushed back to its starting point by *Hauptmann Mager's II./FJR6*.¹⁴³⁸ For the moment the main prize still eluded General-Major Barber's division. A new attempt would be made the following day.

Steaming ahead

The right flank of I Corps, however, once again performed much better that day. It was basically the same story as in Operation Pheasant, where the German pivotal position, in this case Bergen op Zoom, held while the centre units were allowed to fall back. Early in the morning, the 104th US Division was about to execute divisional order number 6, stating that the main goal that day was the town of Rucphen which was to be captured by the Mountaineers (414th Regiment).¹⁴³⁹ As they were getting ready to execute the order a call came from I Corps ordering the Americans to head for Breda instead. It seems probable that Crocker was hedging his bets since both the Poles and the Americans were closing in on the town on the 28th. It was a race between the 104th US and 1st Polish Armoured Divisions about who would seize the historical town of Breda. The Poles faced the *711. Infanterie-Division* and opposite the Americans was the *245. Infanterie-Division*.¹⁴⁴⁰ The Mountaineers received this mission at nine a.m. and two hours later moved out of Zundert. Small groups of German infantry surrendered and the advance proceeded at a leisurely pace and for a moment it looked as if the Americans would enter the historic town first. Then, at five p.m., Crocker changed his mind again. The Mountaineers were to go as far as Rijsbergen, but then swing north and head for the river Mark, their original destination. Following this new Corps directive the other two regiments of the Timberwolves began their advance in a north-westerly direction. They continued throughout the night and by dawn the following morning were just south of the Breda-Roosendaal main road. The Poles had won the race for Breda, but they were not there yet.

After the spectacular operation the previous day hopes were high, but Maczek's men soon discovered that they had now hit the outer crust of the main German line of defence and, inevitably, the advance slowed down.¹⁴⁴¹ Because the main road to Breda was bordered by woods, Maczek decided to launch the main attack south of there, the 10th Armoured Cavalry Brigade leading the way while the 3rd Polish Infantry Brigade followed further south. To the left of the Poles the Sherman tanks of the 2nd Canadian Armoured Brigade rumbled towards Ulvenhout, plugging the gap with the Americans. The advance went well and Bavel was captured, but the infantry got into trouble when they reached IJpelaar on the outskirts of Breda. There a

¹⁴³⁸ For this identification: Second Army, Intel Log, 30.10.44, Serial 3.

¹⁴³⁹ This section, Hoegh and Doyle, *Timberwolf Tracks*, 70-3, Didden and Swarts, *Einddoel Maas*, 187-8.

¹⁴⁴⁰ First Cdn Army, IS 120, 28.10.44.

¹⁴⁴¹ This section, Operational Report Polish 1st Armd Div, 41-2, and Didden and Swarts, *Einddoel Maas*, 188.

seminary was established in a complex of buildings which not only offered good cover for the German defenders, *II./Grenadier-Regiment 731 (711. I.D.)*, but also dominated the crossroads and surrounding park. Resistance was fierce and only ceased when Polish artillery set fire to the buildings. As darkness began to fall the Sherman tanks of the *24th Ulanow* entered Dorst. Maczek decided to press his advantage. He ordered the battalion to continue another two kilometres at ten p.m., together with a squadron of *10 PSK*, the Recce Regiment, and seize an important crossroads. The tankers reached their objective at three a.m. and dug in for the night, pounded by German artillery. The scene was set for the capture of Breda the following day. In view of the situation *General/Von Zangen's* order to *LXVII. Armeekorps* read: 'schliesst durch Gegenangriff Front bei Roosendaal und wirft mit 719.I.D. ostw. Breda eingebrochenene Feind ueber alte HKL nach S zurueck.'¹⁴⁴²

Infantry versus infantry

While the Poles stood poised in the early hours of 29 October to take Breda, in Bergen op Zoom the Canadians were still stuck, although the moment of truth had finally come here, too.¹⁴⁴³ Major Stockloser, the CO of the Argylls, realizing that a crossing of the Zoom could only be made under cover of darkness, was fast running out of options. He ordered his men to give it one more try before dawn. While A Company once again tried the land route B Company would explore a frontal crossing. The CO of B Company, Major G. Armstrong, actually swam across the Zoom to investigate the situation – no mean feat since he had one arm in a cast. At three a.m. he reported back to Stockloser and asked for three recce boats. But the attempt to ferry his company across using assault boats was a wash-out as the boats were all punctured. Amazingly, the outflanking attack by A Company actually managed to get to the other side. Apparently their opponents, *III./FJR 6*, could not believe the Canadians would try the same route twice. At five a.m. B Company followed and soon after the Argylls were spotted and came under heavy fire from the *Fallschirmjäger*. Around the same time D Company managed to cross the Zoom near the bridge itself and three hours later all three companies were entering houses along the Halsterseweg, the only escape route for *Hauptmann Von Hütz'* men. The fighting was extremely heavy and clearing the houses north of the Zoom took most of the day. However, by the end of the afternoon the *Fallschirmjäger* were pushed back far enough for the engineers of the 8th Field Company to blow up the concrete obstacle after two Churchill AVRE tanks firing 215 mm Petard shells failed to destroy it. Once the obstacle was finally out of the way the first Shermans of C Squadron the British Columbia Regiment crossed over, followed by infantry from the Algonquin Regiment. After occupying all the houses the infantry settled down for the night.

The Lincs, meanwhile, were still trying to oust *Leutnant Le Coutre's 10. Kompanie* from the factory buildings. To rescue Lambert and his men, still isolated inside one of the buildings, Lieutenant-Colonel Cromb ordered first C and then D Company to break through to them. The attack went in at eleven a.m. under cover of a smoke screen and soon all of D Company was across. Bitter fighting broke out, but from

¹⁴⁴² KTB 88 AK, 28.10.44, C 303.

¹⁴⁴³ This section, War Diaries 10th Cdn Inf Bde, Argylls, Lincs, Zuehlke, *Terrible Victory*, 424-6 and Van Doorn *Woensdrecht*, 103-4.

then on there could only be one outcome. The *Fallschirmjäger*, exhausted though they were, undertook a last, desperate counterattack at 14:20 hours in a bid to drive the Canadians back. The attack was beaten off and the *Fallschirmjäger* pulled back. For holding out as long as he and his men did, thus allowing *III./FJR 6* to fall back in good order, Le Coutre was recommended for the *Ritterkreuz* which was eventually awarded on 7 February 1945. The cost of crossing the Zoom had been high for the Canadians. The three Argyll companies that made it to the other side, numbered only 125 men, barely one company and the Lincs had also suffered 38 casualties. Moreover, the battle for control of Bergen op Zoom was eventually not decided in the town itself, but further north where the 4th Canadian Armoured Brigade had a pleasant surprise that day.

After having cut the eastern escape route out of Bergen op Zoom the previous day, on 29 October Moncel's brigade was ready for the decisive drive northward towards Steenberg. ¹⁴⁴⁴ During the morning B Company The Lake Superiors captured Heerle against minor German resistance. The next objective was Moerstraten and Lieutenant-Colonel E.M. Smith, the CO of The Governor General's Foot Guards (21st CAR) ordered No.2 and 3 Squadrons to avoid the main road. This turned out to be a mistake. As the column set off, one Sherman was knocked out and the attack stalled while an artillery concentration was laid on a wood south of Moerstraten. The advance then continued, but the terrain was muddy and sticky in the extreme and soon ten tanks were bogged down. However, the remaining tanks plodded on and around noon Moerstraten was completely cleared of enemy troops, all of them from *FJR 6*. At two p.m. Moncel assigned the Foot Guards a new task. They were to turn west and cut the road Bergen op Zoom – Steenberg, now the only way out for *III./FJR 6*. Using their binoculars the Canadians could see German vehicles still moving in and out of Bergen op Zoom.

First to move off were No.2 Squadron and one platoon of B Company the Lake Superiors and once again the soil was the big enemy. Tanks and carriers began to bog down in large numbers and the advance ground to a halt at a point about one kilometre east of the road. As darkness fell the Shermans and the Lake Superiors firmed up for the night. Nevertheless, the Brigade diarist correctly concluded that 'this day's ops broke the German resistance in this anchor of his def[ence] in BRABANT [capitals in original].'¹⁴⁴⁵ The advance was indeed the straw that broke the camel's back in Bergen op Zoom. Von Hütz' men who were still in the northern outskirts of Bergen op Zoom were now threatened with encirclement. Since their only line of withdrawal was about to be cut, there was no alternative for *III./FJR 6* but to give up Bergen op Zoom and, together with *Sturmgeschützbrigade 667*, pull back as far as Steenberg. Once again *Kampfgruppe Chill* had accomplished its mission: to delay the enemy advance as long as possible. Even though they were now with their backs to the wall, the battle was not over yet.

¹⁴⁴⁴ This section War Diaries 4th Cdn Arm Bde, 21st CAR, Lake Superiors, Zuehlke, *Terrible Victory*, 417-420.

¹⁴⁴⁵ War Diary, 4th Cdn Armd Bde, 29.10.44.

And armour versus armour

On 29 October Second TAF also offered some assistance to I Corps although the bulk of the sorties were still directed at Walcheren or spent on rail interdiction.

Nevertheless four sorties, two in the morning and two in the afternoon, covered the Roosendaal –Breda road in an effort to help the troops on the ground. Spitfires from 131 and 132 Wings repeatedly strafed the road and knocked out seven vehicles.¹⁴⁴⁶

It was of little practical help to the 49th (West Riding) division which was to capture Roosendaal, the town it had been closing in on for the last two days.¹⁴⁴⁷ The plan that day was for A and C Squadrons 9th Royal Tank Regiment (RTR) to join the Hallams in a move on the adjoining villages of Boeink and Vinkenbroek, preparatory to the attack on Roosendaal itself. The Boeink area was defended by the reserve unit of *LXVII. Armeekorps, Grenadier-Regiment 937 (245, I.D.)* whose two battalions had now been merged into one due to losses and were assigned to the *346. Infanterie-Division*.¹⁴⁴⁸ They were backed by *Sturmgeschützbrigade 244* (and possibly *Sturmgeschützbrigade 667*).¹⁴⁴⁹ The advance of the combat groups would be in two stages. First C Squadron 9th RTR and A Company Hallams set off at noon and half an hour later were in Vinkenbroek although four Churchill tanks became bogged down and two had been knocked out by a *Sturmgeschütz*. The Squadron leader, Major R. Holden, was seriously wounded. The infantry collected about forty *Grenadiere*.

At 12.48 hours the second stage began when A Squadron 9th RTR and B Company Hallams left the start line a hundred metres further west. Again the objective, Boeink, was soon reached and the infantry began mopping up. But again Jaschke's *Sturmgeschütze* began to inflict losses on the accompanying tanks. In just fifteen minutes A Squadron lost eight of its eleven Churchills for the loss of one German SP. Even worse, the 9th RTR suffered twenty-five casualties, nine of them fatal. Even the 'super heavy tanks' were not invulnerable it seemed. In this 'tank battle' the Germans had come out victorious, partly because of their experienced crews, partly because of the open terrain. The *Sturmgeschütze* had taken up position to the left (north) of the attacking force and were therefore ideally situated for flanking shots where the armour of the Churchills was thinnest. Also, once again, tank-infantry cooperation was far from ideal and the Churchills felt that their ability to manoeuvre was constricted because they had been ordered to stay close to the infantry. To Major-General Barker it must have seemed as if the Germans in Roosendaal would hold out forever, but then he received some good news. At 15.45 hours the 1st Leicesters launched an attack across the anti-tank ditch using the miniature bridgehead the 7th Duke of Wellington Regiment (DWR) had made the previous day. This time the attack was successful and together with B Squadron 9th RTR the Leicesters pushed back *II./FJR 6* and *I./GR 937* and expanded the bridgehead until it was half a kilometre deep. Brigadier H. Wood (147th Brigade) held an O group at seven p.m.

¹⁴⁴⁶ Second TAF, Daily Log, 29.10.44. In the morning twelve Spitfires were from 317 Sqd and two from 302 Sqd were engaged. In the afternoon twelve from 302 and twelve from 332 were involved.

¹⁴⁴⁷ This section War Diaries 49th WR Div, 9th RTR, Hallams.

¹⁴⁴⁸ 49th WR Div, IS 72, 29.10.44 and Von Hobe, 46.

¹⁴⁴⁹ Soldbuch Gefr. Bormann (private collection) and War Diary 9th RTR, 29.10.44.

He decided to order a night attack. The 7th DWR was told to advance into Roosendaal. H hour was set for three a.m.

Right wing

Next to the capture of all of Bergen op Zoom another pleasant surprise for Crocker's I Corps on 29 October was the capture of Breda by the Polish 1st Armoured Division.¹⁴⁵⁰ The loss of Dorst and the crossroads two kilometres west the previous evening had caused quite a stir at the headquarters of the *711. Infanterie-Division* in Teteringen. *Generalleutnant* Reichert was afraid that his troops in Breda would be cut off and he ordered *Grenadier-Regiment 744* (*Oberst* Jobst Von Bose) to drive the Poles out of the village. The counterattack took place at nine a.m. Since all of their attention was focused on Breda the Polish troops in Dorst were taken by surprise and the village was soon back in German hands. But that was the extent of the German success that day. Maczek immediately ordered a counterattack and Dorst was recaptured by No.3 Squadron *24th Ulanow* in the course of the afternoon. In the meantime all three battalions of the 3rd Polish Infantry Brigade entered Breda. They fanned out towards the city centre seizing street after street. The going was slow, but gradually German infantry, few in numbers to begin with, began to pull back northward in the direction of the railway station and as night fell most of the city was in Polish hands.

To the left of the Poles the Americans also pushed on during 29 October.¹⁴⁵¹ As day broke the Old Faithfuls (415th Regiment) were on their objective, the Roosendaal – Breda road. To their right the Mountaineers (414th Regiment), coming up from Rijsbergen, were supposed to join them. However, their advance got stuck along the Turfvaart canal, four kilometres south of the road. There *Grenadier-Regiment 936* (*245. I.D.*) had set up a strong defensive position supported by the bulk of the divisional artillery further north. Even the Churchill tanks of C Squadron 147th RAC were unable to break the deadlock until artillery barrages pounded the German defences for so long that the blocking position slowly began to disintegrate. At six p.m. the 3rd Battalion crossed the canal, soon followed by the other two. Shortly after dark the Mountaineers seized the twin villages of Etten and Leur straddling the Roosendaal – Breda road and the two American regiments were once more abreast.

At the end of Sunday 29 October the Allies had captured Breda, Roosendaal was about to fall and Bergen op Zoom was slowly being encircled. In view of the rapidly deteriorating situation Von Zangen ordered a general withdrawal to *Stellung III* in an attempt for the two constituent Corps of *15. Armee* to maintain contact.¹⁴⁵² For Reinhard's Corps the new main line of defence was north of the river Maas, for Sponheimer's *LXVII. Armeekorps* it ran behind the river Mark (and Dintel as the western part is known).¹⁴⁵³ This was to be the new main line of defence, except for two strong points south of there, in Steenbergen and in Stampersgat (the latter to cover the first). The reason for these was that Student, the new *Heeresgruppe*

¹⁴⁵⁰ Operational Report Polish 1st Armd Div, 41-2, and Didden and Swarts, *Einddoel Maas*, 188-9.

¹⁴⁵¹ This section, Hoegh and Doyle, *Timberwolf Tracks*, 73-5, War Diary 147th RAC and Didden and Swarts, *Einddoel Maas*, 190.

¹⁴⁵² KTB 88 AK, C 304, 30.10.44.

¹⁴⁵³ KTB 88 AK, C 288a, 18.10.44.

Oberbefehlshaber, wanted to delay the Allied advance for as long as possible. He needed the time to pull back *Kampfgruppe Chill* in good order as he seriously considered sending it to Schouwen-Duiveland to defend that island.¹⁴⁵⁴ However, before *FJR 6* could be transferred to Walcheren the Allies had landed there and the move became futile. The *Fallschirmjäger* were spared a pointless battle although one cannot help wondering how the fighting for Walcheren would have gone with them there to bolster the defences of *70. I.D.* Von Zangen's order for the two *Korps* to maintain contact came too late and, as mentioned earlier, the following day *15. Armee* would be split up after all.

In view of the new order to pull back behind *Stellung III*, all four divisions during the night began the retreat. Farthest east, the *711. Infanterie-Division* (Reichert) was nearly too late. As it began to fall back from the northern edge of Breda towards the river Mark, Sherman tanks of the Polish 1st Armoured Regiment tried to follow them. *Oberst* Von Limburg-Hetlingen, the *Kommandeur* of *Grenadier-Regiment 731*, alerted two 8.8 cm *Flak* guns which were also about to relocate. Two tanks were hit and the division pulled back in good order except for *III./G.R. 731* south of Breda with which all contact had been lost the previous day and which was now presumed lost and possibly captured.¹⁴⁵⁵ To Reichert's relief the missing battalion showed up early the following morning. It had indeed been virtually surrounded, but escaped during the night by moving around the western outskirts of Breda and slowly crawling their way north through the Polish outposts.

Following up

On Monday 30 October most of *LXVII. Armeekorps* had pulled back behind the security of the river Mark leaving I Corps room to clear the area south of there. The same day the *Kommandierende General*, *General* Otto Sponheimer, left to undergo surgery in Germany as he was suffering from infected gums and cheeks, complicated by heart trouble.¹⁴⁵⁶ He was replaced by *General* Karl Püchler, who knew the staff since he had also commanded the *Korps* for two days at the end of July.¹⁴⁵⁷ Von Zangen and Student had every confidence in Püchler whom they described as a 'Sehr active und zielbewusste Persönlichkeit mit klarem Beurteilungsvermögen. (...) Besonders hervorzuheben sind seine Zuversicht auch in schwersten Lagen und die Fähigkeit, dies auf die Truppe zu übertragen.'¹⁴⁵⁸ The new *Korps* headquarters were located in Dordrecht. The general withdrawal was followed closely by Allied troops, even though air support was again very limited.¹⁴⁵⁹ In fact only two Spitfire squadrons, 331 and 308, attacked targets far behind the front line in the Moerdijk bridge area.¹⁴⁶⁰ South of there, after the race for Breda two days earlier, a new race

¹⁴⁵⁴ KTB 88 AK, C 309, 02.11.44.

¹⁴⁵⁵ Reichert, 33-4.

¹⁴⁵⁶ Special Interrogation Report Sponheimer, 6.

¹⁴⁵⁷ Kursietis, *The Wehrmacht at War*, 58 and 353.

¹⁴⁵⁸ Personalakten Püchler, assessment Student 12.12.44.

¹⁴⁵⁹ This section, Operational Report Polish 1st Armd Div, 42, Hoegh and Doyle, *Timberwolf Tracks*, 76-7, and Didden and Swarts, *Brabant Bevrijd*, Hulst n.d, 242-4.

¹⁴⁶⁰ Second TAF, Daily Log, 30.10.44. Twelve Spitfires from 331 (132 Wing) attacked both Hooge Zwaluwe and Flak at the northern exit of the Moerdijk bridge, dropping eleven 500-pounders, while 308 (131 Wing) dropped an unknown number of 250 and 500-pounders on the latter target.

developed between the Polish 1st Armoured and the US 104th Divisions. The question was, who would cross the river Mark first?

The Poles marched northward along two different routes and the more spectacular was the advance by the 10th Armoured Cavalry Brigade. The tanks used a new road, still partly under construction, running from Breda all the way to Rotterdam via Moerdijk. Around noon Prinsenbeek was liberated and about the same time the first Cromwells of *10 Pułk Strzelców Konnych (PSK)* arrived on the banks of the river Mark at Nieuwe Veer.¹⁴⁶¹ The road bridge had been blown up, of course. Around the same time the Americans reached the river, further west. The 415th Regiment during the afternoon had entered Oudenbosch from two sides. They were cheered by the population and then moved on. At seven p.m. the 3rd Battalion reached the river opposite the village of Standdaarbuiten. Amazingly the bridge there was still intact. Confusion could be observed on the other side as Germans were shouting and running about. Seconds later the bridge blew up, just as Lieutenant-Colonel G.C. Kelleher's men were about to cross it. But the Timberwolves were not about to give up yet.

That same day the 49th (West Riding) Division found Roosendaal which had proved such a tough nut to crack before, now more like a ripe plumb which easily fell into their hands. The 7th DWR reported the city clear of enemy at six a.m., a mere three hours after they had launched their advance. Soon more battalions entered Roosendaal. Patrols from the 49th Recce and the 1/4th KOYLI reached Kruisland and Oud-Gastel respectively, the 2nd Gloucesters followed up, ready to move on. But that was as far as they could go, because northwest of Oud-Gastel they suddenly faced one of the two German rearguard positions south of the Mark. The defence of the village of Stampersgat, where about a hundred men with two *Pak*, a few mortars and a dozen machine-guns plus one *Sturmgeschütz* had taken up position, was typical for this kind of position.¹⁴⁶² The infantry were mainly from *II./Grenadier-Regiment 743* although they were reinforced by Pohl's men (*Fallschirm Panzer Ersatz und Ausbildungs-Regiment Hermann Göring*). To their right the Canadians had stumbled on the other blocking position, in Steenberg, this one occupied by *III./Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 6* and *Sturmgeschützbrigade 667*. Stampersgat was vital for *Kampfgruppe Chill* in Steenberg as the village held the key to the land bridge between the Dintel and the Steenbergsche Vliet. Losing Stampersgat meant that the Allies would cut off the troops in and around Steenberg. This was the reason for the prolonged battles in this corner of Brabant. It also explains why the 4th Canadian Armoured Division was the least fortunate of all Crocker's divisions on 30 October.

¹⁴⁶¹ Second Army, Intel Log, 30.10.44, Serial 46.

¹⁴⁶² Dellepoort en Nijman, *Bevrijding van Oud-Gastel*, 24-6.

Following Chill

During the night the tanks of the Foot Guards had struggled through the mud towards the Bergen op Zoom-Steenbergen road until they could not go on.¹⁴⁶³ At a point about a kilometre from there they laagered for the night. The advance was resumed at first light and No.1 Squadron took over the baton. Now they found their way barred by a canal, Het Bergsewater. However, at 10.35 hours they found a way around the northern end and slowly two troops of Shermans and one platoon of motorized infantry continued to edge their way westward.¹⁴⁶⁴ Finally, at 12:30 hours, the group reported that they had reached the road at a point near Klutsdorp, only a few hundred metres north of the original objective.¹⁴⁶⁵ The column turned south and, finally on terra firma, raced to Oudemolen where, within the hour, they made contact with patrols of the Algonquins who had come up from Bergen op Zoom.¹⁴⁶⁶ The trap on the defenders of Bergen op Zoom had been closed, but it was clear that the pigeon –*III./FJR 6*– had flown the coop. The question was, where to? The Canadians were to find out the same afternoon. While the Foot Guards were concentrating in Oudemolen No.3 Squadron of the Canadian Grenadier Guards (22nd CAR) and C Company of the Lake Superiors set off for Steenbergen along the road from Moerstraten. The advance soon encountered the first obstacle, a culvert which had been blown. This was quickly overcome, but then, at two p.m., the column arrived at a bridge which had also been destroyed. The canal was only a minor one, nevertheless the gap was about three metres, just too big for a Sherman to cross. It was clear that the infantry would have to establish a bridgehead before anything else could be done. Assault boats would have to be brought up and so the group settled down waiting for the equipment to arrive.

Meanwhile No.1 Squadron of the Foot Guards, still accompanied by B Company the Lake Superiors, also drove north to Steenbergen. They set off from Oudemolen and took the road from Bergen op Zoom. The drive went fine until they hit a blown bridge over the Ligne river at five p.m. As the lead tanks closed in on the bridge two of the Shermans were knocked out by mines. Then two *Pak* guns, an 8.8 cm northwest of Steenbergen and a 7.5 cm *Pak* near the Cornelius church in Welberg, opened fire and destroyed two more tanks. Soon another Sherman and a carrier ran on mines. At the same time No.7 and 8 Platoons of the Lake Superiors crossed, wading through the water. German guns zeroed in on them and it was instant chaos. Eventually the Shermans pulled back to Oudemolen. The only option for the Canadians was to admit defeat and pull the infantry back south of the river. The column to their right had been more successful. At one a.m. the infantry crossed, covered by tanks, and soon the first engineers arrived to start building a bridge. The Lake Superiors advanced another four hundred metres and dug in, waiting for what daylight would bring. It was now perfectly clear to the Canadians where *Kampfgruppe Chill* had dug in. Elsewhere along the front of I Corps the night had been equally restless and with equally mixed results.

¹⁴⁶³ This section, War Diaries 4th Cdn Armd Bde, 21st and 22nd CAR, and Lake Superiors.

¹⁴⁶⁴ 4th Cdn Armd Div, G Log, 30.10.44, Serial 73.

¹⁴⁶⁵ Ibid, Serial 78.

¹⁴⁶⁶ Ibid, Serial 87.

One crossing

After hearing that the bridge had been blown, Major-General Allen, the CO of the 104th US Infantry Division, ordered his 415th Regiment to force a crossing of the river Mark before dawn on 31 October.¹⁴⁶⁷ The task to cross at a point about two kilometres east of Standdaarbuiten fell to the 1st Battalion under Major F. Needham. At 06:30 hours B Company crossed in assault boats, under withering machine-gun fire. But the crossing succeeded and soon they were joined by A and C Companies. Around nine a.m. most of Needham's battalion was across. But the infantry were on their own. Because a persistent and heavy mist limited visibility the American mortars and artillery could offer little support. German observers, on the other hand, closer to the actual line, brought down accurate fire and soon *II./Grenadier-Regiment 857 (346. I.D.)* and remnants of *I./Grenadier-Regiment 723 (719. I.D.)* slowly squeezed the tiny bridgehead from three directions while *Sturmgeschütze* from Jaschke's *Sturmgeschützbrigade 244* covered them.¹⁴⁶⁸ Early in the afternoon the Americans noticed that they also received fire from their rear.

Things quickly began to get worse from then on and at four p.m. *Sturmgeschütze* surrounded the battalion, firing into individual foxholes. American artillery tried to help out and the regimental headquarters of *Grenadier-Regiment 857* in Noordhoek were hit. One of the highest ranking victims was the *Kommandeur* of *346. I.D.*, *Generalleutnant* Walter Steinmüller who suffered a concussion and had to relinquish command to *Oberst* Neumann for the next week.¹⁴⁶⁹ The 'Old Faithfuls' put up a brave fight, but it was only a matter of time before they would be overrun. Lieutenant-General Crocker (I Corps) directed the battalion to pull back. But that was easier said than done since the way back was cut off. Lieutenant William C. Tufts (C Company) led a group of men forward with anti-tank weapons. They managed to knock out at least one *Sturmgeschütz*.¹⁴⁷⁰ The action by Tufts' groups opened a wedge in the German encirclement, allowing most of the battalion to withdraw south of the river, most, but not all. Two days later, when the Americans returned to the other side of the river, they discovered that sixty-five of their comrades had stayed behind, hiding from the Germans and sustaining themselves with sugar beets and turnips after their K-rations had run out. At Nieuwe Veer, the 1st Polish Armoured Division had also crossed the Mark in darkness.

And another

Since the Cromwell tanks of *10 Pułk Strzelców Konnych (PSK)* could not cross the river in view of the destroyed bridge, infantry was called forward.¹⁴⁷¹ At seven p.m. on 30 October the 8th Rifle Battalion began to arrive at the site of the blown road bridge. They immediately came under heavy artillery and mortar fire. Crawling forward the Poles explored the site. Even in darkness German soldiers could be seen. As the main road was next to the divisional boundary (always a weak spot) between

¹⁴⁶⁷ This section, Hoegh and Doyle, *Timberwolf Tracks*, 77-80.

¹⁴⁶⁸ First Cdn Army, IS 123, 31.10.44 and I Corps IS 93, 01.11.44.

¹⁴⁶⁹ Rehm, 77-8.

¹⁴⁷⁰ From *Sturmgeschützbrigade 244* since we know that *Oberleutnant* Heinrich Specht who commanded *3. Batterie* was wounded that day. Van Doorn, *Operatie Rebound, bevrijding van de Westhoek*, Willemstad 1994, 27.

¹⁴⁷¹ This section, Operational Report Polish 1st Armd Div, 42, Jamar, *With the tanks*, 34-5.

the *245. I.D.* and the *711. I.D.* the Poles stood a fair chance of once more punching a hole in the German line. Still, the sector west of the bridge and the bridge itself were the sole responsibility of *Grenadier-Regiment 935 (245. I.D.)*. Assault boats were brought forward while Polish combat engineers studied the canal. They decided a bridge could be built at the old ferry site. But first the infantry would have to establish a bridgehead there. Lieutenant-Colonel Aleksander Nowaczynski, the CO of the 8th Rifle Battalion, ordered No.1 Company to cross first. As soon as dawn broke on 31 October Captain Nitka's company rowed across.¹⁴⁷² Even though dense fog covered their approach, the Cromwells of *10 PSK* fired incessantly to force the Germans to keep their heads down. The *Grenadiere* were surprised and driven from their positions. During the morning No.2 Company crossed the canal soon the Poles had a bridgehead. The Germans responded by raining down a hail of shells and further crossings became impossible. But Nitka's men crawled forward and during the afternoon had gone forward about one-and-a-half kilometre.¹⁴⁷³

Sander became increasingly nervous and he ordered a counterattack which went in at six p.m. *Grenadiere* supported by six *Sturmgeschütze*, probably from *Sturmgeschützbrigade 280*, tried to crush the Poles.¹⁴⁷⁴ Having no anti-tank weapons the Polish infantry was pushed back.¹⁴⁷⁵ The vehement German response is understandable. From the Polish bridgehead it was a mere eight kilometres to the key road bridge at Moerdijk. A determined Polish attack could easily get there in one day and deprive the divisions of *LXVII. Armeekorps* of the only land link to the north, in addition to splitting the *Korps* sector in two. For the moment the danger was averted and the Polish bridgehead was compressed to one kilometre by five hundred metres. The German counterattack also meant that No.3 and 4 Companies were unable to cross until after midnight. Command over the bridgehead was assigned to Nowaczynski's second-in-command, Captain Gryziecki. Building a bridge and getting tanks across would have to wait until the next day, 1 November.

Fallschirmjäger hold out (once more)

Meanwhile further west Major-General Harry Foster was unhappy with the fact that the advance on Steenberg seemed to have lost its momentum on 31 October.¹⁴⁷⁶ Again this was due to *Kampfgruppe Chill* who would fight its last battle on Dutch soil there. One more time it managed to stall the Allied advance to a considerable degree, this time with only two battalions. The sector south of the town and west of the village of Welberg was defended by *Hauptmann Von Hütz' III./FJR 6 (I. and IV.* had already pulled back further north to Dinteloord and Willemstad respectively), the

¹⁴⁷² I Corps, G Log, 31.10.44, Serial 595.

¹⁴⁷³ 4 AGRA, Signal Log, 31.10.44, Serial 546.

¹⁴⁷⁴ So far it has not been possible to positively identify the parent unit of the German SPs, but it seems highly probable that they were from *Sturmgeschützbrigade 280*, since 244 was still near *Standdaarbuiten* and 667 was in *Steenbergen*. Moreover, 280 had just received five *Sturmhaubitze 42G* to make up for the losses (*Klages*). Also it is known to have been in *Den Hout*, three kilometres from *Wagenberg*, only three days later, plus 280 had some *DoW's* in *Dordrecht (PAJVD)*.

¹⁴⁷⁵ Operational Report, 42.

¹⁴⁷⁶ This section, War Diaries 4th Cdn Arm Bde, 21st and 22nd CAR, Lake Superiors and Algonquins. For details, Robert W. Catsburg, *Vijf dagen in November, De bevrijding van Welberg en Steenberg in de tweede wereldoorlog*, Steenberg 2009, 28-45.

sector around Welberg itself was covered by *I./Fallschirm Panzer Ersatz und Ausbildungs-Regiment Hermann Göring (Bataillon Pohl)*.¹⁴⁷⁷ The infantry were supported by six or seven *Sturmgeschütze* from Major Knüpling's *Sturmgeschützbrigade 667* who would play a key role in the forthcoming battle.¹⁴⁷⁸ Their first action was to disrupt the construction of a bridge over the Bergsewater south of Welberg. An attempt to use the other, more westerly approach, the road from Bergen op Zoom, failed that day, because it was too close to the German lines for a bridge to be built there. Therefore, the attack on Steenberg would have to come from the direction of Moerstraten. Early in the morning, as the fog lifted, two *Sturmgeschütze* rolled down the road to Moerstraten and fired random shots at the engineers. But the 8th Field Squadron was not so easily deterred. Major Allen, the CO, called for volunteers and at 10:17 hours the bridge was completed. Within ten minutes the first group of tanks of No.3 Squadron the Canadian Grenadier Guards (22nd CAR) crossed it and then headed towards Steenberg. This advance covered about a kilometre before it ground to a halt, mainly because of mines. When a patrol from the Lake Superiors discovered a tank wall further up the road it was clear that the armour would not be able to get through. Brigadier Moncel –under pressure from Foster- decided to order a night attack by infantry, i.e. the Algonquins who had been assigned to his brigade for the moment.

The Algonquins were temporarily commanded by Major L.C. Monk, as Lieutenant-Colonel Bradburn was on a forty-eight hour leave. His plan was for B and D Companies to advance straight up the road to Steenberg while A and C Companies secured Welberg as that was slightly elevated ground. The companies assembled at the start line around eight p.m. and an hour later the attack went in. The advance on the left met with stiff resistance right away, but the Algonquins kept on pushing ahead and towards morning they had reached a crossroads about level with Welberg. Just before dawn on 1 November the two companies were instructed to halt until it was clear how the right flank was doing. There, things had gone horribly wrong. The attack had started off alright, a dozen Germans were captured and fairly soon A Company reached Welberg which it reported clear of enemy. It was three a.m. Then C Company began to deploy into Welberg itself. Suddenly the German defenders reasserted themselves and at five a.m. a counterattack began by *Bataillon Pohl*, supported by two *Sturmgeschütze*. It was beaten off because infantry and SPs became separated. But Pohl's men regrouped for another, more determined, attempt. This went in at eight a.m. and the result was mayhem for the Canadians. Soon the Algonquins had to pull back. Some platoons became isolated and trapped because the enemy covered the only road to safety, the bridge across the Boomvaart. All in all twenty-seven Algonquins were taken prisoner including the CO of C Company, Major Keith Stirling. As fog once more began to cover the fields the Algonquins assembled around the original start-line to await further orders. Von Zangen was happy for the moment and he sent Püchler a cable, saying that *LXVII. Armeekorps* 'stellte Lage suedl. Steenberg und an Bahn Breda-Dordrecht trotz staerkstem Artl.-Feuer im Gegenangriff wieder her. Ich spreche den Korps meine

¹⁴⁷⁷ Catsburg, *Vijf dagen in November*, 3. This disposition suggests that the rest of Kampfgruppe Dreyer was north and east of Welberg.

