

SECOND WORLD WAR

# 60<sup>TH</sup>

ANNIVERSARY

The Clearing of the Scheldt Estuary  
and the Liberation of Walcheren  
2 October – 7 November 1944



'Operations designed to open up Antwerp's port to Allied shipping'

**No.8**

# The clearing of the Scheldt Estuary and the liberation of Walcheren

## THE SCHELDT ESTUARY AND WALCHEREN, NETHERLANDS



Cover image: A Churchill tank of 34th Armoured Brigade crosses an obstacle in Roosendaal



## Foreword by the Under Secretary of State for Defence and Minister for Veterans, Don Touhig MP

This series of commemorative booklets is dedicated to those who fought for our freedom in the Second World War. The booklets provide a detailed account of key actions of the war for those familiar with the period, as well as serving as an educational tool for younger people less familiar with the heroic action of Allied Service Personnel.

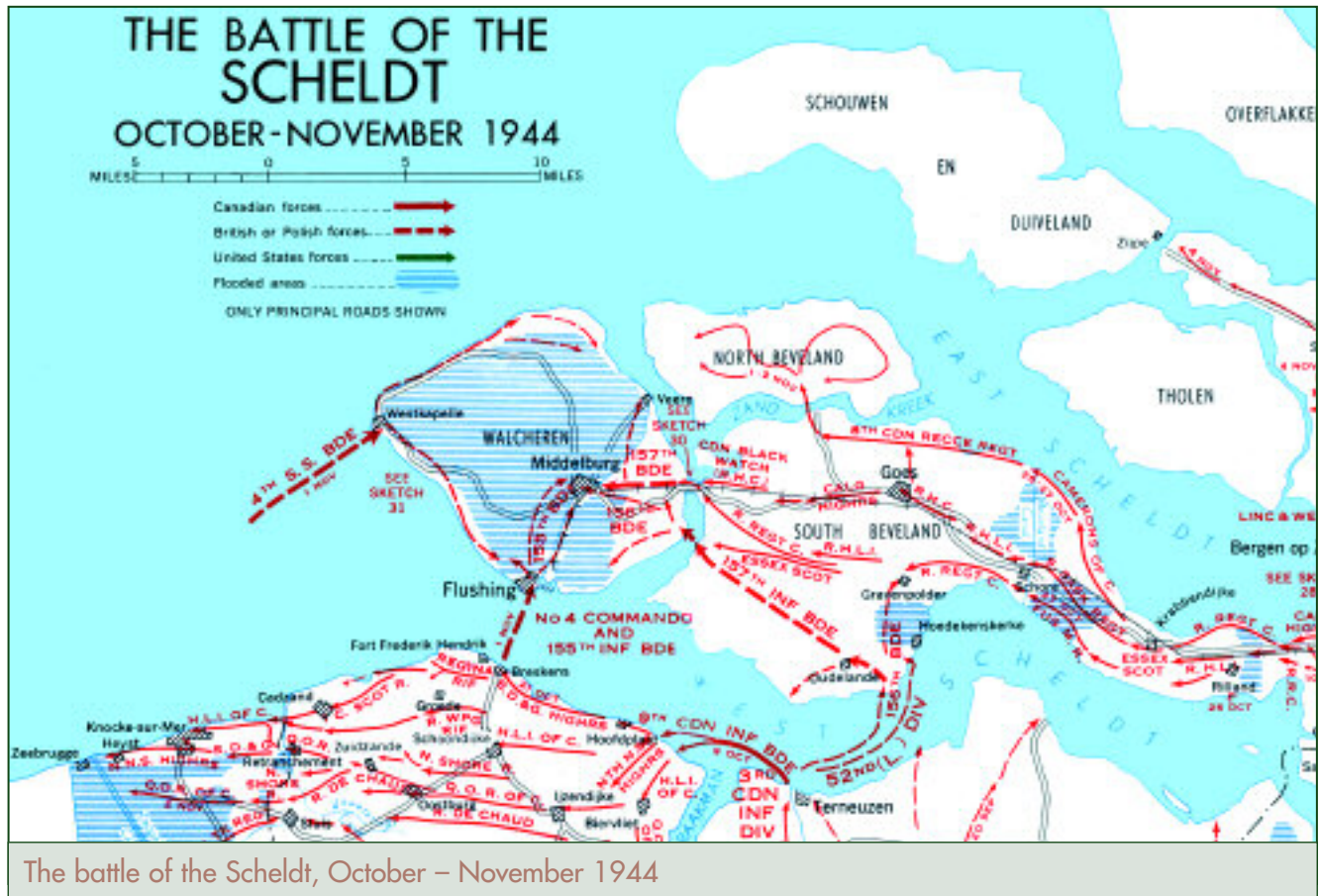
The successful Allied clearing of the Scheldt Estuary forms the subject of this eighth booklet. Following the D-Day landings of the previous spring, Allied supply lines were becoming ever more stretched as the armies advanced into the Netherlands, leaving their logistical base in Normandy. Comprising a succession of collaborative operations between British and Canadian Forces, the securing of the port of Antwerp and its Scheldt Estuary provided a crucial logistical platform from which further assaults on the Third Reich could be launched.

Combining amphibious and ground operations, the Allied forces managed to secure the Scheldt Estuary up from Antwerp, isolating the heavily defended island fortress of Walcheren. By 7 November 1944, a daring dual-pronged amphibious attack took Walcheren from the 12,000 defending German soldiers and connected the crucial post to Beveland. This allowed for supplies to be delivered more effectively to Allied forces in North-West Europe, and was instrumental in the road to victory.

As we celebrate and commemorate these crucial events of the Second World War, it is important to remember that those who gave their lives during those dark days did so for the freedom we enjoy today. Sixty years on we must take this opportunity to salute the bravery and ingenuity of our Service personnel and we must continue to pass the baton of remembrance to future generations, so that these heroes will continue to be honoured and the level of their sacrifice understood.

*Don Touhig*

## The background to the clearing of the Scheldt Estuary and the liberation of Walcheren



During late August and early September 1944, after the collapse of the German front in Normandy, Field Marshal Montgomery's 21st Army Group advanced rapidly north and north-east through Northern France and Belgium. On 4 September, British forces and local resistance fighters captured Antwerp in northern Belgium. This was a tremendous prize, since Antwerp's docks were the largest in Europe. Once opened to Allied shipping, the harbour would revolutionise the delivery of Allied supplies into mainland Europe. At that time, most Allied supplies still had to be delivered over the Normandy beaches or via Cherbourg, necessitating lengthy overland transportation. Then, as now, the transportation of bulk supplies by land was many times less effective compared with transportation by water. This supply

problem now increasingly influenced Allied operations as their forces advanced toward Germany. To maintain the momentum of their advance, the Allies had to open Antwerp's port as quickly as possible. But to do this the Allies also had to clear the enemy from the 50 km (30 mile) Scheldt Estuary that lay downstream of the port. The operations to clear the Scheldt (correctly, West Scheldt) Estuary were undertaken between 2 October and 25 November 1944. During this period, the land forces, First Canadian Army, were led temporarily by Lieutenant-General Guy Simonds (the commander of II Canadian Corps) in place of the sick General Henry Crerar. These operations comprised six main missions determined primarily by the region's geography. In chronological order, these were:

