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The Dunes of Walcheren

By striking towards Arnhem instead of first clearing the approaches to Antwerp, which had been captured on 4 September, 1944, with its docks intact, Montgomery had created a critical situation not only for his own army group but for the whole invasion force. As the British and the Americans pushed towards Germany, their numbers building all the time, so they moved further away from the source of their supplies. Organizations like the "Red Ball" convoys made supreme efforts to keep the advancing troops supplied, but it soon became obvious that only a major port like Antwerp could solve the acute problem of keeping the armies rolling. Not only was the advance slowed by this logistical problem, but actually halted.

To be fair, Montgomery thought that while he struck for the vital bridges across the Rhine the Canadians would be able to clear the banks of the Scheldt. But once Antwerp had been taken German resistance stiffened and the British drive into Holland petered out. The island of Walcheren, which dominates the mouth of the Scheldt, then became, and was so named by Hitler, a fortress, its powerful array of gun batteries and other defensive positions being manned by a mixture of tough Kriegsmarine gunners and medically below par members of the Wehrmacht.

It needed a series of major operations to drive out the Germans from the area but by the end of October the Canadians had, with great bravery and loss of life, taken almost all of what was known as the Breskens pocket on the south bank of the Scheldt as well as South Beveland on its north bank. British army units under 2 Canadian Corps were then poised to strike from South Beveland on to Walcheren Island to help clear the one remaining centre of resistance that was preventing Antwerp from being used.

The hub of the attack on Walcheren was the two amphibious landings that took place on 1 November by No 4 Special Service Brigade commanded by Brigadier Leicester, Royal Marines. The dawn attack on Flushing from across the Scheldt by No 4 Commando was codenamed Infatuate I, while the landing on the north-west part of the island, at Westkapelle, undertaken by Nos 41, 47, and 48 Royal Marine Commandos, and by two Troops of the Inter-Allied Commando, was codenamed Infatuate II. American amphibious LVTs – called Buffaloes by the British – and the smaller amphibious Weasels were employed in the landings. These were an essential part of the operation, for the island had been partially flooded when RAF bombers had blown a large hole in the dyke at Westkapelle and smaller ones in several other places. The inundations caused by this bombing had isolated the German positions from possible reinforcements. They had also flooded some of the defences situated inland away from the higher ground of the dunes that were an integral part of the island's dyke system against the North Sea.

This amphibious attack on Walcheren saw by far the largest contingent of the Inter-Allied Commando to go into battle at the same time, for not only were the two French Troops still attached to No 4 Commando but No 41 Commando was reinforced for its drive to the north-eastern part of the island by the Norwegian and Belgian Troops of the Inter-Allied Commando under the command of their own HQ.* In addition, eleven members of the Dutch Troop who had managed to escape from Arnhem were attached, under the command of Captain Linzel, to No 47 Commando and twelve, under 2/Lieutenant de Ruiter, were attached to No 4 Commando, while a number of No 3 Troop continued in their inimitable role of interrogators, interpreters, and in helping patrols snatch prisoners. Among those attached to the three Commandos or to Brigade HQ for this purpose were Sergeants Farr and Gray, Corporals Douglas, Hamilton and Latimer, and Private Watson.[1]

On 30 September the two Troops and their HQ sailed from Southend and disembarked at Arromanches, and from there were taken by truck to De Haan on the Belgian coast near Bruges where the captured German defences were very similar to the ones that were to be stormed at Walcheren. Intensive training then began, but there was time for the Belgian Troop to snatch a few days' leave to return to their homes. It was, as their historian wrote, a brief but joyous reunion, and for some it was also a time of additional anxiety. One man found that his father was in prison for collaborating with the Germans and that the rest of his family had fled to Germany. Another discovered that his wife had left him for a Luftwaffe pilot.[2]

On 28 October 4 SS Brigade was moved to its concentration area where

* 10 (IA) Cdo HQ included its commanding officer, Lt-Colonel Peter Laycock, the 2 i/c, Major Godfrey Franks, the Intelligence Officer, Lieutenant Dwelly from No 3 Troop, and Captain Emmet, now the Commando's Adjutant.