¹⁴⁷⁸ Catsburg, *Vijf dagen in November*, 13-4.

Anerkennung aus.¹⁴⁷⁹ He was right to be content, after all, delaying the Allied offensive had been the aim all the time.

Allied plan

On Wednesday 1 November *15. Armee* finally pulled back behind the river Maas except for two bridgeheads. The smaller one, west of 's-Hertogenbosch behind the Afwateringskanaal, was defended by the *59. Infanterie Division*. For the moment it was left in peace as the 51st (Highland) Division prepared for its first canal crossing to drive the Germans out of it later in the week. The bigger one, behind the Dintel and Mark, with outposts at Steenbergen and Stampersgat, still held the bulk of *LXVII. Armeekorps*. The main reason for the existence of these bridgeheads was that the mission of the new *Heeresgruppe H*, led by *Generaloberst* Student, was 'nachhaltende Verteidigung' north of the major rivers.¹⁴⁸⁰ In other words Student's units would maintain bridgeheads in order to tie as many Allied troops for as long as possible. Of the three bridgeheads envisaged, Arnhem and Venlo had proved most useful so far. The question for the Allies was how best to deal with it quickly before that, too, solidified and became too strong. That afternoon Lieutenant-General John Crocker, in command of I Corps, held a conference with three of his divisional commanders at his forward headquarters in Roosendaal.¹⁴⁸¹ He informed Major-General Allen (104th US), Major-General Barker (49th West Riding) and Major-General Maczek (1st Polish Armoured) of his plans. At nine p.m. the following day I Corps was to make the decisive drive as far as the Hollands Diep (the mouth of the river Maas). While Allen's men were to make the main attack at Standdaarbuiten, the 49th was to cover this by crossing to their left. The Poles were still heavily engaged at Nieuwe Veer and the outcome of the battle there was far from certain. Until that was clear the final decision regarding the Polish division would be on hold. During the struggle for the Mark bridgehead *schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559* would be engaged in battle south of the river Maas for the last time.

Second Polish attempt

During the early hours of 1 November the Polish engineers at Nieuwe Veer had decided to put together a pontoon as German harassing fire made it impossible to construct a Bailey bridge.¹⁴⁸² The engineers decided to build a raft instead. Just before four a.m. the raft was ready.¹⁴⁸³ First No.1 Squadron of *2 Pułk Pancerny* (2 PAR) under 2nd Lieutenant Wiatrowski crossed, followed by two M-10 Achilles Tank Destroyers of the 8th Battery 1st Polish Anti-Tank Regiment under Sergeant Franczak.¹⁴⁸⁴ By seven a.m. the armour was in position, just as it was getting light,

¹⁴⁷⁹ KTB 88 AK, 02.11.44, C 309.

¹⁴⁸⁰ Report after interrogation German officers 1947 (NINMH 567/27).

¹⁴⁸¹ Meeting described in Hoegh and Doyle, *Timberwolf Tracks*, 80. We may safely assume that Harry Foster (4th Cdn Armd Div) was not invited since his division was heavily involved at Steenbergen and was still many kilometres away from the Dintel-Mark river line.

¹⁴⁸² This section, Operational Report, 42, War Diary 2 PAR 31.10-02.11.44 and Jamar, *With the tanks*, 252-7.

¹⁴⁸³ Jamar gives 'four o'clock', the War Diary gives 03:40 hours.

¹⁴⁸⁴ All sources agree that two M-10s were ferried across, but there is confusion as to the number of Shermans put across, Jamar gives eight, the Operational Report gives ten (possibly eight Shermans plus two M -10's), the War Diary of 2 PAR gives seven and I Corps G Log gives ten (01.11.44, Serial 640).

trying desperately to avoid the sticky mud on either side of the roads. At 08:30 hours the infantry and tanks attacked, hoping to expand the bridgehead enough to allow a bridge to be built. The arrival of the tanks did make a change and initially the attack met with some success and some forty Germans were taken prisoner. Then one Sherman got stuck and was knocked out by a *Sturmgeschütz* (*Sturmgeschützbrigade 280*). It was a sign of things to come. Early in the afternoon the CO of the 3rd Polish Infantry Brigade, Colonel Franciszek Skibiński, conferred with his subordinate commanders. He was sorely tempted to send more troops across to force the issue, but decided to wait and see how things would develop. Soon it became clear that they were not going too well. The main attack took place west of the road and railway line, but the more the Poles pushed, the more the Germans resisted. The problem was that the Polish armour was confined to the roads which greatly helped the German defence. Polish tank losses began to increase and one Sherman after another was destroyed by anti-tank guns or *Sturmgeschütze*. In the midst of this fray, Kopka and his small band from *schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559* appeared on the scene.

The general withdrawal of *15. Armee* north of the rivers on 1 November meant that all the heavy equipment, communications and staff were moved out of the combat zone. This order also affected *schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559*. As related above, *559* had crossed the river Maas using the Capelse Veer ferry and the bridge at Keizersveer and was now concentrated south of Utrecht. That is, all of the *Abteilung* except for a small detachment that had been left behind. The two *Jagdpanther* whose firing equipment had broken down were still south of the Maas, in Geertruidenberg. The group was commanded by *Oberleutnant* Franz Kopka. This group stayed in Geertruidenberg until 1 November when they were also directed to go north of the river. The Polish bridgehead at Nieuwe Veer threatened Moerdijk bridge, the only way out for these heavy vehicles. Kopka received orders from *15. Armee* to proceed first to Dordrecht and thence to Utrecht. The small column of vehicles set off from Geertruidenberg during the morning, drove through Made and arrived in the next village, Wagenberg, around noon. The German vehicles parked for a brief halt. At about three p.m. the group fired off their engines and proceeded in a westerly direction.¹⁴⁸⁵ It was now just twelve kilometres to Moerdijk bridge. Kopka in his captured Dingo scout car took point, followed by the two *Jagdpanther* and the two halftracks while the *Schwimmwagen* brought up the rear. After about two kilometres the column approached a bend in the road.¹⁴⁸⁶ Turning right (north) there Kopka suddenly saw Polish tanks in the distance. Suddenly the second *Jagdpanther* was hit in left hand sprocket. It came to a sudden stop. The crew jumped out and hopped on to the halftracks following them. It was the end of the involvement of *559* south of the river Maas.

End of a bridgehead

Meanwhile the fighting for the Polish bridgehead at Nieuwe Veer was about to reach a critical point. From attackers the Poles had turned into defenders and increasingly had to call on artillery to help them out. Just before six p.m. the most serious of all

¹⁴⁸⁵ *De Bevrijding van Terheijden*, 1980, 21.

¹⁴⁸⁶ This section, Kopka, *Missbraucht und Gebeutelt*, 167-8 and 334-5.

German counterattacks began, from the very point where the *Jagdpanther* had been knocked out two hours earlier.¹⁴⁸⁷ Infantry supported by *Sturmgeschütze* closed in on the Polish positions. In sheer desperation Captain Gryziecki called 'Hullo Orchid X'. This was the sign that all the available artillery was to fire on their own line. A hurricane of fire rained down and the German attack was broken up. The German infantry (from *Grenadier-Regiment 935* as well as the *Korps* reserve, *Grenadier-Regiment 723*) suffered heavy losses. But the *Sturmgeschütze* kept firing and one by one the remaining four operational Shermans were knocked out. At the same time the decision was made to abandon the bridgehead.¹⁴⁸⁸ A despatch rider was sent to Captain Gryziecki who grimly accepted the order. The infantry would cross first, the two M-10s last. Once again things went wrong. At nine p.m. the first Achilles crossed the Mark when one of the pontoons was hit, sinking the raft. The other M-10 had to be abandoned. The following morning the last Polish soldiers left the bridgehead. The successful German defence had won *LXVII. Armeekorps* a temporary reprieve, the operative word being temporary. Already Maczek's division stood poised a few kilometres east for the second attempt to cross the river. Meanwhile *Kampfgruppe Chill* in their outpost at Steenberg, were still engaged in battle. For the umpteenth time they would slug it out with units of the 4th Canadian Armoured Division.

Welberg again

On 2 November the second attempt by the Canadians to take Steenberg during the night was set to begin.¹⁴⁸⁹ This time the Lincoln and Wellands on the left were to head towards Steenberg along the road from Moerstraten, using the same starting point as the Algonquins two days earlier. The Algonquins themselves, meanwhile, on the right would try to get into Welberg through 'the back door' and sweep into village from the less strongly defended southeast. To deal with the threat from *Sturmgeschütze*, like the Poles at Nieuwe Veer, the Canadian infantry was followed by M-10 Achilles tank destroyers of the 5th Anti-tank Regiment RCA. To underline the importance of the operation the attack was preceded by an intense air raid that was observed by both the divisional commander, Major-General Foster, and Brigadier Jefferson. Now that the operations against Walcheren had almost run their course (Flushing was captured on 1 November, Middelburg four days later), the Royal Air Force for once showed up in force again.¹⁴⁹⁰ Throughout the afternoon Welberg and surroundings were subjected to air attacks by no fewer than fifty-four Typhoons from five squadrons in 146 Wing. While 193, 257 and 263 Squadrons dropped sixty 500-pounders, 266 and 609 Squadrons fired 126 rocket projectiles on to suspected positions.¹⁴⁹¹ The attacks were devastating and a large number of houses in Welberg were reduced to rubble and set alight. Elsewhere on I Corps front, particularly north of the river Mark, Typhoons and Spitfires from 84 Group also strafed and bombed

¹⁴⁸⁷ 4 AGRA, Signal Log, 01.11.44, Serial 12.

¹⁴⁸⁸ Here, too, sources disagree. The Operational Report states that Maczek was ordered to do so by Crocker (I Corps), the War Diary of 2 PAR says that Colonel Franciszek Skibinski (3 PIB) gave the order.

¹⁴⁸⁹ This section, War Diaries 10th Cdn Inf Bde, Lincolns, Algonquins, 29th CAR and Catsburg, *Vijf dagen in November*, 50-70.

¹⁴⁹⁰ Details, Second TAF, Daily Log 02.11.44.

¹⁴⁹¹ In detail: squadron, number of planes and number of bombs or R/P's: 193, 8, 14; 257, 10, 16; 263, 15, 30; 266, 8, 64 and 609, 9, 62.

positions in preparation for the coming offensive across the Mark. The air raids were followed by an intense artillery barrage on Welberg. It was seven p.m. Dusk fell and the attack on Steenberg began.

After an hour the Lincs reached their first objective, west of Welberg, and began to dig in. Soon after, a lone *Sturmgeschütz* began to fire at point-blank range at the trenches pestering the Lincs throughout the night. It was not until the following morning that two M-10s of K Troop were able to destroy the German SP. The advance of the Algonquins met with mixed success from the very start. A and B Companies heading straight for Welberg (via Bocht) ran into serious trouble almost from the very start coming under small-arms fire and of course the omni-present SPs of *Sturmgeschützbrigade 667*. Of the four M-10s following A Company, one got stuck in the mud while two were knocked out by a *Sturmgeschütz*. B Company was equally unsuccessful and around midnight both companies had pulled back to their starting points. At dawn they made a second attempt which also failed. The only positive thing was that this effort diverted attention away from D Company which during the night had been executing the right hook which carried it into Welberg. Lieutenant-Colonel R.A. Bradburn, the CO of the Algonquins, decided to reinforce the success by sending C Company on a parallel course and by reinforcing D Company with armour, both M-10s of C Troop 5th Anti-Tank Regiment RCA and Shermans of C Squadron The South Albertas (29th RAC). The M-10 Achilles arrived just before first light on 3 November, the Shermans soon after. The link-up took time as all the armoured vehicles were confined to the few roads that were passable.

The leading platoons now turned west into the village, but their progress was halted around seven a.m. by a counterattack. The *Fallschirmjäger* of *I./Fallschirm Panzer Ersatz und Ausbildungs-Regiment Hermann Göring (Bataillon Pohl)* were supported by one *Sturmgeschütz* and a 'tank'.¹⁴⁹² The Germans threatened to drive a wedge between D and C Companies and the Algonquins had to run for cover. Sergeant Honey, commanding one of the M-10s in C Troop tried to manoeuvre into a position to deal with the German armour. However, his Achilles got stuck and he had to dismount. He then spotted a 'tank' right ahead of his SP, behind a wooden barn. He ran back to his M-10 and within seconds a seventeen-pounder shell smashed straight through the barn hitting the *Sturmgeschütz*. As it began to burn the SP headed back to Steenberg followed by the *Fallschirmjäger*. The *Sturmgeschütz* then took its revenge as it fired back and hit Honey's Achilles, killing the Sergeant. Still, Honey's brave action was the turning point in the battle for Welberg. Slowly the Algonquins moved west. But the Germans kept resisting and at ten a.m. two more M-10s were knocked out.

However, by noon the village was finally cleared and from then on progress was slow but steady. At the end of the afternoon contact was made with the Lincs coming up from the west. The Canadians were ready for the next stage, the attack on Steenberg itself. Instead of trying to dislodge the Canadians from Welberg as they had done before, *Kampfgruppe Chill* now began to pound the Canadian positions

¹⁴⁹² Alternately reported as a Tiger (War Diary 4th Cdn Arm Div), which can be rejected out of hand as nonsense. The 'tank' could conceivably be an older type of *Sturmgeschütz* or a *Sturmhaubitze*.

with mortar and artillery fire in order to prevent the Canadians from resuming the attack on Steenberg proper. The *Kriegsmarine* helped out by sending nine gun boats of *2. Artillerie-Flottille* with 8.8 cm guns.¹⁴⁹³ This help was invaluable as Chill's own artillery was running low on ammunition and was also being prepared for evacuation. As night fell the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders made preparations for the final attack on Steenberg. In view of recent events the Argylls were understandably apprehensive. However, this time the Canadian infantry were lucky. As the Argylls were getting ready, sounds from Steenberg appeared to indicate that the Germans were finally pulling out. *Kampfgruppe Chill* had fought its last battle on Brabant soil and as the Argylls and the Lincs moved into Steenberg in the early hours of 4 November, they only captured a few stragglers. The bulk of the *Kampfgruppe* fell back to Dinteloord, the last stop before being ferried to safety. This move had become all the more urgent in view of developments elsewhere. In fact *Kampfgruppe Chill* pulled back towards Dinteloord on the orders of *Oberbefehlshaber West* himself. Von Rundstedt conceded that *LXVII. Armeekorps* had counterattacked successfully, but that it was now time to pull back.¹⁴⁹⁴ The die was finally cast, all German troops were to be evacuated. All that was left was to delay the Allies until that was accomplished.

Across the Mark

While the Algonquins were getting ready for the attack on Welberg Thursday 2 November also saw the planned crossing of the river Mark.¹⁴⁹⁵ The main attack with the objective of splitting the German bridgehead in two was to be made by the 104th US Division, the Timberwolves, while the 49th (West Riding) Division provided flank cover to their left. There the crossing of the river Mark was assigned to the 56th Brigade under Brigadier M.S. Ekin. He ordered the 2nd Essex to cross first while the 2nd Gloucestershires protected the crossing by capturing a crossroads due east of Stampersgat which was still in German hands. This battalion had barely recovered from the shock of losing their CO, Lieutenant-Colonel F. Butterworth, the previous day when a shell struck his command post.¹⁴⁹⁶

The Essex crossed at nine p.m. It was another wet and cold day. In order not to alert the Germans Ekin had decided to forego the usual introductory barrage. The assault boats went across in silence and the plan appeared to work, but then, just as the first troops (C Company) were nearly across a flare went up. Withering fire met the Essex, but miraculously most made it to the other side. An hour later the whole battalion was across, including two six-pounders and a jeep. The Timberwolves crossed around the same time. This attack was preceded by the usual devastating artillery barrage and many of the houses in Standdaarbuiten were pounded to rubble. But the hail of shells achieved the desired result and soon most of the division was across.¹⁴⁹⁷ Soon bridges were built and on 3 November the

¹⁴⁹³ KTB F.d.Motorbootverbände, 04.11.44. 08.30 hours.

¹⁴⁹⁴ KTB OB West, 03.11.44.

¹⁴⁹⁵ This section, Didden and Swarts, *Brabant Bevrijd*, 247-9.

¹⁴⁹⁶ He died of his wounds four days later.

¹⁴⁹⁷ One of the driving forces was Lieutenant Cecil Bolton who, even though he was seriously wounded, with his mortar platoon and later a bazooka team, knocked out several machine-guns and even an *88 Flak* gun. He was awarded America's highest decoration, the Medal of Honor, for this.

Timberwolves expanded the bridgehead as far as the village of Noordhoek four kilometres from Standdaarbuiten. That Friday spelled the beginning of the end for Püchler's *LXVII. Armeekorps* as the Polish 1st Armoured Division crossed the river Mark a second time, this time to stay.

Colonel T. Majewski, the CO of the 10th Armoured Cavalry Brigade, was in charge of the operation.¹⁴⁹⁸ He had organised two tactical formations which would cross in different places about two hundred metres apart. The crossings took place at six a.m. Soon the 1st Podhalanski Rifles north of Ter Aalst had a sizeable bridgehead, but the 9th Rifle Battalion at Vrachelen, ran into trouble. A single *Sturmgeschütz* from *Sturmgeschützbrigade 280* hammered away at the Polish lines and brought the advance to a halt after just one company had crossed. It also destroyed the raft intended to send across reinforcements. The Royal Air Force was asked for help. Fighter-bombers arrived around 10:30 hours and intervened with a vengeance. That day was one of the few occasions on which 84 Group put in a really concerted effort to help the advance of I Corps.¹⁴⁹⁹ All of the major towns and villages north of the Dintel-Mark line still in German hands were subjected to aerial bombardments and strafing. Throughout the morning four of the six Wings, totalling ninety-six Spitfires and forty-one Typhoons from twelve different squadrons unleashed a hell of bombs and rocket projectiles on German positions.¹⁵⁰⁰ In Stampersgat many civilian lives were saved because most of the inhabitants had been evacuated.¹⁵⁰¹ Elsewhere the population was less fortunate. Klundert, in the American zone of operations and the key position in the German defences here, was hit hard during the afternoon as Spitfires from 66, 127 and 332 Squadrons (132 Wing) and 341 Squadron (145 Wing) swooped down and dropped a total of forty-four 500-pounders to which seven Typhoons of 257 Squadron (146 Wing) added another ten. The devastation in the village was incredible as was the loss of life among the civilians. Elsewhere, in Dinteloord, Terheijden, Wagenberg and Zevenbergen many civilians also lost their lives. A black pall hung over the German lines as the Poles resumed their attack after the air raids.

At noon the 9th Rifle Battalion crossed a the second time about a hundred metres east of the first site. This took *Grenadier-Regiment 744* by surprise and a *Sturmgeschütz* was knocked out from across the river. Three hours later a Class 40 bridge was ready and the Shermans of No.2 Squadron *24th Pułk Ułanów* drove across to the north side. The German infantry fell back on the village of Den Hout, but the Poles wasted no time and two hours later they had captured it. The writing was clear to everyone. To prevent total collapse Püchler (*LXVII. Armeekorps*) allowed the *711. Infanterie-Division* to straighten the line while *Sturmgeschützbrigade 280* would provide the necessary backbone. Meanwhile Von Zangen realised what the Allies were trying to do, namely 'Stoss ueber Klundert bis Hollandsch Diep zu

¹⁴⁹⁸ This section, Operational Report Pol 1st Arm Div, 43, and Didden and Swarts, *Brabant Bevrijd*, 248-250.

¹⁴⁹⁹ Details: Second TAF, Daily Log, 03.11.44 and 84 Group IS 85, 04.11.44.

¹⁵⁰⁰ Breakdown: 146 Wing (193, 197, 257 and 266 Squadrons) with 41 Typhoons; 135 Wing (33, 222, 349 and 485 Squadrons) with 48 Spitfires, and 145 Wing (74, 329, 341 and 345 Squadrons) with 48 Spitfires.

¹⁵⁰¹ Dellepoort en Nijman, *Bevrijding van Oud-Gastel*, 28.

vertiefen um Korps zu spalten’¹⁵⁰² His orders were clear. Püchler’s was told to delay the enemy advance for as long as possible ‘ohne dabei wesentliche Teile der Vernichtung auszusetzen’.¹⁵⁰³ In other words, over the next few days Püchler’s divisions were to execute an orderly withdrawal as slowly as possible. Moreover it was complicated by the fact that there was only one land route, the road and railway bridges at Moerdijk. The rest of the evacuation would, once more, rely heavily on the assistance of the *Kriegsmarine*.

More devastation

The Polish attack early on 4 November started at Den Hout and fanned out from there.¹⁵⁰⁴ One battle group went to take Terheijden, while the main attack was in the direction of Made (the shortest route to the Maas) where it clashed with the bulk of *Grenadier-Regiment 744* and *Sturmgeschützbrigade 280*, who were just getting ready for a counterattack. The German force had taken up position behind an old line of fortifications and their accurate fire brought the Polish attack to a standstill. But once more the Royal Air Force showed up in force, in support of the troops of the ground. It was the biggest air support so far and a large number of missions were flown, both during the morning and the afternoon and all key positions in front of the advancing Allied units were plastered with bombs and rocket projectiles. A staggering 172 tons of bombs (of all calibres) were dropped on a relatively small area.¹⁵⁰⁵ A factory in Zevenbergen, which was used by the *245. Infanterie-Division* as an ammunition dump, in addition to twenty-eight 500-pounders was hit by especially heavy ordnance, four 1,000 pounders. The air intervention was the straw that broke the camel’s back for the German defenders, including *Kampfgruppe Bieg*.¹⁵⁰⁶ The previous day they had managed to block the Essex’ advance before pulling back in the direction of Moerdijk, which is how they ended up opposite the Polish division.¹⁵⁰⁷ But even the skills of a *Ritterkreuzträger* were to no avail. There was no stopping the Poles now.

This intervention by the Second Tactical Air Force must have shaken the German defenders in Made. Still it was not enough for them to abandon the village and eventually the flame-throwing Crocodiles of C Squadron Fife and Forfar Yeomanry were asked to support the Poles.¹⁵⁰⁸ The Fife and Forfars tried out a new tactic. No.1 Troop drove down the main street flaming all the houses causing the German infantry to rush out at the back where they were then caught by No.2 and 4 Troops.

¹⁵⁰² KTB 88 AK, C 310, 03.11.44.

¹⁵⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰⁴ This section, Didden and Swarts, *Brabant Bevrijd*, 250-2, and Operational Report Pol 1st Armd Div, 44.

¹⁵⁰⁵ Details, Second TAF, Daily Log, 04.11.44. In the morning 84 Spitfires and 45 Typhoons came into action, during the afternoon 72 Spitfires and 52 Typhoons attacked.

¹⁵⁰⁶ It appears that Major Bieg, whom we last saw near ‘s-Hertogenbosch, was sent back across the river Maas at the end of October to command a new Kampfgruppe composed of four companies, the second containing eighty men from 331. Infanterie-Division while the rest of his unit came from the remnants of MG Bataillon 14 and 29 Festungs MG Bataillon. Details I Corps, IS 95, 03.11.44, and First Cdn Army IR PoW 712. I.D. 26.10.44. Later these two battalions were incorporated in the 712. I.D. (Frontnachweiser 10)

¹⁵⁰⁷ 49th Div, IS 75, 03.11.44.

¹⁵⁰⁸ Details, Sellar, *Fife and Forfar*, 74.

It was a massacre and by the time the village was taken, four p.m., it was ablaze from one end to the other. The other Polish battle group meanwhile captured Terheijden and Wagenberg. Reichert's division had suffered appalling losses (in addition to the killed and wounded 126 men had been taken prisoner). It pulled back a few kilometres and dug in along the railway line Geertruidenberg- Zevenbergschen Hoek. The *Grenadiere* were now just four kilometres from the vital bridge at Moerdijk. The first *Sturmgeschütze* of 280 were sent across to safety that day. Eventually thirty-two could be brought back safely.¹⁵⁰⁹

The other divisions in I Corps also continued their advance. The Americans started at ten a.m. and advanced in a northeasterly direction, the 413th Regiment on the left, the 415th on the right. Their opponent, the *245. Infanterie-Division*, was powerless to halt the American advance although *Sturmgeschützbrigade 244* did everything it could to delay the inevitable. In fact, if it had not been for the *Sturmgeschütze*, Sander's division would have collapsed altogether.¹⁵¹⁰ By the end of the day the Timberwolves were closing in on Klundert and Zevenbergen and they were just a few kilometres from their ultimate objective, the Hollands Diep (as the Maas estuary is known here). In order to keep the momentum going now that the end was, literally, in sight, Major-General Allen ordered the 414th Regiment to carry on during the night. However, their left-hand neighbours, the 49th (West Riding) Division, had not done so well that Saturday.

The main problem was the inundated terrain which restricted all movement to the few dykes. After liberating Fijnaart the Hallams headed west as far as Oude Molen while the 1/4th King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry (KOYLI) advanced along the left flank of the Americans, as far as Oude Stoof. At the same time the 2nd Gloucester Regiment struck out west from Stampersgat which it had captured the day before. The battalion then hit upon groups of *Fallschirmjäger* whose sole purpose was to cover the withdrawal of *Kampfgruppe Chill*. Because of the flat terrain it took the Glosters until four p.m. to break the German resistance. After this the 11th Royal Scots Fusiliers took over and they continued to head for Dinteloord. By the time they got there (the following day) their opponent had escaped. That night the last elements of *Kampfgruppe Chill* were evacuated from Dinteloord by the *Kriegsmarine*.¹⁵¹¹ Fighting a stiff southwesterly wind a small flotilla of fifteen boats sailed into Dintelsas at 23.35 hours to pick up the last of the *Fallschirmjäger* under Major Pohl.¹⁵¹² The evacuation was hampered by British artillery fire from Stampersgat. Two of the boats, *KFK 44* and *46* were hit, and the latter sank.¹⁵¹³ To make matters worse for the Germans, the ferry had not arrived and Pohl had to send the remaining vehicles across the river Dintel hoping they could still make it to safety using the land route. Just after five a.m. the last vessel left the dock and set sail for Dordrecht where it arrived two hours later. Even though fifty *Fallschirmjäger* could not be rescued in time and were taken prisoner by the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders of Canada, no fewer than 720 had managed to escape and *Kampfgruppe*

¹⁵⁰⁹ I Corps, IS 98, 07.11.44.

¹⁵¹⁰ Hobe, 49.

¹⁵¹¹ KTB F.d. Motorbootverbände 1-15. Nov.44, Anlage 2.

¹⁵¹² This included four KFK, ten boats from the river flotilla and a B 37, a ferry.

¹⁵¹³ KFK = Kriegsfischkutter.

Chill would live to fight another day. As mentioned above, as early as 27 October *Generaloberst Student (Heeresgruppe H)* had intended for *FJR 6* to be sent to the island of Walcheren to reinforce the weak *70. Infanterie-Division* there.¹⁵¹⁴ However, in view of the deteriorating situation there the idea was soon dropped.

Breakthrough

On Sunday 5 November the advance of I Corps followed its relentless course and for the third consecutive day it was supported by 84 Group RAF, albeit on a very much reduced scale as most of the Wings went back to rail interdiction missions. In fact only four squadrons were in action that day dropping bombs on or near Dinteloord, Klundert and Blauwe Sluis.¹⁵¹⁵ For the 49th (West Riding) Division the end of the campaign was still some way off. The Hallams at Oude Molen had been forced out of the village after a fierce German counterattack. However, the attackers' only intention was to gain time for the withdrawal and by noon *Grenadier-Regiment 858* (or rather what was left of it) abandoned the village again and fell back in the direction of Willemstad. There, in the old fortress town on the Hollands Diep, they would make their last stand the following day. Meanwhile the 11th Royal Scots Fusiliers had established contact with the Canadians east of Dinteloord. Reaching the river Dintel marked the end of the autumn campaign for the Canadian 4th Armoured Division. East of there Klundert proved a tough nut to crack and the 1/4th KOYLI was temporarily held up by a group just outside this key village. Then the Royal Air Force intervened. Ten Spitfires from 74 Squadron (145 Wing) dropped the same number of 500-pounders on the centre of the village, obliterating it and killing seventy-five civilians in the process. The KOYLIs captured the village, which looked like a furnace during the afternoon. And although one KOYLI noted that the 'bloody Germans had set fire to the place' the truth was that the bombs and Allied artillery had done the job.¹⁵¹⁶ Three kilometres to the east Zevenbergen was also captured at some cost to the civilians.

There the Timberwolves could finally finish their part in Operation Rebound.¹⁵¹⁷ At four p.m. the first G.I.s reached the Hollands Diep. In a symbolic gesture the soldiers from the 414th Regiment dipped their mugs in the blue-grey water. Around the same time the 415th Regiment had begun the attack on Zevenbergen which was in their hands as darkness fell. The village had also suffered terribly from the continuous Allied barrages. In all eighty-five civilians were killed. The Timberwolves reached a small stream, the Roode Vaart, on the west side of Moerdijk. The American advance had achieved its purpose. The front of *LXVII. Armeekorps* was now split in two. In the eastern sector the *711.* and the *245. Infanterie-Division* pulled back towards the Moerdijk bridge followed closely by the 1st Polish Armoured Division. However, the terrain still favoured the defenders who were dug in behind the railway embankment between Zevenbergschenhoek and Hoge Zwaluwe. *Sturmgeschützbrigade 244* in Zevenbergschenhoek in particular

¹⁵¹⁴ Manuscript Van Hilten, 14.

¹⁵¹⁵ Second TAF, Daily Log, 05.11.44. The squadrons were: 74 and 341 from 145 Wing and 302 and 317 from 131 Wing.

¹⁵¹⁶ Quoted in Patrick Delaforce, *The Polar Bears, From Normandy to the relief of Holland with the 49th Division*, Stroud 1995.

¹⁵¹⁷ This section, Didden and Swarts, *Brabant Bevrijd*, 253-5.

still put up a hell of a fight and the hamlet of Blauwe Sluis remained in German hands.¹⁵¹⁸ It was a minor defensive success that bought the retreating Germans valuable time. Afterwards the achievement of 244 was officially recognised when it was mentioned in the *Wehrmachtsbericht* of 29 November where it said that 'Die Heeressturmgeschützbrigade 244 unter Führung von Hauptmann Jaschke hat in zehntägigen pausenlosen Kämpfen an der Westfront die schwerringende Infanterie durch besondere Standhaftigkeit unterstützt und bei nur zwei eigenen Ausfällen 54 schwere und schwerste englische und amerikanische Panzer sowie 12 Panzerspähwagen vernichtet'.¹⁵¹⁹ The bridge at Moerdijk now became the responsibility of *Oberstleutnant* L. von Alvensleben.¹⁵²⁰ Von Zangen made him responsible 'mit seinem Kopf.' Von Alvensleben had to see to it that the bridge was blown in time so that it would not fall into enemy hands intact.¹⁵²¹ During the night the 711. *Infanterie-Division* moved to the other side of the Hollands Diep across the Moerdijk bridge leaving *Generalleutnant* Sander's 245. *Infanterie-Division* inside the reduced bridgehead.

In the western sector the bulk of the 346. *Infanterie-Division* plus *Grenadier-Regiment 937* (*Oberstleutnant* Walter Nass of 245. *I.D.*) and *III./FJR 6* (*Hauptmann* Von Hütz) had retreated to Willemstad. As the fall of the town could now only be a matter of days the evacuation started that night.¹⁵²² After the evacuation of *Kampfgruppe Chill* this was the second time that the *Kriegsmarine* had to evacuate a large body of soldiers. In order to cope with over a thousand men and equipment *Korvettenkapitän* H. Engel, *Führer der Motorbootsverbände in den Niederlanden*, sent a small fleet of no fewer than twenty-one small vessels. It was a mixed bag of escort ships, river boats and motor launches plus two big Dutch ferries, the 'Koningin Emma' and the 'Willemsdorp'. It was another windy and wet night, but at 01:45 hours the first boat docked at Willemstad and three hours later the last one arrived. Even though shells landed around them, all the vessels were gone again within an hour and 1,200 soldiers, light *Flak* guns, assorted vehicles, horses and even two 10.5 cm howitzers were brought back to safety. But even then the Germans did not give up stalling for time yet. A rearguard, consisting mainly of *Fallschirmjäger* under *Oberstleutnant* Nass, was left behind in Willemstad and they would play a trick on their adversaries the following day.

Still stalling

Monday 6 November would see the end of the fighting for the Polar Bears.¹⁵²³ Setting off from Oude Molen the 2nd South Wales Borderers via Heijningen arrived in Helwijk, just one kilometre from Willemstad. Fearing that an all out attack on the old fortress town over completely open terrain would be a costly and bloody operation, the divisional commander, Major-General Barker, decided to put an ultimatum before

¹⁵¹⁸ It seems highly likely that by that time Sturmgeschützbrigade 280 had already pulled back across the Moerdijk bridge.

¹⁵¹⁹ *Die Wehrmachtsberichte*, Band 3, 351.

¹⁵²⁰ Later the 'Insel Gruppen Kommandant' (island commander) at Goeree Overflakkee.

¹⁵²¹ KTB OB West, 994/44, 03.11.44.

¹⁵²² Details KTB F.d. Motorbootsverbände 1-15 Nov. 44, Anlage 3, and KTB Adm. In den Niederl. 06.11.44.