- 2–23 October, 2nd Canadian Division cleared the eastern approaches to the River Scheldt as it ran north-east from Antwerp as far as Woensdrecht. This advance isolated the German forces on South Beveland from their colleagues deployed on the Dutch mainland. South Beveland was a long thin peninsula that stretched west for 30 km (19 miles) to form the northern bank of the Scheldt Estuary.
- Between 6 October and 3 November, 3rd Canadian Division mounted Operation Switchback. This battle eliminated the German positions in the Breskens Pocket, located on the southern bank of the mouth of the Scheldt Estuary.
- Between 20 October and 7 November, 4th Canadian Armoured Division, plus units of 1st (British) Corps, secured the north-eastern flank of First Canadian Army. These forces fought their way north from Antwerp towards the estuary of the River Maas.
- Between 24 and 31 October, Allied forces mounted Operation Vitality, in which 2nd Canadian Division advanced west along South Beveland. Meanwhile, the British 52nd (Lowland) Division initiated an amphibious assault on the southern coast of the peninsula.
- Between 31 October and 7 November, Allied troops executed Operation Infatuate. This involved two British amphibious assaults on the heavily defended island fortress of Walcheren, located at the north-western corner of the estuary. Simultaneously, 52nd Division attacked Walcheren's eastern coast. Some of its forces executed an amphibious assault across the Sloe Channel while others mounted a ground attack via the connecting causeway from Beveland.
- Finally, between 3 and 25 November, Royal Navy minesweepers undertook Operation Calendar. Once the threat of fire from the shore had been removed, these vessels were able to clear the extensive German minefields, so that merchant ships could make a safe passage up the estuary to Antwerp.

IWM B 11746



Field Marshal Montgomery (front centre) with Lt-Gen Simonds (front left) and Maj-Gen Spry (rear, second from right) 6 November 1944

## KEY FACTS

### List of commanders

#### ALLIED:

##### First Canadian Army:

Lt-Gen G.G. Simonds (acting commander in place of the sick Gen H.D.G. Crerar)

##### II Canadian Corps:

Maj-Gen C. Foulkes (acting commander in place of Simonds)

##### I (British) Corps:

Lt-Gen J.T. Crocker

##### 1st Polish Armoured Division:

Maj-Gen S. Maczek

##### 2nd Canadian Division:

Brig R.H. Keebler (acting commander in place of Foulkes)

##### 3rd Canadian Division:

Maj-Gen D.C. Spry

##### 4th Canadian Armoured Division:

Maj-Gen H.W. Foster

##### 52nd (Lowland) Division:

Maj-Gen E. Hakewell Smith

#### Force T:

Capt A.F. Pugsley RN

#### 4 Commando Brigade:

Brig B.W. Leicester RM

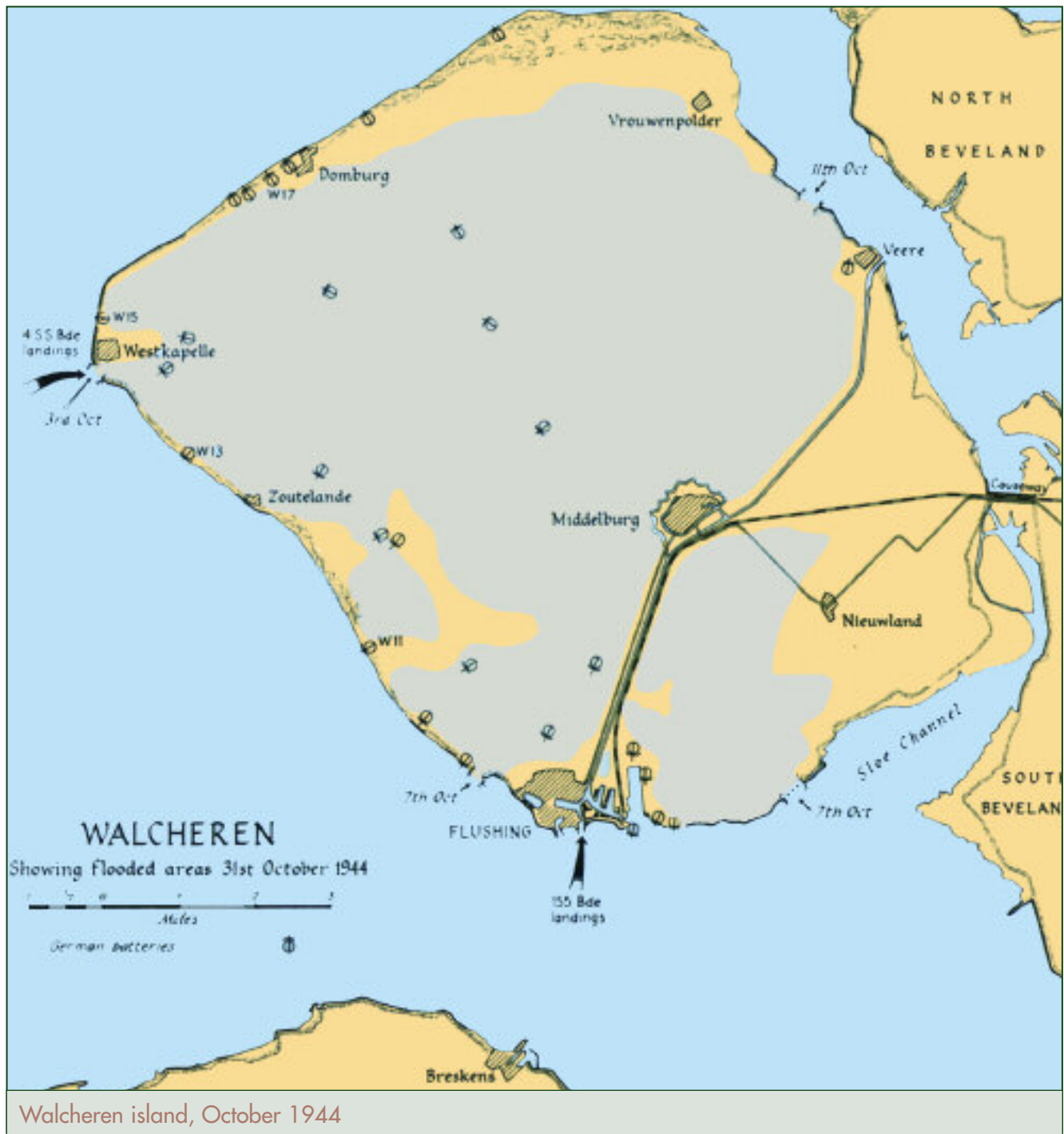
#### AXIS:

##### Fifteenth German Army:

Gen Gustav Adolf von Zangen



## The battle for the Scheldt Estuary



Walcheren island, October 1944

By 26 September 1944, after a disorganised retreat from France, the Germans had managed to re-establish a solid front in the Scheldt region of Belgium. Their lines ran from near Antwerp, west along South Beveland, and onto Walcheren island, and extended down onto the estuary's southern bank around Breskens. In the previous three weeks, the Germans had extricated their Fifteenth

Army from potential encirclement south of the estuary. This command used improvised boats and rafts to evacuate 86,000 troops north across the estuary to recreate a cohesive front. At this time the Allies were still optimistic after their previous successes, and many – including Montgomery – underestimated the difficulties involved in opening the Scheldt.