behind barbed wire the men were briefed on the role they were to play. They were not, of course, told their destination but it was an open secret that the landing was to take place on one of the islands in the area of the Scheldt and when they embarked at Ostend on the evening of the 31 October Segers of the Belgian Troop recalled a meeting with a French fortune teller in London. "I was told, 'Don't go swimming in November as this could be fatal to you.' I had laughed at the time but now I remembered and felt a cold shiver run down my spine."[3]

Those taking part in Infatuate I were moved to Breskens and spent the night of the 31 October in the ruined houses of the town. That evening the two French Troops gathered in the ruins of the local Catholic church where the French Chaplain, René de Naurois, held mass.*

For the attack on Flushing the Dutch section under de Ruiter was divided up amongst the two French Troops, now numbered 5 and 6, though de Ruiter himself was with Dawson, van Woerden was with the 2 i/c, and van Gelderen – who had won the Dutch Bronze Cross at Arnhem for organizing two supply air strips – and Persoon were with Kieffer. Their brief was to act as guides and interpreters, and to liaise with the local Dutch underground. They proved to be invaluable in this last role, for the Resistance rose against the Germans immediately the Commando landed and the British, the French and the local townsmen fought alongside one another to drive the enemy from Flushing.

"I worked as Liaison Officer for Colonel Dawson and after we landed one of my roles was to keep the Colonel in touch with Kieffer. I would also take back any German officers to the prison compound on the beach in case I could extract any information from them as I could speak German. One of these officers was mortified that he was in charge of someone so junior, but he brightened up when he learnt my name was De Ruiter. There was a big monument in the town of the famous Dutch Admiral, De Ruyter, and he thought I was related to him, and so was not such an insignificant person to escort him after all!

"On the first night after the landings it became known that fourteen German engineers and technicians who were working on a large ship in the dockyard were willing to surrender. The ship, which was under construction,

* De Naurois had escaped from France and had made his way to England via Spain, and was eventually attached to the French Commandos as their priest. But he also took a great interest in the British soldiers in the Commando and, despite his fractured English, got on very well with them – so much so that he learnt a number of words which were distinctly unclerical which he tended from time to time to use in conversation in the Officers' Mess. He was trained as a medical orderly and in Normandy he would insist on going out on night patrol with his flock. He was a fighting padre and always went armed. When he undertook one of these hazardous operations his bald head would be plastered with blacking, because, "If your cap falls off, Padre, it will shine like the beacon off Le Havre".[4] Sadly, de Naurois had a nervous breakdown after Walcheren and was hospitalized in England, but soon recovered. At the time of writing he is still alive, and is a world expert on the migration of sea-birds.

had been mined by the Germans and these technicians knew where the charges had been laid. So I went with two others and with a member of the Dutch Resistance who had tipped us off about the men. We started at 10pm and went over the Verbroon bridge. Before we went I told the Dutch Resistance man that he was to lead the way and that if we were fired on I knew it would be an ambush and that I would kill him. He still said he would go, but we got lost in the dockyard. Eventually, we found the technicians, disarmed them and removed the explosive charges – which in fact had already been rendered harmless by the shipyard personnel. As we led the way back I heard someone running towards us and expected trouble. But it was only a German sentry who had heard what was going on and wanted to be made a prisoner too!

"We recrossed the bridge at about 2.30 in the morning, which was much later than we had planned, and the Commando unit I had arranged to cover my return had been replaced by an army unit who knew nothing about us. We were challenged and though I was allowed across the bridge, my prisoners had to stay on the other side. While I was arguing with the officer in charge as to whose prisoners they were the Germans started mortaring the bridge and the prisoners scattered. The officer then said I could have them as he didn't know where they were anyway, but when I called across to them to follow me they all did!"[5]

The landing beach, codenamed Uncle, was right in Flushing, at Dokhaven. It was between two long piers and was very narrow, but was the only place the planners could find that fulfilled their requirements. The low cloud and persistent drizzle made heavy bombing impossible so for an hour before the first men went ashore the German defences in the area were pounded by heavy artillery and by low-flying Mosquito light bombers.