¹⁵²³ This section, Didden and Swarts, *Brabant Bevrijd*, 258.

the Germans: surrender or be obliterated. His adjutant, Lieutenant-Colonel Hughes, was sent to negotiate. His opponent, *Oberstleutnant Nass*, was an experienced commander and not willing to throw in the towel yet. Nass was said to have 'Gutes taktisches Verständnis, sicheres Urteil' to be 'Geistig beweglich'.¹⁵²⁴ As one of his men put it, Nass was a man 'whose vocabulary has never, at least in military things, contained the word 'impossible''.¹⁵²⁵ Nass thought he knew a way out of even this mousetrap and he rejected the ultimatum, but agreed to a truce between two and six p.m. to allow the civilians to leave. Unknown to the British Nass was going to play a trick on them. While they were busy taking care of the refugees Nass ordered his troops to fall back to the harbour. The ruse worked and the evacuation of the rearguard took place during the night. Four launches and an unknown number of *Pionier-Sturmboote* picked up 179 men.¹⁵²⁶ Because the boats were too small to take it aboard all the equipment had to be left behind. The job was finished around two a.m. As the last *Fallschirmjäger* were sailing away the first Lincolns entered the town to find it free of enemy troops. With the capture of Willemstad operation Rebound was finished and two days later the 49th (West Riding) Division was finally allowed a well earned rest and the 18th Canadian Armoured Regiment (12th Manitoba Dragoons) assumed control of the division front. Further east the Poles had only just arrived at the last main point of resistance, Moerdijk.

After the departure of the *711. Infanterie-Division* (except for some rearguards) the previous night, the road and railway bridges at Moerdijk were blown between four and five a.m.¹⁵²⁷ The only German troops left in and around Moerdijk were one company from each of the three battalions in *Grenadier-Regiment 935 (245. I.D.)*, the bulk of *II./Grenadier-Regiment 723 (719 I.D.)* and three *Sturmgeschütze* from *Sturmgeschützbrigade 244*. In addition there was *6./16 Schiffstamm Bataillon (Leutnant Hoffner)*, one of six companies of a naval basic training battalion. While the other five companies remained north of the river Waal, this one had been sent to Moerdijk in mid October to prevent the bridges from falling into Allied hands prematurely.¹⁵²⁸ All in all the bridgehead still contained a sizeable force of about 1,000 soldiers.¹⁵²⁹ Casualties soon began to mount. The problem was that it was almost impossible for the troops to dig in owing to the wet ground. Moreover, they were not only shelled by the Allies, but also had to deal with the occasional shells from their artillery north of the river. In addition to blowing up the bridges the *Pioniere* had also destroyed most of the dock area. This led the *Kriegsmarine* to state that, when asked, under these circumstances they could no longer help out, especially since the front line was now '800 M[etres] away'.¹⁵³⁰ The latter was not true, but it was clear that without proper quays evacuating the troops by water was now highly problematical. But things were not easy for their opponents either. After

¹⁵²⁴ Personalakten Nass, 01.03.44 by Generalleutnant Sander.

¹⁵²⁵ First Cdn Army, IR PoW 245. I.D. 29.10.44.

¹⁵²⁶ KTB Adm. in den Niederl. 07.11.44, 14:43 hours.

¹⁵²⁷ I Corps Ops Log, 06.11.44, Serial 918. This section, Didden and Swarts, Brabant *Bevrijd*, 259 and Operational Report 1st Pol Armd Div, 45.

¹⁵²⁸ First Cdn Army IR PoW German Naval Miscellaneous Units, 10.11.44.

¹⁵²⁹ I Corps, IS 99, 08.11.44. Von Hobe, 53, suggests that GR 936 and I./GR 723 also stayed behind, but in that case more soldiers would have been captured.

¹⁵³⁰ KTB F.d.Motorbootsverbände, 06.11.44, 01:00 hours.

discovering that the Germans had pulled back to Moerdijk the Poles had followed up, capturing Blauwe Sluis, Hoge Zwaluwe and Zevenbergschenhoek and they cleared the area as far as the river Maas. They took 93 prisoners, all of them from the *711. Infanterie-Division*. In addition the 2nd Battery 1st Polish Anti-Tank Regiment proudly, but erroneously, reported that it had knocked out a *Jagdpanther*.¹⁵³¹ Obviously nobody had claimed the abandoned vehicle until then.

Blasting away

On 7 November the Poles finally arrived at the outer edge of the Moerdijk defences. In view of the intensive mining and flooding of the fields all movement was restricted to the roads. To add to the Polish problems, they found that all three roads into the village were blocked by huge concrete anti-tank obstacles. It was clear that the regular artillery could not deal with these imposing, two-metre thick walls. For the moment the defenders were secure behind these seemingly impregnable barriers. After having established that artillery shells could not break down the anti-tank obstacles, General Maczek decided upon another approach.¹⁵³² He held an officers' conference. He ordered *10 Pułk Strzelców Konnych (PSK)* to blast a passage through the concrete walls using armour piercing rounds. Once this was accomplished the Shermans of *24th Pułk Ułanów* would pass through followed by the infantry of the 9th Polish Rifle Battalion. Led by its commander, Major Wasilewski, the Polish Cromwell tanks in pairs began to shell the concrete wall. Two tanks fired simultaneously until all their shells were spent after which they made way for the following pair. Shell after shell slammed into the concrete walls while the Germans replied with mortar and artillery fire. The din was incredible and the initial results were disappointing, but slowly parts of the wall began to crumble. It was clear that the task would not be completed until the following day. Meanwhile the *Kriegsmarine*, at the request of the *245. I.D.* sent a boat (*HM 28*) to Moerdijk with supplies, mainly food, batteries and *Panzerfäuste*.¹⁵³³ However, the boat waited underneath the bridges in vain, watching for signs from land before turning back to Dordrecht.

At ten a.m. on 8 November the gaps in the anti-tank walls were finally wide enough for tanks to pass through. All in all 2,500 shells had been fired. Now it was up to the Shermans of *24th Pułk Ułanów*. Major Wasilewski informed his colleague, Major W. Rakowski, second-in-command of the 24th and in charge of the operation, that two of the three walls had been breached. Rakowski ordered No.3 Squadron to take the direct road straight for the bridges using the middle passage while No.1 Squadron hooked around to the right in order to cut off retreating Germans. Assistance from the Royal Air Force was requested, but not granted because weather conditions were said to be unfavourable.¹⁵³⁴ The final attack on Moerdijk began just after noon, covered by the usual withering heavy artillery barrage by no fewer than ten regiments. Still, the attack by No.3 Squadron misfired almost immediately. The first

¹⁵³¹ I Corps Ops Log, 0.11.44, Serial 938.

¹⁵³² This section, Didden and Swarts, *Brabant Bevrijd*, 259-261.

¹⁵³³ KTB F.d.Motorbootsverbände, 06.11.44, 23:30 hours. HM stands for Holland Maas Flottille one of the units commanded by the F.d.M.

¹⁵³⁴ There was indeed some ground haze, but Second Tactical Air Force flew plenty of rail interdiction missions that same day (Second TAF, Daily Log for 08.11.44).

tank went through the obstacle and ran on a mine. It then had to be towed back after which the mines were cleared. The second tank came up and burst into flames, probably hit by a *Pak* gun. By the time the third Sherman was able to drive up Rakowski cancelled the attack. It was three p.m. and he had just learned that No.1 Squadron had just reached the area of the bridges. The rest of the Shermans and then the infantry came up heading into the village itself. The whole village was ablaze and progress was slow. The German defenders would not give an inch and capturing Moerdijk took all day. The first to reach the bridges were the 3rd Company 8th Polish Rifle Battalion. As night fell the Germans still held out in a tiny pocket around the harbour area.

The final evacuation

While the battle was raging in Moerdijk on the other side of the water *Generalleutnant* Sander and his *Ia*, *Oberstleutnant* H.G. Mayer, had a heated discussion with *Korvettenkapitän* Engel about the evacuation of the troops remaining in Moerdijk.¹⁵³⁵ Engel pointed out that the operation needed to be finished before ten p.m. in connection with high tide as the landing craft and barges would no longer be able to leave the beach after that. Three landing points which were to be marked by lamps were agreed upon, two west of the road bridge, one east of the railway bridge, and nine boats and two tugs were assigned the task.¹⁵³⁶ *Leutnant zur See* Schmidt was in charge of the operation. The vessels left Dordrecht at 18:45 hours and slowly sailed south. As they neared the landing area they received a radio message from the *245. I.D.* informing them that the landing point near the railway bridge was no go as Polish tanks had already captured the area. Then shells began to fall around the small fleet. Still the boats persisted and they managed to make it to the other sites. But there were no lamps or troops to be seen, except for thirty soldiers in a pillbox. After half an hour Schmidt decided to turn back as hanging around was far too risky. Back in Dordrecht Schmidt reported to Engel who in turn asked Meyer why the *245. I.D.* had changed its mind. When he heard the news Sander was furious and accused the *Kriegsmarine* of defeatism which Engel vehemently rejected. He agreed to send the fleet back but only after taking on board some infantry officers which Sander agreed to. The second trip began just after midnight and had to brave squalls of rain and hail.

The round trip took about five hours and this time the boats brought back ninety-four soldiers and some mortars. The rest of the defenders had already been taken off the beaches by *Sturmboote* from the army that managed to rescue about five hundred men in spite of the atrocious weather. One of the boats in the naval flotilla, *MAL 25*, got into trouble as it ran aground at low-tide. Attempts to pull it free failed and eventually it was blown up. The crew and the sixty soldiers -among them *Oberst* Neumann, the *Kommandeur* of *723 G.R.* - it had on board, tried to get back crawling over the demolished railway bridge. Neumann and twenty-seven of his men made it to the northern shore, clambering up and walking along the remaining sections, swimming when necessary.¹⁵³⁷ As dawn broke Polish soldiers spotted the last

¹⁵³⁵ KTB Adm.in den Nied., 08.11.44, 14:30 hours.

¹⁵³⁶ Ibid, 09.11.44, 04:45 hours gives eight boats and two tugs.

¹⁵³⁷ Special Interrigation report Schwalbe.

stragglers and opened fire on the soldiers hanging between the girders, killing the majority. The fighting in Moerdijk had finally ended. The Poles were now on the southern shore all along the line and they saw the demolished bridge spans in the murky waters of the Hollands Diep. Through their binoculars they could also see their adversaries across the water, about a kilometre and a half away. In Moerdijk itself the rearguard, 379 soldiers, were taken prisoner. It was 9 November, the conclusion of the Allied campaign against *15. Armee*.

Twenty kilometres to the east the other German bridgehead -around Heusden - had been cleared three days before (Operation Guy Fawkes). In their first canal crossing the 51st (Highland) Division fought an enemy force that consisted of the *59. Infanterie-Division* (mainly from *Grenadier-Regimenten 1035* and *1036*) and *Fallschirmjäger-bataillone* Gramse and Bloch plus remnants of an SS-battalion, under Sturmbannführer Herbert Gillhofer (*II./SS-Panzergranadier-Regiment 22*).¹⁵³⁸ The crossing which was launched on Saturday at five p.m. was successful. The advance was carried on during the night and the following day the Scots reached the banks of the river Maas. When they entered the fortress town of Heusden the 5th Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders were confronted with a tragedy. During the night a *Sprengkommando* had blown up the town hall, even though they knew that the population was in the cellars, killing 134 civilians. It was, at best, criminal negligence, at worst a wilful atrocity. At the end of the day another German bridgehead had been eliminated.

Balance

The battle for the approaches to Antwerp was finally over after the island of Walcheren had been captured on 5 November and Moerdijk fell into Polish hands four days later. It was the end of a gruelling campaign which had begun just over two months before, on 6 September. It had been a costly campaign, for both sides.¹⁵³⁹ But *General* Von Zangen could be content. The depleted divisions of the *15. Armee* had prolonged the inevitable for as long as was humanly possible and, even more importantly, had been able to pull back the bulk of the units and most of the materiel intact. In view of Germany's economic position and production problems the latter even pleased Hitler himself when *Generaloberst* Alfred Jodl, *Chef des Wehrmachtführungsstabes im OKW*, acquainted him with the facts.¹⁵⁴⁰ Von Zangen was awarded the *Eichenlaub* for the successful way he had led *15. Armee* during the retreat and battles since August. In the final analysis denying the Allies the use of Antwerp for as long as possible and gaining time to rebuild units in Germany had been the only realistic goal for the German High Command. In that they had succeeded beyond all expectations, assisted by Montgomery's obstinacy, the inclement weather, the terrain and the skill of some commanders and units on the ground, notably *Kampfgruppe Chill*. The fact that it was not until 28 November, that the first Allied vessel, a Canadian-built Liberty ship, the *Fort Catarqui*, berthed in

¹⁵³⁸ Second Army, IS 154, 05.11.44 and IS 155, 06.11.44.

¹⁵³⁹ For 4th Cdn Arm Div alone: Operation Suitcase cost it 945 casualties whereas it inflicted about 4,000 cas on the Germans, of whom 1,495 were captured. It lost 36 tanks and destroyed seven SPs (I Corps Ops Log, 08.11.44, Serial 981).

¹⁵⁴⁰ Heiber, *Lagebesprechungen*, 702.

Antwerp, eighty-five days after Antwerp was captured by the 11th Armoured Division, was in itself a testimony to the tenacity of the German defence.¹⁵⁴¹

Conclusion

During the final fighting south of the river Maas *Kampfgruppe Chill* contributed to the delaying of the inevitable by its protracted and successful defences first in the Bergen op Zoom area, one of the two key points in the German defensive system, and subsequently at Steenberg. These engagements enabled *15. Armee* to pull back intact by and large and set up a new defensive line behind the river Maas. Proof of the efficacy of the defensive actions of *Kampfgruppe Chill* even at this final stage of the campaign to clear the Scheldt estuary can be found in the directive (JSM 315) sent by the Joint Staff Mission on 23 October 1944, just as Operations Pheasant and Suitcase were getting underway.¹⁵⁴² In this directive the JSM ordered General Eisenhower to 'conduct operations with the objective of completing the defeat of Germany by 1 January.'¹⁵⁴³ They had even prepared a timetable the day before in which a Ruhr offensive would start on 15 December resulting in a 'German collapse' within a fortnight. That the Joint Staff Mission took this best case scenario seriously can also be deduced from the fact that in the same document Eisenhower was assured that they would 'give maximum support to this all-out effort' and 'Nothing will be held back.' Just over one week later, on 31 October, the optimism had evaporated and the Directorate of Military Operations predicted, fairly accurately as it turned out, that the war in the West would end on 15 May 1945. One can only conclude that the continuing fierce German resistance had finally made the Allied planners realize that they would definitely have to start thinking 'beyond the 31st December, 1944.'¹⁵⁴⁴ Whereas for the Allies seizing the area between the Albert Canal and the Maas (and Rhine) had been about maintaining the momentum of the rapid advance through northern France and Belgium and thus entering the German heartland before winter set in, for the German High Command it had always been about gaining time.¹⁵⁴⁵ Operationally speaking for them the province of North Brabant was not essential territory, it was a bridgehead to deny the Allies the use of Antwerp for as long as possible. This is evident from the reluctant authorization Hitler gave Von Zangen on 29 October 1944, allowing him to pull his army back, but only on condition that he maintain bridgeheads south of the Maas for as long as possible. For a while the Allied commanders had expected their successful advance to continue whereas the German commanders had feared that the end was nigh. The immediate outcome of the engagements discussed above, in fact of the whole autumn campaign, was never a foregone conclusion and often could have gone either way. That it tilted in the Germans' favour for a while is a tribute to the fighting qualities of *Kampfgruppe Chill* which had played a key role from the beginning to the very end.

¹⁵⁴¹ Ellis, *Victory Volume II*, 127.

¹⁵⁴² The JSM was the tri-service committee in Washington headed by Field-Marshal Sir John Dill.

¹⁵⁴³ TNA, WO 106/4338, 57A, 56B and 55A.

¹⁵⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 64A.

¹⁵⁴⁵ Dr. H. Amersfoort, 'Noord-Brabant en Operatie Market Garden, September-oktober 1944', *Militaire Spectator* 163 (1994), 446.

PART FOUR, THE WESTERN FRONT 9 NOVEMBER 1944

'The idea of decisive battle continues in the West.'¹⁵⁴⁶

'... the seemingly endless habit of the Allies to underestimate the tenacity of their opponent.'¹⁵⁴⁷

4.1 The military situation

At the start of November the situation on the western front for the Twenty-First Army Group was nothing like what it had been two months earlier. Then the situation had been fluid in the extreme, full of potential for Montgomery's troops and with the sword of Damocles hanging over the *Reich*. Now, at the end of autumn, large sectors of the front were static and the approaches to Antwerp had finally been cleared. South of the river Maas the left hand sector was covered by the First Canadian Army, the right hand one by the British Second Army. Here the British units had recently been dealing with a spoiling attack. As Operation Pheasant was gaining momentum on 25 October *Generalfeldmarschall* Model, *Oberbefehlshaber Heeresgruppe B*, looked for a way to relieve the pressure on *15. Armee*.¹⁵⁴⁸ His eye fell on the centre of the Peel marshes where the 7th US Armored Division (Major-General Lindsay McD. Silvester) was known to hold a line of more than thirty kilometres. Model reckoned that a diversionary attack there might just do the trick. Von Rundstedt, *Oberbefehlshaber West*, agreed and offered him *XLVII. Panzerkorps* under *General* Heinrich *Freiherr* von Lüttwitz. This *Korps* consisted of the *9. Panzer-Division* and the *15. Panzergrenadier-Division* and boasted about 25,000 men, thirty brand new *Panther* tanks and dozens of *Sturmgeschütze* and *Jagdpanzer IV*. Von Rundstedt had only one reservation, it was to be an attack with 'a limited objective'. Focus of the attack was the town of Meijel. The attack by the *9. Panzer-Division* began before dawn on 27 October and caught the Americans by surprise. After the infantry had crossed bridges were constructed, the first Panthers rattled across and at eight a.m. the Germans captured Meijel. From there two routes ran westwards, one towards Liessel, the other towards Asten. Silvester ordered his CCR to block both routes.¹⁵⁴⁹ Now the *15. Panzergrenadier-Division* joined in to exploit the gap. As Silvester's division could not hold the attack on its own Field-Marshal Montgomery on 28 October decided to send both the 6th Guards Tank Brigade and the 15th (Scottish) Division, which had just captured Tilburg, to relieve the Americans. These measures bore fruit almost immediately. The British artillery in particular proved most effective in delaying the German advance and it was stopped about halfway between Meijel and Asten, although the *Grenadiere* managed to capture Liessel the following day. Sunday 29 October marked the zenith of the German spoiling attack. Model would have liked to press on, but Von Rundstedt was content. Because he was one of the

¹⁵⁴⁶ Victor Davis Hanson, *Carnage and Culture, Landmark Battles in the Rise of Western Power*, New York 2001, 97.

¹⁵⁴⁷ D'Este, *Decision in Normandy*, 368.

¹⁵⁴⁸ This section, unless otherwise specified, Didden and Swarts, *Einddoel Maas*, 205-213, and Wim Klinkert, 'Opmars naar de Maas', in Klep and Schoenmaker, *De Bevrijding*, 223-6.

¹⁵⁴⁹ American armoured divisions usually deployed their troops in Combats Commands, called A, B and R (reserve).

few in the know about the coming offensive in the Ardeness he was happy to let the matter rest there. He knew that he was going to need Von Lüttwitz' *Korps* for a bigger job and he also needed a reserve force behind the *Westwall*. Still Model persuaded Von Rundstedt to give him another twenty-four hours. However, the attempt to capture Asten failed and the Scottish division retook Liessel on 31 October. Von Rundstedt ordered his troops to fall back and the attack was basically over. Nevertheless retaking Meijel and clearing the area up to the canals over the next few days was 'one of the most difficult and costly actions (...) in North-West Europe,' for some of the units involved.¹⁵⁵⁰ What it taught the Allies was never to take anything for granted in this campaign and the clearing of the Peel marshes as far as the river Maas was an operation painstakingly planned and executed under the appropriate code-name 'Nutcracker'. In the final analysis the spoiling attack never really fulfilled its purpose, because on the very first day the Allies were already aware of the nature of the attack because a message of the *Heeresgruppe* had been deciphered. Hence they had never felt the need to slow down the operations against Von Zangen's *Armee*. All in all the *OKW* was both content and not with the outcome of the autumn campaign. The German high command was happy because, 'Dadurch lag nun ein starkes Naturhindernis vor der 15. Armee,' but continued to fret, because, on the other hand, 'Gegner hatte Kräfte freibekommen, die er sofort nach Osten vorschob, wo nun in Kürze der Grosskampf begann.'¹⁵⁵¹ So what was the strategic situation like in early November 1944?

4.2 The German and Allied strategic positions

During the first week, while the last engagements were being fought on Walcheren and in Brabant, Von Zangen's army was taking up positions north of the rivers Maas and Waal. Initially Hitler feared that the Allies might try and outflank the new defensive system by capturing the islands north of Walcheren.¹⁵⁵² Since Von Rundstedt had no further reserves to cover this flank he ordered preparations for the destruction of the docks at Rotterdam to begin immediately. On the 5th, however, Hitler was apparently less anxious and he decided that the docks were still useful and were to be spared.¹⁵⁵³ On 7 November Von Rundstedt issued a new directive to *Heeresgruppe H* which was to take over three days later from *Heeresgruppe B* which was to start planning for the Ardennes offensive ('*Wacht am Rhein*'). As related earlier Von Rundstedt told the *Oberbefehlshaber* of *Heeresgruppe H*, *Generaloberst Student*, to set up a 'hachhältender Verteidigung', behind the major rivers (Maas, Waal and Rhine) in the Netherlands, while maintaining and/or creating as many bridgeheads as possible south of them. Student was told to retain three bridgeheads on the left bank of the rivers Rhine and Maas. One was south of Arnhem, one east west of Venlo and one south of Moerdijk.¹⁵⁵⁴ The Moerdijk one was annihilated on the 9th, but those near Arnhem and Venlo were still in German hands. However, the last one was clearly getting the attention of the Allies. It gradually became clear to

¹⁵⁵⁰ Patrick Forbes, *The 6th Guards Tank Brigade, The Story of Guardsmen in Churchill Tanks*, London 1947, 67.

¹⁵⁵¹ Schramm, *Kriegstagebuch*, 7/I, 413.

¹⁵⁵² *Ibid*, 412.

¹⁵⁵³ *Ibid*, 413.

¹⁵⁵⁴ Manuscript Van Hilten, 13-4.

the Germans that, now that Antwerp and its approaches were finally in the hands of the Allies, the next major threat would be a thrust towards the Rhine. The signs were there for all to read. The intelligence section of *OB West* noted that units from the First Canadian Army were taking over the Maas-Waal sector, which could only mean one thing, that the British Second Army was free for commitment elsewhere.¹⁵⁵⁵ That they would focus their attention on the Venlo bridgehead was a foregone conclusion for the German commanders. It was indeed the first step of Montgomery's new plan.

As Montgomery explained to Eisenhower and Bradley during a conference in Brussels on 18 October, for him the Ruhr was still the most important objective.¹⁵⁵⁶ The result was that, after it had opened up the port of Antwerp, the Twenty-First Army Group was to launch an attack from the Nijmegen bridgehead into the Rhineland. This plan was revised by Eisenhower on 2 November in which he told Montgomery's army group first to 'attack the enemy west of the MEUSE [capitals in original].'¹⁵⁵⁷ Montgomery was also to release the American divisions under his command (the 7th Armored and 104th Infantry) right away to the Twelfth Army Group. The Field-Marshal issued his own directive the same day.¹⁵⁵⁸ Montgomery knew that after clearing the Moerdijk and Venlo bridgeheads fewer troops would be needed to cover the rivers and he could finally prepare for an attack south-eastwards from Nijmegen and northwards across the Rhine to seize the high ground between Arnhem and Apeldoorn with a bridgehead over the IJssel river. In essence, Montgomery still hoped to capture the Market-Garden objectives, albeit two months late. That desire, like the airborne operation, would turn out to be a pipe dream, because of a combination of the appalling weather, difficult terrain and stubborn German resistance.

In the evening of 14 November Operation Nutcracker, aimed at eliminating the German bridgehead around Venlo, was launched. The name was appropriate, because because a huge cracker (five Allied divisions plus armoured brigades) was used to deal with a small, but particularly tough nut (three weakened divisions).¹⁵⁵⁹ The initial stage went well and the 51st and 53rd Divisions rapidly covered the first few miles after crossing the Wessel to Nederweert Canal. The next canal was also crossed fairly quickly three days later. This was quite an achievement in view of the terrain, the lack of metalled roads and the atrocious weather. On 20 November the 15th and 11th Armoured Divisions joined in, followed by the 3rd Division three days later.¹⁵⁶⁰ The Germans were powerless to stop the Allied avalanche and on 25 November the first allied troops reached the banks of the Maas. But then the advance began to bog down, usually literally. It took Dempsey's troops another week to eliminate the last three bridgeheads. Finally Montgomery was free to focus on the next stage, entering the Rhineland. However, the season had caught up with him.

¹⁵⁵⁵ Canadian Report 77, §116.

¹⁵⁵⁶ Montgomery, *Normandy to the Baltic*, 167.

¹⁵⁵⁷ SCAF 118, 02.11.44.

¹⁵⁵⁸ Directive M 534, 02.11.44.

¹⁵⁵⁹ Description Nutcracker: Didden and Swarts, *Einddoel Maas*, 213-8, and Wim Klinkert, 'Opmars naar de Maas', in Klep and Schoenmaker, *Bevrijding*, 226-232.

¹⁵⁶⁰ Kampfgruppe Chill was assigned to 86 AK on 22.11.44, but did not join in the fighting (see 4.3) as I erroneously reported in *Einddoel Maas*, 215.

The intended starting points were flooded and a new date was set for this operation which was given the code name 'Veritable'.¹⁵⁶¹ Montgomery expected the operation to be launched as soon as possible after 1 January 1945. In the same directive the Field-Marshal evaluated the German strength and concluded that 'his situation is such that he cannot stage major offensive operations.'¹⁵⁶² The same day '*Wacht am Rhein*' was launched and in the end it would take until 28 January 1945 before the old frontline was restored.¹⁵⁶³ Operation Veritable was finally launched eleven days later, on 8 February 1945.¹⁵⁶⁴ The penultimate stage of the attack on the Reich had finally begun.¹⁵⁶⁵

4.3 Postscript for *Kampfgruppe Chill et al*

Kampfgruppe Chill and *Fallschirmjäger-Regiment 6* continued to see heavy fighting after leaving the Netherlands. On 22 November the *Kampfgruppe* together with *Sturmgeschützbrigade 244* were assigned to *LXXXVI. Armeekorps* (Von Obstfelder). On the other side of the river Lieutenant-General Richard O'Connors VIII Corps was steadily pushing back Von Obstfelder's troops in the direction of Venlo on the river Maas (operation Nutcracker). For the moment the *Kampfgruppe* and Jaschke's *Brigade* were to stay on the right (east) bank of the river, pending developments. The same day *Generalleutnant* Chill left his trusty *Kampfgruppe* and got sick leave. His place was temporarily taken over by another *Ritterkreuzträger*, *Oberst* Helmut Bechler. Soon after the *Kampfgruppe* was moved further south and was in the Roermond area astride the boundary of two armies, the *1. Fallschirmarmee* and *Gruppe von Manteuffel*.¹⁵⁶⁶ On 8 December Chill was transferred to the *Führerreserve OKH* and Bechler took over permanently. Chill was subsequently trained as a *Kommandierender General* and ended the war in command of *LV. Armeekorps* near Pillau in East Prussia. On 9 December the *Kampfgruppe*, once more referred to as the *85. Infanterie-Division*, was moved to the Eifel area.¹⁵⁶⁷ The Ardennes offensive (operation *Wacht am Rhein*) was a mere three days away and *LXVII. Armeekorps* and its constituent units were needed further south. Hence the *Kampfgruppe* was to take over a hotly contested area in the Hürtgenwald from the *89. Infanterie-Division* and part of the sector previously defended by the *272. Volksgrenadier-Division*. It was now under *LXXXIV. Armeekorps* (*General* Karl Püchler). Its mission was to protect the important Roer dams. Interestingly the composition of (*Kampfgruppe*) *85. I.D.* during this period and even as late as 28 January 1945 was the same as it had been during the second half of the autumn campaign. It was still composed of two regimental sized *Kampfgruppen*. One consisted of *I., III., and IV./FJR 6*, while *Kampfgruppe Dreyer* was made up of *II./FJR 6* and *I./Fallschirm Panzer Ersatz und Ausbildungs-Regiment Hermann Göring*

¹⁵⁶¹ Directive M 538, 16.12.44.

¹⁵⁶² Ibid, §3.

¹⁵⁶³ Charles MacDonald, *The European Theater of Operations, The Last Offensive*, Washington 1973, 22-68.

¹⁵⁶⁴ Ellis, *Victory Volume II*, 260.

¹⁵⁶⁵ The last stage for 21st Army Group was the crossing of the Rhine on 23 March 1945.

¹⁵⁶⁶ Map in P-157 dated 27.11.44 and map Heeresgruppe H dated 04.12.44 in Die geheimen Tagesberichte. StuGBde 244 was assigned to 5. Pz. Armee and fought in the Ardennes offensive before pulling back to the Düren area. It was destroyed in the Ruhr pocket.

¹⁵⁶⁷ KTB H.Gr.D., 09.12.44, rail transport report, and MacDonald, *The Siegfried Line Campaign*, 602.

(*Bataillon Pohl*).¹⁵⁶⁸ The only difference therefore with the time frame discussed in this study being the substitution of *Hauptmann Mager's II./FJR 6* for *Batallion Ohler*.

By then the Ardennes offensive had run its course and the German troops in the Eifel were pushed back towards the Rhine. In the course of the heavy fighting Bechler was wounded (4 February 1945) and had to be evacuated. His left hand had to be amputated. Soon after he was promoted to *Generalmajor*. At the end of March the *Kampfgruppe* was virtually annihilated. The *OKW* decided to form a new division from the remnants. It was to be renamed *Infanterie-Division Potsdam*. This was formed up in Döberitz, west of Berlin from 8 April and would be commanded by *Oberst d. Res.* Erich Lorenz. One of the two regiments was commanded by (now) *Oberstleutnant* Pohl. But even as it was being formed the troops were sent west to the Harz mountains (where *3./559* had just arrived) to cover the assembly area of *12. Armee*. The division, at most 6,000 men strong, suffered heavy losses and by then not many German soldiers saw the point of dying at the last minute. On 20 April (Hitler's birthday) Lorenz disbanded his unit and told his men to give themselves up or try to escape. Their comrades in *FJR 6* had also been forced to surrender only three days before. For the remnants of the *Sturmgeschütz* company of *schwere Heeres-Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559* the war had ended on the same day when Kopka officially disbanded the unit and sent the men home. The *Jagdpanther* company held out a bit longer and the last vehicles of *559*, escorted by British, were driven to training grounds near Oldenburg on 22 May 1945.¹⁵⁶⁹

FJR 6 together with the *272. Volksgrenadier-Division* had been responsible for the sector covering the important Roer dams, the southern edge of the Hürtgenwald where in November the American 28th Division had suffered such appalling losses.¹⁵⁷⁰ One of the most memorable battles being fought over the Burgberg where the *Fallschirmjäger* had to fight a formidable adversary, the 2nd Ranger Battalion.¹⁵⁷¹ Although they suffered serious losses the Rangers managed to capture the commanding height on 7 December. Two days later the rest of *Kampfgruppe Chill* joined them. There was also a rare moment when a patrol from *FJR 6* and an American unit celebrated Christmas Eve together in the *Forsthaus* in the Kall valley. The battles continued into 1945. In the ongoing fighting one of the casualties was *Hauptmann* Rolf Mager, the skilful *Kommandeur* of *II./FJR 6*, who died of his wounds in American captivity on 1 January. In February the Americans renewed their offensive to seize the Roer dams once and for all. Control of the dams meant that the Germans could flood the area west of the Rhine at any time. Hence the 78th US Division (Major-General Edwin P. Parker jr.) was told that the capture of the dams was 'the most vital on the entire Western front'.¹⁵⁷² The attack was launched on 5 February and although the division suffered serious casualties they lived up to their nickname, Lightning, and three days later Schmidt and the dams were in American

¹⁵⁶⁸ KTB 88 AK, 28.01.44.

¹⁵⁶⁹ On 8 May 1945 Oberfeldwebel Lothar Heinz, the *Ia* of *559*—unfortunately for historians—destroyed the KTB of the *Abteilung*, all according to the official guidelines, in the presence of two officers (Kopka, *Missbraucht und Gebeutelt*, 191).

¹⁵⁷⁰ This section, Griesser, *Die Löwen von Carentan*, 239-270.

¹⁵⁷¹ MacDonald, *The Siegfried Line Campaign*, 461-3.

¹⁵⁷² MacDonald, *The Last Offensive*, 73.

hands. The *Fallschirmjäger* fell back, now chased by two opponents, Parker's division and the 9th Armored Division (Major-General John W. Leonard). After the fall of Schmidt *Kampfgruppe Chill* and *FJR 6* each went their own way since Henke's regiment was now assigned to the *3. Fallschirmjäger-Division* (*Generalleutnant* Richard Schimpf) which was trying to cover the withdrawal to the Rhine. They failed and the capture of the Remagen bridge by the 9th Armored Division on 7 March sealed the fate of the German troops still west of the river. On 14 March *Oberst* Fritz Hencke and most of the regiment were taken prisoner near Ittenbach. The remainder of *FJR 6* were then told to fall back north in the direction of the Ruhr area, but the situation became increasingly confused and on 17 April the last survivors surrendered at a farmhouse near Velbert, north of Wuppertal. The war for our key players was finally over. Von der Heydte himself had been out of the war for four months by then. He had led a group of *Fallschirmjäger* in *Unternehmen Stösser* which was designed to secure the north flank of the Ardennes offensive. He was captured with a small band of soldiers on 24 December.¹⁵⁷³

¹⁵⁷³ His interrogators were not so favourably impressed by Von der Heydte; they thought that 'though he disclaims any party connections [he] is a dangerous character and his soft and alledgedly intelligent talk was full of falsity and Nazi propaganda' (I Corps, IS 126, 29.12.44).