'The Canadians... fought brilliantly [at Hoogerheide on 7 October]. To the rank of brigadier, the officers stood side by side with their men on the front lines.'

### German Paratrooper Colonel Augustus von der Heydte

Before focusing on clearing the Scheldt, Montgomery ordered First Canadian Army to concentrate on clearing the Channel ports. It took the Army until 1 October 1944 to capture most of these harbours. Meanwhile, Montgomery had allocated priority of supply to Second (British) Army for Operation Market Garden and the anticipated ensuing drive into Germany.

That decision had restricted the combat power that First Canadian Army could deploy against the enemy. It was only on 16 October – after being pressured by Supreme Allied Commander General Eisenhower and Allied Naval Commander-in-Chief Admiral Ramsay RN – that Montgomery accorded the Scheldt operations the priority they deserved. It was only with the additional resources, that Simonds' forces could bring significant combat power to bear against the German defences in the region.

IWM BU 1273



German coastal artillery gun on Walcheren island

IWM BU 11716



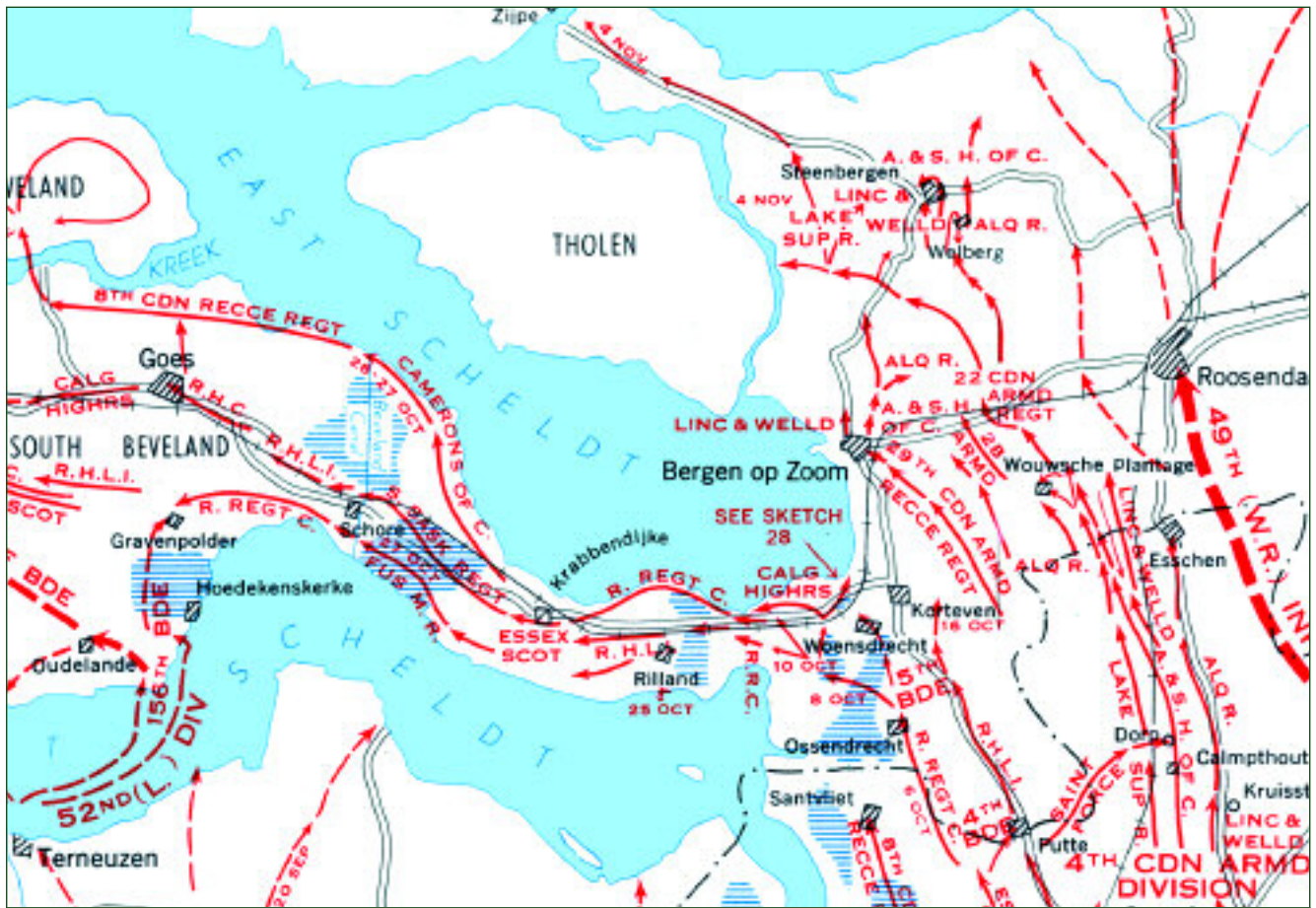
Colonel Reinhardt commanded a regiment in the German Fifteenth Army

A key factor that hampered the advance of Simonds' forces was the difficult terrain. Much of the area was actually below sea level, comprising 'polder' land that had been reclaimed from the sea. It was only the large raised embankments (dykes) that kept the waters from flooding the flat low-lying land. The German defenders skilfully exploited these conditions. In addition, the Germans constructed bunkers in the steep rear slopes of these dykes, and located Nebelwerfer rocket launchers immediately behind them. Such positions proved hard to hit. As a result, Allied infantry had to display extraordinary courage and determination to wage war amid such miserable, wet and cold conditions.

'And here 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 free use of the port.'

Montgomery's memoirs, p297

## Advance to Woensdrecht (2–23 October 1944)



Woensdrecht, October – November 1944

On 2 October 1944, 2nd Canadian Division began to advance north from Antwerp toward the eastern base of the South Beveland peninsula. For the first four days, the division made good progress. It advanced 14 km (9 miles) to capture Putte, with its prize – the base of the peninsula – remaining just 5 miles away. 4th Canadian Armoured Division moved up to cover 2nd Division's eastern flank, freeing forces for a renewed drive toward the base of the peninsula. Indeed, during the next 10 days, the Canadians eventually managed to secure a tenuous foothold on the peninsula to the west of Woensdrecht. Simultaneously, the Canadians tried to extend their front by capturing the nearby villages of Woensdrecht, Hoogerheide and Korteveen. Here bitter fighting raged for many days. The Canadians now faced a newly reinforced enemy that included elite paratroopers.

The enemy forces skilfully exploited their hold on the high ground and the widespread flooding to prevent the Canadians widening their tenuous positions around the base of the peninsula. Despite suffering heavy casualties, the Canadians continued their attempt to advance but faced repeated local counter-attacks and nighttime infiltration of their positions. One Canadian War Diary recalled that 'the slaughter was terrific'. By 16 October, a lull had descended over much of this particular battlefield after both sides' troops reached the point of utter exhaustion. The only exception to this was at Woensdrecht and Korteveen, where fighting continued to rage until the Canadians captured the village on 23 October. This first phase of the Allied clearance of the Scheldt had been largely, but not entirely, accomplished.