The plan was for No 1 and No 2 Troops, under the 2 i/c of the Commando, to land first and to move as quickly as possible to throw a secure perimeter round the landing area, before the main landing force, with Commando HQ, came ashore. Kieffer's task was to oversee the landing of the main part of the Commando before joining his two French Troops to co-ordinate their attack with No 3 Troop on their objectives. For ease of identification the town had been divided into various sectors, each named after an English or Scottish town.

One of the first ashore was Corporal Bill de Liefde of the Dutch section who at 5.45 landed as part of a reconnaissance party whose job it was to guide the rest of the landing force into the beach. This he managed to do with a lantern and at 0615 Kieffer landed, intending to set up his headquarters at the base of a windmill. "The enemy was firing from the windmill so I sent my HQ bren with Lieutenant Hattu to clear it; this was completed at 0710 and two prisoners were brought back. The bren and two men were left to hold the windmill. From 0730 until 0750 we were shelled violently. At about 0800 after a

conference with the Commanding Officer, Lt-Colonel Dawson, I started moving my HQ to Bellamy Park to take up a HQ position for leading operations of Nos 3, 5 and 6 Troops."[6]

No 3 Troop touched down at 6.40 without difficulty and made straight for Bellamy Park, a town square 200 yards in length just inland of the Western harbour. The first French Troop to get ashore, No 5, under Lofi, landed under fire. The Troop had embarked in two LCAs, No 1 Section with Lofi and Lieutenant Chausse in one and No 2 Section with Lieutenant Amaury in the other. Both craft encountered machine-gun and light flak fire and the first LCA struck the pier out of control after the coxswain had been hit, and then sank. The second boat was also hit and several men, including two of the Dutch section, were wounded, and the rest had to wade through shoulder-high water to the shore.

Once ashore, No 5 Troop followed No 3 Troop to Bellamy Park and found it tough going. "Two prisoners were taken, one speaking French, who said that an important group had withdrawn to the barracks. The Troop moved forward, and on civilian information the church was attacked and one prisoner taken by Lieutenant Chausse. Route was now: Kerk Straat/Spuik Straat/Bree Straat/Bellamy Park, with No 2 Section (Amaury) in the lead. At the Groote Markt Crossroads No 2 Section was ordered to hold Bree Straat and No 1 Section was ordered to West Straat/Mossel Mans Gang to attack the barracks.

"The time was now approximately 0730. Lieutenant Amaury, with No 2 Section, was stopped by MMG and sniper fire. Lance-Corporal Montean and the prisoners were killed. House fighting forced the enemy to withdraw to the barracks leaving several wounded and dead behind."[7]

Chausse, with two of his sergeants, Messanot* and Paillet, now went forward to reconnoitre the barracks, but were ambushed en route with stick grenades and Chausse was slightly wounded. Lofi reported to Kieffer that he was held up and was informed that a company of the King's Own Scottish Borderers, which had landed behind the Commandos, would press home the attack on the barracks and the rest of Worthing Sector while Lofi moved on to attack Dover Sector.

The next French Troop, No 6, under Lieutenant Guy Vourc'h, was luckier when landing and lost only two men. With Captain van Nahuis, a former police inspector and now a local Resistance leader, as their guide, they made their way to their first objective, the main Post Office at the northern end of Wilhelmina Straat. At first they encountered only light sniper fire, but when they reached the Post Office they found it had been reinforced by, as it turned out, Germans

* It was during this heavy street fighting that Messanot behaved with such exemplary courage that he was later awarded the Military Medal. "In the course of street fighting," the citation read, "this NCO and his section were held up by strong, well-sited enemy pockets of resistance. Sergeant Messanot immediately dashed forward under heavy fire and destroyed the enemy with grenades. He then promptly broke into the position and took a number of prisoners."

who had been withdrawn from other parts of the town. The Troop's No 1 Section, under Lieutenant Senée attacked the position and took fifty prisoners, but a small group, under an officer, continued to hold out on the first floor and was only silenced when four or five Frenchmen climbed onto the roof and threw hand grenades in through the windows. Vourc'h and his Troop then made their way along Wal Straat to the big crossroads at the dockyard gates, Betje Wolf Plein in the Bexhill Sector, where they were to form a line between the Spui Kom lake and the docks to throw back any German counter-attack which might come from the new part of the town.