PART FIVE, CONCLUSIONS

"Battles in fact are chaotic affairs in which personalities and the element of chance play a considerable part. Victory goes to the commander who can first create some sort of order out of the terror and confusion."¹⁵⁷⁴

"The German army was a superb fighting organisation. In point of morale, élan, unit cohesion, and resilience, it probably had no equal among twentieth-century armies."¹⁵⁷⁵

"... time after time they were checked or even induced to withdraw by boldly handled packets of German infantry of greatly inferior strength."¹⁵⁷⁶

"... every officer who for the time being has to act independently, every officer in charge of a patrol is constantly brought face to face with strategical [sic] considerations."¹⁵⁷⁷

The time has come to summarize and analyse the findings concerning the efficacy of *Kampfgruppe Chill*, examine the nature of its fighting power, including morale and mentality, which might offer an explanation for its extraordinary achievements and finally compare it to other *Kampfgruppen* and the rest of the *Wehrmacht*.

5.1 Achievements

In each of the Chapters in Part Three the results of the actions of the *Kampfgruppe* have been analysed. In brief they boil down to the following:

- Undoubtedly the single greatest, most important contribution *Generalleutnant* Chill made to the defence of the *Reich* was to ignore orders from above to fall back to Germany and, instead, on 4 September instruct some of his officers to start collecting groups of soldiers marching back and assemble these into ad hoc fighting groups, thus setting up a security screen behind the Albert Canal, just in time to slow down first and then block the British advance when it was resumed two days later. This was a major operational blow for the Allies who had reckoned on continuing into Germany during the following week. Their advance lost its momentum and would not regain it again until the spring of 1945.
- During the first engagement at Beringen *Kampfgruppe Chill* deflected the Guards attack away from Leopoldsburg, forcing the British to use the only other available route north, via Hechtel. This again completely upset the British timetable and meant that it took them another five days before they had a bridgehead over the next waterway, the Maas-Scheldt Canal.

¹⁵⁷⁴ H. Essame, *The Battle for Germany*, New York 1969, 52-3.

¹⁵⁷⁵ Martin Van Creveld, *Supplying War Logistics from Wallenstein to Patton*, New York 1977, 163.

¹⁵⁷⁶ D'Este, *Decision in Normandy*, 286.

¹⁵⁷⁷ G.F.R. Henderson, *The Science of War: Collected Essays and Letters*, Longmans Green and Co., London 1910, 47, quoted in the *British Army Doctrine Publication*, 3-17.

- During the same period of time, *Kampfgruppe Chill* managed not only to delay the capture of Geel by the 50th (Northumbrian) Division, but even to recapture the town, effectively preventing the British from pursuing another avenue north and enabling Model to concentrate his limited resources. The successful defence also prevented the British from outflanking the defences north of Antwerp. This, in turn, vitiated the Allied operations aimed at opening up the port which affected their overall operational plan.
- After the 15th (Scottish) Division had taken over from the 50th at Geel, it tried to establish a bridgehead north of there at Ten Aard. The successful defence put up by *Kampfgruppe Chill* not only meant that the planned advance towards Turnhout (and beyond to Tilburg) could not be carried out, again securing the defences north of Antwerp, but it also forced Ritchie (XII Corps) to cancel Operation Flood and to use a bridgehead near Lommel instead as a starting point for the advance to protect the flank of XXX Corps during Operation Market Garden. The consequences were far reaching, since this meant that it took XII Corps much longer to advance north, enabling German units (*59. and 245. Infanterie-Division*) to intervene in North Brabant, contributing to the failure of Market Garden.
- By seizing control of part of the Allied CL, nicknamed Hell's Highway by the Americans and the Corridor by the British, south of Veghel for nearly two days *Kampfgruppe Chill* held up traffic and diverted Allied units and in this way was part of the death blow to Operation Market Garden.
- By successfully blocking the attack towards Tilburg in early October. *Kampfgruppe Chill* again frustrated Allied operational plans to advance in the general direction of 's-Hertogenbosch. This advance was to enable Second Army to break out from the Nijmegen area as well as forcing *15. Armee* back across the river Maas. Chill's successful defence again thwarted Montgomery's ambitions to continue the operations into the industrial heart of the *Reich* and hence had both operational and strategic consequences.
- By subsequently preventing the Canadians from seizing the heights near Woensdrecht and isolating the German troops on Walcheren, *Kampfgruppe Chill* ultimately forced Montgomery to reconsider his whole operational thinking which since early September had been focused on one thing and one thing alone: to attack the Ruhr area and isolate it from the rest of Germany.
- Finally, during the final fighting south of the river Maas *Kampfgruppe Chill* contributed to the delaying of the inevitable by its successful defence in the Bergen op Zoom area, one of the two key points in the German defensive system, and at Steenberg. This enabled *15. Armee* to pull back intact by and large and set up a new defensive line behind the river Maas with all the consequences this followed from this.

This answers the first question, to what extent did the actions of the *Kampfgruppe* influence the operational (and strategic) levels? The conclusions above bear

testimony to the success of *Kampfgruppe Chill* and confirm what the Intelligence officers at SHAEF had found in October, i.e. that 'The battle group system, in spite of its many defects, has been a relatively successful expedient, particularly in the early stages of the German attempt at stabilization.'¹⁵⁷⁸ All of the above also points at the answer to the second key question, i.e. who decide the outcome of engagements, the men at the top or the men in the ranks? It is clear that in *Kampfgruppe Chill's* case it was neither the men at the very top, nor the common soldiers, as Tolstoj thought, who decided the outcome of battles and engagements. Rather it was the men in between, the junior and senior officers on the spot like Chill who made the difference between defeat and success. The men in the ranks who were struck by panic could be rallied, if necessary at gun point, and the commanders at the operational (and strategic) levels were often too late, especially in situations where communications with the front had broken down and it was down to the battalion, regimental and divisional commanders to influence the course of events. That this needs no longer be the case nowadays is due to much improved communications where the commanders at the highest level can be informed in real time. Even so, as the tragedy at Srebrenica for example has shown, it is still the commander on the ground who is face to face with his opponent, that can make a difference.

There is another indication of the success of *Kampfgruppe Chill* that needs to be mentioned here, the loss figures for both the German and the Allied sides, since 'one of the main criteria used to measure the level of development of operational art, tactics, command, staff work (...) is the level of losses given a known correlation of forces and means in an engagement or battle.'¹⁵⁷⁹ With respect to the correlation of forces it is evident from the narrative in Part Three that *Kampfgruppe Chill* was always outnumbered and often heavily. The losses it suffered reflect this disparity. Between 4 September and 8 November 1944 the *Kampfgruppe* lost well over 7,000 men.¹⁵⁸⁰ The loss of the equivalent of twelve battalions meant that the infantry was destroyed twice over and reinforcements were constantly needed. Compared to the German losses, 56,200, it is also clear that the *Kampfgruppe*, accounting for 14 %, or one-seventh, of the losses, suffered more than its share which can be explained by its role as *Eingreifreserve* as this meant that it was always in the thick of the fighting. The fact that many counterattacks were undertaken without proper reconnaissance or preparations meant that the Allied artillery caused huge losses. In turn Chill's men inflicted nearly 7,000 casualties on the Allied units it fought against. At first glance these figures may seem a little disappointing for a military unit that fought so efficiently. However, the fact that the *Kampfgruppe* apparently gave as good as it got is an achievement in itself since it fought a numerically superior enemy. Moreover, it is surprising in view of the limited supply of ammunition on the German side which should have resulted in far fewer Allied victims. Also the improvised nature of the unit –whereas the opponents were always regular units that had been fighting for a long time- and the lack of armour make these figures all the more remarkable. Finally, and most impressively, compared to the overall Allied

¹⁵⁷⁸ SHAEF Int notes 31, in: I Corps, IS 83, 21.10.44.

¹⁵⁷⁹ Valeriy Zamulin, *Demolishing the Myth, The Tank Battle at Prokhorovka, Kursk, July 1943: an operational narrative*, Helion & Company Ltd, Solihull 2011. Losses and casualties are both used here to indicate the total number of killed, wounded and missing.

¹⁵⁸⁰ Details of the casualty figures are given in Appendix 4.

losses in this theatre of war and during the same period, 18,000, the casualties *Kampfgruppe Chill* inflicted on its opponents (more than one-third of the total in this theatre and during this period) are disproportionately high and are clear evidence of the efficacy of the battle group. The huge losses, on both sides, are further testimony to the ferocity of the engagements. One thing about the casualty figures is surprising, i.e. that overall German losses in Belgium and Northern France during just the first week of September – a staggering 82,000 men,¹⁵⁸¹ far outnumbered those in the Falaise pocket in August (55,000 men), which so far have attracted most attention and are usually highlighted in the existing literature.¹⁵⁸² These numbers suggest that the real blow to the *Wehrmacht* was not delivered until the following month. Whereas the average German loss figure on the Western front for August was 150,000, for September it rose to 344,000.¹⁵⁸³ These numbers help to explain the desperation felt even by seasoned soldiers such as Model and Von Rundstedt. This total collapse in the west during the first two weeks of September also makes the success and resilience of *Kampfgruppe Chill* both all the more remarkable and more important.

Although the impact of the successful actions of *Kampfgruppe Chill* was huge, Montgomery's persistent denial of reality and continued obsession with the Ruhr was clearly a contributory factor as well. A writer on Montgomery's operational approach concluded that, 'the six-week delay before opening Antwerp constituted the gravest of his errors...'¹⁵⁸⁴ Montgomery himself admitted as much in his memoirs where he wrote 'I must admit a bad mistake on my part – I underestimated the difficulties of opening up the approaches to Antwerp (...) I thought that the Canadian Army could do it *while* [italics in original] we were going for the Ruhr. I was wrong.' Nevertheless, to attribute everything to an erroneous operational approach would be a travesty of the actual fighting as the above narrative has shown. Time and again the *Kampfgruppe*, even when facing vastly numerically superior opposing forces, as at Beringen, Geel, Ten Aard, Veghel, Woensdrecht and Steenberg, managed to delay or block an advance, sometimes even recapture ground by skilful manoeuvring and making full use of the terrain.

The enormous impact this delay had on both Allies and Germans is stressed by the eminent German historian John Zimmermann (whose book on the *Wehrmacht* in 1944 and 1945 was discussed in Chapter 1.2) when he wrote that the failure to reach the Ruhr area in the autumn of 1944 was due to 'das Scheitern der hochfahrenden Pläne Bernard L. Montgomerys beim Unternehmen "Market Garden" ebenso (...) wie durch dessen Unfähigkeit, den Hafen von Antwerpen rechtzeitig (...) freizukämpfen.'¹⁵⁸⁵ The unexpected and major impact *Chill's* battle group had on the Allies is irrefutable. Montgomery himself admitted as much when he wrote about the

¹⁵⁸¹ I Corps, IS 77, 11.10.44 and First Cdn Army IS 109, 12.10.44, and Eisenhower Library AAR First US Army September 1944.

¹⁵⁸² E.g. Blumenson, *Breakout and Pursuit*, 558.

¹⁵⁸³ During the first two weeks of September Second Br Army took no fewer than 39,673 POWs (Second Army, IS 93-105, 05-17.09.44). For the period 1 September -10 November among the top ten of losses among German divisions were 59. I.D. (5,051), 245. I.D. (3,754) and 712. I.D. (3,714).

¹⁵⁸⁴ Hart, *Colossal Cracks*, 170.

¹⁵⁸⁵ *Das Deutsche Reich* 10/1, 279.

first actions of the *Kampfgruppe* at Beeringen, Geel and Lommel, 'considerable opposition', 'well staged counter attacks' and 'The enemy was developing more spirit in his attacks (...) and had clearly received reinforcements of better calibre.'¹⁵⁸⁶ All of the above explains why *General/Von Zangen* in his post-war analysis had no hesitation in singling out the *Kampfgruppe* for his unstinting praise because he described it as 'durch General Chill vorzueglich aufgebaut und im Kampf gefuehrt; wertvollsten Verband der Armee'.¹⁵⁸⁷ Having established that the actions of *Kampfgruppe Chill* had a serious impact on the various levels of military decision making, the question remains, why it was so effective.

5.2 Analysis

Effectiveness for a military unit equals military power. To try and answer the third key question, to find an explanation for why *Kampfgruppe Chill* fought as well as it did, it is necessary to find a framework which defines the military strength, the effectiveness of a given unit. The British armed forces doctrine handbook (2010) provides one. It states that military power consists of three components, the physical component, the conceptual component and the moral one.¹⁵⁸⁸ The physical component is described as 'the means to operate and fight'.¹⁵⁸⁹ Does a unit have the official establishment in terms of men and materiel (German army: *Sollstärke*) or is the actual number of men and weapons (*Iststärke*) less than that? The conceptual component is formed by 'the ideas behind how to operate and fight',¹⁵⁹⁰ in other words the doctrine and the procedures as established in an army, in this case the guiding principles the *Wehrmacht* established before and during the war. The moral component finally, is 'the ability to get people to operate and fight'.¹⁵⁹¹ It refers to the morale, the leadership and the organisation. Analysing how *Kampfgruppe Chill* scores on these three basic elements should explain what made it such an effective fighting force.

5.2.1 The physical component

The physical component of a unit consists of its 'manpower, equipment, collective performance...'¹⁵⁹² The performance has already been discussed above. For the sake of clarity I have broken it down into three aspects, the size (manpower), the armour (equipment) and the presence of what Shils and Janowitz call a 'hard core' of elite troops.

5.2.1.1 Size

When examining the size and structure of a military unit one would normally refer to both the strength it should have according to the official table of organisation and

¹⁵⁸⁶ Montgomery, *Normandy to the Baltic*, 131-2.

¹⁵⁸⁷ Von Zangen, MS B-475, 5.

¹⁵⁸⁸ *Army Doctrine Publication 2010*, 2-2.

¹⁵⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹² Ibid, 2-31.

the actual one, the *Sollstärke* and the *Iststärke* respectively, then compare the two and draw conclusions from that.¹⁵⁹³ A given unit may then be found to be understrength for example in general or in specific elements. However, this litmus test does not apply to a *Kampfgruppe* since by its very nature that has no *Sollstärke*, being an improvised, ad hoc unit. The history of *Kampfgruppe Chill* illustrates this perfectly. As we have seen above (cf. 5.2) it ranged in size from a few battalions to nearly a division. In order to assess its physical component, since there is no *Sollstärke* to refer to, the only frame of reference are the other *Kampfgruppen* (cf. 1.4). Appendix 2 provides an overview of the structure and size of the battle group at various moments during the autumn campaign. Some conclusions can be drawn from these figures. The most important one is that overall, even at its smallest, the average number of infantry within the *Kampfgruppe*, 3,600, or seven strong battalions, was roughly equal that of a regular infantry division.¹⁵⁹⁴ What the unit lacked above all was sufficient artillery and (mobile) anti-tank weapons. This was partly remedied by the inclusion of first *schwere Heeres-Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559* and then *Sturmgeschützbrigade 280* and *667*. It is clear that these SPs played an important role.

5.2.1.2 Armour

A key element for the success of *Kampfgruppe Chill* lay in the self-propelled guns (*Sturmgeschütze*, *Sturmhaubitze* and *Jagdpanther*) that supported it during the various engagements. The actions that the *Kampfgruppe* was involved in have shown that where properly used, i.e. defensively and not offensively, *Sturmgeschütze* and *Panzerjäger*, could be very effective in blocking an Allied advance, even if their tanks outnumbered the German armour. No wonder that these vehicles made such a lasting impression on the German infantry during the final stage of World War Two and are described as a 'Fels in der Brandung'.¹⁵⁹⁵ While the Germans were faced with an armoured steamroller that was unleashed on 20 October without any tanks themselves, one of the interesting aspects of operations Pheasant and Suitcase is the Germans' ability to deal with 1,600 Allied tanks without any of their own. It is clear from the accounts above that, apart from the usual suspects such as the ubiquitous 8.8 *Flak* and 7.5 cm *Pak* guns, and the handheld *Panzerfäuste* and *Panzerschreck*, it was the *Sturmgeschütze* which should take most of the credit for this.

An astute analysis written after the war, about the retreat of *245. Infanterie-Division* in the direction of the Maas, concluded that, 'Der eigenen Truppen halfen –ausser der sehr tätigen, aber munitionsschwachen Artl. – nur die Stu.Geschütze [underlined in original], die überall trotz ihrer –gegenüber den Fd. Panzern – geringeren Beweglichkeit an den Brennpunkten auftauchten und Rückhalt gaben.'¹⁵⁹⁶ Although these SPs without turrets were at a disadvantage compared to tanks, they still managed to outgun their opponents as is evident from the engagement near

¹⁵⁹³ In addition there were *Gefechtsstärke* and *Kampfstärke*, daily strength of fighting elements and strength on the actual front line respectively; cf. KTB 88 AK, 08.09.44, B 262.

¹⁵⁹⁴ Cf. KTB 88 AK, C 255, 03.10.44, when KGr Chill was at its biggest (10,880) the next biggest division (59. ID) had 9,550 men.

¹⁵⁹⁵ Kunz, *Wehrmacht und Niederlage*, 199.

¹⁵⁹⁶ Von Hobe, 49.

Roosendaal on 29 October where the 9th Royal Tank Regiment lost eleven Churchills to one *Sturmgeschütz* from *Sturmgeschützbrigade 244*. In 's-Hertogenbosch a single *Sturmgeschütz* of *schwere Heeres-Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559* fought a duel with an M10 Achilles and won. No wonder that the *Bundeswehr* after the war developed its own *Jagdpanzer* (the *Kanonenjagdpanzer*), the only NATO country to do so.¹⁵⁹⁷ A German POW quoted the acting commander of *559*, *Oberleutnant* Franz Kopka, as saying around the end of October 1944 on the eve of the counterattack at Wuustwezel that his unit was so weak that it could at best boost the morale of the infantry with which it co-operated, but counted for nothing against the overwhelming quantity of British armour.¹⁵⁹⁸ Here Kopka was being too modest. As a German study after the war put it, 'Die Sturmgeschütze sind im Bewusstsein der Infanteristen des letzten Krieges von mythischen Glanz umgeben. Sie trugen Schwung und Dynamik des echten Kampfes in sich, Sie waren vorn, wo Not am Mann war, sie nahmen zu jeder Zeit einzelne den Kampf mit einer mehrfachen Übermacht gepanzerter Feinde auf. Wo ein Sturmgeschütz vorfuhr, trug es nicht bloss seine Granaten und den Mut seiner Besatzung: an ihm richtete sich immer wieder der Kampfeswille der Männer auf, die allein mit ihren Körpern und Waffen den Sturm bestehen mussten'.¹⁵⁹⁹ There is no doubt that *559* on a number of occasions such as at Beringen, Geel, Goirle and Woensdrecht not only assisted in the defence, but indeed formed the backbone of an attack.

It is remarkable that the *Sturmgeschütze* and *Jagdpanther* units operated as efficiently as they did in view of the heavy losses they incurred, mostly when they were used offensively such as at Beringen and Geel. In defence, such as Ten Aard and Logtenburg, they performed much better. Still, as described in Part Three, at any given time only part of the *Sollstärke* (authorized strength) was operational. That was not unusual during World War Two, however, and a lot of wear and tear was quite common for mechanised units. The American 3rd Armored Division for example in early September 1944 had only 70 tanks operational of 232 authorized.¹⁶⁰⁰ In all it is clear that this armoured support, even though it was limited compared to a tank, was a key factor to the successful defence conducted from September to November 1944. In addition the *Kampfgruppe* included another key ingredient to success, a 'hard core' of elite troops, which constituted ten to fifteen per cent in a regular Wehrmacht unit,¹⁶⁰¹ but made up half of the battle group.

5.2.1.3 Elite troops

The 'hard core' in this case was formed by the *Fallschirmjäger*. In general in the *Heer* morale was not very high during the autumn campaign. The corporal from *4./743 Grenadier-regiment (719. Infanterie-Division)* already quoted (cf. 2.5), on 15 September noted an incident which is quite revealing, "Had a set-to with the Kommandeur. He takes the bicycles away from my section because he thinks we

¹⁵⁹⁷ Of this 25.7 ton vehicle 770 were built between 1966 and 1967. It was armed with a 90 mm gun (*Lehrsammlung gepanzerte Kampffahrzeuge*, Münster/Örtze 1973, 35).

¹⁵⁹⁸ War Diary 49th (WR) Div, IS 71, 24.10.44.

¹⁵⁹⁹ Buhr, 1.

¹⁶⁰⁰ Adams, *The Battle for Western Europe*, 25.

¹⁶⁰¹ Shils and Janowitz, 'Cohesion and Disintegration', 286.

may retreat. 'Position will be held to the last man,' he shouts at me.¹⁶⁰² *Feldwebel* W. Krey from *Grenadier-regiment 723 (719. Infanterie-Division)*, part of *Kampfgruppe Chill* for a period, from whose diary was also quoted earlier, gives the most telling comments. On 6 September he writes, 'Just before reaching the crossroads Bergen op Zoom – Antwerp – Flushing a convoy comes towards me. As it passes I recognise the Kommandeur, Leutnant Hertel. I call out to him, overjoyed at having found one of our officers (...) Leutnant Hertel promises to fetch Hauptmann Goldheck at once (...) Hours later he returns without the Hauptmann (...) He says that they have gone on towards Rosendaal [sic]. I have lost the last vestige of respect for them.'¹⁶⁰³ And even more tellingly, on 27 September, while moving up to attack Heesch, 'Unnecessary marching and countermarching is making the men discontented. We have now been two days without food...'¹⁶⁰⁴ Another quote comes from the diary kept by *Leutnant* Heinz Krueger from *2./1036 (59. Infanterie-Division)*. On 27 September, when in positions near Liempde, he wrote: 'It's a murderous hell every day. After a while one gets fed to the teeth with it. There's an unending succession of low level attacks by aircraft and concentrations of artillery and mortar fire...'¹⁶⁰⁵ The *Westheer* was then, at best, a mixed bag of competent and driven units and others that barely held together.¹⁶⁰⁶ What these examples illustrate is an army on the verge of losing its cohesion, the linchpin of its operational strength, the cohesion within a fixed unit, which sociologists call the primary group.

On the other hand there were the elite units like the *SS* and the *Fallschirmjäger*. Their esprit de corps was strong even during the autumn of 1944. Their commanders made a special point of this. *Oberstleutnant* Von der Heydte, although himself a devout Roman Catholic, demanded that each of his men give up all external links when *FJR 6* was being reformed in September 1944. Their only allegiance should be to the *Fallschirmjägertruppe*. He envisioned a kind of medieval order of fighting monks. A political belief, Von der Heydte thought, was the reason behind the successes of the *Waffen SS* and the Red Army.¹⁶⁰⁷ His men certainly believed in their own superiority, like any other elite troop, and the value of the paratroopers was great, 'Abgestuft in ihrer Bedeutung waren zunächst die Divisionen der Waffen-SS, dann die Panzerdivisionen des Heeres wie teilweise auch die Fallschirmjäger der Luftwaffe die unverzichtlichen Stützen der Westfront.'¹⁶⁰⁸ Not surprisingly, this sense of superiority not only influenced the group cohesion but added an incentive. As a psychology textbook puts it, 'commitment also involves acceptance of team goals and willingness to work hard for the team.'¹⁶⁰⁹ Still, the story is more complicated than simply stating that *FJR 6*, *I./FJR 2* and *Fallschirm Panzer Ersatz- und Ausbildungsregiment Hermann Göring* were the elite who formed a hard core that Chill could depend on. An important caveat is required here, because the

¹⁶⁰² First Cdn Army, IS 99, 07.10.44.

¹⁶⁰³ Second Army, IS 128, 10.10.44.

¹⁶⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰⁵ Second Army, IS 158, 09.11.44.

¹⁶⁰⁶ Hart, *Colossal Cracks*, 26.

¹⁶⁰⁷ Order quoted in XXX Corps IS 507, 25.09.44.

¹⁶⁰⁸ Lieb, *Konventioneller Krieg*, 446.

¹⁶⁰⁹ Paul E. Spector, *Industrial Organizational Psychology, Research and Practice*, Hoboken 2003, 297.

Fallschirmjäger of the autumn of 1944 were not of the same quality as their predecessors.

In July and August 30,000 soldiers in the *Luftwaffe* were converted to *Fallschirmjäger* to make up for the losses sustained that summer.¹⁶¹⁰ They were followed by another 40,000 in September and October.¹⁶¹¹ The problem was that these hastily constituted units with personnel that had only received the most perfunctory training and no combat experience, had little in common with the original *Fallschirmjäger*. Special measures were taken to fill the void by taking aircrew whose planes were being grounded for lack of fuel, maintenance crews, *Luftwaffe* signals personnel, training units and those just out of hospital and the number of soldiers suffering from ear and stomach complaints increased as a result.¹⁶¹² Von der Heydte had only six weeks to reconstitute *FJR 6* and he complained about the lack of preparation he was given, saying that 'hunderte von Regimentsangehörigen hatten noch nie ein Gewehr in der Hand gehabt und feuerten den ersten Schuss ihres Lebens im ersten Gefecht ab!'¹⁶¹³ One veteran remembered that the recruits who were seventeen received an extra milk ration.¹⁶¹⁴ To what extent therefore these *Fallschirmjäger* units can still be called elite, and thus a hard core of *Kampfgruppe Chill*, is highly debatable. In addition, the *Fallschirmjäger* could be quite a handful. They had a negative reputation among the civilian population and even Reinhard complained about the somewhat excessive requisitioning carried out by them.¹⁶¹⁵ When officers from other arms commanded the *Fallschirmjäger*, the results were also often less than impressive, since 'their good intentions and personal bravery were no substitute for training and combat experience.'¹⁶¹⁶

Neither should we forget that even for the battle hardened *Fallschirmjäger* there was a limit to what they could endure. When the autumn campaign was nearing its end, some had had more than enough. An *Unteroffizier* from Mager's crack unit, *II./FJR 6*, a veteran decorated with the *Eisernes Kreuz II*, *Verwundetenabzeichen* and the *Sturmabzeichen*, who surrendered on 29 October told his captors that 'the troops were completely worn out after the frequent calls made upon them...'¹⁶¹⁷ The NCO, described as 'rather intelligent', added that 'for that reason most of the men had a 'Passierschein' tucked away to make escape easier.' That many of the *Fallschirmjäger* could not cope any longer is also borne out by the fact that during the period discussed three *Jäger* were shot for 'Fahnenflucht' (cf. 5.2.3). That is not a lot in absolute figures and yet is a relatively high number (0.15%) since for the *Wehrmacht* as a whole (on average ten million men strong) the number was 700 men a month (0.007%) sentenced to death for the same crime during the second half of 1944.¹⁶¹⁸ On top of that, the *Fallschirmjäger* from *Fallschirm Panzer Ersatz*

¹⁶¹⁰ Kunz, *Wehrmacht und Niederlage*, 191.

¹⁶¹¹ Ibid, 192.

¹⁶¹² Martin Stimpel, *Die Deutsche Fallschirmtruppe 1942-1945*, Hamburg 2001, 257.

¹⁶¹³ Von der Heydte, *Muss ich sterben*, 1.

¹⁶¹⁴ Griesser, *Die Löwen von Carentan*, 177.

¹⁶¹⁵ KTB 88 AK, 08.10.44, A 608.

¹⁶¹⁶ Lucas, *Battle Group*, 158, quoting a veteran of I./FJR 2, Andy Strauch.

¹⁶¹⁷ I Corps, IS 95, 03.11.44.

¹⁶¹⁸ Kunz, *Wehrmacht und Niederlage*, 267 and 339.

und Ausbildungs-Regiment Hermann Göring were not considered proper paratroopers by the others -or even themselves- and the documentation appears to underline this. Members of the regiment, consisting of new recruits and ex-*Luftwaffe* ground personnel all of them aged between 17 and 21 years old, themselves agreed that the name was mainly 'a propaganda device to induce enthusiasm of young recruits.'¹⁶¹⁹ They had not received any training in air-landings or parachutes. Nevertheless the Allied interrogators conceded that the men 'were of a better type than those encountered in regular army units.' All of the above shows that even the 'hard core' did not consist of a group of uniformly driven, indoctrinated and highly motivated soldiers willing to fight until their dying breath.

It is finally also worth remembering that the hard core was not included when the *Kampfgruppe* was first formed. Chill was then in charge of a true hodgepodge of troops, many of low quality. This is attested by the evaluation by *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps*, 'Eigene Truppe ist besonders im Abschnitt der 85.I.D. stark durcheinandergewürfelt, viele Kampfunlustige Splittereinheiten älterer Jahrgänge aller Wehrmachtteile, die junge Mannschaft von Luftwaffeneinheiten sind grösstenteils Rekruten, im Gefecht noch ungewandt. Es fehlen tatkräftige Führer, besonders Unterführer bei der Truppe.'¹⁶²⁰ It is evident that some of the junior officers, particularly those from other than front line units, such as airfield or railway guards, often older men or barely trained personnel, were found wanting. Nevertheless, the officers in charge, Chill, Dreyer, Von Hütz et al were seasoned veterans with a firm grip on the situation as is evident from the successful outcome of the engagements described above. It is clear that two elements of the physical component were key to this success in spite of the constantly shifting composition of the battle group, the presence of low grade troops and lack of sufficient artillery or anti-tank weapons. The inclusion of *Sturmgeschütze* and *Jagdpanther* on the one hand and a hard core of *Fallschirmjäger* on the other go some way to explain the efficacy of the *Kampfgruppe*.

5.2.2 The conceptual component

According to a recent definition, 'At the heart of the conceptual component is doctrine, supported by an understanding of conflict and context, education and innovation.'¹⁶²¹ As far as doctrine and procedures were concerned there were no special rules for *Kampfgruppen*, the same that went for the *Heer* as a whole also applied to the *Kampfgruppe*. This meant for example that the tactics employed, such as how to deal with enemy attacks, though often effective, were not always refined. Officers in the German army were taught that an enemy that had broken through 'durch sofort einsetzende kurze Gegenstösse zurückzuwerfen, ehe er in dem gewonnenen Gelände Fuss gefasst und sich eingerichtet hat.'¹⁶²² These counterattacks usually went in without any proper preparations, let alone reconnaissance, but as a writer on the Normandy campaign already noted on this

¹⁶¹⁹ I Corps, IS 94, 02.11.44.

¹⁶²⁰ KTB 88 AK, 08.09.44, Tagesmeldung.

¹⁶²¹ *Army Doctrine Publications 2010*, 2-3.

¹⁶²² H. Dv. 300/1, § 463.

tactic, 'it worked, but it wasn't fancy...'¹⁶²³ One important aspect that was drilled into German officers was that counterattacks were always to be undertaken 'gegen die Flanke des eingebrochenen Gegners...'¹⁶²⁴ This is something we see Chill undertaking time and again, at Beringen, Geel, Goirle and Woensdrecht. Only where circumstances made a flanking attack impossible, for example at Ten Aard, or where another goal was pursued, such as at Veghel, did he adopt other methods. Quite often these flanking attacks, though costly, were successful, if not at retaking territory then certainly at halting an Allied advance. The danger here was that the attackers in turn ran the risk of being enveloped themselves. This could only be prevented by a 'Fesselung' of the enemy tip before attacking the flanks.¹⁶²⁵

The key ingredients to a flanking attack were surprise and celerity.¹⁶²⁶ Here the presence of armour with its emphasis on mobility was, of course, a prerequisite. That is why the use of even a small number of *Sturmgeschütze* and *Jagdpanther* could make a difference, as is evident from the counterattacks at Geel, Goirle and Huijbergen. Also speedy decision making was something all German officers had been thoroughly trained in. Following pre-war manoeuvres they were told that 'slowness in arriving at a tactical decision (...) is regarded as a serious fault' and 'the officer who waited until he had clear information always acts too late.'¹⁶²⁷ This emphasis on prompt action was further fuelled by the experiences in Russia where even a moment's hesitation could mean the difference between survival and annihilation. Together with the (relative) independence of thought it explains why Chill and his key officers achieved such results and 'Das hier demonstrierte schnell entschlossene, selbstverantwortliche Handeln, hatte weitreichende Folgen.'¹⁶²⁸ These consequences have been listed above (5.1).

Doctrines and procedures were generally followed, as noted above, the *Sturmgeschütze* and *Jagdpanther*, however, were often used in roles they were not suited for. The guidelines for the *Jagdpanther* for example, stated that the SPs should never be used as tanks because of the lack of all-round firing capability. Also the use of a single *Jagdpanther* was expressly forbidden.¹⁶²⁹ The strong point of the *Jagdpanther* was its 8.8 cm gun so that it was expected to open fire early, either on soft or hard targets, from a distance of 2,500 metres. This was rarely the case during the autumn campaign. For *Sturmgeschütze* similar restrictions applied, and here too it was emphasised that these SPs were not tanks and using them as such meant sacrificing a valuable weapon.¹⁶³⁰ Above all, close cooperation with all arms, but the infantry in particular, was stressed. A number of these tenets were broken during the engagements described above, out of sheer necessity. In his analysis of the first two

¹⁶²³ Marc Milner, Reflections on Caen, Bocage and the Gap, A Naval Historian's Critique of the Normandy Campaign, *Canadian Military History*, Spring 1998, Vol.7, No.2, 17; quoted in Reid, *No Holding Back*, 240.

¹⁶²⁴ H.Dv.300/1, § 463.

¹⁶²⁵ Ibid, § 316.

¹⁶²⁶ Ibid, § 318.

¹⁶²⁷ Robert M. Citino, *The Path to Blitzkrieg, Doctrine and Training in the German Army, 1920-1939*, Stackpole Books, Mechanicsburg 2008, 232.

¹⁶²⁸ Ludewig, *Der deutsche Rückzug*, 336.

¹⁶²⁹ Second Army IS 102, 14.09.44.

¹⁶³⁰ Merkblatt für die Verwendung der Sturmgeschütze.

weeks, quoted extensively In Part Three (3.5), Kopka pointed out that the main problem was that the infantry commanders he served under all too often kept the SPs in the wrong place leading to a scattering instead of a concentration of the armoured forces. That the *Sturmgeschütze* and *Jagdpanther* nevertheless made a valuable contribution albeit at great cost to themselves is abundantly clear.