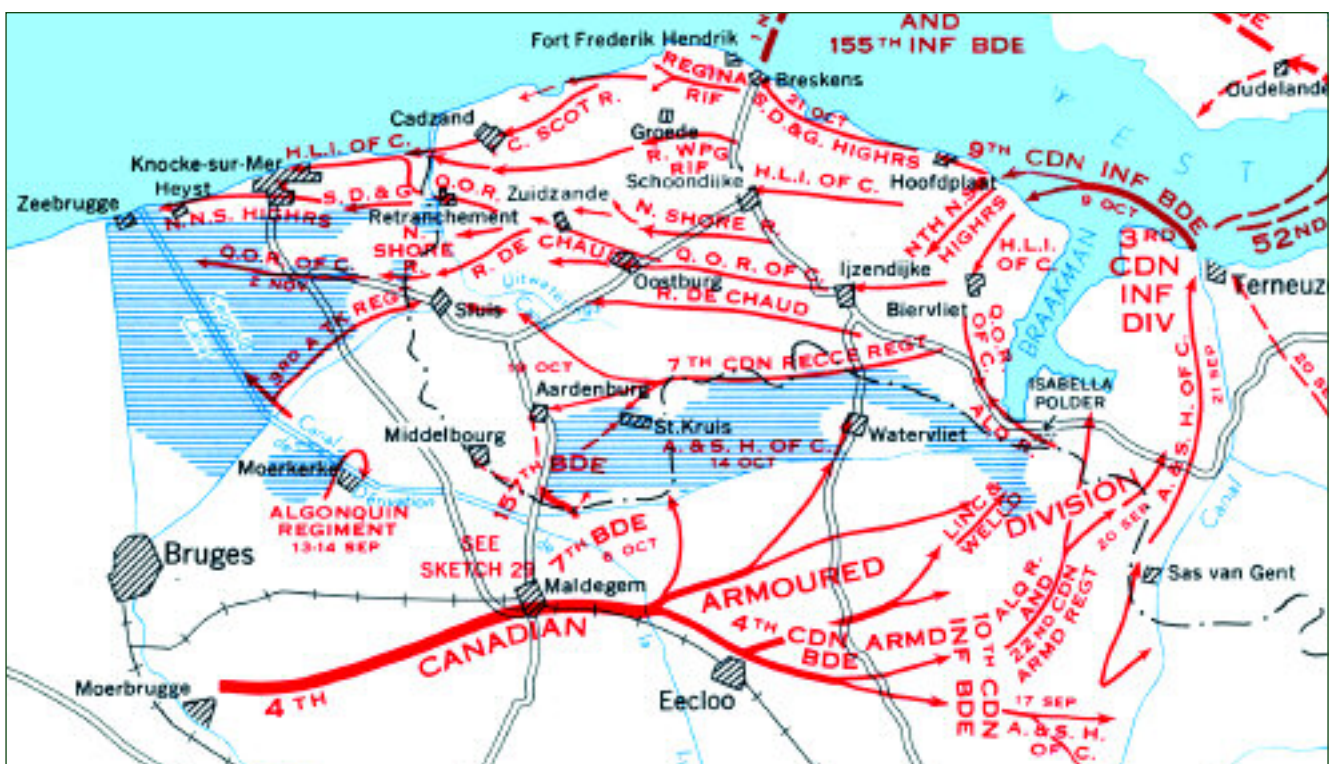
# Operation Switchback (6 October – 3 November 1944)

Between 6 October and 3 November 1944, Major-General Spry's 3rd Canadian Division mounted Operation Switchback, to eliminate the German-held Breskens pocket south of the Scheldt. The German 64th Division held the 40 km (25 mile) sector that ran along the Leopold Canal, from the Braakman inlet in the east through to Zeebrugge in the west. The defenders totalled approximately 12,000 troops, backed by six coastal artillery guns that dominated the estuary.

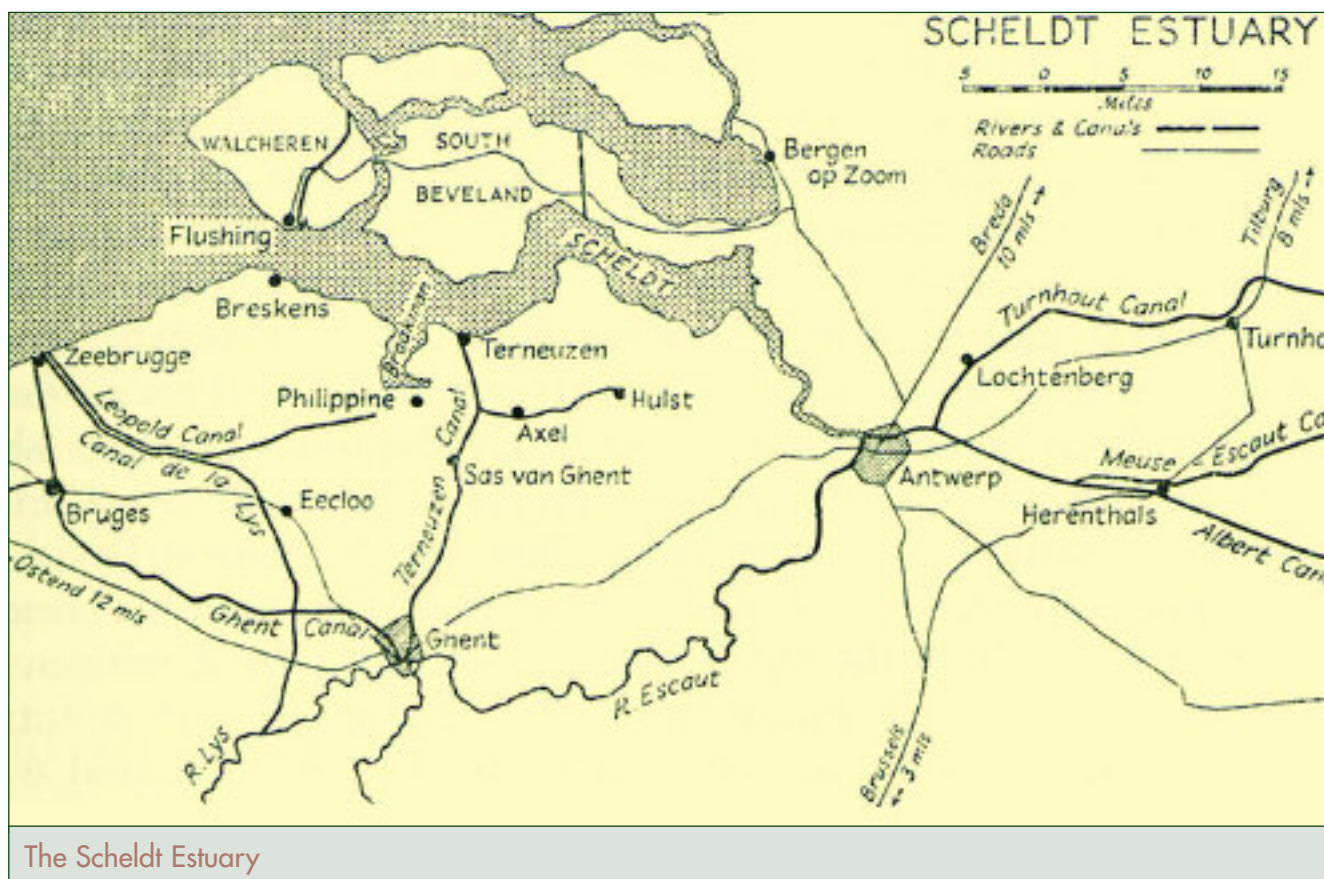
The Germans had deliberately breached the raised dykes that housed the canal and the ensuing flooding channelled the Canadian advance onto the area's few raised dyke roads and dry polder land. As predicted, the Germans had covered these routes with heavy weapons. The Canadians, as a result, had to combine the effective tactical air support provided by 84 Group RAF with accurate artillery fire and sheer determination to secure the Breskens pocket.

