## POSTSCRIPT - BATTLE OF THE SCHELDT

*by Denis Whitaker, Author of Tug of War*

For eighteen months, Dutch and Allied Engineers worked furiously to restore the destroyed lands of Walcheren. It was an enormous task: nearly 80 percent of the island's 47,000 acres had been inundated.

In 1945, a great deal of work was achieved, and that fall the race against winter saw the first gains against the elements. By 1947 new trees were planted, and with them came the birds, and soon the crops, more abundantly than ever before.

And slowly, stiffly, the people of Zeeland picked themselves up from the chaos of the war years and entered on the long, painful process of making a new beginning. The years following the Battle of the Scheldt have been colored by the lasting gratitude they have for their Allied liberators.

But many military commanders and historians remember the battle for Antwerp as one of the war's most costly blunders. It cost us Arnhem, it might easily have cost us the Ardennes – and it certainly cost us many thousands of lives needlessly wasted as the war dragged on into the winter of '45.

The Allies' neglect in intercepting the escaping German 15th Army offered a valuable opportunity to the enemy to regroup their forces for the defense of the approaches to Arnhem. Our failure to establish a bridgehead over the Rhine before the onset of the winter storms and floods had a direct bearing on extending the war by many months.

The continuing reluctance to give military priority to the Canadians for the Scheldt campaign only helped the German strategy. And although the campaign was a brilliant victory by the 1st Canadian Army, the lengthy struggle still deprived the Allies of the use of the front-line port for nearly two months. This dangerously stalled the build-up of essential war supplies, which continued to be dependent on truck convoys from the Normandy coast. On the 1st of November, while British Army and Marine commandos were engaged in their desperate bid to capture Walcheren, the first minesweepers of the Royal Navy braved enemy fire at the mouth of the Scheldt to begin clearing the river of mines. On the 26th, 150 of these craft had completed the tough and dangerous assignment: 267 mines had been swept and detonated from the eighty-five km channel to Antwerp. Within a few days, the first ten thousand tons of vital supplies were off-loaded from Allied ships at Antwerp Harbour.

Just two weeks later, the great German counteroffensive in the Ardennes began. The enemy raced for the American and British supply dumps, capturing vast stores. Had Antwerp Harbour not been open to bring up fresh supplies for the dwindling Allied reserves, the Germans might well have been successful in breaking through the line and isolating the British and Canadian armies in the northern part of Belgium and Southern Holland. Cut off from supplies, the vital arm of the Allied offensive would have been paralyzed.

By the narrow margin of two weeks, Antwerp's opening forestalled this threat. It was that close. A single mistake in executing the battle plan to free the Scheldt, one error in strategy or an isolated slip in judgment could have jeopardized the entire Northwest European campaign.

Eisenhower's major blunder – failing to open Antwerp Harbour quickly enough – was the manifestation of the victory euphoria that infected so many. It was this euphoria that caused him to lose his direction in the campaign and his control over its commanders. Removing himself from direct communication with his

land commanders, abandoning his influence with SHAEF's air marshals, plainly ignoring the advice of his top naval man, and even neglecting Ultra's strong warnings, Eisenhower, for the moment, allowed the conduct of war to slip from his grasp. An unparalleled opportunity to end the conflict was tragically lost.

Personal ambitions were unleashed. The will to win the war was still up front, but what's-in-it-for me? was becoming the silent motivator. Dozens of minor conflicts between the principals of those times emerged – rivalries that Eisenhower's skilled diplomacy had until now kept submerged. Mistrust was rampant. Jealousies sprang up everywhere – Americans quarreled with British, British with Canadians, the French with everyone. Had the Belgian Government-in-Exile trusted their king, or the Royalist Resistance group that had supported him, the Albert Canal bridges would almost certainly have been captured intact, as "Harry" had pleaded that they be. Had Montgomery or Dempsey ordered Horrocks to advance over the bridges immediately, the German escape channel would have been cut off.

Instead, a night's work took two months. Had essential supplies been diverted earlier to the 1st Canadian Army, along with urgent orders to secure the Scheldt approaches, a major battle could have become a minor skirmish. And had Simonds's request for bomber support been heeded, the German defenses of Breskens and Walcheren would have been diluted, clearing the way for a fast victory….and sparing, in the process, so many lives of Canadian infantry, British Commandos and Support Squadron personnel.

Even among the various arms of the Allied forces, the war effort was briefly stalled by mistrust: the lofty attitude of Bomber Command towards the infantry, and the lack of communication between air force and army were but two examples of this prevalent mood.

And who was listening when lone commanders stood up against the unnecessary wastage of their men? It was expedient for Mackenzie King and his governmental appointees to play their dangerous game, paying little heed to the untrained Canadian volunteers who were being sacrificed on the polders.

The simple conclusion would seem to be that even in time of war, the enemy is not always on the other side of the hill.

---

On the 28th of November, Allied naval and military chiefs from Belgium, Great Britain and the United States gathered with the Burgemeester of Antwerp and dignitaries of the municipality for a reception to formally open the port of Antwerp to Allied shipping. The band played the Belgian national anthem and the British one, too.

Admiral Ramsay, who was killed in an air crash two months later, attended the ceremony, as did British minesweeping personnel who had performed the dangerous task of clearing the Scheldt of hundreds of mines in record time.

Not present, not having been invited, were members of the Secret Army. Somehow, Reniers' name, and Colson's too, had not warranted inclusion in the celebration.

With a single exception, there was no Canadian representation there either. General Crerar, by then recovered and back in command of the 1st Canadian Army, was not invited. Nor were General Simonds, nor anyone from Canadian Military headquarters. But, proudly steaming up from the Scheldt as the first supply ship to enter Antwerp Harbour, was the Canadian-built Fort Cataraqui, manned by a crew of the British Royal Navy. 12,873 casualties of the odd-job Canadian Army would have to be content with that.