5.2.3 The moral component

The moral component is concerned with the human element, 'the least predictable aspect of conflict', but one that 'wins and loses battles.'¹⁶³¹ Here we find key aspects such as morale, cohesion (and within it comradeship, pride, the warrior spirit, discipline, integrity and loyalty), leadership and organisation.

5.2.3.1 Morale

The first of the three elements of the mental component is morale. As mentioned in the introduction, one question that was on the minds of historians after 1945 was, why did the *Wehrmacht* continue to fight until the very end? For renowned historian and Hitler expert Ian Kershaw it is clear why the Third Reich fought until its dying breath, Hitler stood in the way of any other solution and 'Confronting Hitler in any organized body, political or military, was completely impossible.'¹⁶³² There was no alternative, but to go on until Hitler, the sole source of power in the Reich killed himself. This offers a plausible explanation of why the elite was powerless to do anything else but support Hitler. It does not explain why the ordinary *Landser* fought on till the inevitable end. Several possible answers have been given by scholars (cf. 1.3). As has already been pointed out in the introduction, the devastating defeat in France in the summer of 1944 was a major psychological blow to the German soldiers. 'Frankreich verloren zu haben besiegelte in den Augen der Soldaten die totale Niederlage.'¹⁶³³ Why, in the awareness of being on the brink of defeat did the ordinary soldier continue to function as before? The study by Neitzel and Welzer discussed in 1.3 provides us with a possible answer. The soldiers functioned as before because they were used to obeying orders. It is true that they were threatened with a court-martial if they did not, but it is also true that they took pride in what they did. Even in the face of defeat, 'Die Soldaten der Wehrmacht wollten vor allem eine: die eigene Aufgabe, welcher Art sie auch immer war, gut erfüllen.'¹⁶³⁴ This applied in 1944 or 1945 just as much as during the period of the great German victories. Indoctrination did not come into this. There is no reason to assume that the atrocities which Bartov (cf. 1.3) ascribed to a high degree of indoctrination, were not also largely the result of a rapidly deteriorating moral framework because of the vicious nature of the conflict on the Eastern Front (on both sides). The GI's who were responsible for the massacre in My Lai were certainly not indoctrinated by a barbaric regime setting out to inflict maximum damage on the enemy, but still they

¹⁶³¹ *Army Doctrine Publication 2010*, 2-10.

¹⁶³² Kershaw, *The End*, 398.

¹⁶³³ Neitzel and Welzer, *Soldaten*, 263.

¹⁶³⁴ *Ibid*, 342.

indiscriminately shot and killed possibly as many as 500 civilians. There is no doubt, 'Mit dem Krieg brechen Chaos, Unerwartetes und Barbarei herein.'¹⁶³⁵

Not only chaos, the unexpected, but a deterioration of the normal moral framework are part and parcel of any war. Belief in the superiority of the Third Reich was no doubt part of the training, the mindset of the German army, but a soldier trying to survive has other priorities. The soldiers in *Kampfgruppe Chill*, like many of their peers, did not believe in the final victory either. When two of them were taken prisoner in December by the Americans they told their interrogators that 'the morale of the three combat groups is low: the men are unwilling to fight and want relief.'¹⁶³⁶ The resilience all boils down to that old chestnut, primary group cohesion. Franz Kopka, acting *Kommandeur* of 559, for most of the period described in this study, explains how he and his men felt when he disbanded the company on 17 April 1945. 'Die 'Zeit der Gemeinsamkeit' (...) war für die nun zum Teil heimatlos gewordene Männer zu Ende, die 'Zeit der Einsamkeit' begann.'¹⁶³⁷ These words, 'togetherness' as opposed to 'loneliness', clearly express a deeply felt, traumatic loss experience and not a rejoicing that the end of a struggle for survival was almost over. The idea of the group as a surrogate family is confirmed by experiences like this. As John Ellis puts it in his excellent study of the fighting man in World War Two, 'Selflessness, pride, mutual respect are still not adequate concepts to fully describe the frontline soldiers' feelings towards one another. In the final analysis one is speaking of an identification with and concern for one's fellows so all-consuming that one can only speak in terms of love.'¹⁶³⁸ Finally, it should be remembered that the primary group, although born out of necessity and no more than a substitute family, also offers to young men the promise of exhilarating experiences, 'The sociality of the primordial group is most likely, after all, rooted in the exigencies of defense against animal predators. We may *enjoy* the company of our fellows, but we *thrill* in the prospect of joining them in collective defense against the common enemy [*italics in original*].'¹⁶³⁹ Defying the odds, taking on the world, has something attractive, heroic even, especially for men raised in a tradition of honour as Germans were.

Then, and this is also a principle that applies to soldiers anywhere, there is the fact that most people by instinct want to do what is perceived as right, or what they are being told is right. Defending one's country is one of those duties, 'Wenn der Krieg beginnt, so kämpft der durchschnittliche Jüngling oder Mann für sein Land, weil er das als seine Pflicht ansieht...'¹⁶⁴⁰ After all, defending one's country also means protecting one's loved ones. Neither should we forget, that in 1944, unlike in today's world, people only received limited, heavily filtered and biased information about events outside. Of course, the ordinary German must have been aware that things were going badly, but then had not Hitler helped them out of seemingly desperate situations before? Everything was done to encourage the soldiers to do their utmost. For example, on 11 October Von Zangen passed on an order from *OB West* issued on

¹⁶³⁵ André Bach, 'Einführende Bemerkungen', in Gross, *Führungsdenken*, 375.

¹⁶³⁶ Periodic reports XIX Corps G-2, 30.12.44.

¹⁶³⁷ Kopka, *Missbraucht und Gebeutelt*, 187.

¹⁶³⁸ Ellis, *The Sharp End, the Fighting Man in World War II*, London 1990, 350.

¹⁶³⁹ Barbara Ehrenreich, *Blood Rites, Origins and history of the passions of war*, London 1997, 224

¹⁶⁴⁰ Edward H. Sims, *Jagdflyger*, Motorbuch Verlag, Stuttgart 1979, 33-4.

30 September, in which among other things he offered the following rewards for acts of bravery: a one week's stay at the *15. Armee* rest camp at Zeist for knocking out a tank or shooting twenty enemy soldiers, two weeks for knocking out two tanks or killing forty soldiers and twenty days' home leave for exceptional bravery.¹⁶⁴¹

Nevertheless, there is no evidence that this enticing offer had much effect. That most German soldiers continued to do their best and did not give up, should not really come as a surprise because it stems from a long soldierly tradition which is not specifically German, 'All codes of military justice in the West clearly define cowardice as running from formation or abandoning rank, regardless of the situation...'¹⁶⁴² Only when the formation as a whole collapsed did the individual soldiers give up. In this sense the German soldiers were no different from the small group of British infantrymen surrounded at Rorke's Drift in 1879 who were also heavily outnumbered by the Zulus facing them and were in a seemingly hopeless situation, yet fought on, because of 'the training and the regulations of the British army, the fear of and respect for their officers, and the camaraderie and loyalty to one another.'¹⁶⁴³ Or to put it in more basic human terms, an important motive for carrying on was 'the unwillingness as in most armies, to leave close friends and comrades in the lurch.'¹⁶⁴⁴ In addition there was the fear of what would come after the war was over, fuelled by the Morgenthau plan and reports of atrocities committed by the Red Army. The spectre of 1918 loomed large. Finally, is not the basic question much simpler: what else could the ordinary soldiers have done? The documents that have survived about *Kampfgruppe Chill* bear this out.

The answer to the question of morale within the *Kampfgruppe* is a somewhat complicated one in view of the varied nature of the battle group. In order to get a reliable picture therefore the whole time frame needs to be examined. The best documentation on the mindset of *Kampfgruppe Chill* comes from the POW interrogations. Unlike for example the OCMH studies, they were not written in hindsight and therefore give a fairly reliable picture of how the men in the *Kampfgruppe* felt about the war. The picture varies, no doubt partly because some of the men were taken by surprise, e.g. when their positions were overrun, whereas others willingly surrendered to the Allied troops and a few even deliberately deserted. Still, their testimonies are the closest we can come to what their morale was at the time and they give an invaluable insight as to how the men in the *Kampfgruppe* felt and what they thought. That certainly applies to the somewhat inauspicious start, when Chill was in charge of a truly mixed bag of men. Near Geel and the Maas-Scheldt Canal on 14 and 15 September a number of officers and other ranks from *Bataillon Pohl* were captured. They were interviewed a few days later. In the preamble the (Canadian) interrogators state that, 'they ranged from would-be deserters to youthful sailors with fairly marked NAZI [capitals in original]

¹⁶⁴¹ Second Army IS 150, 01.11.44.

¹⁶⁴² Hanson, *Carnage and Culture*, 323.

¹⁶⁴³ *Ibid*, 292.

¹⁶⁴⁴ Kershaw, *The End*, 272.

characteristics.¹⁶⁴⁵ The information the prisoners gave was checked against other sources and was 'considered fairly reliable.' The sailors, *Luftwaffe* personnel and others who had been marshalled on 4 September and locked in by some Chill's officers in barracks in the Belgian town of Turnhout before being sent to the various battle groups set up by Chill on the whole were more angry and upset than inspired by suddenly being thrown into the line as infantrymen. In addition the naval men had expected to become sailors, not foot soldiers. The fact that they had been issued Italian rifles was another slight for them. They especially disliked the way they had been treated by the officers who they felt had 'deserted' them. Also the fact that many had not received any mail since D-Day put a serious damper on their spirits. The older men in particular indicated that they were worried about the future and wondered whether the Allies were already in Germany. Finally most of the men taken at Geel blamed *SS* troops on their right for running away.¹⁶⁴⁶ There was another reason older soldiers were more negative which is evident from another group of prisoners, from *Kampfgruppe Buchholz*, captured in the same area a few days later, who had originally served with *Eisenbahn Schützbataillon 484* in France.¹⁶⁴⁷ They stated that 'the retreat from Lille area (...) was most disorderly, reminding them of the final phase of the last war.' What they added, however, was also very revealing, i.e. 'as long as orders were given they will be obeyed.' On 5 October a group of soldiers belonging to *Kampfgruppe Dreyer* were captured south of Goirle.¹⁶⁴⁸ The interrogator noted that now the front had temporarily stabilised the prisoners, who had only been with the battle group for the last eight days, were 'more security conscious' and needed to be pressured to reveal information. Nevertheless, most of them admitted that the war was lost.

An officer and four NCOs, all ex-*Luftwaffe*, captured at the brickworks in Hoogerheide four days later quite clearly had another axe to grind.¹⁶⁴⁹ The disgust at the way they were treated was represented by a *Stabsfeldwebel*, who had been trained as a pilot, had even soloed and was still turned down by his CO and then sent to *Kampfgruppe Chill* as a rifleman where he had to take orders from a 'cheeky' Corporal. Another group from *Bataillon Ohler*, captured on 14 October, provided further insight why some of these disgruntled men kept on fighting.¹⁶⁵⁰ They told their interrogator that they thought continuing to fight was 'senseless', but that their company commander, *Leutnant* Glade, used his *MP 40* whenever soldiers tried to pull back during an Allied artillery barrage. Another group that was extremely likely to desert, apart from the defeatists, the Canadians discovered were the *Volksdeutsche*, often Poles within Chill's battle group.¹⁶⁵¹ Many of them had been included in the original *85. Infanterie-Division* and a number of them were still with the division in

¹⁶⁴⁵ First Cdn Army, IR PoW Battle Groups, 17.09.44. Interestingly, although the men were captured by 15th Scottish Division and interned in Second Army PW Cage, they were interviewed by intelligence officers from First Canadian Army.

¹⁶⁴⁶ A feeble excuse as there were no *SS* units to their right.

¹⁶⁴⁷ First Cdn Army, IR PoW Misc. Guard-Engineer Units, 24.09.44.

¹⁶⁴⁸ First Cdn Army, IR PoW Battle Groups, 10.10.44.

¹⁶⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 12.10.44.

¹⁶⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 15.10.44. The preamble reads 'North of Bergen op Zoom', but that is clearly impossible.

¹⁶⁵¹ First Cdn Army, IR PoW Infantry, 85 Inf Div, 28 and 30.10.44.

early September. After the *Kampfgruppe* was formed in early September they were deliberately kept further to the rear to reduce their opportunity to desert.

In stark contrast to this were two soldiers from *Sturmabteilung AOK 15*, both surprised to find themselves captured one day later.¹⁶⁵² They categorically stated that morale in their unit was very good. The next day an officer and five NCOs from *I./FJR 2* (Finzel) surrendered at Hoogerheide as a result of intense artillery fire on their positions. In spite of having been captured, the officer, one *Leutnant Ackermann (1. Kompanie)*, boasted of Germany's secret weapons and the effect on the war.¹⁶⁵³ He admitted, however, that the majority of the group had never received any parachute training. The same optimism was expressed by a *Fahnenjunker* from *FJR 6* captured on 3 October, who was described as intelligent by his captors.¹⁶⁵⁴ He explained that Germany's 'reverses are (...) only temporary if the army can hold out long enough to permit the reorganized industry to sup[ply] the t[roo]ps.' The report continued, 'the new w[ea]p[ro]ns are not illusory and PW hinted on [sic] new explosives (atoms) but admitted he did not know very many details.' Other prisoners from *FJR 6* also thought that morale was still very good within the unit.¹⁶⁵⁵ One of them contributed it not to outside circumstances, but to his own sense of humour.¹⁶⁵⁶ A group of three senior NCOs from *FJR 2*, captured in a cellar at Hoogerheide on 16 October, were equally sanguine and their morale was good even though they had been in constant action since being committed at Beverlo on 7 September.¹⁶⁵⁷ The same can be said for two prisoners from *I./Fallschirm Panzer Ersatz und Ausbildungs-Regiment Hermann Göring (Bataillon Pauls)* captured at Essen on 22 October after the start of operation Suitcase. They said that even though they were unsure about the outcome of the war, morale was fairly good mainly because 'rations were quite good and this kept the morale in balance.'¹⁶⁵⁸ Another large group of sixteen prisoners from *I./FJR 2* taken near Roosendaal five days later, were in relatively high spirits.¹⁶⁵⁹ They still hoped and believed in a German victory since they were 'convinced of Germany's strength and its ability to turn the tide with the new weapons...' In the preamble the interrogator made an interesting remark when he said about the group that 'They were typical German soldiers who tried to do their duty.'

Towards the end of the campaign, another *Fallschirmjäger* from *I./FJR 2* was taken by surprise when he was tending a wounded soldier in Welberg on 3 November.¹⁶⁶⁰ This young *Jäger* (he was eighteen) was on the same wavelength as his comrades and believed in German victory because there was 'nothing else to believe in.' Morale in the unit was good, he said, mainly because they had 'quite good' officers. On the other hand the statements of two prisoners from *Kampfgruppe Dreyer* who stayed

¹⁶⁵² First Cdn Army, IR PoW Misc. Artillery Units, 16.10.44.

¹⁶⁵³ When asked to give an example, he finally got off his high horse and described a new '50 man tank' to his interrogator, explaining that it had 2 men inside while 48 were pushing it.

¹⁶⁵⁴ First Cdn Army, IR PoW Infantry FJR 6, 11.10.44.

¹⁶⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 05.10.44, 13.10.44, 16.10.44 and 18.10.44.

¹⁶⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 16.10.44.

¹⁶⁵⁷ First Cdn Army, IR PoW Battle Groups, 18.10.44.

¹⁶⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 25.10.44.

¹⁶⁵⁹ First Cdn Army, IR PoW Infantry, 2 Para Rgt, 27.10.44.

¹⁶⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 2 Para Rgt, 07.11.44.

back in Steenberg and were interrogated the same day contradicted this picture.¹⁶⁶¹ They claimed that morale in their unit was very bad and both officers and NCOs expressed the opinion that the war was lost, although some of them hoped that secret weapons would turn the tide in Germany's favour. These prisoners, who had served at regimental headquarters, said that the worst thing was the Allied artillery. It was not just the regular infantry who were prey to doubts about Germany's position, even men from *FJR 6* shared these sentiments, and, quite unlike their comrades quoted above, three of them felt that the war had been going on for long enough and they just wanted to go home.¹⁶⁶² Others professed themselves to be anti-Nazi.¹⁶⁶³

Not surprisingly *Kampfgruppe Chill* also numbered a few *Fahnenflüchtige* some of whom, from *Bataillon Pohl*, were captured near Roosendaal.¹⁶⁶⁴ The story they told their captors reads like a thriller. The original group of four first deserted near Boxtel on 6 September. Then one of them, an *SS* man, betrayed the others, who had in the meantime been joined by another deserter. The five appeared before a court-martial and the president sentenced them to death. They were locked up in a cellar. In sheer desperation they stood on each other's shoulders to look out of the window. Then, on 12 October, fortune finally favoured them. The guards were called away because of a potential Allied breakthrough and they managed to escape. A Dutch policeman they encountered by accident came to their rescue and directed them to a farm near Roosendaal where they waited until the British captured the area in order to desert a second time. Their main reasons for deserting were that they had long periods of fighting without rest, that they felt the war was lost, and –interestingly– that they had heard no news from home for months and had found out that their outgoing mail had been destroyed by their own unit. In a note the interrogator added that the ages of the four deserters (18, 27 and 38) showed that 'not all the younger generation were saturated with that desired Nazi zeal.' Other deserters were not so lucky. In all three *Fallschirmjäger* from *FJR 6* were shot for *Fahnenflucht* during the time frame discussed in this study.¹⁶⁶⁵ The story of a deserter from *FJR 6* who crossed the lines at Woensdrecht on 14 October may provide some insight into their motives.¹⁶⁶⁶ He had quite a different story to tell from those who praised the strong group cohesion in the regiment. This *Jäger* from *10. Kompanie* complained about being pushed to the limits of endurance, adding that his platoon had had no rations for five days and were consequently hungry and exhausted. The prisoner told the Canadians that he had fainted as a result and was caught by his *Feldwebel* who warned him and reported the incident. When he later learned that his company commander (*Leutnant* LeCoutre) and a *Feldwebel* were approaching his position he was sure he would be shot which was why he deserted.

¹⁶⁶¹ Ibid, 85 Inf Div, 07.11.44.

¹⁶⁶² First Cdn Army, IR PoW *FJR 6*, 10.10.44.

¹⁶⁶³ Ibid, 11.10.44.

¹⁶⁶⁴ First Cdn Army, IR PoW Battle Groups, 05.11.44.

¹⁶⁶⁵ Namely *Jäger* Heinz-Joachim Weigandt 27.09.44 in Schijndel, *Jäger* Franz Fuchs, 09.10.44 in Goirle and *Feldw.* Heinrich Wilhelm, 26.10.44 in Oudenbosch (PAJVD).

¹⁶⁶⁶ First Cdn Army, IR PoW *FJR 6*, 16.10.44.

These interviews provide a window into the mindset of the men in *Kampfgruppe Chill* and it is evident from all of the above that morale in the battle group ran the whole gamut from a zealous dedication to national-socialism to a willingness or even eagerness to desert. Some men said that morale was good within their unit, while others from the same outfit complained that it was not.¹⁶⁶⁷ Some praised the bond between officers and men, others said that the relationship was poor. In this respect the *Kampfgruppe* did not differ from the rest of the German army in any significant way and the answer to the unit's effectiveness therefore cannot be found here. However, the mental component has two other elements, leadership and organisation.

5.2.3.2 Leadership

Even though Shils and Janowitz already found that senior commanders like Chill, Dreyer and Von der Heydte were too remote for ordinary soldiers to be inspirational (which is confirmed in the POW interviews), they were still crucial for the success of *Kampfgruppe Chill* because of their tactical and organisational skills plus the fact that company and battalion grade officers tended to copy their superiors.¹⁶⁶⁸ This emphasizes the key roles played by them. The German manual for officers, *Heeresdienstvorschrift 300 Truppenführung*, written in 1936 already accurately pointed this out. Paragraph 11 succinctly puts it like this. 'Der wert des Führers und des Mannes bestimmt den Gefechtswert der Truppe'.¹⁶⁶⁹ Likewise, Lieb concluded in his study that 'Entscheidend für die Haltung der Truppe war das Vorhandensein entsprechende Führer, insbesondere der Offizieren und deren Haltung...'¹⁶⁷⁰ In addition to group loyalty, skilled officers, 'the crucial cogs in the military machine' are the second pillar of any effective army.¹⁶⁷¹ Interestingly Chill, the man after whom the *Kampfgruppe* was named, fits in a category described by Lieb in his study as 'energisch, rücksichtslos, 'osterfahren'...'¹⁶⁷² These soldiers were junior officers in the First World War and now in their fifties were fighting the Second. In other words, in 1944 these men were in their tenth year of war which means that for about a third of their adult lives they had been actively involved in a war. This made them seasoned veterans. But Lieb feels that this could also be why they used all their powers to prevent the war, and thus their own careers, from coming to an end. Retrospectively the results justify Chill's decision during the first days of September when he formed a core of senior and junior officers to lead the new *Kampfgruppe*. That this was no accidental decision, but one that had been carefully considered by Chill is borne out by the statement of his Ia, *Oberstleutnant* Kurt Schuster, who wrote about the creation of the *Kampfgruppe* on 4 September, 'Hier bewährte es sich, dass die Div. von Anfang an bei hohen Kampfverlusten Einheiten zusammengelegt und die freiwerdenden Offiziere in der Div.Führer-Reserve

¹⁶⁶⁷ Veterans from FJR 6 who were interviewed after the war said that it was mainly the new recruits who suffered from low morale and often gave up when the first shots were fired (PAJVD). This might explain the difference.

¹⁶⁶⁸ Shils and Janowitz, *Cohesion and Disintegration*, 295 and 300.

¹⁶⁶⁹ *On the German Art of War*, 18.

¹⁶⁷⁰ Lieb, *Konventioneller Krieg*, 422.

¹⁶⁷¹ Kershaw, *The End*, 394.

¹⁶⁷² Lieb, *Konventioneller Krieg*, 513.

zusammengefasst hatte.¹⁶⁷³ In other words, even before events required him to employ them Chill was already aware of the crucial importance of maintaining a core of experienced officers. No doubt the fact that many of these senior officers were veterans from the Eastern Front was a contributory factor to their efficiency as well.

This efficiency is confirmed by the combat performance in Normandy of the *85. Infanterie-Division*, which after all was the basis, if a slender one, for the *Kampfgruppe*. The problem here is that the division fought only for a very brief period, just one week, before being crushed under the avalanche of Operation Tractable (cf. 2.4). After one week in action about a hundred infantry were left. Still, during this short period of time the division earned three *Ritterkreuze*, an amazing feat, compared to other infantry divisions fighting on the same front.¹⁶⁷⁴ This, too, proves that *Kampfgruppe Chill* had a high number of excellent and brave officers and it is no wonder that two of the three divisional *Ritterkreuzträger*, Dreyer and Von Hütz, played key roles in the actions described above.¹⁶⁷⁵ This is all the more astonishing in view of the fact that according to some of his men Von Hütz was in some way connected to the plot to kill Adolf Hitler.¹⁶⁷⁶ It is unclear to what extent this was true, but the mere fact that this, and the fact that he listened to the BBC and refused to give the Nazi salute, was rumoured about him suggests that if not anti- he was certainly not pro-Nazi. Nevertheless, he was an excellent and energetic officer and that was all that mattered. As organizational psychologists have found, 'A leader who is charismatic and has a profound effect on followers is transformational. Such a leader can transform followers' aspirations, needs, preferences, and values by providing a vision of something worthwhile to achieve.'¹⁶⁷⁷ This exactly describes the effect the aforementioned officers had on their men. It was not merely through fear or by imposing a harsh regime that they got their way, although that too was part of the military *modus operandi*, but they inspired their subordinates to go beyond what was expected of them and thus, even while losing a battle, stand their ground against all the odds.

Even though Hitler had abolished the principle of *Auftragstaktik* in 1941 (cf. 1.2) it was still in use wherever possible, requiring officers that were not afraid to take quick and decisive action. In this crisis, more than ever before did these men determine how their units performed. Noted Hitler biographer Ian Kershaw also pointed out the vital role played by the officer corps in delaying the inevitable because the 'junior and middle ranking officers were crucial cogs in the military machine.'¹⁶⁷⁸ *Kampfgruppe Chill* undoubtedly prevailed in the face of almost impossible odds because of its leaders. Superior leadership compensated for inferior numbers and truly made the battle-weary and often inexperienced soldiers of the battle group achieve the seemingly impossible. The basic tenet of tactics, superior fire and movement were applied by them time and again. There is no evidence to

¹⁶⁷³ Schuster, B-424, 42.

¹⁶⁷⁴ For a complete table of comparison: Lieb, *Konventioneller Krieg*, 581-3, although he –erroneously– does not include 85. I.D. in the divisions that only entered the battlefield in August.

¹⁶⁷⁵ The third, Oberleutnant Adolf Vogt, had been wounded and was recuperating in a hospital in Jena.

¹⁶⁷⁶ PoW interview WO 208/603.

¹⁶⁷⁷ Spector, *Industrial Organizational Psychology*, 329.

¹⁶⁷⁸ Kershaw, *The End*, 394.

suggest that the average soldier in *Kampfgruppe Chill* was braver than their Allied counterparts or more skilled, but in addition to other factors mentioned above, it was primarily the superior leadership and personal initiative that gave them the edge during engagements. This was recognized as early as 1948 when German generals, questioned by the British military theoretician B.H. Liddell Hart, said that compared to World War One their troops had performed much better, because 'die Beziehungen zwischen Offizier und Mann waren besser' and, equally important 'Die einfachen Soldaten zeigten immer mehr Initiative und gebrauchten ihre Köpfe besser (...) besonders, wenn sie im Kampfe auf sich gestellt waren oder in Kleine Verbände fochten.'¹⁶⁷⁹ This leaves the aspect of organisation.

5.2.3.3 Organisation

With regards to the third pillar of the mental component it can be safely stated that Chill and the other key officers used the limited resources they had to maximum effect. It is clearly evident from the way the *Kampfgruppe* responded to attacks and the way in which it handled attacks and counterattacks, i.e. quickly, resolutely, determinedly and effectively, points to a high degree of control and experience. Chill's forward headquarters were always close to the front line and like many veteran commanders he liked to lead if not 'from the front' then certainly very close to the front. That he managed to maintain control was to a considerable degree because the divisional staff had remained intact by and large during the retreat from Normandy. It arrived back in Belgium with its infrastructure still functioning, enabling Chill to set up the *Kampfgruppe* at such short notice.¹⁶⁸⁰ It is also clear that many of the officers that played key roles came from the *85. Infanterie*-Division and had been specially selected by Chill himself. In the end, the fact that the *Kampfgruppe* performed so much better than the other units in *15. Armee* (see below, 5.3.2) is evidence of the organisational skills of Chill and his staff.

The answer to the question about the fighting power of *Kampfgruppe Chill* can now be answered. It is evident from all of the above that the explanation for the excellent performance of the *Kampfgruppe*, almost from day one until early 1945 when it was finally disbanded, lies in three aspects, the support by 'hardware', in this case SPs, the superior leadership and the presence of a hard core of elite troops.

5.3 Kampfgruppe Chill as a case study

One of the primary aims of this study was to take *Kampfgruppe Chill* as a study of the *Wehrmacht* at this stage of the war on a micro level. Having already explained why *Kampfgruppe Chill* was so effective, the time has come to answer the remaining two questions: what new light does the performance of *Kampfgruppe Chill* shed on what we know of *Kampfgruppen* in the west in 1944 and on the *Wehrmacht* as a whole in the same setting?

¹⁶⁷⁹ Liddell Hart, *Jetzt dürfen sie reden*, 514.

¹⁶⁸⁰ KTB 88 AK, 14.09.44, B 276, shows that the 85 ID still had 705 non-fighting troops (Stab, Nachrichten, Nachschub, Kraftfahrpark, Sanität, Verwaltung, Veterinär and Feldpost) as opposed to 784 fighting troops (infanterie, Pioniere, Artillerie and Panzerjäger) of whom nearly half, 369, were artillerymen without guns.

5.3.1 Kampfgruppe Chill as a Kampfgruppe

The first of the two questions to be answered is, to what extent was *Kampfgruppe Chill* typical or atypical for *Kampfgruppen* (in the sense of improvised battle groups) in the West? As we have seen (cf. 1.4), there was a huge variety in the size that a *Kampfgruppe* could take, from that of a platoon to a division. To a certain extent *Kampfgruppe Chill* also varied in size, although not as markedly.¹⁶⁸¹ When his battle group was formed on 4 September Chill controlled only his own infantry (about a hundred men) plus about 2,000 sailors, security personnel and ex-*Luftwaffe* personnel. On 29 September, just after the final attack on the Corridor near Schijndel, in addition to its core troops¹⁶⁸² (1,020 men), it also controlled various *Fallschirmjäger* battalions¹⁶⁸³ (6,318 men), artillery and one company of *schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559*, making up a force of no fewer than 10,800 men, roughly the size (at least on paper) of the average German division in 1944. For most of its existence it controlled six to seven infantry battalions and six batteries plus some SPs, usually *Sturmgeschütze*. As we have seen (cf. 1.3.2) the majority of the *Kampfgruppen* on the western front was either battalion-sized or smaller. This means that Chill's battle group is one of the 11-13% that were bigger and like most of these it initially lacked artillery and anti-tank weapon. Although that deficiency was later partly remedied it always had fewer guns than a regular infantry division. This means that it was atypical for the majority of the *Kampfgruppen* in the West. That still begs the question as to how it performed in comparison to similar sized battle groups.

To assess its effectiveness as a *Kampfgruppe* it is pointless to compare it to the smaller ones and instead a battle group similar to Chill's needs to be examined. As it happens there is one, *Kampfgruppe Walther*, which also fought over similar terrain during the same period. This *Kampfgruppe* existed for exactly one month, from 13 September to 12 October, and like *Kampfgruppe Chill* varied in size and composition.¹⁶⁸⁴ At the start it controlled seven infantry battalions (including the redoubtable *FJR 6*), two artillery batteries and the seven operational *Sturmgeschütze* of *2./schwere Heeres Panzerjäger-Abteilung 559*. However, this relatively strong force was split into two by operation Garden on 17 September and for the next five days Walther was down to three infantry battalions plus the *SS* artillery.¹⁶⁸⁵ A week later it had absorbed the bulk of *107. Panzerbrigade* and some extra infantry and the *Kampfgruppe* was again a sizeable force with five infantry battalions, three batteries, *Panther* tanks and *Sturmgeschütze*.¹⁶⁸⁶ Once settled around Overloon the battle

¹⁶⁸¹ For a complete overview see Appendix 2.

¹⁶⁸² Feld Ersatz bataillon 185, Artillerie Regiment 185 and the remnants of Grenadier Regimente 1054 and 1055 plus the divisional staff.

¹⁶⁸³ I and II/F.Pz.Ers. und.Ausb.Rgt. Hermann Göring, I, II and IV/FJR 6, Fl. Btl. Bloch, Gramse, Wittstock, Duchstein and Hanke, 3/Pz.Jg.Abt. 170 and part of Pz.Jg. Abt. 344.

¹⁶⁸⁴ Data, Schacht, OCMH MS P-188 I.

¹⁶⁸⁵ I/FJR 18, III/SS PzGr 19, II/SS PzGr 21. (Sixt, Anhang zur P-188, 3)

¹⁶⁸⁶ I/FJR 18, III/SS PzGr 19, I/FJR 21, I/GR 16, PzGr Btl 107 (Sixt, 4). According to Sixt (6) on 2 October Fallschirmjägerbataillon Paul was added and a week later Kerutt (I./FJR 18) left. However, it appears that this may be incorrect and that Hauptmann Paul simply took over I/FJR 18 when Kerutt was wounded on 13.10.44 (Fallschirmjäger-Suchdienst, Suchliste 1/1968, 1, and Suchliste 5/1967, 1 (via Peter Vandermissen).

group could also call on *LXXXVI. Armeekorps* artillery including a *Werfer* battery.¹⁶⁸⁷ Finally, on 14 October when command was transferred to *Oberst* Rudolf Goltzsch and it was renamed *Kampfgruppe Goltzsch* (from 16 October: *Kampfgruppe 344. I.D.*) it boasted five infantry battalions, four batteries plus *Panther* tanks.¹⁶⁸⁸ There are no exact figures as to the size of the *Kampfgruppe*, but it is reasonable to assume that the infantry battalions –except for *Panzergrenadier-Bataillon 107* which had about 1,000 men- were of average size (cf. 2.4) so that Walther commanded five battalions or 3,000 men plus.¹⁶⁸⁹ Compared to *Kampfgruppe Chill* the battle group was therefore only slightly weaker in infantry. It was, however, much stronger in armour, possessing thirty-three of the best medium tanks of the war at the start. Also, the infantry was far more mobile than Chill's since *Panzergrenadier-Bataillon 107* had its own *Schützenpanzerwagen* (halftracks). Another similarity is that, like *Kampfgruppe Chill*, its constituent parts came from three different services, the *Heer*, the *Waffen SS* and the *Luftwaffe*. This also meant that like Chill *Oberst* Walther had a 'hard core' of elite troops. One would expect the two to be equal in efficacy therefore.

It is certainly true that *Kampfgruppe Walther* scored some major defensive successes, notably delaying the advance of VIII Corps while pulling back to the Zuid-Willemsvaart and during the various engagements around Overloon and environs, but also had its share of serious defeats. There were five separate episodes in the actions of the *Kampfgruppe*. The first was the failed attempt to eliminate the British bridgehead at Neerpelt (13-15 September). This has already been discussed (3.4) in detail. The next was operation Garden (17 September). This was a major disaster for *Kampfgruppe Walther* as the ground offensive of XXX Corps sliced through the battle group, splitting it wide open. During the next stage (18-21 September) it pulled back slowly to the Zuid-Willemsvaart where the last elements crossed on 20 September. The next episode began two days later when *107. Panzerbrigade* was subordinated to Walther and the *Kampfgruppe* was ordered to attack and seize and destroy Veghel bridge in concert with the *59. Infanterie-Division* which was to attack from the west. Again, as described extensively above (3.4), the attack failed to achieve the objective. On 24 September the *Kampfgruppe* was forced to pull back as it was now being threatened from the rear by the advance of VIII Corps and it set up a defence in a semi-circle around Overloon. Here the last episode (24 September – 13 October) took place. The battle group fought a successful delaying defence, successful because it was time consuming, costly and bloody for the Allies, the defenders making full use of the fact that the attacks were channelled by the few metalled roads which had been turned into killing zones.¹⁶⁹⁰

¹⁶⁸⁷ Schacht, 21.

