BATTLE OF THE RHINE - OPERATION VERITABLE

By R.W. THOMPSON, Author of Battle for the Rhine

At NO time in the whole war was the enormous extent of the Nazi military power more evident- and, in a way, more awe inspiring- than in January, 1945, when, assaulted from the east, south and west, the vast military machine moved into its dance of death, and strategy into its last phase. Eighty five divisions faced eighty five divisions west of the Rhine, on the last battlefield, and in its death throes the German Army was still a most terrible and potent force.

On January 14, 30th British Corps Headquarters moved north to join, and, be under command of the 1st Canadian Army Headquarters, where they planned "Operation Veritable." The intention was to destroy all enemy forces between the Maas and the Rhine from Nijmegen to the general line Julich- Dusseldorf. The stage was fast being set and the task was immense. It would be the last great battle paving the way for the final assault across the Rhine. The battle was originally scheduled the first part of January when the ground would still be frozen and would allow for the relatively easy movement of the armor. However, because of the Americans fatal mistake of becoming bogged down in the Hurtgen Forest, the start date was set back to February 8. By this time, the ground had thawed and coupled with the Germans blowing all the main dikes, the ground conditions became appalling. It thawed, froze, fogged, snowed and rained, sometimes all five in a mushy mixture, all within 24 hours. It was always bitterly in what was the worst winter on record. All of which made the movement of armor and artillery almost impossible.

VERITABLE- THE PREPARATION-

The opening of the Port of Antwerp by the Canadians, had enabled General Crerar, commanding the 1st Canadian Army, to assemble a vast weight of materials in the Nijmegen bridgehead in preparation for Operation Veritable, the Battle of the Rhineland.

The final period of the build-up began on January 25th. Seldom, if ever, has so much activity, so immense an expenditure of energy, taken place in so confined a space. The result was swelling to the ranks of Canadian 1st Army to 13 divisions, 3 armored brigades, to 30th Brigade of 79th Armored Division (British), 5 artillery groups, 2 anti-aircraft brigades and the Canadian Rocket Battery. The ration strength of the Canadian 1st Army , together with attached personnel, reached a peak of more than 470,000 men of which nearly 400,000 were fighting troops.

All these would funnel through the narrow space between Grave and Nijmegen to debouch into the Reichswald Forest, and close the west bank of the Rhine from Emmerich to Wesel, from the Nijmegen- Kleve-Emmerich road on the left to the Geldern- Xanten road on the right.

It is essential to the layman, in considering such a battle, to lend his imagination to the meaning of such numbers of men and quantities of equipment, in terms of movement, food, ammunition and the expenditure of the intricate paraphernalia of warfare as it was in the mid-Twentieth Century, for only by so doing, is it possible to form judgements on matters of strategy. 35,000 vehicles and 1,300,000 gallons of fuel, just to move these troops and their equipment to their assembly points. Many hundreds of trains and thousands of vehicles in constant transit were essential to their supply and continued movement. 1,880 tons of bridging equipment were used

to bridge the River Maas at 4 points prior to the battle. 7 bridges would be needed and because of the flooding 400' of folding-boat equipment were brought forward to meet the emergency.

A steady intake of 7,250 tons of supplies each day had enabled General Crerar to amass 250,000 tons in his stockpiles. In the last stages before the battle the daily maintenance reached 10,000 tons, which included 2,800 tons of ammunition. The variety of goods was very wide, from drugs and medical supplies, and boots to shells for the super heavy guns. A great array of buoys to mark channels in the flooded areas seemed grotesque, adding a whiff of the sea to the saturated inland scene, and this impression was enhanced by large numbers of amphibious vehicles constantly to be observed in the forward areas.

In addition to the immense road building and repairing tasks of the engineers and pioneers, it was necessary to build 95 bridges, each 75' long, to span huge flooded craters 12' deep and up to 70' in diameter, blown by the enemy with 500 lb. bombs in the few existing roads. Traffic control police in close collaboration with the engineers were forced to reroute traffic each day, and to add to these problems, essential traffic moved mainly by night, especially to the gun sites. The dumping program for ammunition began on January 25th and was completed on the night of 1st/2nd February. In that period 500,000 rounds of ammunition of 350 different kinds, and weighing 11,000 tons were moved forward to the gun sites and camouflaged. At that time many of the batteries comprising a total of 1,034 guns of all calibers, including more than 300 medium, heavy and super heavies, had not reaced their positions. Errors in distribution would eliminate batteries. There were no errors.