On 6 October, 7th Canadian Infantry Brigade attacked the canal along an unflooded sector near Eede. Following an attack by Wasp flamethrowing carriers, the assault infantry crossed the 90 metre (100 yard) wide canal in dinghies and attacked the German positions on the far bank. The Canadians successfully prevented the now consolidated single bridgehead. However, the ensuing 48 hours saw repeated fierce German counter-attacks which prevented the bridgehead being extended.

The Canadian infantry discovered that they could not dig their trenches more than a foot deep before they filled with water. Close air support, which had at first been very successful, was now hampered by poor weather. It was not until 13 October that a significant bridgehead was established, by which time the Canadians had suffered approximately 600 casualties.



Leopold Canal, October–November 1944



The Scheldt Estuary

On 9 October, the division launched a subsidiary attack, an amphibious assault across the 1.6 km (1 mile) wide Braakman inlet. Buffalo and Terrapin amphibious vehicles, manned by the British 5th and 6th Assault Regiments (Royal Engineers) carried the troops of 9th Canadian Infantry Brigade across the inlet. Meeting only light opposition from the surprised Germans, the assault soon established a sizeable bridgehead.

Maj-Gen Spry turned this into his main effort, and moved his remaining force – 8th Brigade – into the bridgehead. Attacking west, the Canadians took Biervliet and Hoofdplaat on the coast. Having had the eastern flank of their defences unhinged, the Germans then withdrew to a second line of defence that ran from Breskens down to, and along, the Sluis Canal to Zeebrugge in the west. Meanwhile, an RAF Bomber Command braved intense anti-aircraft fire to mount heavy strikes against German gun batteries at Breskens and Flushing. Improved weather also led to the resumption of large-scale close air support operations, and air

attacks on German lines of communication in northern Holland.

The second phase of Switchback started on 21 October, with a successful assault on Breskens. Bomber Command supported with strikes on Flushing, and there were large-scale ground attack operations led by 84 Group. The nearby Fort Frederik Hendrik held out for a further three days. On 27 October Cadzand was captured, and on 1 November the commander of German 64th Division, Lieutenant-General Kurt Eberding, was taken prisoner. 3rd Division completed Switchback on 3 November by overwhelming the last German resistance in the Belgian coastal towns of Knocke and Zeebrugge, in the south-west of the pocket.

The last 29 days cost the division 2077 casualties. With the Breskens pocket cleared, the Allies could use the area as a vital staging post for the attack on Walcheren. Amphibious vehicles could use the port of Breskens and the area to the south would soon be filled to capacity with artillery guns, all ranged on Walcheren.

## Operation Suitcase (20 October – 7 November 1944)

On 20 October, the 4th Canadian Armoured Division initiated Operation Suitcase from its positions, six miles north of Antwerp. The division's first objective was to capture the Belgian town of Essen, located 13 km (8 miles) east-south-east of Bergen-op-Zoom on the coast. It was accomplished on 27 October, but only after sustaining significant losses, as the Germans had sown mines under the cobbled main road. Unfortunately, the attached British Flail mine-clearing tanks discovered that their thrashing chains could not detonate mines placed under cobblestones and consequently the tank itself would detonate the mine. Despite this setback, the Allies courageously fought their way into the town, with further support from the Typhoons and Spitfires of 2nd Tactical Air Force.

Then, the division struck west towards Bergen-op-Zoom and the area north of Woensdrecht. This unhinged the tenacious German defence of the latter area, and helped 2nd Canadian Division drive north to establish a more extensive front at the base of the Beveland peninsula. The

success enabled 2nd Division to divert more of its forces to Operation Vitality, the advance west along South Beveland toward Walcheren.

The recently reinforced I (British) Corps, which formed the remaining part of First Canadian Army, also joined the advance north. In the sector immediately east of the 4th Canadian Armoured Division, the British 49th Division thrust north to capture Roosendaal on 29 October. Some days earlier, to the east, the 1st Polish Armoured and US 104th 'Timberwolf' Divisions had also joined in the Allied advance north toward the River Maas.

From 28 October, the 4th Division closed on Steenberghe, and the 49th and 104th Divisions moved toward Standdaarbuiten. Whilst the Polish troops had advanced on the key Maas bridges at Moerdijk. Consequently, by 7 November, the Germans had been forced to withdraw north of the Maas, and the north-eastern flank of the Scheldt region had been successfully secured.

IWM B 11574



British armour advancing north towards Roosendaal

### KEY FACTS

#### Allied specialised landing craft and vehicles

**Landing Craft, Gun:** Landing craft armed to support the assault troops

**Landing Craft, Flak:** Landing craft armed with anti-aircraft guns

**Landing Craft, Rocket:** Landing craft carrying up to 1,000 rockets to support troops

**Landing Craft, Assault:** A small landing craft capable of carrying about 35 troops to the shore

**Buffalo:** Amphibious armoured troop carrier

**DD (Duplex Drive):** Amphibious variant of Sherman tank

**Flail:** Mine-clearing variant of Sherman tank

**Terrapin:** Amphibious lightly armoured troop carrier

**Wasp:** Flame-throwing armoured troop carrier



## Operation Vitality (24–31 October 1944)

IWM CL 1656



The Germans had flooded large parts of South Beveland peninsula

Between 24 and 31 October 1944, Maj-Gen Foulkes' forces also advanced west along South Beveland toward the eastern coast of the German-held fortress-island of Walcheren. Prior to this, on 23 October, Brigadier Keebler's 2nd Canadian Division finally captured the fiercely defended villages of Woensdrecht and Korteven, enabling the attack along the peninsula to begin.

In the early hours of 24 October, after a heavy artillery bombardment, 4th Canadian Infantry Brigade began to fight its way west. By dawn of the following day, it had advanced 5 km (3 miles) to capture Rilland. Throughout the remainder of that day, the 4th Canadian Infantry Brigade had closed in on Krabbendijke, just 8 km (5 miles) short of the Beveland ship canal, which bisected the peninsula. Then the Canadian Infantry Brigade took over as the division's spearhead.