¹⁶⁸⁸ I and II/FJR 21, I and II/FJ Lehr Rgt, Pz Gr Btl 107. (Sixt, P-188 II, 2, 3 and 4.) The Brigade did not have StuGs, contrary to what Schacht and Sixt claim, as is explained in 3.4.

¹⁶⁸⁹ A Panzerbrigade numbered about 2,000 men, 1,081 in the Pz G rBtl alone (Timm Haasler, *Die Geschichte der Panzerbrigade 105, Den Westwall halten oder mit dem Westwall untergehen*, Uelzen 2005, 2).

¹⁶⁹⁰ Details: Wim Klinkert, 'Opmars naar de Maas', 197-209, and A. Korthals Altes & N.K.C.A in 't Veld, *Slag in de Schaduw*, Venlo 1981, 56-127.

It is clear that the performance of the two *Kampfgruppen*, which shared many characteristics and were alike in composition, size and strength, as well as operating during the same period and over much of the same ground was superficially similar. Both fought delaying actions with great success. Still, there were also major differences. Unlike Walther's group *Kampfgruppe Chill* was employed as an *Eingreifreserve* and therefore constantly moved from one sector to another. This meant that Chill constantly had to create new defensive positions, rearrange his troops according to the needs of the situation and adapt his tactics accordingly. *Kampfgruppe Walther* on the other hand, once it had arrived in the Overloon area, fought one long delaying action in the same area allowing it to use prearranged fields of fire, areas that had been mined earlier etcetera. Also, as an attacking force *Kampfgruppe Chill* tended to be much more successful (Geel, Logtenburg, Goirle), even though it was far less mobile, which could be explained by a more skilful reading of the tactical situation or – in the case of *Kampfgruppe Walther* – a more apt response on the side of the opponents (Neerpelt, Veghel). Nevertheless, on the whole the disparity between the two *Kampfgruppen*, even though not great, is obvious, and a reasonable conclusion to the fourth key question (i.e. to what extent is the history of the *Kampfgruppe* a case study for *Kampfgruppen* during the same time frame and in the same theatre of war?) would be that *Kampfgruppe Chill* because of its excellent commanders exemplified the best tradition of the German army, the *Auftragstaktik*, even though Hitler himself had abolished it three years earlier. It also showed what an ad hoc unit was capable of, but it should be added that it performed much better overall than might be expected of a divisional-sized *Kampfgruppe* in this theatre of war, the only possible explanation being the officers in charge. How it compared to the other divisions in *15. Armee* needs to be examined next .

5.3.2 Kampfgruppe Chill as a Wehrmacht unit

Shils and Janowitz' contention about the nature of *Kampfgruppen*, namely that 'so diverse in age composition and background, and especially so mixed in their reactions to becoming infantrymen, could not very quickly become effective fighting units,' is obviously wide of the mark.¹⁶⁹¹ If that were true *Kampfgruppe Chill* would have been the weakest, most ineffective of all the units in *15. Armee* since all the others were regular units, often having served together for years and years. However, exactly the converse was true. That Chill as an improvised unit would fail was precisely what *General* Reinhard feared as we have seen in Chapters 3.2 and 3.3. He felt that such an ad hoc unit could never meet the serious threat posed by the British bridgeheads south of Geel (cf. 5.2.1). He could not have been more wrong. If this is compared to how other units acted within the timeframe discussed even in hindsight this is still surprising. One infantry division that was quite similar in size to *Kampfgruppe Chill* was the *59. Infanterie-Division* led by *Generalleutnant* Poppe. As noted earlier (3.4) the division boasted 2,600 infantry plus in seven battalions and it had six artillery batteries as well as ten 7.5 cm *Pak* when it entered the mainland on 16 September.¹⁶⁹² Following the disastrous attack near Son and the

¹⁶⁹¹ Shils and Janowitz, 'Cohesion and Disintegration', 288.

¹⁶⁹² KTB H Gr B, 16.09.44, Ia 1601/44.

engagements with the US 101st Airborne Division at Best, the division had increased to twelve battalions, now including *Fallschirm* units, two of which were classified as 'schwach' and four as 'abgekämpft' as well as eight batteries.¹⁶⁹³ After receiving reinforcements at the start of October the *59. I.D.* had grown once more to a respectable 9,626 men, the size of a 1944 type infantry division.¹⁶⁹⁴ Chill's battle group only had 1,174 more men on the same date. On the eve of operation Pheasant Poppe's division numbered an impressive eleven infantry battalions, six of which were weak, and it had ten artillery batteries and twenty-two *Flak* guns.¹⁶⁹⁵ It should have been a force to be reckoned with in other words, but the Scottish attack, operation Colin, launched on 23 October, showed the division to be a paper tiger which was completely powerless to stop the advance (cf. 3.7). Only the arrival of *Panzerjäger-Kompanie 1363* provided temporary relief before the 51st (Highland) Division punched another huge hole and Poppe's division found security behind the Afwateringskanaal where it remained until that bridgehead was also captured by the Scots (Operation Guy Fawkes). Most of the other divisions in *15. Armee* fared hardly any better.¹⁶⁹⁶

The performance of the *59. Infanterie-Division*, which was of equal strength to *Kampfgruppe Chill*, shows that the latter was far superior. Poppe's division was roughly the same size as Chill's battle group, it also had a hard core of *Fallschirmjäger*, albeit a smaller one, was also at times supported by SPs and still did not come even close to what the latter achieved. This again confirms the importance of the leading officers like Chill, Dreyer, Von der Heydte and others, because they were the only real difference between the two units. More than the other two factors (hard core and armour) this then appears to have been the decisive factor for the success of *Kampfgruppe Chill*. It also provides an answer to the last key question, to what extent the *Kampfgruppe* was emblematic of the *Wehrmacht* as a whole. It is evident that the battle group can be said to represent those units that showed tactical superiority against an enemy that outnumbered them, units that were few and far between during the autumn of 1944. It was certainly not representative for all those that failed, for various reasons.

The above example also shows quite clearly that the persistent claim that the German army as a whole performed better than its Allied counterparts is a fallacy.¹⁶⁹⁷ Some, like *Kampfgruppe Chill*, were certainly tactically superior, others, like the *59. Infanterie-Division* performed very poorly. Sometimes the *Wehrmacht* outfought its enemies, sometimes it did not. So Andreas Kunz (cf. 1.3) is right to call this idea of a superior German army a 'legend'. His explanation, however, that it was engendered by the need of some of Germans to explain why they lost the war, seems very much

¹⁶⁹³ KTB 88 AK, 24.09.44, B 314.

¹⁶⁹⁴ KTB 88 AK, 03.10.44, C 255.

¹⁶⁹⁵ KTB 88 AK, 23.10.44, B 432.

¹⁶⁹⁶ E.g. the 712. I.D. suffered huge losses during the first serious attack on 22 October, the 245. I.D. after conducting a successful defence, mainly thanks to II/FJR 6, did very poorly overall, the 346. I.D. was completely powerless to halt the Canadian attack.

¹⁶⁹⁷ 'the Germans consistently outfought the far more numerous Allied armies...', Dupuy, *A Genius for War*, 234-5.

to be a case of oversimplification.¹⁶⁹⁸ From my own personal contacts with British veterans I know that they, too, felt that individually often, though not always, Germans were better soldiers.¹⁶⁹⁹ These Allied soldiers certainly had no emotional need to explain why the Germans lost, so there must be another reason. This study provides plenty of instances where German commanders operated more skilfully tactically than their Allied opponents. Kunz explains occasional German successes away too easily by blaming that on Allied 'Abstimmungsprozesse und Nachschubprobleme'.¹⁷⁰⁰ However, that certainly did not apply to most of the period covered in this study where the Allied troops were extremely well equipped and provided with plenty of fuel and ammunition. Maybe Field-Marshal Alan Brooke was right when he said that, 'The trouble with our boys is that they are not killers by nature.'¹⁷⁰¹ The ordinary German soldier, especially if he had served in Russia, had simply had more experience as a soldier as well as learning the hard way that in war one either kills or is killed. Probably the biggest difference was that the British Tommy or the American GI was fighting a war which he knew was bound to end in an Allied victory in the foreseeable future. This offered an incentive not to risk his life, while the *Landser* on the other hand faced an uncertain future and was defending his homeland. In view of this the bravery of many Allied soldiers is all the more remarkable.

5.3.3 Final Conclusions

The ultimate goal for the *Westheer* and hence for Chill was to delay the Allied advance for as long as possible. The rule book devoted two separate sections to 'inhaltender Widerstand'.¹⁷⁰² The main objective, it said in the introduction, was to delay 'den Gegner unter für ihn möglichst hohen Verlusten (...) ohne dass sich der Widerstand Leistende einem ernsten Kampfe aussetzt'.¹⁷⁰³ It is clear that here the German commanders were extremely successful during the autumn of 1944 in the wake of the seemingly total defeat in France, inflicting serious losses on the British army, which could not afford them and had to disband units including an entire division, the 50th (Northumbrian), in November 1944. Where Montgomery succeeded in ultimately wearing down the German army through his operational concept of 'Colossal Cracks', his opponents still managed to delay the inevitable for as long as was humanly possible.¹⁷⁰⁴

In the introduction the various theories about why the *Wehrmacht* persisted to the very end have been discussed (cf. 1.2). It now remains to be analysed what the findings on *Kampfgruppe Chill* (cf. 5.2 and 5.3) as a test case, a *Heer* in miniature, reveal about this last fundamental question concerning the resilience of the

¹⁶⁹⁸ Kunz, *Wehrmacht und Niederlage*, 13.

¹⁶⁹⁹ E.g. Major Eric Mainwaring, in 1944 commanding A company in the 5th Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders (letter to the author, 10.06.85). He also pointed out the war weariness among many Allied veterans.

¹⁷⁰⁰ Kunz, *Wehrmacht und Niederlage*, 336.

¹⁷⁰¹ Quoted in Max Hastings, 'Their Wehrmacht was better than Our Army', *The Washington Post*, 5 May 1985.

¹⁷⁰² H.Dv.300/1, § 475-502.

¹⁷⁰³ *Ibid*, § 41.

¹⁷⁰⁴ Cf. Hart, *Colossal Cracks*, 1-13.

Wehrmacht. It is quite clear that the findings of Shils and Janowitz about the importance of the officers (especially the middle ranking ones), the hard core and the social group cohesion, which Fritz called the *Frontgemeinschaft*, are confirmed. It is apparent that even in an ad hoc unit like the *Kampfgruppe* social cohesion was a powerful incentive, suggesting that this phenomenon is not solely dependent on a prearranged organisation as exists in regular units which refutes the findings of Bartov. Likewise Van Creveld's conclusions about training, organisation, doctrine as well as its emphasis on operational excellence epitomized by the principle of *Auftragstaktik*, are found to be relevant. It is also evident that Rush and Zimmermann were correct in pointing out in their studies the crucial importance of the fact that after the defeat in France the divisional and corps units by and large stayed together. Without the divisional staff Chill and the pool of officers he had retained he could never have set up the collection pools on 4 September and created the core of his *Kampfgruppe*. Finally, this study confirms what Zimmermann, Neitzel and Welzer found on what is possibly the core explanation for the German soldiers' resilience, namely the deeply human desire to do one's duty and do that as well as possible (cf. 5.2.3). On the other hand there is little evidence that the fear of reprisals (Lieb) or ideology (Bartov, Fritz) played a major role. No evidence has been found for what Zimmermann posited about the senior officers' desire to further their careers, but neither can this be refuted. His theory that for most soldiers it was business as usual is certainly confirmed. Studying the *Kriegstagebuch* of LXXXVIII. *Armeekorps* for example one can see all the administrative aspects coming back once the situation at the front stabilized. Documentation clearly cannot always keep up with events at the start of September, but all the trimmings of a well-functioning military organisation with its attention for even the most minute details are in evidence after the dust of operation Market Garden has settled. Finally, what has been found about morale in *Kampfgruppe Chill* (5.2.3) makes it clear that the whole range of emotions from fanaticism to defeatism occurred even in such an effective fighting unit where all soldiers, except for a handful of deserters, fought on for as long as they could. These testimonies lead to a number of conclusions.

First of all, morale is a highly personal matter, influenced by circumstances and peer pressure, but not directed by it. In this respect war is not different from other human endeavours, 'for there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.'¹⁷⁰⁵ Secondly, there is not one single explanation about why the men in the *Wehrmacht* fought on, but rather a mosaic of reasons for their resilience. All of the monocausal explanations fail to do justice to the complexity of social interaction, personal psychology and the physical circumstances on the battlefield. This study confirms what Kunz pointed out in his study, i.e. that there never was such a thing as *the Wehrmacht* and that certainly not all of the soldiers in the Third Reich fought on to the bitter end (cf. 1.2). On the other hand, we can deduce from the performance of *Kampfgruppe Chill* that military units can perform well even in circumstances where everything works against them. The ultimate lesson that can be drawn from this study is that, in spite of a numerical inferiority in every respect, in spite of the opponent dominating the skies, in spite of a poor supply situation, necessitating a

¹⁷⁰⁵ Hamlet, Act II, Scene ii.

serious rationing in use of ammunition,¹⁷⁰⁶ in spite of at least a substantial part of the troop having a major morale problem, a unit not only can still function, but even stand out for its quality and excellence, provided that the men in charge are well-trained, skilful, energetic and charismatic leaders.

Based on the above it is clear that *Kampfgruppe Chill* was not unique as a unit in the *Wehrmacht*, but that it was certainly exceptional. It was not unique since there were other divisions and *Kampfgruppen* that were also successful in fighting the Allies, although they were few and far between on the western front in September and October 1944. It was exceptional, because it punched far above its weight and played a key role in plugging the gap in the German front line that had developed in early September and because within *15. Armee* it rapidly developed into an 'Eingreifreserve' that in the end was instrumental in allowing the bulk of Von Zangen's army to pull back safely north of the major rivers in the Netherlands and fight another day. The case of *Kampfgruppe Chill* also shows that the negative connotation of the phenomenon of *Kampfgruppen* we often find in literature on the *Wehrmacht* i.e. weak, disorganised, ramshackle, chaotic, is incorrect. Brigadier David Belchem, Montgomery's head of operations, for example, was not impressed by the German deployment of *Kampfgruppen*. In his memoirs, published in 1977, when describing the German army reorganized in early September by using 'hastily formed battle groups', he added that 'Such battle groups could not stop our progress, but by making full use of the numerous water obstacles they were able seriously to reduce the impetus of our advance'.¹⁷⁰⁷ This seems patently wrong in view of the evidence given above. As demonstrated in Part Three, *Kampfgruppe Chill* did much more than merely 'reduce the impetus' of the Allied advance, on a number of occasions it completely blocked it, forcing a rethinking at the operational and –sometimes– strategic levels. The battle group was more than just an effective fighting unit, it excelled at what it was ordered to do. On a number of occasions it was asked to act as a 'Feuerwehr' having to take over where regular units failed. So, in conclusion it is safe to say that the British or American intelligence officer who in October 1944 wrote about *Kampfgruppen* that they 'will never compare with divisions or specially formed task forces...' ¹⁷⁰⁸ could not have been further off the mark if he had tried.

5.4 Postscripts

While writing this thesis I came across some aspects of the fighting which were remarkable or contrary to what is commonly believed, but are outside the scope of this study. I feel that they warrant further research in order to add to our understanding of the occurrences described in this study and military operations in World War Two in general.

5.4.1 The Royal Air Force

It is a popular notion that the Allied tactical air forces 'gave close support to the

¹⁷⁰⁶ KTB 88 AK, 11.10.44, C 277, where H Gr B instructs the subordinate units to conserve ammunition, proscribing exactly how much can be fired from each weapon.

¹⁷⁰⁷ Belchem, 223.

¹⁷⁰⁸ SHAEF Int Notes 31, in I Corps IS 83, 21.10.44.

Allied armies by protecting them from interference by the enemy's air forces and by attacking the enemy's ground forces.¹⁷⁰⁹ Although the former was true, one surprising discovery was that, the latter most certainly was not. The Second Tactical Air Force did not always support the ground offensive even when it could have tipped the balance in the favour of their comrades on the ground. The pictures of 'cab ranks' of Typhoon fighter bombers circling overhead to be called down by a Forward Air Controller, may have been true in Normandy, but during the autumn campaign Second TAF only rarely intervened in the fierce land battles. From the daily logs it soon became clear what they were doing instead. The planes were more engaged in rail interdiction than in support of the ground forces even when the need was high. This confirms the findings of Brian Reid, who studied operation Totalize in August 1944, and noted that 'air power had not lived up to its advanced billing...'¹⁷¹⁰ He attributes this to the 'limitations of technology' (meaning that, unlike the Germans and the Russians for example, the British never developed ground attack aircraft) and 'the aspirations of the air forces to retain their own independence'.¹⁷¹¹ The evidence from this study seems to suggest that the latter is the main reason as is clear from the doctrine laid down by the man in charge of Second TAF, Air Marshal Sir Arthur Coningham.

Coningham's conviction was that the greatest attribute of air power was its ability to speedily concentrate its force. Tactical air power had to be closely coordinated with the ground forces, but the army could not command it. Here lay the heart of the problem. Coningham stated as much in a pamphlet, FM-100-20, that was widely distributed, to every ranking officer in North Africa, so that they would know what to expect. FM 100-20 also listed Coningham's priorities for success in use of tactical air power.¹⁷¹² They were in descending order of importance: gain air superiority, use the air superiority gained to interdict enemy reinforcements of men and materiel and combine air attacks with ground assaults on the front lines. Thus helping the troops on the ground always came last as is evinced by what happened during Operations Pheasant and Rebound. Any air force officer that did not follow these rules or tended to be too sympathetic to the plight of the men on the ground could lose his job and sometimes did. Consequently Coningham sacked the CO of No. 84 Group which supported the First Canadian Army, Air Vice-Marshal Leslie Brown, on 9 November 1944 because he was too 'army oriented'.¹⁷¹³ There may have been other reasons for the lack of direct support and quite possibly the staff of Second TAF genuinely

¹⁷⁰⁹ Ellis, *Victory Volume II*, 398.

¹⁷¹⁰ Brian Reid, *No Holding Back, Operation Totalize, Normandy, August 1944*, Toronto 2005, 409.

That the RAF has always been very good at PR is also shown by the failed raid on the HQ of 15. Armees on 24 October, even today still hailed as a success (cf. 3.7).

¹⁷¹¹ Ibid.

¹⁷¹² Also, Vincent Orange, *Coningham, A biography of Air Marshal Sir Arthur Coningham*, London 1990, 105.

¹⁷¹³ Angus Brown and Richard Gimblett, *In the Footsteps of First Canadian Army northwest Europe 1942-1945*, Ottawa 2009, 65. They erroneously state that No. 83 Group supported First Cdn Army. Also Terry Copp, *Cinderella Army*, 192. Coningham's biographer, Vincent Orange, explains the dismissal in a euphemistic turn of phrase stating that Brown, 'had never convinced the Canadians that aircraft were a support, not a substitute for ground action'.

believed that rail interdiction was the best way to help the ground troops.¹⁷¹⁴ Whatever the reason, this highly selective use of what was a truly awesome weapon by that time allowed most of Von Zangen's *15. Armee* to get away twice. Second Army correctly noted that 'The absence of air attacks on the withdrawal routes has made an enormous difference, and some of the nine enemy divisions which faced the Allied armies when the present operations began may be fit to reappear before very long'.¹⁷¹⁵ It was, in effect, a tragic oversight which was to cost countless Allied lives.

On the other hand it should not be forgotten that Second TAF did attain almost absolute air superiority which meant that it was virtually impossible for the *Luftwaffe* to intervene, although German planes did attack on rare occasions. An official historian of the Air Historical Branch (RAF) explains the lack of ground intervention by claiming that there was 'very little scope for doing so'.¹⁷¹⁶ He provides some valid reasons noting that, unless carefully choreographed (like on 17 September at the breakout stage of Garden), air support was conducted on an ad hoc basis with all the problems involved in such operations. Also, identification from the air was often a genuine obstacle in view of the terrain as was the close nature of the fighting. However, when he falls back on the Typhoon's limited endurance and the weather, he does not really have a case. During Operations Pheasant, Suitcase and Rebound the planes of Second TAF rarely intervened, although they often took to the air on interdiction missions far beyond the battlefield, invalidating the claims of range and weather conditions. Also, in the flat and open countryside where these operations took place German troop concentrations could easily be distinguished. It seems that doctrine, rather than practical obstacles, prevented Second TAF from intervening more than they did. All in all it seems that, in view of the way it operated a lot of the time, the epithet 'tactical' may have been a misnomer for Second TAF. The least that can be said is that this aspect of the campaign in the west warrants closer investigation.

5.4.2 The Kriegsmarine

The achievement of the *Kriegsmarine* during the autumn campaign was no mean feat and far exceeded what is known so far. During the autumn campaign the *Kriegsmarine* contributed in a number of ways. It is generally recognized that it was essential in the rescue of *15. Armee* and thus allowed the fighting to continue for another two months after the capture of Antwerp by the 11th Armoured Division. However, that was not the only contribution the *Kriegsmarine* made to the land campaign. It was again of invaluable assistance to Von Zangen's army when it needed to pull back north of the rivers Maas and Waal, setting up a special staff to deal with these crossings which were extremely successful in spite of Allied air superiority. This allowed more German troops to resist the Allies in their advance into Germany. However, as is evident from the narrative of the fighting, the *Kriegsmarine* also helped out in ways that are deeply buried in the annals of history, such as by

¹⁷¹⁴ D'Este, *Decision in Normandy*, 222, attributes what he calls the 'air-ground controversy' to Coningham's 'severely bruised ego'.

¹⁷¹⁵ Second Army, IS 154, 05.11.44.

¹⁷¹⁶ Ritchie, *Arnhem*, 235-245.

having units deployed as infantry at the front, often to the despair of naval headquarters, and the assistance rendered by gun boats to beleaguered troops (such as Steenberg). All in all, the contribution of the *Kriegsmarine* units to the fighting in the Netherlands from early September until the end of the war in May 1945 is still a chapter in history that needs to be written.

5.4.3 Communications

A somewhat astonishing aspect of the campaign was the total lack of communication between troops that were supposed to link up at a certain point. Three examples are especially striking. On two occasions Poppe's *59. Infanterie-Division* failed to make contact with the *107. Panzerbrigade* at Son and *Kampfgruppe Walther* at Veghel respectively, although in each instance they were no more than a few kilometres apart. The same lack of contact occurred on 18 September when the American Paratroopers after liberating Eindhoven waited all afternoon for the Guards who were held up by the German *Riegelstellung* north of Aalst. Experts in this area offered a similar explanation for both sides: due to lack of preparation no frequencies on which to establish contact were exchanged beforehand.¹⁷¹⁷ As for the German side this is perfectly plausible. The armoured vehicles used various types of radios, the most common being the *Funkgerät (FuG) 5* in the *Sturmgeschütze* and the *FuG 7* in the *Jagdpanther*. These all operated on frequencies of 27.2 – 33.3 and 42.1 – 47.8 MHz respectively.¹⁷¹⁸ The infantry on the other hand, using the portable *Tornister-Funkgerät b, c* or *g*, operated on frequencies of 2.5 – 3.5 MHz, a different range altogether.¹⁷¹⁹ A separate model (*f*), working on frequencies of 27.2 – 33.3 and therefore compatible with the armour, had been developed for the *Panzergranadiere*, but it is highly unlikely that Poppe's troops had such radios. In addition the ranges of the radios varied. The *FuG 5* had a range of only 350 metres, the *FuG 7* of 470, and the portable *Tornister* up to ten kilometres. It is clear that the very nature of the counterattacks at Son and Veghel precluded long and careful planning which probably explains why the commanders responsible probably never agreed on certain frequencies beforehand.

More surprising than the German failure to make contact is the lack of communication between the British ground forces and the American Paratroopers in Eindhoven on 18 September. This is all the more amazing as in the planning stage of Operation Market Garden a communication network had been set up including five American liaison officers, so-called contact detachments in the jargon of the day, who had been assigned to work with the Guards and were provided with frequencies and sequences beforehand.¹⁷²⁰ The after action report itself in its conclusions hints at the problems that occurred, finding overall that 'Cipher delays could be reduced by pre-arranged codes (...) further training and improved wireless sets are essential in

¹⁷¹⁷ German communications: Arthur O. Bauer; Allied: Cor van Doeselaar, Fred Marks and Mark Roubos.

¹⁷¹⁸ Details in Hans-Joachim Ellissen, *Die deutschen Funknachrichten bis 1945, Band 3, Funk- und Bordsprechanlagen in Panzerfahrzeugen*, Telefunken, Ulm 1991 (thanks to Arthur O. Bauer).

¹⁷¹⁹ Arthur O. Bauer, *Some aspects of military line communication as deployed by the German armed forces prior to 1945*, Diemen 2004, 6.

¹⁷²⁰ 21 Army Group, Operation Market Garden, 17-26 September 1944, 11 and 32-5.

order that communication between airborne troops and ground troops following them up become more efficient.' Even more tellingly it said that 'US air support parties were formed at the last moment, but the Air corps operators had not reached a reasonable standard of wireless operating.'¹⁷²¹ After studying the documents, a communications expert from the Dutch army arrived at the conclusion that the chance of the network operating successfully would only have been 10 to 20 per cent both because of the reliance on one frequency (4050 KHz) and the fact that it was arranged top down with no lateral contacts.¹⁷²² Again, further research seems called for, particularly since so far only the communication problems at Arnhem have been looked into.

5.4.4 War crimes

One last aspect of the autumn campaign that warrants further research is the fact that on the Belgian side of the border, during the first weeks of September 1944, German troops committed a large number of war crimes, killing scores of civilians, either as hostages or because they were suspected of being resistance fighters, whereas on the Dutch side only a handful of such incidents occurred.¹⁷²³ These atrocities have left a deep scar on the Belgian memory of the Second World War. In an article concerned with the area around Hasselt and Leopoldsburg the author calculates that no fewer than fifty-six Belgians were executed outright there while others were sent to concentration camps.¹⁷²⁴ The youngest victim was just sixteen years old. A possible explanation for this 'furor teutonicus' south of the Dutch-Belgian border among mainly –but not exclusively– *Fallschirmjäger* may lie in the fact that Belgian armed resistance was much more aggressive than its Dutch counterpart, particularly in early September. Whereas the Dutch resistance was much more restrained,¹⁷²⁵ the Belgian underground fighters on 3 September had been ordered to attack German columns and depots.¹⁷²⁶ One day later twenty-five SAS agents were dropped to assist in these actions (Operation Caliban). All agents wore British uniforms, but all were native Belgians, which added to the confusion since their actions were interpreted by the Germans as coming from 'Terroristen'.¹⁷²⁷ The day Brussels was liberated, at 19.15 hours the BBC broadcast a call for the mobilisation of all Belgian resistance fighters, members of the *Geheime Leger/Armée Secrète* (Secret Army).¹⁷²⁸ The main mission was to attack German vehicles, blow up dumps, confuse the enemy by changing road signs and even take prisoners. All resistance fighters were to wear boiler suits with armbands in the colours of the Belgian flag, black, red and yellow. Guerrilla warfare in Belgium had been officially declared.

¹⁷²¹ Ibid, 115-6.

¹⁷²² Mark Roubos, mail 09.12.2011.

¹⁷²³ For example in the author's town of birth, Waalwijk, where the burgomaster and two young men were executed by passing SS-men of II./SS-Grenadier-Regiment Landstorm Nederland on 6 September.

¹⁷²⁴ Jos Bouveroux, *Liever het vel van vijf zwarten*, *Knack Special*, 2011.

¹⁷²⁵ E.g. on 8 September national sabotage coordinator Van Bijnen issued an order to stop all acts of sabotage for fear of reprisals against the civilian population

¹⁷²⁶ Victor Marquet, *History of the Secret Army*, Ch. XXXI, quoted in Wuyts, *Herfststorm over Hechtel*, 95.

¹⁷²⁷ KTB FJR 24, 07.09.44, quoted in Wuyts, *Herfststorm over Hechtel*, 99.

¹⁷²⁸ Louche, *Heppen en Leopoldsburg*, 41 and 50-1.

German listening posts intercepted the order from Britain for the Belgian resistance to mobilize and passed it on to *Heeresgruppe B*. Model had earlier ordered his commanders to be on the alert and take security measures in his instruction on 'Bandenbekämpfung'.¹⁷²⁹ He told his commanders with respect to these groups, 'mit allen Mitteln und äusserster Härte nieder(...)kämpfen.' He urged them to carry out this order speedily and energetically. The idea behind the official order and the name Secret Army was that the resistance fighters would be protected under the terms of the Geneva convention. But Hitler had already decided otherwise. On 30 July the *OKW* had issued instructions that, 'Those who attack us from the rear at the decisive stage of our fight for existence deserve no consideration.'¹⁷³⁰ Possibly memories of 'Freischärler' during World War One also still lingered in the minds of the *Landser* which might explain their often outrageous behaviour.

5.5 A final thought

Had the *Kampfgruppe Chill* not prevented the Allied troops from breaking through, Germany could have been entered before winter set in and the Ruhr area encircled cutting the Reich off from essential industry. The war in Europe might have ended before 1945, the 'Hunger Winter' in Holland would not have taken place, and millions of Nazi victims would have survived. Tragically for the German people, all the efforts made by skilful commanders such as Chill and his men not only served to extend the life of a criminal regime, it also added hugely to the suffering of the German people, including the military themselves. On 10 May 1945, the *Wehrmachtführungsstab* calculated that the German ground forces (*Heer* plus *Waffen SS* and *Luftwaffe* ground units) between 1 September 1939 and 31 December 1944 had suffered 3,367,000 casualties (killed, wounded, missing and POWs). For the last four months of 1945 the number rose to another 4,617,000.¹⁷³¹ Even worse, of these casualties before the final war year, 1,757,000 were confirmed as killed whereas for 1945 the total was 2,007,000.¹⁷³² In other words well over fifty per cent more German soldiers died during the last four months than in the five years before. Amazing the German recovery in the West in September 1944 may have been, a miracle even in the eyes of the German High Command, but all it eventually did was prolong the suffering of millions of people, the majority of them Germans. On the other hand, this sacrifice may have been historically necessary to lay the Nazi ghost to rest once and for all and create a foundation for the modern, democratic Germany that we know today.

¹⁷²⁹ KTB 88 AK, C 209, 01.09.44.

¹⁷³⁰ Philip W. Blood, *Hitler's Bandit Hunters, The SS and the Nazi Occupation of Europe*, Washington 2007, 243.

¹⁷³¹ *OKW*, WFSt, Org Abt, 10.05.45, Gesamtverluste (NARA RG 242, T 78, Roll 398).

¹⁷³² The Total number of German military killed during World War Two is now estimated at 5,180,000 (*Das Deutsche Reich*, Band 10/2 endplate).

Appendix 1: Structure 85. Infanterie-Division 31.07.1944¹⁷³³**Kommandeur: Generalleutnant Kurt Chill****Grenadier-Regiment 1053**

- I. Bataillon 1053 (1.- 4. Kompanie)
- II. Bataillon 1053 (5.- 8. Kompanie)
- III. Bataillon 1053 (9.- 12. Kompanie)
- 13. Infanteriegeschütz (IG) Kompanie
- 14. Maschinengewehr (MG) Kompanie (including Panzerschreck)

Grenadier-Regiment 1054

- I. Bataillon 1054 (1.- 4. Kompanie)
- II. Bataillon 1054 (5.- 8. Kompanie)
- III. Bataillon 1054 (9.- 12. Kompanie)
- 13. Infanteriegeschütz (IG) Kompanie
- 14. Maschinengewehr (MG) Kompanie (including Panzerschreck)

Artillerie-Regiment 185

- I. Artillerie Abteilung 185 (8 x 10.5 cm leFH)
- II. Artillerie-Abteilung 185 (8 x 10.5 cm leFH)
- III. Artillerie-Abteilung 185 (12 x 8.8 cm Flak)¹⁷³⁴

Füsilier-Bataillon 185

Kompanie 1-2

Feldersatz Bataillon 185

Kompanie 1-4

Panzerjäger-Abteilung 185

12 x 3.7 cm (Selbstfahrlafette)
12 x 7.5 cm Pak

Pionier-Bataillon 185

Kompanie 1-3

Nachrichten-Abteilung 185

Kompanie 1-3

Sanitäts-Abteilung 185

Kompanie 1-2 (motorisiert)

Kraftfahr-Abteilung 185**Fahrschwadron 185****Verwaltungs-Abteilung 185**

¹⁷³³ Based on Anlage AOK 15 Ia Nr. 1295/44, 06.02.44, T312, R516, and Schuster, Anlage 1.

¹⁷³⁴ Reid, *No Holding Back*, 392, has 12 x 15 cm sFH guns which seems unlikely in view of the two 88 guns remaining on 05.09.44.