Anticipation of extensive flooding had caused the assembly of more than half a million gallons of fog oil for burning in a probable 100,000 smoke generators in case it should be necessary to mask the whole of the left flank. These were in addition to the normal smoke supplies.

The Signal Corps also made heavy demands, and supplies included more than 8,000 miles of 4 different kinds of cable, 151,000 yds. of assault cable and 14 pairs of double armored submarine cable to be laid across the Maas.

It would be possible to compile a dozen lists equally impressive, and all these materials had to move constantly under cover through Nijmegen and over the Maas-Waal Canal, through Grave to Mook, or over the few roads between these 2 points. On February 8th, it was estimated, trains would run into Nijmegen itself, right behind the battlefield, and in the month of February alone 350,000 tons of supplies would feed the stockpiles.

On January 31st a thaw added suddenly to the burdens of the army road maintenance personnel and served further to compress the great weight of transport moving in continuous streams into the area held within the loop of the Maas between Nijmegen and Grave. In every village and town the troops were assembling fast. Tilburg and s'Hertogenbosch were crammed with men and vehicles. Conferences were in constant session, and commanders from generals to 2nd lieutenants studied the 800,000 special maps and 500,000 air photographs, together with massive sheaves of orders, which had been prepared for them.

On February 4th the troops detailed for the opening attack began to move forward into the 6 mile wide funnel between Nijmegen and Mook. They moved essentially on 2 roads, the one through Nijmegen itself to the left flanking position, and through Grave to the right flank. In scores of villages and towns in south west Holland, the forward brigades of 2nd and 3rd Canadian Divisions, who would spearhead the operation, made ready for battle.

Thus, on the morning of February 4th, 1st Canadian Army, along with attached British formations, stirred to the opening phases of mounting ***the greatest battle of the campaign since Normandy.*** Montgomery knew that his forces would face the most powerful troops and defensive positions remaining to the enemy on the western front. He also knew that if the Americans failed in their attack (which they did) on the dams in the Hurtgen Forest, the Germans would move massive reinforcements north to face the Canadian 1st Army (which they did).

The Canadian 2nd and 3rd Divisions had maintained their forward defensive localities on the fringe of the Reichswald Forest proper, in the area of Groesbeek, immediately facing the forward defensive system of the German Siegfried Line running from Wyler to anchor on the Maas south of Mook. Throughout all the long and bitter 1944 winter of preparation these Canadian troops alone had held the bridgehead, actively patrolling and denying information to the enemy. Up to the very eve of battle, no enemy patrol could hope to gain the identification of any unit other than Canadian.

The Canadian positions around Groesbeek would be the starting line for the attack which would open the Battle of the Rhineland. It would be essential for the Canadians to secure the village of Den Heuvel, gain Wyler, and thus open the main road through from Nijmegen to Kranenberg.

The Reichswald was a state Forest cut into rectangles by long tracks and trails, giving long fields of fire to the German defenders. The forest was closely planted, and giving a visibility of no more than a dozen yards except in the clearings and along the path. Old clearings had become thickly overgrown with low scrub, but the new fields would give fields of vision up to 200 to 300 yards. There were small groups of deciduous trees. Maps were unreliable, and air photographs had failed to add precise knowledge of the conditions on the ground. Many of the trails and tracks were overgrown; others were sandy. It was certain that the going would be hard or impossible for wheeled or tracked transport.

Two new roads of concrete ran through from north to south, from Cleve converging at Hekkens, the one curving through Kranenberg-Frasselt, the other through Bedberg. These roads enclosed roughly the central third of the forest area, including the neck of high ground known as the “Materborn” feature, covering the town of Cleve.

From the Hekkens crossroads the road runs west to Gennep and south east from Asperden to Goch. The main Cleve-Goch road bounds the forest to the east. Beyond it lies the railway and the small forest of Cleve, a tight square mile of trees in the center of the position.