Vourc'h later wrote: "At about 0745 we were at Bexhill sector. The Dutch officer made a mistake at that time. He took a sub-section with him to a place near Dover sector and that sub-section got cut off by a party of Germans. Some of the men managed to escape and come back. Some had to hide for some time and joined the Troop only the day after.

"My plan was to occupy the block of houses which makes the corner between Badhuis Straat and Goosje Busken Straat. The first section of my Headquarters crossed the latter street, under fire from the pill box in Dover. The school in the street was occupied by the enemy, who had there large stores. We took seven prisoners. The second section was unable to cross the road, the fire being too strong. As we were just arriving a force of Germans about a company strong was coming towards us down Badhuis Straat. We opened fire on them from the street and stopped them. It was then about 0800.

"One of the sections was holding the corner of Badhuis Straat and Glacis Straat. They remained there alone with Lieutenant Senée in command for about two hours, stopping all attacks from the Germans and killing a great number of them. My losses were three killed. My headquarters was in the corner of Goosje Busken Straat and Badhuis Straat, the other section was in the building in front on the other side of Goosje Busken Straat, with Lieutenant G. de Montlaur. They made a recce of Aagje Keken Straat along the shipbuilding yard, but could not enter it. At about 0815 we were reinforced by the machine-gun section of No 4 Troop [the Heavy Weapons Troop]; one MG managed to come to my headquarters, the other staying with No 2 Section, having lost a man while trying to cross the road."[8]

At about 0900 another company of KOSB managed to contact the heavily beleaguered Frenchmen and an hour later got a platoon across the road to Vourc'h who despatched them to reinforce Senée. At about the same time the Germans again attacked in force, this time down Aagje Keken Straat, but they were again dispersed, the Heavy Weapons Troop MMG killing two of them before it jammed.

By noon Hove and Worthing sectors had fallen to the Commando, but Lofi was still unable to move forward through the narrow neck of land between the lake and the sea and at 1500 had come to a halt at the corner of Noord Straat and

Goosje Busken Straat. Kieffer now sent for Lofi and together they went to confer with Dawson. It was decided that Lofi should continue to advance as much as possible but later he was ordered to withdraw for the night so that a heavy barrage could be put down on the German positions.

At 0700 the next morning Lofi continued his advance along the Goosje Busken Straat. However, progress was slow for they found their way blocked by a 20mm quadruple-barrelled anti-aircraft gun in a concrete strongpoint at the far end of the street.

"It was always a pleasure to see the French in action," Dawson was to remark later. "They showed endless resource and contrivance, and were masters of individual action"; and what Lofi and his men did that morning is a shining example of what Dawson meant, for they took part in what was probably the classic street-fighting attack of the whole Flushing operation.

One section of the Troop managed to get into a cinema in the street and the PIAT team climbed on to the roof. From there it was able to give effective covering fire while the other section crossed the street and entered a building. Both sections now moved forward house by house by blowing holes in the garden walls – a method of advance called "mouseholing" – and clearing each house of any Germans, often in hand-to-hand fighting. Slowly the two sections moved closer and closer to the concrete blockhouse and were about to prepare themselves for the final assault when they were ordered to withdraw so that six Typhoons could attack the remaining German positions with rockets.

In the afternoon the advance was continued, with the Troop clearing houses and reaching the corner immediately overlooking the strongpoint. During this push forward they came across evidence of the ruthless manner in which the Germans behaved towards the local Dutch population. As mentioned earlier, one sub-section of No 6 Troop had been cut off the previous day and one member had been compelled to take refuge in a house which the Germans retook next day. When they found English equipment there they took the entire family who lived there outside and shot them.

The enemy were now confined to the strongpoint and to the house on the corner of the Boulevard Bankert. From this building they attempted to escape at about 1630, but ran into the concentrated fire of the whole of No 5 Troop and received several casualties.[9]

By now Lofi's No 1 Section had reached the anti-tank wall which blocked the end of the street and was firing PIAT bombs at very short range into the embrasures of the strongpoint, but as there was no sign of surrender from it Lofi decided the only thing to do was to lay an explosive charge by the armoured door.