On 26 October, the Allies launched Operation Vitality II to outflank the German defence at the narrow eastern end of the peninsula. A Royal Navy landing craft, supplemented by Buffalo and Terrapin amphibious vehicles, carried elements of the British 52nd (Lowland) Division across the Scheldt. Sailing from Terneuzen, the amphibians of 1st Assault Brigade, Royal Engineers travelled 13 km (8 miles) across the estuary to South Beveland, west of the ship canal. Spearheaded by amphibious DD Shermans from the Staffordshire Yeomanry, the force soon established a beachhead near Hoedekenskerke. 52nd Division had been Britain's only designated mountain division – yet its soldiers experienced the formation's first combat in flooded polders below sea level! Allied planners had also proposed that Allied airborne forces, recently released from Operation Market Garden, be dropped on the western part of South Beveland. This



operation was cancelled, in part, due to the unsuitability of the terrain.

That same day, 26 October, 2nd Canadian Division assaulted the German positions on the ship canal, and established a bridgehead the next day. By 29 October, the Canadians had captured Goes and linked up with the eastward advance of 52nd Division. In Goes, the joyful response of the inhabitants to liberation compelled the soldiers of 5th Canadian Infantry Brigade to 'kiss babies and sign autographs'.

On 31 October, the last German action on South Beveland was mounted on the eastern end of the causeway. The 1100 metre (1200 yard) by 37 metre (40 yard) structure bridged the Sloe channel and connected South Beveland to Walcheren island. The German defences on the western end had not been flooded after Allied bombers had breached Walcheren's perimeter dyke. Across this causeway ran the road and railway that headed west to Flushing and Middelburg on Walcheren. By mid-morning, the Canadians had driven the last German soldier from South Beveland, and thus Vitality had been accomplished. One observer then described the state of the exhausted Canadian troops:

'The men were indescribably dirty. They were bearded, cold... and wet from living in waterfilled holes in the ground.'

#### KEY FACTS

##### Close air support for the Scheldt operations

- Tactical support by 84 Group RAF (1–31 October): 9782 sorties mounted.
- Bomber Command operations against batteries (18 September – 23 October): 643 sorties mounted.
- Bomber Command operations against Walcheren dykes (3–17 October): 494 sorties mounted.
- Bomber Command operations against coastal defences (28–30 October): 745 sorties mounted.
- Strategic and tactical 'softening up' of Walcheren (3–27 October): 1600 tons dropped.
- Strategic 'softening up' of Walcheren (28–30 October): 4092 tons dropped.
- Strategic bombing of Walcheren dykes (3–17 October): 2762 tons dropped.

IWM B11710



British 49th Division troops near Klundert

National Archives WO 218/70

| <small>Instructions regarding War Diaries and Intelligence Summaries are contained in F.S. Reg., Vol. I and the Staff Manual respectively. Title pages will be prepared in manuscript.</small><br><b>WAR DIARY</b><br><b>INTELLIGENCE SUMMARY.</b><br><small>(Errors leading not required).</small> |       |            | <small>Army Form C. 2118.</small><br><b>Unit No. 10 (I.A.) Commando, (Detachment).</b><br><b>Commanding Officer Lt.-Col. P. Laycock.</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |                                 |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Place.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | Date. | Hour.      | Summary of Events and Information.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | References to Appendices.       |
| WALCHEREN.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | 1st.  |            | D-day for Operation INFATUATE. 10 IA Cdo Troops disposed in LCTs as follows:-<br>1. Cdo HQ, No.4 (Belge) Troop less one Section, and 1 Offr and 14 ORs of No.5 (Norge) Troop.<br>2. No.5 Troop, less 1 Offr and 14 ORs.<br>3. 1 Sub-Section of No.4 Troop, Lt. Meny i/c, to act as tank protection.<br>4. 1 Sub-Section of No.4 Troop, as tank protection, with Capt. Joy in this craft to act as LO on landing.<br>Zero hour for 10 IA Cdo landing was H + 25 (1010 hrs).<br>Enemy fire became intense when approaching within about 1 mile of shore. | Appendix "A" - Operation Order. |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |       | 1010.      | Apart from other ships seen to be hit, LCT with Capt Joy aboard received 3 direct hits, these knocking out all the tanks and wounding Capt Joy and two 4 Troop ORs.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | JL                              |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |       | 1015.      | Same LCT passed Cdo HQ ship, still under control but making for home. This was not an aid to morale.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | JL                              |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |       | 1035.      | Having received several near misses, Cdo HQ ship touched down, but when ramp was lowered it was found to be up against some iron stakes.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | JL                              |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |       | 1035-1045. | The craft a sitting target, with LVTs unable to proceed ashore. One near miss wounded Adjutant who was later evacuated to Ostend.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | JL                              |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |       | 1040.      | LCT containing bulk of 5 Troop passed inshore on our port beam, and giving a rousing cheer, landed satisfactorily.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | JL                              |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |       | 1045.      | It was considered too dangerous to remain on board any longer and orders were given for Troops to get ashore as best they could. Landing very wet, strong current and deep water, with mortar and shell fire to add to the confusion. Casualties however were slight.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | JL                              |

Walcheren  
1 Nov 1944

D-day for Operation INFATUATE. 10 Inter-Allied (IA) Commando (Cdo) Troops disposed in Landing Craft Tanks (LCTs) as follows:

1. Cdo Headquarters (HQ), No.4 (Belge) Troop less one Section, and 1 Officer (Offr) and 14 Other Ranks (ORs) of No.5 (Norge) Troop.
  2. No.5 Troop, less 1 Offr and 14 ORs.
  3. 1 Sub-Section of No.4 Troop, Lieutenant (Lt.) Meny in charge (i/c), to act as tank protection.
  4. 1 Sub-Section of No.4 Troop, as tank protection, with Captain (Capt.) Joy in this craft to act as Liaison Officer (LO) on landing. Zero hour for 10 IA Cdo landing was H+25 (1010 hrs). Enemy fire became intense when approaching within about 1 mile of shore.
1010. Apart from other ships seen to be hit, LCT with Capt Joy aboard received 3 direct hits, these knocking out all the tanks and wounding Capt Joy and two 4 Troop ORs.
1015. Same LCT passed Cdo HQ ship, still under control but making for home. This was not an aid to morale.
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- 1035-1045. The craft a sitting target, with LVTs unable to proceed ashore. One near miss wounded Adjutant who was later evacuated to Ostend.
1040. LCT containing bulk of 5 Troop passed inshore on our port beam, and giving a rousing cheer, landed satisfactorily.
1045. It was considered too dangerous to remain on board any longer and orders were given for Troops to get ashore as best they could. Landing very wet, strong current and deep water, with mortar and shell fire to add to the confusion. Casualties however were slight.

Extract from No.10 (Inter-Allied) Commando's war diary, 1 November 1944

# Operation Infatuate (3 October – 7 November 1944)

IWM C 4668



The breach in the Walcheren sea-dyke at Westkapelle

The Allies had to capture one final piece of German-held territory before Antwerp's harbour could be opened to Allied shipping – Walcheren Island. Situated at the north-western boundary of the Scheldt Estuary, just to the west of South Beveland, the powerful German coastal artillery positions on the island dominated the sea approaches to Antwerp. In addition to numerous battery personnel, the island was defended by the German 70th Division.

These powerful defences had been attacked by Bomber Command and 2nd Tactical Air Force in September, but poor weather and heavy anti-aircraft fire had reduced the effectiveness of the air strikes. It still seemed likely, however, that any Allied amphibious assault would be an extremely difficult – and costly – undertaking. Indeed, such an assault was only made possible by an audacious Allied plan to flood Walcheren by bombing its massive perimeter dyke. The aim was to disorganise the Germans' communications, immobilise their reinforcements, flood some of their defences, and create

conditions in which Allied ground forces could exploit amphibious vehicles to outflank German forward positions.