The heavily fortified town of Goch was surrounded by a maze of concrete pill boxes anchored to the two main defensive systems of the Siegfried Line, the westernmost covering the

Kranenberg-Frasselt-Hekkens-Goch road, the other anchored on the defenses of Cleve in the north, passing behind the forest of Cleve, sited east of the railway line to Goch. Beyond this lay a third main defensive system running from Rees forward of the Hochwald Forest and continuing south to Geldern. This was known as the Hochwald lay-back, the last line of defense covering the Rhine and Wesel road and rail bridges.

The immediate defenses of the whole area consisted of continuous trenches along the east bank of the Maas, and an anti-tank ditch covering the western edge of the Reichswald Forest. These first defensive positions were organized for 2,000 yards in depth. Roadblocks and anti-tank guns covered all roads, trails and tracks. Trench systems had been dug to defend the Materborn Feature, linking in with the main defenses of Cleve. Further trenches and strongpoints had been developed at Nutterden and Donsbruggen on the road between Kranenberg and Cleve.

Isolated farms in the Reichswald and small villages everywhere, were known to be strongpoints and self-contained "boxes of defense." Mine fields and wire had been laid on an elaborate scale. The whole area of the battlefield comprised of floodplains of the Rhine, Maas and Niers Rivers, low undulating forest alternating with marshes, backwaters and flood channels. Tall poplars revealed the lines of many ditches and orchards, often surrounded the smaller villages.

The River Maas was flooded up to 1,000 yards beyond both banks, and the River Niers had overflowed to turn its water meadows into swamps. In the north, the Rhine floods had converted the land north of the Nijmegen-Cleve road to a series of inland lakes,

This whole formidable area, with Cleve and Goch as the hinges of its powerful and narrow jaws, had to be forced against the finest troops remaining to the German Army in the west, the ***1st Parachute Army, Army Group H.*** These troops were highly trained, young and were as dedicated and fanatical as were Hitler's youth SS Divisions. (1st SS LAH Leibstandardte Adolph Hitler & 12th SS Hitlerjugend)

2nd Canadian Division was positioned ***Inside Left*** and were to capture Den Heuvel and Wyler and open the main road to Berg-en-Dal. 3rd Canadian Division was positioned ***Outside Left*** and were to protect the left flank; capture and clear the low ground between the main road Wyler-Kranenberg-Cleve and the Rhine up to the line of the railway Cleve-Griethausen.

The battle to come has been described by many veterans who also fought in Normandy, as the most ferocious and intense battle of the entire war. It was comparable in intensity to the Battle of the Scheldt.

POSTSCRIPT- BATTLE OF THE RHINE, by Denis Whitaker Author of Rhineland

The soldiers' war was drawing to an end. But the war of the generals was not.

One hundred and fifty miles south of Wesel, the small Rhine town of Oppenheim had long been noted for the fine Niersteiner wines produced on its sunny slopes. On the night of March 22, twenty-four hours before Operation Varsity was due to be launched, Lieutenant-General George Patton "sneaked" a regiment of 5th U.S. Infantry Division across the Rhine at Oppenheim, giving the hamlet a new prominence and giving the U.S. Army a new bridgehead: Patton achieved this feat in a silent attack without artillery or air bombardment, and with only 20 casualties. As with the Remagen coup, the location was so unlikely and unpromising that the Germans were surprised. By the next day, the whole division was across and an armoured division was preparing to follow.

Here was Patton's longed-for breakout. Now he could get such a major force committed in so far-reaching a campaign that "Americans rather than British could carry the ball."

"Wait until tomorrow to announce it," his deputy suggested. And just as Montgomery's troops were launching their attack across the Rhine, Patton called his chief.

"Brad," he shrilled excitedly to his senior commander, "for God's sake tell the world we're across! I want the world to know Third Army made it before Monty starts across."

"[Patton] wanted a quick, spectacular crossing…to produce newspaper headlines like those generated by the First Army's seizure of a bridge at Remagen," American military historian Charles MacDonald speculates. "Most of all he wanted it in order to beat a certain British field-marshal across the river."

The Allies now had three bridgeheads across the Rhine. Although Remagen and Oppenheim were valuable pressure points on a faltering enemy, Eisenhower himself maintained that it was the bridgehead at Wesel that opened the way for the Allies to capture the Ruhr. "The March 24 operation sealed the fate of Germany," he concluded.