Appendix 2: Structure Kampfgruppe Chill

Date	Infantry	Artillery	Armour
05.09.44 ¹⁷³⁵	Six battalions; 2,400 KGr Dreyer KGr Buchholz KGr Seidel	One battery from AR 185 with six guns (four IFH and two 88)	None
12.09.44 ¹⁷³⁶	Nine battalions; 5,000 plus II/FJR 6, Marschbtl 352, I/FJR 2, FEB 347, GR 723, KGr Dreyer, II/SS Ndl	Six batteries: 3. and 4./AR 1719, 17. and 18./SS AEAR, II./AR 185	sHPzJgAbt 559 (six Jagdpanther, eight StuGs)
17.09.44 ¹⁷³⁷	Six battalions; 2,500 plus KGr Dreyer: Langlotz, I/FJR 2, II/SS Ndl, FEB 347, I/GR 723, II/FJR 18	Nine batteries: III/HGö, II and III/AR 185, 17. and 18./SS AEAR, 1. and 4./AR 347	1./sHPzJgAbt 559 (two Jagdpanther)
24.09.44 ¹⁷³⁸	Seven battalions; 3,023 KGr Von der Heydte: I, III, IV/FJR 6 KG Dreyer: I/HGö, I/FJR2, Ohler, Bloch	Nine (?) batteries: II and III/AR 185, III/HGö ¹⁷³⁹	1./sHPzJgAbt 559 (three Jagdpanther)
03.10.44 ¹⁷⁴⁰	Ten battalions; 5,500 KGr Von der Heydte: I, III, IV/FJR 6, I/FJR 2, Gramse KGr Dreyer: I/HGö, Ohler, Bloch, Wittstock, Duchstein, Hanke	Nine Batteries: I and II/AR 185, III/HGö	1./sHPzJgAbt 559 (three Jagdpanther)
14.10.44 ¹⁷⁴¹	Six battalions; 3,300 plus KGr Von der Heydte: I, III, IV/FJR 6, I/FJR 2 KGr Dreyer: I/HGö, Ohler, Kp Balzereit (Bloch)	Nine Batteries: I and II/AR 185, III/HGö	sHPzJgAbt 559 (two Jagdpanther, six StuGs) Stugbde 280 (eight StuGs and StuH)
24.10.44 ¹⁷⁴²	Seven batallions; 3,500 plus KGr Von der Heydte: I, III, IV/FJR 6, I/FJR 2 K GR Dreyer: I/HGö, Ohler, Bauer	Ten Batteries: I and II/AR 185, III/HGö, I/AR 164	Stugbde 667 (thirty-one StuGs and StuH)

¹⁷³⁵ War Diary 50 (N) Div, IS 64, 09.09.44 and First Cdn Army IR PoW Battle Groups 17.09.44.

¹⁷³⁶ KTB 88 AK, A 236, 12.09.44, Tagesmeldung, 12.09.44, B 311, 24.09.44.

¹⁷³⁷ KTB 88 AK, A 330, 17.09.44.

¹⁷³⁸ KTB 88 AK, B 311, 24.09.44.

¹⁷³⁹ B 311 gives nine batteries, but A 439 (23.09.44) gives five and C 243 (28.09.44) gives ten.

¹⁷⁴⁰ KTB 88 AK, C 256, 03.10.44, C 271, 09.10.44.

¹⁷⁴¹ Various sources, cf. Chapter 3.6.

¹⁷⁴² Various sources, cf. Chapter 3.7.

Appendix 3: Kampfgruppe Chill, a chronology

1944

10 February: creation of *85. Infanterie-Division* (Wehrkreis XII, Wiesbaden) around *GR 1024*.

From March: Training in the Crecy area in France.

6 June: division moved to area around Abbeville.

31 July: division ordered to Rouen area by *15. Armee*.

9 August: first units arrive to take over sector from *12. SS. Panzer-Division Hitlerjugend*.

14 August: Operation Tractable; division shattered, begins to pull back.

29 August: remaining units back around Abbeville. Order to set up *Kampfgruppe* together with remnants of *84.* and *89. I.D.* Withdrawal continues.

3 September: remains arrive in Turnhout area.

4 September: Chill and his staff start rounding up stragglers in Turnhout (Belgium) and assembling them into groups.

5 September: *Kampfgruppe Chill* is born when *Generalleutnant* Chill on his own initiative puts the assembled troops in position behind the Albert Canal. He divides his battle group into three *Kampfgruppen*: Buchholz, Dreyer and Seidel. All in all he can muster about 2,400 men of all branches of the armed forces.

6 September: Chill is put in charge, by *General* Reinhard (*LXXXVIII. Armeekorps*), of the sector from Herentals to Hasselt, hence *GR 723* is assigned to him. Heavy fighting at Beringen. Chill is assigned *FJR 6, I./FJR 2* and *s.H.Pz.Jg.Abt.559*.¹⁷⁴³ The first two are still on their way from Germany.

7 September: Chill is assigned *FEB 347*. He also receives artillery: *17.* and *18. SS-Artillerie Ersatz und Ausbildungs Regiment*. In addition *Flieger-Regiment 53* is assigned to him.

10 September: *Kampfgruppe Chill* is officially created. The headquarters of the *84.* and *89. Infanteriedivision* return to the *Reich*. *Kampfgruppe Chill* involved in fighting at Leopoldsborg and Geel.

11 September: Chill insists on the use of the word *Kampfgruppe* instead of *85. ID*.

12 September: the *Kampfgruppe* pulls back behind the Maas-Scheldt Canal; Chill now responsible for the sector from Herentals to Luijksgestel.

13 September: *FJR 6* is now assigned to *1. Fallschirm-Armee*.

15 September: *2./s.H.Pz.Jg.Abt.559* leaves Chill to become Corps reserve.

17 September: Market Garden. At the end of the day *FJR 6* returns to *Kampfgruppe Chill*. Dreyer is still involved at Ten Aard with *1./559* while *FJR 6* in Kempen. Artillery increased to nine batteries.

20 September: the remnants of *2.* and *3./559* end up in Wesel.

21 September: *1./559* assigned to *59. ID* to support attack on Veghel.

22 September: the *Kampfgruppe* falls back behind the Antwerp-Turnhout Canal.

23 September: *Kampfgruppe Chill* under *15. Armee*; once again assigned *1./s.H.Pz.Jg.Abt.559*; ordered to move north and attack Veghel bridge.

27 September: 1944 Chill is made responsible for sector between Schijndel and 's-Hertogenbosch.

s.H.Pz.Jg.Abt.559 is to become *Heeresgruppe* reserve.

28 September: all of *s.H.Pz.Jg.Abt.559* and *Fallschirmjäger-Bataillon Bloch* assigned to *Kampfgruppe*.

1 October: first elements alerted for move to Goirle.

3 October: *Kampfgruppe Chill* ordered to Goirle; halts attack I Corps. It is from now on composed of two *Kampfgruppen*: Von der Heydte and Dreyer.

8 October: four battalions (*FJR 6* plus *I./FJR 2*) sent to Woensdrecht. *Sturmgeschützbrigade 280* already there.

11 October: other two battalions (*Kampfgruppe Dreyer*) follow together with *s.H.Pz.Jg.Abt.559*.

14 October: *s.H.Pz.Jg.Abt.559* put into reserve (*LXVII. AK*) near Zundert.

27 October: *Kampfgruppe Chill* falls back behind the river Zoom. Joined by *Sturmgeschützbrigade 667*.

29 October: the *Kampfgruppe* falls back on Steenberg and Dinteloord and Willemstad.

4 November: the last elements ferried across the Hollands Diep.

9 November: the Allies have cleared western North Brabant.

22 November: *Kampfgruppe* with *Sturmgeschützbrigade 244* assigned to *LXXXVI. Armeekorps* (Von Obstfelder).

8 December: Chill is transferred to the *Führerreserve OKH*; *Oberst* Helmut Bechler takes over.

9 December: the *Kampfgruppe*, once more referred to as the *85. Infanterie-Division*, but still composed of the two *Kampfgruppen* (*FJR 6* and *Dreyer*), moves to the Eiffel area.

12 December: the *Kampfgruppe* takes over sector in Hürtgenwald, under *LXXXIV. Armeekorps* (*General* Karl Püchler).

1945

7 February: *FJR 6* leaves to join *3. Fallschirmjäger-Division*.

15 March: *85. I.D.* pushed back to the Rhine and virtually annihilated.

8 April: remnants *85. I.D.* are gathered in *Infanterie-Division Potsdam* (*Oberst* Erich Lorenz).

20 April: remnants are disbanded.

¹⁷⁴³ Bar, of course, *II./FJR 6*, which acted independently during this period.

Appendix 4: Casualties 5 September – 9 November 1944¹⁷⁴⁴

A. German casualties:

German total North Belgium:	21,000 ¹⁷⁴⁵
German total Noord Brabant (west of Corridor):	35,200 ¹⁷⁴⁶
German casualties total:	56,200

Casualties *Kampfgruppe Chill*:¹⁷⁴⁷

<i>I/FJR 2</i> :	38 KIA, 10 MIA, 11 DoW, 192 WIA, 663 POW	914
<i>FJR 6</i> :	389 KIA, 39 MIA, 108 DoW, 1,104 WIA, 1,108 POW	2,784
<i>HG Rgt</i> :	219 KIA, 23 MIA, 8 DoW, 968 WIA, 158 POW	1,376
<i>KGr Dreyer</i> :	329 KIA, 7 MIA, 87 DoW, 1344 WIA, 1,054 POW	2,821
Total:		7,895

B. Allied casualties:

Allied casualties overall:	18,806 ¹⁷⁴⁸
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Inflicted by *Kampfgruppe Chill*:

7-13 September 1944, Beringen, Leopoldsburg and environs:	415 ¹⁷⁴⁹
7-12 September 1944, Geel area:	918 ¹⁷⁵⁰
13-20 September 1944, Ten Aard:	914 ¹⁷⁵¹
18-23 September 1944, Kempen:	930 ¹⁷⁵²
24-25 September 1944, Koevering:	970 ¹⁷⁵³
5-8 October 1944, Goirle area:	216 ¹⁷⁵⁴
9-19 October 1944, Woensdrecht area:	1,840 ¹⁷⁵⁵
21 October–9 November 1944, Western Brabant:	655 ¹⁷⁵⁶
Total:	6,858

¹⁷⁴⁴ Casualty figures: Killed in Action (KIA), Died of Wounds (DoW), Wounded (WIA) and Missing (MIA). In cases where only the KIA are known the number of wounded was extrapolated by using a factor of four (exclusive of DoW) which, is a conservative estimate. Martin (*Fifteenth Scottish Division*, 347-354) has an overall ratio (KIA-WIA-MIA) of 1 : 4.9 : 1.3 for the 15th Scottish Div. for this period. However, German units had far higher numbers of POWs (MIA) than the Allies.

¹⁷⁴⁵ Based on 2,400 KIA and 13,000 POWs. Sources: IS First Cdn Army, Second Army and PAJVD, who collated these figures from many different sources (cf. note 1741).

¹⁷⁴⁶ Based on 4,100 KIA and 20,300 PoW (ibid).

¹⁷⁴⁷ PAJVD, based on information collated over many years from the Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräbelfürsorge (VDK), the Wehrmachtsauskunftsstelle für Kriegerverluste und Kriegsgefangene (WAsst), Intelligence Summaries of First Cdn and Second British Army, Red Cross archives, municipal archives and War Diaries.

¹⁷⁴⁸ Based on 1,592 KIA (PAJVD) for British army units (total 11,461). Added were 859 Polish casualties (Operational Report 1st Pol Armd Div, 49), 1,391 from the US 104th (Hoegh & Doyle, *Timberwolf Tracks*, 98), 2,600 paratroopers (PAJVD) and 2,495 Canadian casualties (PAJVD).

¹⁷⁴⁹ Based on 59 KIA for the Guards units, 12 for the 8th Armd Bde units and 2 for the 11th Armd units, of course only when they fought in the area.

¹⁷⁵⁰ Delaforce, *Monty's Northern Legions, 50th Northumbrian and 15th Scottish Divisions at War 1939-1945*, Stroud 2004, 93.

¹⁷⁵¹ Martin, *Fifteenth Scottish Division*, 350 (112 KIA, 644 WIA, 158 MIA).

¹⁷⁵² Based on 163 KIA and 3 DoW.

¹⁷⁵³ Based on 119 KIA and DoW 101st US Airborne, 36 KIA and DoW 7th Armd Div, and 31 KIA various smaller units.

¹⁷⁵⁴ War Diary 146th Bde, 07-12.10.44; War Diary Sherbrooke Fusiliers, 07-10.10.44.

¹⁷⁵⁵ Van Doorn, *Woensdrecht*, 109-119 (372 KIA).

¹⁷⁵⁶ PAJVD (144 KIA).

Samenvatting

Na het ineenstorten van het front in Normandië in augustus 1944, stroomden de resten van de *Wehrmacht* terug door Noord-Frankrijk en België. Begin september, met de bevrijding van Brussel en Antwerpen, leek het einde van de oorlog binnen handbreik. Nog geen week later was de geallieerde opmars tot staan gebracht. Het was voor de Duitse legerleiding het 'wonder in het westen'. Deze dissertatie zoekt naar een verklaring voor de grote rol die de *Kampfgruppe Chill* bij deze ommekeer op 5 september en de daaropvolgende vertragende gevechten tot 9 november heeft gespeeld. Een deel van de verklaring moet worden gevonden in de historiografie van de *Wehrmacht* aan het westelijk front vanaf september 1944. Tegelijk wordt het fenomeen *Kampfgruppen* onderzocht, waarover nog geen serieuze literatuur bestaat, zodat duidelijk wordt, niet alleen hoe de *Kampfgruppe* zich verhiel tot de rest van de Duitse troepen in de te onderzoeken periode, maar meer in het bijzonder tot andere *Kampfgruppen* die tegen dezelfde tegenstanders in het zelfde tijdsbestek vochten. Door een eenheid te onderzoeken die een wisselende samenstelling had, niet evenwichtig bewapend was, en tegen een overmacht moest vechten, hoop ik het antwoord te vinden op de vraag, wat de kern is van het goed functioneren van een militaire eenheid. Het antwoord richt zich, geheel volgens de ideeën omtrent moderne militaire geschiedschrijving, ook op de effecten van het opereren op de drie niveaus van militair handelen, namelijk het tactische, het operationele en het strategische. Kortom, het verhaal wordt verteld van 'hoog' tot 'laag'. Tegelijk wil deze dissertatie het bestaande beeld van de operaties in Noord-België en Zuid-Nederland bijstellen, mede door gebruik van andere dan de gebruikelijke bronnen, bij landoperaties, zoals die van de *Kriegsmarine* en de *Second Tactical Air Force*.

Bij de bronnen deed zich een probleem voor. Zolang de *Kampfgruppe Chill* viel onder de verantwoordelijkheid van het *LXXXVIII. Armeekorps* (General Hans Reinhard) kon ik het *Kriegstagebuch (KTB)* van dit legerkorps gebruiken. Vanaf 5 oktober 1944 viel de *Kampfgruppe* echter onder het *LXVII. Armeekorps* (General Hans von Obstfelder) en het *KTB* van dit legerkorps is, zoals de meeste Duitse verdwenen. Om de bewegingen van de *Kampfgruppe* toch te kunnen reconstrueren moest ik te rade gaan bij de voormalige vijand. Hier bleken naast de gebruikelijke *War Diaries* vooral de *Intelligence Summaries*, de *Intelligence Logs*, de *Daily Logs* en de *Special Interrogation Reports* zeer waardevolle informatie te bevatten. Met name over moreel en bewapening was veel te halen uit de verhoren van krijgsgevangen Duitse soldaten.

De dissertatie is in vijf delen opgesplitst. In Deel 1 wordt het theoretisch kader uiteengezet. Het gaat dan om de definities van de strategische, operationele en tactische niveaus (1.1.1), de zogenaamde bruggenhoofdstrategie (1.1.2) en de *Auftragstaktik*, (1.1.3). In 1.2 wordt de historiografie geschetst van de studie naar de mentaliteitsgeschiedenis van de Duitse soldaat tijdens de slotfase van de Tweede Wereldoorlog. Een van de vragen die historici bezighield na 1945 was, hoe te verklaren dat de strijdkrachten tot het bittere einde bleven doorvechten. Na de oorlog passerden diverse theorieën de revue. Deze worden hier in chronologische volgorde besproken en geanalyseerd, waarbij opvalt dat de meeste op een enkele oorzaak focussen. Tot slot wordt in 1.3 het fenomeen *Kampfgruppen* onder de loep

genomen. Bij het ontbreken van relevante literatuur wordt door de auteur zelf een mogelijk raamwerk geschetst. In 1.3.1 gaat het om *Kampfgruppen* in het algemeen terwijl 1.3.2. ingaat op *Kampfgruppen* in het westen. Deel 2 schildert de situatie tot aan het ontstaan van de *Kampfgruppe Chill*. In 2.1 wordt de militaire situatie eind augustus 1944 in beeld gebracht. Vervolgens wordt gekeken naar de geallieerde (2.2) en Duitse (2.3) strategieën eind augustus en begin september. In 2.4 wordt de voorgeschiedenis van de *Kampfgruppe* en de carrière van *Generalleutnant* Chill beschreven en 2.5 behandelt de geboorte van de *Kampfgruppe* op 5 september 1944. Deel 3 is het narratief van de strijd vanaf het eerste optreden van de *Kampfgruppe Chill* tot aan het afsluiten van de terugtocht van het *15. Armee* op 9 november 1944. Achtereenvolgens gaat het om de strijd in de driehoek Herentals-Roermond-Maastricht (3.1), de strijd om Geel (3.2), de gevechten bij Ten Aard (3.3), de gevechten in het kader van operatie Market Garden, met name het blokkeren van de Corridor (3.4), de strijd bij Goirle (3.5), de slag om Woensdrecht en omgeving (3.6) en de diverse gevechtshandelingen tijdens de strijd in westelijk Brabant van eind oktober tot begin november (3.7). Deel 4 geeft een overzicht van de militaire situatie na de terugtocht van het *15. Armee* uit Brabant (4.1) en onderzoekt de geallieerde en Duitse strategieën (4.2). Dit deel wordt afgesloten met een beschrijving van wat er na 9 november 1944 gebeurde met de diverse actoren (4.3). Deel 5 begint met een reeks conclusies over het effect van het optreden van de *Kampfgruppe* (5.1) en vervolgt dan met een onderzoek naar de militaire kracht van de *Kampfgruppe* (5.2) door de drie componenten van gevechtskracht te onderzoeken, de fysieke (5.2.1), de conceptuele (5.2.2) en de mentale (5.2.3). Tot slot wordt onderzocht in hoeverre de *Kampfgruppe Chill* representatief was voor *Kampfgruppen* (5.3.1) en voor de *Wehrmacht* in het algemeen (5.3.2). Een naschrift benoemt een aantal zaken die tijdens dit onderzoek naar voren kwamen en nader onderzoek verdienen, te weten de rol van de *Royal Air Force* (5.4.1) die minder spectaculair was dan wordt gesuggereerd in de meeste boeken, de tot nu toe onderbelichte rol van de *Kriegsmarine* (5.4.2), de gebrekkige communicatie op cruciale momenten, zowel aan Duitse als aan geallieerde zijde (5.4.3), en het relatief groot aantal oorlogsmisdaden op Belgisch grondgebied (5.4.4). Tot slot wordt de buitengewoon hoge prijs gememoreerd die Duitsland betaalde door het volhouden van de Duitse strijdkrachten (5.5).

Uit de gevechten die de *Kampfgruppe* voerde kunnen de volgende successen worden afgeleid: door zijn kordate optreden op 4 september 1944 heeft *Generalleutnant* Kurt Chill er voor gezorgd dat het gat dat was ontstaan in het Duitse front in het westen in ieder geval provisorisch werd gedicht. Dit was een majeure strategische tegenslag voor de Geallieerden, met name Montgomery's 21ste Legergroep die een paar dagen later al over de Rijn had willen zijn. De *Kampfgruppe Chill* dwong door haar taaie verzet bij Beringen de Britten een omweg te nemen zodat pas vijf dagen later, op 11 september, een brug over het Maas-Scheldekanaal in Britse handen viel. Tegelijk blokkeerde de *Kampfgruppe* een Britse aanval over Geel en voorkwam zo dat de verdediging benoorden Antwerpen werd omtrokken. Na de terugtrekking achter het Maas-Scheldekanaal blokkeerde de *Kampfgruppe* een aanval vanuit Ten Aard richting Turnhout. Opnieuw waren de gevolgen groot. Via deze route had het *XII British Corps* de flanken van het *XXX British Corps* tijdens operatie *Market Garden* moeten veiligstellen. Nu was het legerkorps van *Lieutenant-*

General Sir Neil Ritchie gedwongen een omweg te volgen zodat het uiteindelijk bleef steken in de Kempen. De *Kampfgruppe* slaagde er op 22 september als enige Duitse eenheid in Hell's Highway te blokkeren. Deze blokkade, die vierenveertig uur duurde, was de genadeslag voor *Market Garden*. Begin oktober voorkwam de *Kampfgruppe* ten zuiden van Tilburg een opmars van het *I British Corps* richting 's-Hertogenbosch. Deze aanval was bedoeld om Brabant te veroveren zodat de Britten vanuit Nijmegen alsnog voor de winter Duitsland konden binnenvallen. Meteen daarna slaagde Chill's gevechtsgroep erin de Canadese opmars bij Woensdrecht te stoppen. Het succes van de *Kampfgruppe* in beide confrontaties betekende dat Montgomery opnieuw zijn operationele plannen moest omgooien. Alvorens richting Duitsland te kunnen trekken, moest hij eerst de haven van Antwerpen veiligstellen, waarvoor niet alleen Zeeuws-Vlaanderen en Walcheren dienden te worden veroverd, maar het hele *15. Armee* terug moest worden gedrongen benoorden de Maas. De *Kampfgruppe* speelde een sleutelrol in het vertragend gevecht bij Bergen op Zoom en Steenberg. Al met al betekenden de Duitse defensieve successen, waarbij de *Kampfgruppe Chill* een hoofdrol vervulde, dat de aanval richting Ruhrgebied niet plaatsvond in het najaar van 1944, maar pas in maart 1945. Hierdoor werd niet alleen de geallieerde operationele planning (Montgomery), maar ook de strategische (Eisenhower) beïnvloed.

Een analyse van het militaire vermogen van de *Kampfgruppe Chill* laat zien dat het succes van de gevechtsgroep verklaard kan worden door drie factoren, het voorhanden zijn van een elite van *Fallschirmjäger*, ondersteuning door mobiele wapens, namelijk *Sturmgeschütze* en *Jagdpanther*, en superieur leiderschap. Een vergelijking met de *Kampfgruppe Walther*, een geïmproviseerde eenheid van vrijwel dezelfde omvang en samenstelling, optredend tijdens dezelfde periode en over deels hetzelfde soort terrein, onderstreept met name dat laatste aspect als doorslaggevend voor het effectieve optreden van Chill's gevechtsgroep. Hiermee wordt tevens antwoord gegeven op de vraag hoe kenmerkend de geïmproviseerde eenheid was voor *Kampfgruppen* in het algemeen. Alleen al door de grootte (variërend van zes tot tienduizend man) was de *Kampfgruppe* atypisch, aangezien slechts 10 tot 15 % van dergelijke eenheden groter was dan een versterkt bataljon. Ook het succes maakt haar bijzonder, zelfs in vergelijking met reguliere Duitse eenheden van een vergelijkbare omvang en gevechtssterkte, die het vaak lieten afweten (de *59. Infanterie-Division* bijvoorbeeld). Hiermee is tegelijk aangetoond dat de veelgehoorde bewering in de literatuur over deze periode, namelijk dat de eenheden van de *Wehrmacht* altijd beter vochten dan de geallieerde troepen, naar het rijk der fabelen moet worden verwezen.

De afgelopen zeventig jaar zijn verschillende baanbrekende studies verschenen over de vraag naar het waarom van de Duitse volhardendheid. De auteurs komen tot zeer verschillende conclusies, maar de belangrijkste verklaringen zijn sociale cohesie binnen een primaire groep, plichtsbesef, de rol van officieren, de uitstekende organisatie, nationaalsocialistische ideologie, angst voor represailles en de militaire doctrine met haar nadruk op *Auftragstaktik*. Afgezet tegen de bevindingen over de *Kampfgruppe Chill*, waarbij verhoren van krijgsgevangenen een belangrijke bron vormen, kunnen we constateren dat alle monocausale verklaringen tekort schieten en dat de belangrijkste verklaring gezocht moet worden in een

combinatie van factoren waarvan de belangrijkste primaire groepsbinding, een sterk plichtsbesef, naïviteit, doctrine en, bovenal, een sterk leiderschap zijn. Gesteld kan worden, tot slot, dat de *Kampfgruppe Chill* niet uniek was binnen de *Wehrmacht* in deze fase van de oorlog en op dit strijdtoneel, maar wel uitzonderlijk.

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Abbreviations of archives:

BA-BA = Bundesarchiv Bundesarchiv, Freiburg, Germany
 BA-MA = Bundesarchiv Militärarchiv, Freiburg, Germany
 GAHt = Gemeentearchief Den Bosch, the Netherlands
 LAC = Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa, Canada
 MGFA = Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt
 NARA = National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, USA
 NIMH = Nederlands Instituut voor Militaire Historie, Den Haag, the Netherlands
 OCMH = Office of the Chief of Military History, Washington, USA
 PAJVD = Personal Archive Johan van Doorn, Sommelsdijk
 SAG = Stadsarchief Geel, Belgium
 SAT = Stadsarchief Tilburg, the Netherlands
 TNA = The National Archives, Kew, London, England



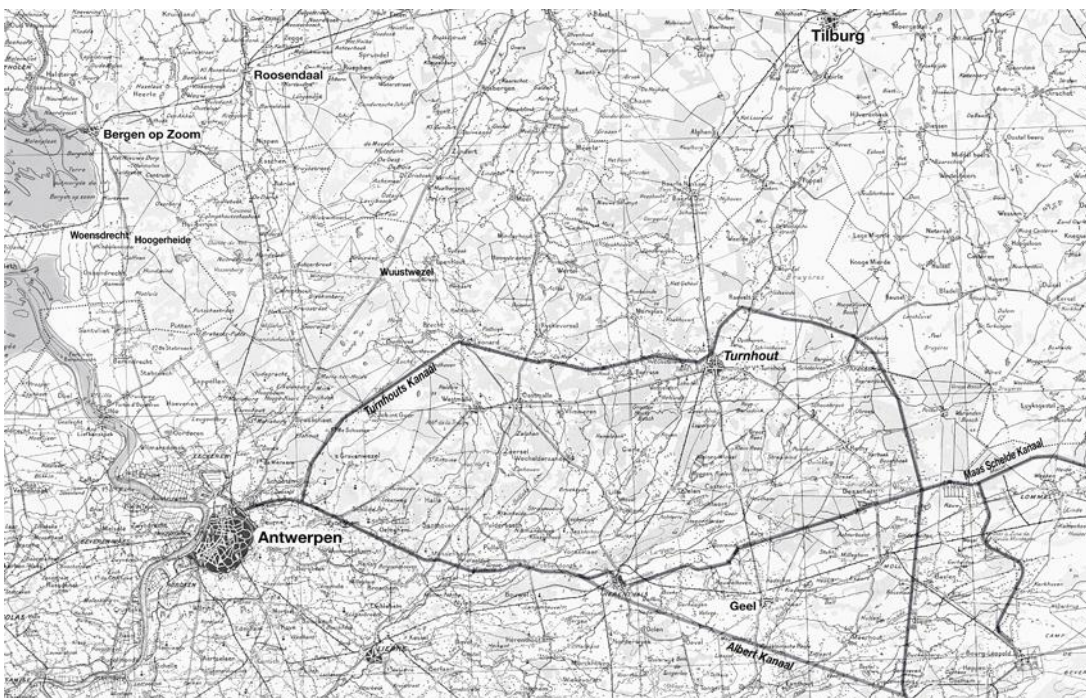
Generalleutnant Kurt Chill (1895-1976)

Maps

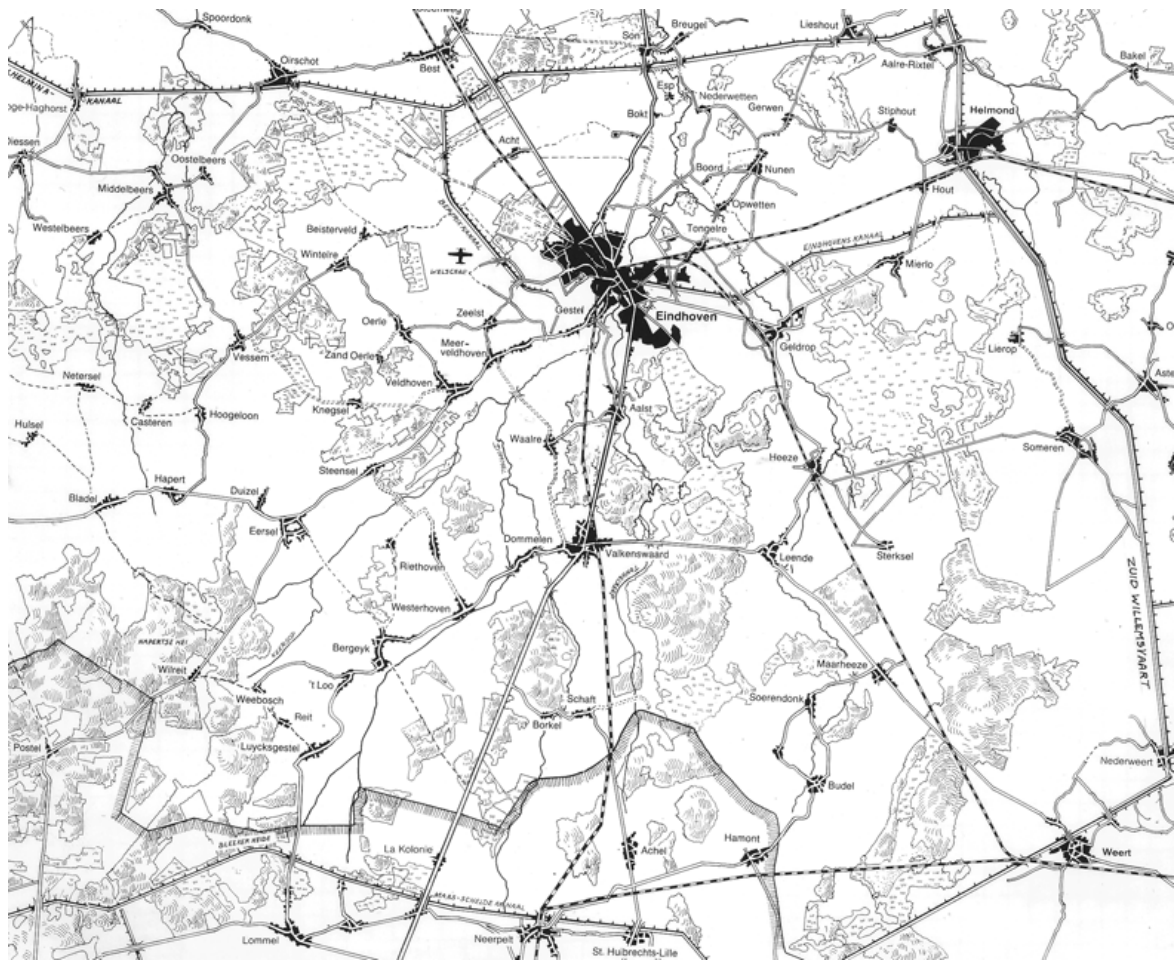
The General situation 5 September 1944



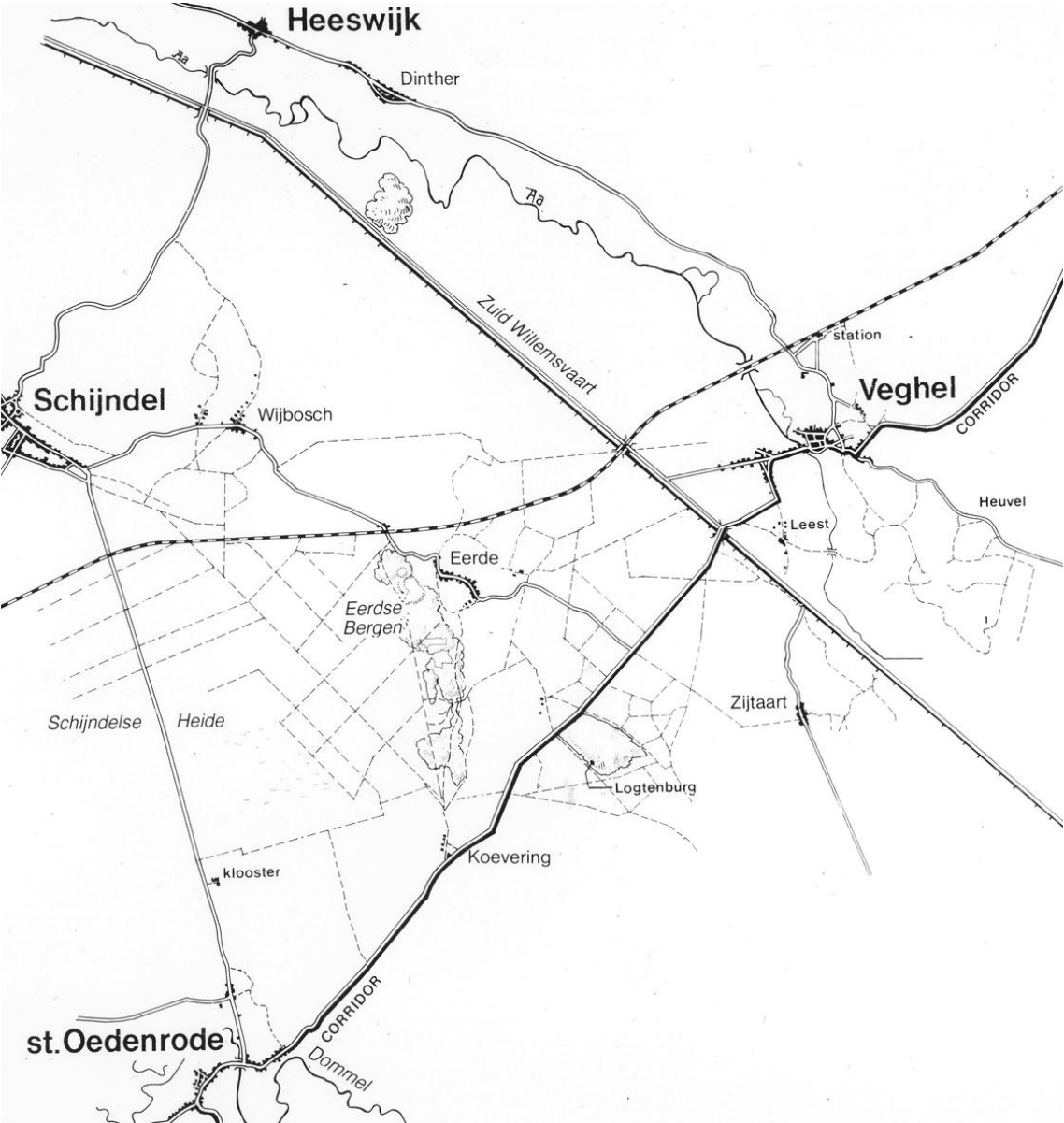
Beringen, Leopoldsburg, Hechtel, Geel and Ten Aard