At Lt-Gen Simonds' insistence, during 3–17 October, Bomber Command mounted five separate attacks involving some 494 sorties against the perimeter dyke. The bombing breached the dyke in four places, and the sea poured into the interior of the low-lying island, flooding four-fifths of its area. According to a report by 4th Special Service Brigade, German morale was sapped 'to an incredible extent'. Between 28–30 October, prior to the Allied landings on Walcheren, Bomber Command mounted a further 745 sorties against the German defences there, dropping more than 4000 tons of bombs. This was an extremely difficult task, as the German positions were well camouflaged and protected, dispersed, and ringed by anti-aircraft guns. Nevertheless, 11 of the enemy's 28 artillery batteries were put out of action. The landings were also preceded by bombing and strafing attacks by Mosquitoes from 2 Tactical Air Force.



The first ground action of Operation Infatuate unfolded on 31 October. That afternoon, 5th Canadian Infantry Brigade launched its first attack across the causeway from South Beveland to Walcheren. This was a difficult mission to undertake. Armoured vehicles could not cross the partially flooded strip of land, and there was virtually no cover from the hail of German defensive fire that emerged. Inevitably, the attack was driven back with heavy casualties, as was another assault that night. A third assault on 1 November established a small bridgehead on Walcheren, but a subsequent German riposte drove the Canadians back onto the causeway. In the face of bitter resistance, a fourth Canadian attack on 2 November established a tenuous bridgehead on Walcheren. Later that day the 52nd Division relieved the exhausted Canadian infantrymen. On 3 November, other Lowland units daringly crossed the Sloe channel in boats to outflank the German defences. Within 24 hours the division had established a sizeable bridgehead across the island's unflooded eastern fringes.

Shortly after midnight on 1 November, a force of landing craft and amphibious vehicles, part of Force T under Captain A.F. Pugsley RN, departed Ostend and headed north-east. Carrying troops from 4th Special Service Brigade under Brigadier B.W. Leicester, Royal Marines, the

IWM BU 1250



British troops fight their way through the streets of Flushing

force was to launch an amphibious assault on the westernmost point of Walcheren at Westkapelle. From 0445 hours onwards, 314 artillery guns positioned around Breskens engaged enemy targets on Walcheren. Under cover from this bombardment, additional landing craft and amphibious vehicles departed Breskens destined for Flushing, located on the southern coast of Walcheren. This force comprised 4 Commando and elements of 155th Infantry Brigade, and was similarly protected by escort ships. At 0540 hours the commandos assaulted the heart of Flushing's harbour area, with troops of the 4th King's Own Scottish Borderers landing at 0730 hours.

Within the town, Dutch resistance groups also began to attack German positions; and with the support of accurate artillery and Typhoon fighter-bomber strikes, British troops, with some French commandos, gradually fought their way through the Old Town. The next day, troops fought their way to the northern fringes of Flushing, again aided by artillery and Typhoon strikes. That night the 7/9th Royal Scots attacked the Hotel Britannia, an isolated centre of German resistance located south-west of the town. This building was just 180 metres (200 yards) from the breach in the sea-dyke and it was badly flooded. Despite finding themselves wading in darkness through waters 1.5 metres (5 feet) deep with strong

IWM BU 1244



British troops land on Walcheren at Flushing

currents, the Royal Scots soldiers nevertheless pressed home the attack with vigour. When the 600 surviving defenders surrendered around noon on 3 November, Flushing was finally completely cleared of enemy forces.

The force destined for Westkapelle had moved north-east during the early hours of 1 November. News then reached them that the weather back in the UK had prevented the planned air support for the amphibious attack. Despite this, Capt Pugsley and Brig Leicester jointly decided to continue with the mission. At 0809 hours the first German coastal batteries engaged the armada, with the battleship *HMS Warspite* and the monitor *HMS Roberts* returning fire from 0820 hours. At 0845 hours, Allied artillery from Breskens engaged the defenders, as did 12 Typhoons from 183 Squadron RAF. The first assault troops landed at 0959 hours. Within 30 minutes, the bulk of 41 (Royal Marine) Commando was ashore, as were elements from 10 (Inter-Allied) and 48 (RM) Commandos. The forces landed at Red and White Beaches, respectively located to the north and south of the breach in the sea-dyke. In order to ensure that the vital landing was a success, the 27 armed landing craft of the Support Squadron

Eastern Flank deliberately engaged the German gun batteries, seeking to divert their fire from the assault troops. They achieved this but at a heavy cost, with only seven of the craft surviving unharmed, and over 370 casualties to the squadron's sailors and marines.

During that morning, the Allied commandos fought their way through Westkapelle in the face of fierce resistance. Subsequently, 41 Commando advanced north along the dunes of the narrow unflooded coastal strip toward Domburg, which it secured by dusk. Meanwhile, 48 Commando had advanced south-east along the dunes toward Zoutelande, with 47 Commando landing later that day. By nightfall, 4th Brigade had secured a 9.5 km (6 mile) strip of coastal dunes, and now had three complete Commandos, plus two French troops of 10 (Inter-Allied) Commando ashore. On the morning of 2 November, 48 Commando captured Zoutelande, taking 150 prisoners in the process. 47 Commando fought its way forward until it was within the W11 Battery position by nightfall. The battery fell the next day. On 4 November, 47 Commando linked up with 4 Commando to advance north-west along the dunes from Flushing.

IWM B 11632



A Flail tank comes ashore from a Landing Craft tank at Westkapelle, 1 November 1944

IWM CL1505



The flooded hinterland around Flushing

On 5 November, a force managed to advance north-east through the island's flooded interior to Middelburg. The force comprised the remaining 11 operational Buffaloes of the 11th Royal Tank Regiment plus the infantry of the Royal Scots. Simultaneously, the 5th Highland Light Infantry struck west from the bridgehead secured on the unflooded eastern flank of Walcheren by 52nd Division. Taking the defenders by surprise, the Buffaloes advanced deep into Middelburg, where their presence brought throngs of joyful civilians onto the streets.

A group sought out Lt-Gen Daser, the commander of German 70th Division, and requested that he surrender immediately or face an overwhelming assault. Daser consented, and during the hours that followed the small British force found themselves guarding a far larger number of disarmed Germans than they had expected. The arrival of the Highland Light Infantry in the early hours of 6 November was much appreciated. Later that day, Veere in the north-eastern corner of the island surrendered to 158th Brigade, but enemy forces continued to hold out along the northern coast. By 7 November, 41 Commando and the French Commandos, overwhelmed by this last pocket of resistance, were aided by Typhoon strikes. Operation Infatuate had been accomplished.

By 7 November, the Allied forces had cleared the Germans from the Scheldt. However, this

effort in difficult terrain had cost them 12,000 men. To open Antwerp fully still required a large scale minesweeping operation in the estuary. Operation Calendar was undertaken from 3 to 25 November by a large force of minesweepers under Captain H.G. Hopper RN, with a total of 267 mines being swept. Only then could Allied shipping be unloaded.