The American "torpor" of the fall and early winter had given way to a dynamic resurgence of optimism and energy. Seven allied armies fanned out in a spectacular six-week 200-mile armoured drive across Germany that culminated in the German surrender on May 8.

On the left flank, 21st Army Group – Dempsey's Second British Army and Crerar's First Canadian Army, finally on an all-out armoured blitz – shot forward towards the northern sectors of Holland and Germany. Second British Army reached Hamburg on the Elbe River on April 19. The Canadian 1 Corps liberated Amsterdam, and 2 corps drove north to Groningen, Emden, and Oldenburg.

Temporarily attached to Montgomery's force, the British and American divisions of Ridgway's 18 Airborne Corps – those multi-skilled winged soldiers – stayed on to fight as land troops,

gratefully hitching rides on the tanks of armoured divisions as they spearheaded the drive to the Baltic Sea. They met the Russian armies at Wismar.

“It went like clockwork,” Colonel Car Peterson recalls. “It was almost like moving pieces on a chessboard. We leapfrogged regiments, leapfrogged battalions within regiments, and just kept going.”

Simpson’s Ninth Army reverted back to the command of General Bradley’s 12th U.S. Army Group, completing the encirclement of the Ruhr in conjunction with Hodges’s First Army. By April 19, 325,000 Germans, making contact with Russians on April 25 on the Elbe.

On the right, Patton’s Third Army cut southeast to Pilsen in Czechoslovakia and Linz in Austria. Patton, irrepressible to the end, made a cavalier and costly 60-mile detour to rescue his son-in-law from POW camp. Of his strike force of 307 men, only 15 returned.

The 6th U.S. Army Group (Seventh U.S. Army and First Free French Army), under General Jacob Devers, advance through southern Germany, capturing Nuremberg and Stuttgart.

During April, the Allies took more than 1,650,000 prisoners. On May 8, the German forces in Northwest Europe formally surrendered.

It took as long to conquer the 20 miles to the Rhine as it did to cross those next 200 miles into the heart of Nazi German, and the cost was much higher. In the Rhineland campaign, a total of 9,284 Americans and 17,685 British and Canadians were casualties. The strategists of the three nations must share the responsibility for many of these losses.

That the British and Canadian casualties were double those of the Americans can be attributed to the ill-planned and ill-commanded Huertgen campaign and, subsequently, to Bradley’s failure to capture the Roer dams. This gave the German defenders a 15-day reprieve during which they could concentrate all their resources against the First Canadian Army assault without concern for their southern flank.

Eisenhower’s vacillation delayed the launching of Operation Veritable by the critical few weeks that meant the difference between winter and spring – between hard ground and mud. Montgomery compounded the folly by insisting on going ahead with a flawed battle plan. The resulting grind across the Rhineland exacted a high price. The cost was inflated even more by senior commanders who had lost touch with the realities of the battlefield. In the Huertgen Forest and in the Hochwald Gap, the fog of war took a terrible toll.

The Allied air forces were stubbornly short-sighted in refusing to concentrate their air power on knocking out the Roer dams and the Rhine bridges. This allowed General Schlemm to evacuate almost all of his artillery. It was these guns that inflicted so much damage on the airborne troops.

The Rhine was won despite the weather, despite enemy resistance, and – especially – despite the high-level inter-Allied bickering and jealousy. The Rhine was won because the officers and men fighting for it carried through ill-conceived plans with dogged courage and brilliance.

The troops at the sharp end had learned to fight together. The integrated assault that saw Americans, British, and Canadians commingling in battle was historically unique and militarily successful. It gave justification to the often-abused word “Allied.”

The Welsh and Irish linked up cheerfully with the English, Americans, and Canadians. Armour and infantry finally sealed a workable partnership.

The 117,000 men from both sides of the hill who lost their lives, their limbs, and, sometimes, their freedom in that slog to the banks of the Rhine left a permanent imprint – not just in yards gained and battles won, but in the sense of decency to which they stubbornly clung throughout the ugly campaign.

Fighting men found a common denominator: humanity. On the battle-torn slopes of Moyland Wood, German troops crossed the field to take fresh milk to Canadian casualties; at the Coch-Calcar road, two wounded enemies touched hands and became friends; a German Women, Wilma Huhler, wrote a young Welsh private to thank him for burying her husband. “Wars settle nothing,” she said.