Garden, the breakout



Veghel bridge area



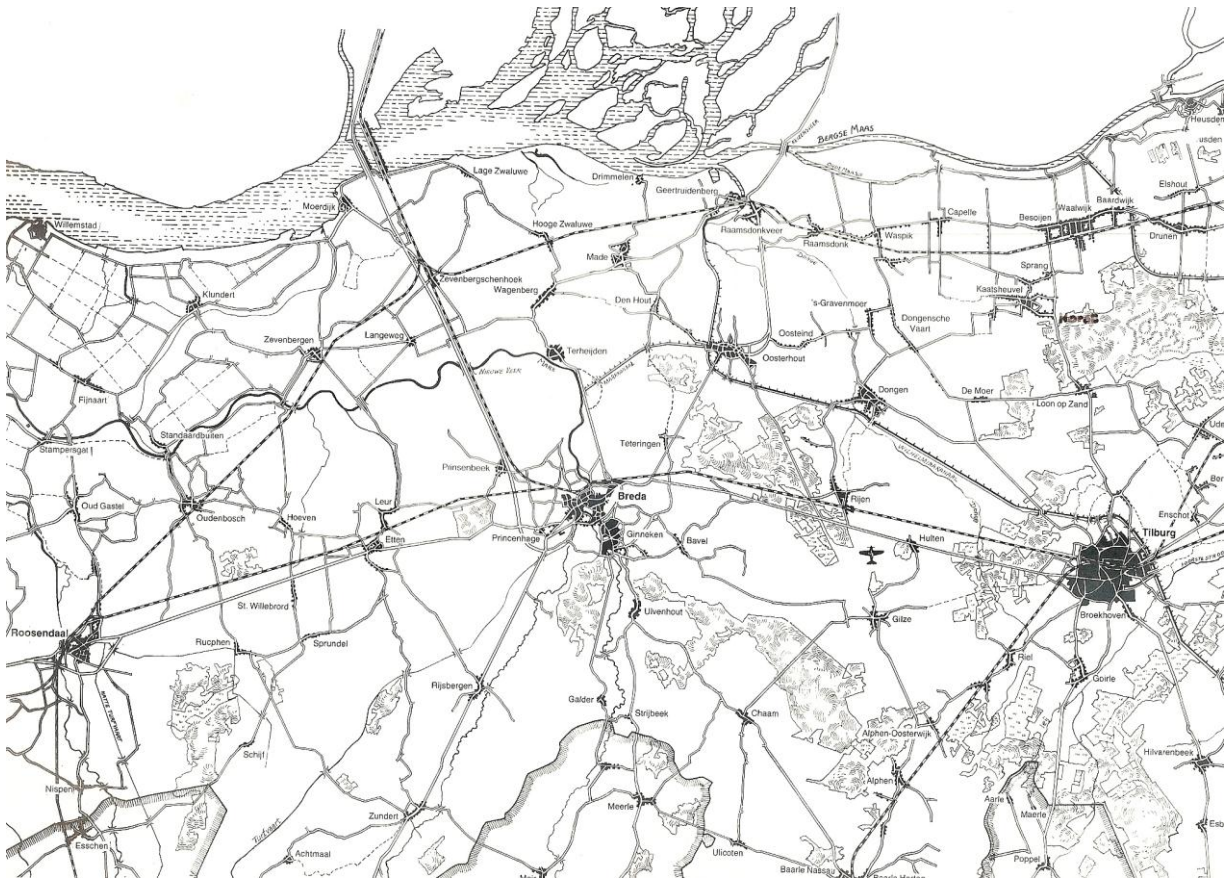
Goirle



Woensdrecht and environs



West Brabant 1 and 2



About the author

Jacobus Maria Cornelis Didden was born in Waalwijk on 23rd July 1952. After attending hbs-b there, he studied English and he got his Master of Arts in English Language and Literature at (then) Katholieke Universiteit Nijmegen. He became a teacher at his old secondary school, the Dr. Mollercollege in Waalwijk, where he also became a careers advisor and set up the bilingual department in 2005. He wrote a number of books with a close friend, Maarten Swarts, who was responsible for the illustrations and lay-out, *Strijd Tussen Maas en Duinen. Een fotoverslag van de gebeurtenissen in de Langstraat van september 1944 tot mei 1945* (Waalwijk 1979), *Einddoel Maas. De strijd in Zuidelijk Nederland tussen september en december 1944* (Weesp 1984), *Waalwijk tussen Oorlog en Welvaart. De jaren 1946 tot 1964 in beeld gebracht* (Drunen 1989), *Provinciestad in Oorlogstijd. Waalwijk en omgeving 1939-1945* (Drunen 1991), *Brabant Bevrijd* (Hulst 1993), *Colin, the 51st Highland Division in Brabant 1944* (Drunen 1994), *Driekwart eeuw Provinciestad. Waalwijk 1920-1995* (Drunen 1995), *Besoyen, een kleurrijk verleden* (Drunen 2004), and they are currently preparing an expanded version of this dissertation called *Autumn Gale, schwere Panzerjägerabteilung 559 and Kampfgruppe Chill and the German recovery in the autumn of 1944* (Drunen 2012). With Jan van Oudheusden he published *Waalwijk en de Wereldoorlog. Zes verhalen uit de jaren 1939-1945* (Drunen 1994). He contributed to various historical books such as *Tussen Vrijheid en Vrede. Het bevrijde Zuiden september '44 – mei '45* (Zwolle 1994), *Waalwijk, 700 Jaar kloppend hart van de Langstraat* (Waalwijk 2002) and *'s-Hertogenbosch 1939-1945* ('s-Hertogenbosch 2007). In addition he wrote six children's books, two with another close friend, Paul van Loon.

Jack Didden is married to Marianne Pijnenborg and has two children, Maartje and Mark, who have long since left the house and live with their partners, Matthijs Blom and Pilar de Rocio.

Index of personal names

A

Ackermann, 164
 Ackermann, (Leutnant), 259, 345
 Adair, A.H.S., 41, 73, 108, 109
 Aldam, J.H., 115
 Allan, Don, 253
 Allen, (Sergeant), 136
 Allen, Terry de la Mesa, 281, 284, 306, 308, 309, 316
 Allsopp, H.R., 102
 Alvensleben, Ludolf von, 55, 318
 Armstrong, G., 299

B

Balck, Hermann, 35
 Balzereit, 249, 363
 Barber, C.M., 40, 139, 143, 150, 151, 152, 154, 298
 Barclay, F.P., 211, 223
 Barker, E.H., 13, 210, 211, 212, 281, 287, 288, 301, 309, 318
 Bartov, Omar, 22, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 32, 33, 341, 355
 Bauer, 252, 279, 363
 Baumgart, 35
 Beatty, Tim, 245, 246
 Bechler, Helmut, 327, 328, 364
 Beck, Rudolf, 92
 Becker, August Hermann, 266
 Beckwith-Smith, P.M., 79, 104, 105
 Belchem, David, 356
 Bennett, David, 34
 Berenheide, 75
 Berlin, 99, 144, 156, 163, 164, 189, 190
 Bertram, Georg, 76
 Bibeau, J., 209, 231
 Bieg, Karl, 315
 Bloch, Ernst, 190, 198, 201, 205, 218, 249, 254, 322, 363, 364
 Blumentritt, Günther, 68, 69
 Böhmer, 170
 Borcherd, Hans, 77, 81
 Bormann, Martin, 32
 Bose, Jobst von, 302
 Bosselmann, 67, 209
 Bradburn, R., 287, 308, 312
 Bradley, Omar, 16, 39, 41, 42, 61, 164, 262, 281, 326
 Brandenberger, Erich, 44
 Brauchitsch, Walter von, 21
 Brereton, Lewis H., 42, 61, 165, 167
 Brockes, 169, 172, 173
 Brooke, Alan, 16, 236, 262, 263, 354
 Brooks, E.H., 120
 Brown, Leslie, 357
 Buchholz, 60, 122, 210, 211, 212, 344, 363, 364
 Burden, G.W.P.N., 176
 Burnett, 133
 Butterworth, F.W.A., 213, 313
 Byron, R.G., 94, 103, 115, 118

C

Cabeldu, F., 233, 234, 235, 236, 250, 253
 Campbell, P.U., 148, 188
 Canavan, E.J., 273
 Carrington, Peter, 181
 Cassidy, Patrick F., 182
 Chandos-Pole, J., 87, 93
 Charity, 136
 Charles, T.L., 127
 Chaux, de la, 47
 Chill, Kurt, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 17, 19, 20, 21, 23, 25, 26, 27, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 36, 37, 38, 39, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 59, 60, 63, 68, 69, 70, 71, 73, 75, 76, 82, 83, 85, 90, 92, 98, 99, 105, 106, 107, 117, 122, 123, 125, 126, 127, 130, 135, 139, 140, 141, 142, 143, 144, 146, 147, 149, 150, 151, 152, 153, 154, 155, 157, 158, 160, 161, 163, 164, 170, 175, 176, 178, 180, 181, 184, 185, 190, 191, 192, 193, 195, 197, 198, 200, 201, 202, 203, 204, 205, 207, 209, 210, 213, 214, 218, 219, 220, 221, 223, 225, 227, 228, 229, 230, 235, 239, 240, 241, 247, 248, 249, 250, 251, 252, 253, 255, 260, 261, 265, 269, 272, 273, 274, 278, 279, 281, 287, 289, 290, 292, 295, 297, 300, 302, 304, 305, 307, 311, 312, 316, 318, 322, 323, 326, 327, 328, 329, 330, 331, 332, 333, 334, 335, 337, 338, 339, 340, 342, 343, 344, 346, 347, 348, 349, 350, 351, 352, 353, 354, 355, 356, 361, 362, 363, 364, 365, 366, 367, 368, 369
 Christiansen, Friedrich, 43, 58
 Christopherson, S.D., 94, 136
 Churcher, J., 64, 66, 67
 Clarke, W.S., 269, 288
 Clausewitz, Carl von, 53
 Cockburn, J.C., 143, 146, 148, 150
 Cole, Robert G., 177
 Collins, J. Lawton, 39, 377
 Colson, Eugene, 56, 61, 64, 233, 234, 271
 Colville, E.C., 150
 Complak, K., 215
 Coningham, Arthur, 357, 358
 Cooke, Ted, 130
 Copp, Terry, 260
 Cory, Bob, 282
 Cowan, Bertie, 173
 Cowley, James, 102
 Cox, W.R., 126
 Crerar, H.D.G., 40, 208, 209, 213, 230
 Creswell, J.N., 111, 112
 Creveld, Martin van, 5, 23, 24, 25, 27, 32, 34, 355
 Crocker, J.T., 13, 41, 209, 213, 216, 219, 223, 264, 270, 283, 289, 298, 301, 304, 306, 309
 Cromb, Bill, 290, 300
 Curry, D., 286
 Cutler, S.W., 111, 112

D

D'Este, Carlo, 110
 Daly, D. Bowes, 74, 158
 Daser, Wilhelm, 232
 Davies, W.G., 256

Deedes, W., 95, 99
 Dempsey, Miles C., 39, 41, 61, 62, 71, 123, 124, 193,
 196, 197, 264, 326
 Devers, Jacob M., 16
 Dewald, 190
 Dickson, G.F.T.B., 176
 Dieringer, 60
 Diestel, Erich, 168, 208, 210, 232, 236, 237, 269
 Dietrich, Sepp, 35, 44
 Dietrich, (Hauptmann), 81
 Dobbeler, 157
 Dreyer, Georg Heinrich, 9, 34, 47, 51, 52, 53, 60, 107, 123,
 125, 126, 128, 129, 130, 131, 134, 137, 139, 140, 142,
 144, 146, 147, 148, 151, 152, 154, 157, 163, 170, 191,
 193, 194, 195, 202, 223, 226, 240, 248, 272, 279, 280,
 282, 286, 291, 292, 297, 307, 327, 339, 344, 345, 347,
 348, 353, 363, 364, 365
 Dudley, M., 83, 84
 Dunkerly, V.A.B., 94, 115
 Dunlop, John, 54
 Dupuy, Trevor N., 23
 Dyke, T. Hart, 211, 215, 223, 224, 225, 226, 227

E

Eames, 83
 Eastman, D.I.T., 93
 Edwardes, M., 94, 115
 Eichert-Wiersdorff, Curt von, 57, 85, 153, 156, 183, 185,
 189
 Eisenhower, Dwight D., 9, 16, 40, 41, 42, 43, 62, 69, 123,
 164, 165, 166, 169, 236, 261, 262, 263, 264, 281, 323, 326
 Ekin, M.S., 313
 Elliott, G.G., 211, 212
 Ellis, Ross, 243, 245
 Ellis, John, 342
 Engel, H., 318, 321
 Erdmann, Wolfgang, 37, 75, 99, 100, 106, 114, 117, 120,
 141, 170
 Ewald, 182, 184
 Ewell, Julian J., 182, 183, 186, 194
 Eykyn, D.A.D., 217

F

Feil, 232, 234
 Feilden, C.H., 86, 87, 93
 Feuchtinger, Edgar, 52
 Finzel, Oswald, 75, 76, 77, 86, 87, 89, 92, 99, 101, 103,
 106, 118, 191, 194, 205, 223, 241, 245, 252, 257, 259,
 279, 293, 345
 Fisher, N.T.L., 79
 Fitzgerald, D.S., 83
 Forbes, Jack, 287
 Foster, Harry, 41, 270, 272, 281, 285, 287, 307, 308, 311
 Fotheringham, P.S., 97, 105
 Foulkes, Charles, 208, 209, 210, 211, 230
 Franczak, 309
 Franklin, 112
 Franz, Gerhard, 267, 295
 Frieser, Karl-Heinz, 15
 Fritz, Stephen G., 25, 26, 31, 32, 33, 355
 Froggett, E.L., 258

Fullriede, Fritz, 121, 151

G

Gallus, Herbert, 95
 Gauvreau, J.G., 210, 211, 230, 239, 271
 Gavin, James M., 166, 181
 Gebhardt, M., 76
 Gerbrandy, P.S., 63
 Gerdes, 76
 Gerrits, Louis, 161
 Gibbs, V.P., 160, 161
 Gibson, H.T., 176
 Gilbert, 194
 Gillam, Dennis, 276
 Gillhofer, Herbert, 322
 Glade, 344
 Goebbels, Joseph, 32
 Goering, Hermann, 57
 Gohthsche, R., 55, 168, 169
 Gold, Michael, 136
 Goltzsch, Rudolf, 351, 381
 Gordon, D.S., 127, 128, 130, 133, 134, 135
 Gordon, M.B.K., 212
 Goulburn, E.H., 74, 112
 Graham, D.A.H., 124, 127, 134, 138, 139
 Gramse, Gerhard, 205, 218, 249, 322, 363
 Grase, Martin, 59
 Grassmel, Franz, 82, 97, 104, 110, 119
 Green, A.E., 128, 129
 Greenleaf, C.A., 292
 Gresham, J.C., 75, 104
 Griffith, W.H., 91
 Gryziecki, M., 307, 311
 Guderian, Heinz, 16, 63
 Gwatkin, N.W., 106, 155, 174

H

Haile, Edmund, 66, 88, 96, 111, 162
 Halberstadt, Karl, 155
 Halder, Franz, 21
 Hales, 199
 Hampson, P.G., 132
 Hanke, 205, 363
 Hankey, J.B.A., 196
 Hardy, J., 64
 Harper, J.W., 215
 Harrison-Topham, T.W.A., 211
 Hartington, the Marquess of, 86, 87, 102
 Haslewood, J., 108
 Hausser, Paul, 39
 Heathcote, Keith, 172
 Hegelheimer, H.L., 257
 Heider, 121
 Heinrichs, Conrad-Oskar, 49
 Hencke, Fritz, 284
 Hendry, A., 109, 112
 Hertel, 337
 Heuser, Beatrice, 14
 Heydte, Friedrich von der, 9, 72, 73, 75, 85, 98, 99, 101,
 103, 107, 143, 161, 162, 163, 169, 173, 175, 176, 177,
 178, 180, 183, 190, 191, 193, 194, 195, 197, 198, 201,

204, 205, 216, 223, 224, 225, 227, 228, 240, 241, 242, 244, 245, 246, 253, 256, 257, 258, 260, 261, 271, 273, 274, 279, 284, 285, 329, 337, 338, 347, 353, 363, 364
 Higgins, E.J.K., 138
 Highfield, 130
 Hill, E.R., 87, 88, 93, 102
 Hiller, 232
 Hills, Stuart, 129, 138
 Hilten, D.A. van, 10
 Himmler, Heinrich, 32, 68, 267
 Hinrichsen, 126
 Hitler, Adolf, 5, 17, 18, 19, 21, 25, 26, 28, 31, 32, 33, 35, 39, 44, 45, 46, 48, 50, 51, 56, 57, 63, 68, 70, 115, 192, 193, 196, 248, 277, 285, 322, 323, 325, 328, 341, 342, 348, 352, 361
 Hobbs, Leland S., 39
 Hodges, Courtney H., 40, 41, 42, 61, 62, 262
 Hoffmann, Helmuth von, 163, 168, 169
 Hoffmann, Rudolf, 153, 192, 276
 Hoffmann, (Hauptmann), 81
 Hoffmann, (Major), 212
 Hoffner, 319
 Holden, R., 301
 Holman, Jack, 129
 Honey, Hedley Arthur, 312
 Hooper, 194
 Hopkinson, G.C., 179, 186
 Hoppe, Harrie, 49
 Hopwood, J.A., 276
 Horrocks, Brian, 13, 39, 40, 62, 64, 67, 106, 117, 137, 154, 155, 167, 172, 174, 182, 188, 193, 196, 197, 204
 Hosp, Erich, 246
 Huber, 184, 185, 186, 191, 196, 197, 198, 200, 201, 202, 204
 Hübner, Friedrich, 82, 90, 106
 Hühne, 238
 Hühnlein, 104
 Hunter, T., 101
 Hutchinson, G.F., 124, 126
 Hutton, Ron, 113
 Hütz, Leopold von, 9, 51, 157, 158, 159, 160, 161, 215, 291, 295, 299, 300, 307, 318, 339, 348

J

Jäger, Arthur, 77
 Jahnke, 58
 Janowitz, Morris, 22, 23, 24, 25, 27, 28, 30, 32, 33, 334, 347, 352, 355
 Jaschke, Friedrich, 259, 271, 282, 301, 306, 318, 327
 Jefferson, J., 281, 311
 Jodl, Alfred, 322
 Johnson, Howard R., 182, 183, 194, 195
 Joynt, P.R. Lane, 142, 143, 145
 Jungwirth, Hans, 184, 186, 191, 193, 195, 198, 201, 202, 219, 249
 Jürgens, 131, 205

K

Kański, J., 215
 Kearns, Del, 243
 Keefler, R.H., 230, 237, 240, 242, 244, 250, 254

Keitel, Wilhelm, 78
 Kelleher, Gerald C., 304
 Kershaw, Ian, 32, 70, 341, 348
 Kerutt, Helmut, 162, 163, 169, 172, 350
 Kinnard, Harry W.O., 182, 183, 185, 186, 194, 195
 Kleffel, Phillip, 49
 Kleikamp, Gustav, 266
 Kluge, Hans von, 40
 Knox, F.Y.C., 124, 127, 137
 Knüpling, Ludwig, 259, 308
 Koch, Heinrich, 88, 89, 221, 226
 Koch, (Major), 144, 205
 Köhne, Heinz, 138
 Kopka, Franz, 9, 76, 77, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 95, 96, 99, 103, 131, 174, 185, 192, 202, 207, 221, 227, 248, 260, 268, 278, 310, 328, 336, 341, 342, 370
 Kornke, Karl, 84, 85, 90, 91
 Kortzfleisch, Joachim von, 48
 Kossack, Gerhard, 136
 Kraemer, Werner, 146, 202
 Krämer, Fritz, 50
 Krebs, Hans, 68, 107, 152, 193
 Krey, W., 337
 Krueger, Heinz, 337
 Kühme, Kurt, 206, 241
 Kühne, Thomas, 22, 32, 376
 Kunz, Andreas, 27, 28, 29, 30, 33, 353, 354, 355
 Kuske, 156
 Kynaston, R.U.F., 83

L

Lambert, 237
 Lambert, Herbert, 296, 299
 Lammert, see Lambert
 Lampard, Duncan, 113
 Langton, R.S., 158
 LaPrade, James L., 198, 199
 Lashner, W., 272
 Laux, 49
 LeCoutre, Georg, 296, 299, 300, 346
 Lee, F., 250, 252
 Lehnert, 266
 Lendrum, R.M., 233, 245, 247
 Lenz, 177, 179, 188, 197
 Leonard, John W., 329
 Liddell Hart, Basil, 6, 15, 349
 Lieb, Peter, 6, 29, 33, 347, 355
 Liesmann, 212
 Limburg, Hetlingen von, 212, 303
 Lindenau, von, 131
 Lister, H.E.J., 104
 Lorenz, Erich, 328, 364
 Löytved-Hardegg, Rolf, 37, 90, 110
 Lucas, James, 36
 Lustnauer, 171
 Lüttwitz, Heinrich Freiherr von, 324, 325

M

Mackenzie, Bruce, 243
 Mackenzie, I., 146

MacLauchlan, D., 244, 245
 Maczek, Stanislaw, 41, 215, 217, 222, 289, 294, 298, 299, 302, 309, 311, 320
 Mager, Rolf, 9, 134, 137, 190, 216, 222, 223, 270, 282, 288, 298, 328, 338
 Majewski, T., 217, 222, 314
 Maltzahn, Berndt-Joachim von, 179, 189
 Mania, 186, 187
 Mann, John, 136
 Margetts, 276
 Marshall, George C., 16, 262, 263
 Mayer, Hans-Georg, 321
 McGurren, 113
 McLeod, William, 286
 McWilliams, Jimmy, 138
 Megill, W.J., 209, 230, 231, 244, 245, 253
 Melchak, see Milzak
 Metzke, Georg, 192, 218, 220
 Meyer, Kurt, 47, 50, 52, 321
 Michaelis, John H., 177, 182, 183, 195
 Middleton, J.K., 136
 Miller, J.M., 90, 97, 98, 105
 Milzak, 279
 Minn, Otto, 104, 105, 120
 Mitchell, Frank, 209
 Mitchley, H.R.E., 98
 Model, Walter, 40, 44, 45, 46, 56, 62, 68, 69, 70, 71, 75, 121, 140, 141, 142, 153, 183, 184, 185, 189, 190, 193, 214, 236, 237, 278, 324, 325, 331, 333, 361
 Mogg, H.J., 128
 Moltke, Helmuth Graf von, 15
 Moncel, R., 272, 282, 285, 292, 300, 308
 Montgomery, Bernard L., 9, 13, 16, 17, 18, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 46, 61, 62, 68, 71, 73, 123, 141, 148, 150, 164, 165, 166, 167, 170, 175, 197, 198, 203, 204, 207, 208, 213, 223, 229, 230, 236, 237, 261, 262, 263, 264, 265, 283, 285, 322, 324, 326, 327, 331, 333, 354, 356, 367, 368
 Morgan, D.R., 143
 Morrison, K., 273
 Müller, G., 218
 Müller, Helmut, 258, 271
 Müller, Willie, 104, 105, 106, 116, 117, 120, 121
 Munro, 243
 Murray, G.L.M., 160
 Muschiol, Franz, 92

N

Nägele, Rudi, 174
 Nass, Walter, 288, 318, 319
 Needham, F., 305
 Neitzel, Sönke, 31, 33, 341, 355
 Nesling, Gordon, 138
 Neubauer, Otto, 58, 209
 Neumann, Friedrich, 13, 203, 205, 274, 275
 Neumann, (Leutnant), 147
 Neumann, Oberst, 306, 321
 Newman, 199
 Newton, W., 226
 Nitka, B., 307
 Noels, Jozef, 74
 Nowaczynski, Aleksander, 307
 Nye, A.E., 123

O

O'Cock, M., 173
 O'Connor, Richard, 40, 175, 180, 181, 197, 262, 327
 Obstfelder, Hans von, 170, 177, 190, 262, 327, 364, 366
 Obstfelder (Hauptmann von), 211
 Oesterheld, Friedrich, 237
 Ohler, 9, 191, 193, 200, 205, 223, 228, 240, 249, 272, 279, 280, 328, 344, 363
 Oldham, H.R.D., 127
 Orr, H.G., 66
 Ott, 221

P

Pangman, J., 233
 Parker, Edwin P., 328, 329
 Patton, George C., 42
 Pauls, 202, 345
 Paulus, Friedrich, 18
 Peel, D., 109, 112, 113, 114, 159
 Peiser, 224
 Pettigrew, 97
 Pigott, Joe, 257, 258
 Pilsach, Ernst Senfft von, 131, 134
 Piron, Jean, 117, 118
 Plaumann, Günther, 104, 105, 117
 Plüskow, Hans-Albrecht von, 189
 Pohl, Horst, 9, 126, 223, 228, 240, 272, 279, 280, 292, 304, 308, 312, 316, 328, 343, 346
 Pohl, Oswald, 60
 Pollard, A.E., 292
 Poppe, Walter, 179, 184, 185, 186, 188, 190, 191, 193, 198, 200, 201, 210, 219, 249, 275, 276, 277, 352, 353, 359
 Porter, Bob, 244
 Post, 268
 Powell, J.R., 242
 Prior-Palmer, G.E., 94, 115, 117
 Prittitz und Gaffron, Karl-Heinz von, 249, 275, 277
 Püchler, Karl, 303, 308, 314, 315, 327, 364

R

Rabe, Hans, 140
 Rakowski, W., 320, 321
 Ralston, J.L., 254
 Ramsay, Bertram, 263
 Ratcliffe, C.B., 54
 Redding, Hans, 92
 Redlich, 252
 Reeves, Ivor L., 64, 65, 66
 Reichel, Friedrich, 91
 Reichert, Josef, 168, 208, 212, 213, 219, 282, 295, 302, 303, 316
 Reid, Brian, 47, 50, 340, 357, 362, 378
 Reinhard, Hans Wolfgang, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 65, 67, 69, 73, 75, 76, 78, 79, 82, 85, 90, 98, 106, 107, 114, 116, 117, 121, 126, 127, 128, 130, 134, 135, 139, 140, 141, 144, 147, 149, 151, 152, 153, 156, 162, 168, 170, 171, 175, 176, 177, 178, 179, 180, 183, 184, 189, 190, 192, 193, 197, 200, 201, 202, 203, 204, 207, 210, 212, 218,

220, 223, 228, 229, 248, 249, 265, 267, 274, 275, 277,
289, 302, 338, 352, 364, 366
Rennie, T., 275
Richards, 95
Richardson, C.W.P., 143, 145
Richter, Friedrich, 169
Rideleagh, W., 132
Rink, Berthold, 177
Ritchie, Bruce, 231, 240, 243, 253, 254
Ritchie, Neil, 40, 150, 152, 154, 169, 175, 179, 197, 264,
275, 278, 331, 358, 368
Roberts, G.P.B., 41, 53, 62, 64, 110
Robinson, Max, 67
Robinson, Peter, 181
Rollo, Duncan, 145
Rommel, Erwin, 35, 40, 175
Ross, Bobby, 13, 40, 275, 276
Ross, (Major), 245
Rübbig, 259
Rundstedt, Gerd von, 44, 56, 62, 69, 70, 193, 220, 267,
277, 278, 313, 324, 325, 333
Runge, Günter, 63, 252
Rush, Robert R., 5, 26, 27, 32, 355
Ruyter van Steveninck, A.C. de, 96
Ryall, E., 246

S

Sandars, F.W., 215
Sander, Erwin, 183, 190, 218, 228, 249, 288, 316, 318,
321
Sattler, Erich, 9, 76, 83, 84, 87, 88, 91, 92, 98, 120
Sauvé, J.M.P., 210
Sajer, Guy, 25, 26
Schauf, Walter, 116, 117
Scheue, 250
Schilling, 268
Schimpf, Richard, 329
Schlemm, Albert, 278
Schmidt, 321
Schroeder, 184
Schürmann, 156
Schuster, Kurt, 47, 77, 100, 144, 147, 164, 170, 227, 347
Schwalbe, Felix, 212, 216, 220, 294, 295
Schwarzelt, 231
Segler, Karl, 169
Seidel, Paul, 60, 363, 364
Seitz, Erwin, 91, 184, 195, 221
Self, G.H., 132
Shils, Edward A., 22, 23, 24, 25, 27, 28, 30, 32, 33, 334,
347, 352, 355
Sick, 79, 156
Sievers, Karl, 6, 58, 60, 65, 67, 75, 147, 162, 192, 210, 211
Silvertop, David N.H., 54, 101
Silvester, Lindsay McD, 324
Simonds, G.G., 41, 208, 213, 230, 264
Sinclair, J.R., 150
Skibiński, F., 215, 310
Smith, A.G.V., 273
Smith, Bedell, 263
Smith, E.M., 297, 300
Smith, Rupert, 15
Speer, Albert, 32

Spencer, J.O., 90, 91, 104
Sponheimer, Otto, 48, 49, 162, 168, 192, 207, 210, 212,
218, 228, 239, 265, 268, 269, 270, 289, 290, 295, 302, 303
Sprenger, 100
Stanley-Clarke, John, 113
Steer, 113
Stein, 125, 215, 217
Steinmüller, Walter, 269, 306
Stephan, 163, 176, 180
Stewart, J.D., 279, 280
Stewart-Fotheringham, P., 90, 97, 105
Stirling, Keith, 308
Stockloser, B., 296, 299
Stolberg, Christoph Stolberg zu, 53, 55, 58
Stopka, John, 182
Stott, V., 210, 234, 250, 252, 253, 254
Strayer, Robert L., 198, 199
Student, Kurt, 54, 57, 68, 69, 71, 72, 73, 75, 85, 92, 98, 99,
101, 107, 114, 117, 126, 135, 141, 144, 147, 153, 156,
157, 161, 162, 164, 168, 169, 170, 171, 175, 177, 183,
189, 190, 192, 204, 277, 278, 303, 309, 317, 325
Stumm, Berthold, 77
Stumme, Georg, 267
Sugden, G.B., 176
Szydłowski, Z., 215
Szyrkowicz, Paul Joachim, 55

T

Taylor, Maxwell D., 167, 182, 183, 189
Taylor, A.D., 179
Teussel, 132
Thomale, Wolfgang, 63
Thomas, G.I., 40
Thompson, E., 234, 271
Thornburn, R., 55
Thorpe, 104
Tolstoj, Leo, 7, 332
Trede, 134
Trench, N., 95
Trierenberg, Wolf, 58
Tufts, C., 306
Turner-Cain, G.R., 109
Tuzo, Harry, 116
Tweedie, J.W., 143
Tyler, E.G., 108, 174

U

Ulmer, Walter, 100, 291
Urbach, Ruprecht Eberhard von, 221
Urquhart, Roy, 166

V

Vandeleur, J.O.E., 83, 106, 108, 111, 112, 113, 114, 159,
172, 173
Vandeleur, Giles, 159
Vaneerdewegh, Remie, 75
Vehrenkamp, 76, 79, 82, 84, 90, 92
Vekemans, Robert, 54
Verney, G.L., 197, 275
Vinke, 169, 173

Vlassov, Andrei, 49
 Vogt, Adolf, 52, 348
 Vokes, Chris, 254
 Volz, Heinz, 162

W

Wagner, 156, 157
 Walker, H.C., 297
 Walker, J.F., 211, 226
 Walker, W.G.N., 109
 Walther, Erich, 162, 163, 164, 169, 170, 172, 174, 175,
 185, 187, 188, 189, 197, 262, 350, 351, 352, 359, 368
 Ward, E.J.S., 74, 158, 159
 Warning, Elmar, 239, 248
 Wasilewski, J., 215, 294, 320
 Watson, Gordon, 159
 Weber, 47
 Weller, 205
 Welzer, Harald, 6, 31, 33, 341, 355
 Westphal, Hauptmann, 153, 202
 Westphal, Siegfried, 6, 62, 69
 Whitaker, D., 234, 236, 253, 256, 257, 258
 Whitley, T.F., 247
 Wiatrowski, 309
 Wiegand, Carl Werner, 246, 247, 257, 258
 Wildt, Kurt, 189
 Williams, H.L., 81

Williams, Ken, 251, 253, 254, 255
 Willoughby, D.M.G.J., 102
 Wilson, Eric Mackay, 231
 Wimmer, Johann, 146, 147, 148, 149, 151, 153
 Wittenberg, 234
 Wittstock, 205, 350, 363
 Woestenburg, Fred, 186
 Wood, G.L., 129, 138
 Wood, H., 301
 Wood, P.T., 148
 Wotherspoon, G., 281, 283, 290
 Wright, P.E.R., 248, 289
 Wühlisch, Heinz-Helmuth von, 67, 68

Z

Zangen, Adolf von, 44, 45, 56, 61, 62, 68, 71, 168, 185,
 192, 200, 203, 204, 206, 208, 212, 214, 216, 219, 220,
 227, 228, 232, 235, 237, 239, 247, 255, 256, 259, 265,
 266, 267, 268, 269, 273, 274, 276, 277, 289, 295, 299,
 302, 303, 308, 314, 318, 322, 323, 325, 334, 342, 356, 358
 Zimmermann, Bodo, 69
 Zimmermann, John, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 70, 333, 355
 Zimmermann, (Leutnant), 121
 Zörkler, 47
 Zoske, 65, 91
 Zuber, 153, 178, 180, 183, 190