The first ship to arrive, appropriately, being the Canadian-built *Fort Cataraqui*, part of the first sea-going convoy in the Antwerp harbour on 28 November. At its peak, the docks off-loaded 22,000 tons of supplies each day. The ability to get large amounts of supplies onto continental Europe relatively close to the front line proved crucial to the development of the future Allied campaign in North-West Europe.

IWM BU 1245



German prisoners from 70th Division at Flushing



# The battlefield today

CWGC



Bergen-op-Zoom war cemetery

The geography of the Scheldt area has changed significantly since 1944. Back then this was a low-lying and sparsely inhabited agricultural region. Today, the coastline of the region has changed, as land reclamation continues apace. The Sloe channel, which separated Walcheren from South Beveland, has been reclaimed, as has the Braakman inlet. The massive storm-surge barrages of the Delta Project have transformed the geography of the East Scheldt inlet, parts of which have been turned into freshwater lakes. Rapid urbanisation has taken place since the war, and the small hamlets and villages, plus the few towns, mentioned above have all grown in size.

Intensive agricultural practices have also altered the landscape in many places. In addition, the area has seen the construction of a large number of new roads that criss-cross the area, linking these growing settlements. The combination of these developments make it somewhat difficult to visualise what the battlefield must have looked like in 1944. Some new roads, however, do follow the course of those extant in 1944, so in many places visitors can trace the actual routes used. This is true, for example, along the route from

Antwerp north to Bergen-op-Zoom. What should remain evident, however, is the sheer flatness and low-lying nature of the terrain, plus the constant presence of water in irrigation ditches and the like. It was precisely these conditions that bedevilled these operations back in 1944.

## KEY FACTS

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission maintains over 1,147,192 war graves (which does not include the graves of some 40,000 foreign nationals) at 23,203 burial sites in 149 countries around the world. It also commemorates a further 759,597 Commonwealth war dead on memorials to the missing.

Commonwealth governments share the cost of maintenance in proportion to the number of graves of their war dead: UK – 79%; Canada – 10%; Australia – 6%; New Zealand – 2%; South Africa – 2%; India – 1%.

# Forces assigned to the clearing of the Scheldt Estuary and the liberation of Walcheren

Space limitations mean that we cannot list all of the units involved in the Operations mentioned in this booklet.

## **Navy**

### **Force T**

The Battleship HMS Warspite, two monitors, a command ship and 181 landing craft, landing barges and motor launches, including the 27 armed landing craft of the Support Squadron, Eastern Flank

### **Minesweeping Force A**

HMS Tudno, 15th, 19th, 102nd, 110th, 131st, 139th, 140th, 157th, 159th, 165th, 197th, 198th, 199th and 704th Minesweeping Flotillas

### **Minesweeping Force B**

19th and 160th Minesweeping Flotillas and five Belgian manned Motor Minesweepers

### **4th Special Service Brigade**

41, 47 and 48 Commandos (Royal Marines) and No. 4 Army Commando

## **Army**

### **First Canadian Army**

II Corps Troops

### **2nd Canadian Armoured Brigade**

### **2nd Canadian Infantry Division**

4th Canadian Infantry Brigade

5th Canadian Infantry Brigade

6th Canadian Infantry Brigade

### **3rd Canadian Infantry Division**

7th Canadian Infantry Brigade

8th Canadian Infantry Brigade

9th Canadian Infantry Brigade

### **4th Canadian Armoured Division**

4th Canadian Armoured Brigade

10th Canadian Infantry Brigade

### **1st Polish Armoured Division**

10th Polish Armoured Brigade

3rd Polish Infantry Brigade

### **Second British Army**

(formations were under the command of the First Canadian Army for these operations)

I Corps Troops

### **4th Special Service Brigade**

### **34th Tank Brigade**

### **79th Armoured Division**

30th Armoured Brigade

### **49th (West Riding) Infantry Division**

56th Infantry Brigade

146th Infantry Brigade

147th Infantry Brigade

### **52nd (Lowland) Infantry Division**

155th Infantry Brigade

156th Infantry Brigade

157th Infantry Brigade

## **Air**

Second Tactical Air Force

Bomber Command

Fighter Command

Mr Martyn Parker



60th anniversary of the liberation of Walcheren



# Glossary

This booklet is intended to be of interest to young people as well as veterans. As the former may not be acquainted with basic military terminology, a simple glossary of

1944 British Army terms relating to variously sized commands is included here. These commands are listed in descending order of size with the rank of the commander shown in *italics*.

| TERM                                          | DESCRIPTION                                                                                                                                                         |
|-----------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Army Group<br><i>General or Field Marshal</i> | The largest military command deployed by the British Army, comprising two or more armies and containing 400,000–600,000 troops.                                     |
| Army<br><i>Lieutenant-General</i>             | A military command controlling several subordinate corps, plus supporting forces, amounting to 100,000–200,000 troops.                                              |
| Corps<br><i>Lieutenant-General</i>            | A military command controlling two or more divisions, as well as other supporting forces, amounting to 50,000–100,000 troops.                                       |
| Division<br><i>Major-General</i>              | The standard 1944 British Army formation, an infantry or armoured division, containing 10,000–20,000 personnel.                                                     |
| Brigade<br><i>Brigadier</i>                   | A formation that contains several battalions or regiments that amount to 3000–6000 personnel, which exists either independently or else forms part of a division.   |
| Regiment<br><i>Lieutenant-Colonel</i>         | A unit typically of armoured or artillery forces, amounting to 500–900 soldiers, that equates in status and size to an infantry battalion.                          |
| Battalion<br><i>Lieutenant-Colonel</i>        | A unit usually comprising 500–900 soldiers (such as an infantry, engineer or signals battalion).                                                                    |
| Squadron<br><i>Major</i>                      | Typically, a sub-unit of an armoured or reconnaissance regiment that equates in status and size to an infantry company.                                             |
| Company<br><i>Major</i>                       | A sub-unit of a battalion. A typical infantry company could contain around 150–180 soldiers.                                                                        |
| Battery <i>Major</i>                          | A sub-unit, usually of artillery, that forms part of a battalion.                                                                                                   |
| Unit                                          | A military grouping that ranges in size from a section (of 10 soldiers) up to a battalion or regiment (500–900 personnel).                                          |
| Formation                                     | A large military grouping that ranges in size from a brigade up to an army group.                                                                                   |
| Dyke                                          | A raised embankment surrounding a polder (qv). The dyke prevents the sea from flooding the polder.                                                                  |
| Nebelwerfer                                   | A multi-barrelled German rocket launcher.                                                                                                                           |
| Polder                                        | A piece of land reclaimed from the sea. The land remains below sea level, and the waters are only kept out by a surrounding raised embankment known as a dyke (qv). |



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'A nation that forgets its past has no future.'  
These words by Winston Churchill could not be more apt  
to describe the purpose of this series of booklets,  
of which this is the eighth.

These booklets commemorate various Second World War actions,  
and aim not only to remember and commemorate those who  
fought and died, but also to remind future generations of  
the debt they owe to their forebears, and the inspiration that  
can be derived from their stories.

They will help those growing up now to be aware of the veterans'  
sacrifices, and of the contributions they made to our security  
and to the way of life we enjoy today.



MINISTRY OF DEFENCE