One of his men, Lafont, had just volunteered for this hazardous mission when the armoured door opened and a white flag on a long stick poked out.

Then, moments later, three officers and about sixty soldiers stumbled out, their hands on their heads, many of them hardly conscious. By then Lofi's Troop had been reduced to three officers and forty-seven men.

2

While Flushing was under attack, the main assault on the island took place on the wind-swept dunes on either side of the ruined and partially flooded village of Westkapelle.

The Operational Orders for the Belgian and Norwegian Troops of the Inter-Allied Commando taking part in Infatuate II listed their role as being in support of No 41 Commando, which was to land north of the gap in the dyke and then move towards Domburg. However, one section of the Belgian Troop, commanded by Lieutenant Meny, was to be detached as protection for the tanks of the 1st Lothians which were also to land with the Commandos. On landing, at H-Hour + 25 minutes, the task of the two Inter-Allied Troops was to pass through the village of Westkapelle which, it was planned, would have been cleared by a Troop from No 41 Commando, and to "protect the left flank of 4 SS Bde and deny the enemy all approaches to N and NE of Westkapelle".

The two Troops, plus headquarters, were embarked with their LVTs at Ostend in four LCTs as follows:

1. Cdo Hq, No 4 (Belgian) Troop less one section, and one officer and 14 ORs of No 5 (Norwegian) Troop.
2. No 5 Troop, less one officer and 14 ORs.
3. One sub-section of No 4 Troop, Lieutenant Meny i/c, to act as tank protections.
4. One sub-section of No 4 Troop, as tank protection.[10]

These four vessels, in company with those carrying Nos 41, 47 and 48 Commandos, were protected by "T" Force, a Support Squadron commanded by Captain A.F. Pugsley RN which included LCFs, LCGs, and LCRs* for tackling the German defences at close range, as well the battleship HMS *Warspite* and two monitors for bombarding the beaches prior to landing and pounding the heavy German batteries that dominated the Scheldt.

Thanks to the bravery of the Close Support Squadron in going right inshore to tackle the German defences the LCTs carrying the Inter-Allied and Royal Marine Commandos approached the landing beaches, some twenty minutes behind schedule, relatively unscathed. Even so the enemy's fire became intense about a mile from shore and the LCT with one of the Belgian sub-sections in it received three direct hits, knocking out all the tanks in it and wounding the sub-section's Liaison Officer and two Belgians. Five minutes later it turned for home and passed the LCT containing the Commando's HQ. The sight of it, as the War Diary noted, "was not an aid to morale".

* Landing Craft (Flak), Landing Craft (Gun), and Landing Craft (Rocket)

The HQ ship, having narrowly missed being hit several times, grounded near the landing beach, codenamed White Tare, just north of the gap in the dyke at 1035. However, when an attempt was made to lower the ramp it was found that the LCT was rammed hard against some iron stakes. The vessel was now a sitting target for the German gunners but those aboard were heartened when a few minutes later the LCT containing the bulk of the Norwegian Troop passed inshore on the port beam and, with a rousing cheer from its occupants, beached safely. Some of the Norwegians, however, had to wade ashore. Lieutenant Gudmundseth, finding his wet trousers extremely uncomfortable, exchanged them for those belonging to the first German prisoner he came across.

The LCT carrying Lieutenant Dauppe's section of the Belgian Troop also became stuck on some underwater defences. The skipper wanted to back off and try again but the stern had already received a direct hit and Dauppe asked that the ramp be dropped and he and his section had to wade ashore.[11] Casualties among the Belgians on landing were light, though Stichnot was seriously wounded and Burggraeve, as he engaged the German beach defences with his bren gun, had his foot smashed by a shell. For this act of bravery under fire he was later decorated with the Belgian Croix de Guerre.

It was soon considered too dangerous to remain aboard the HQ ship any longer and orders were given for those on board to get ashore as best they could. The water was deep and the current strong, but despite heavy shelling and mortaring from the Germans, casualties were light. Corporal Hamilton, however, was killed as he stepped ashore and Captain Emmet was wounded while in the water. He was supported by Watson – who was wounded, too – until they were both picked up and taken back to Ostend.[12]

By 1050 the Commando's HQ had managed to establish itself at the top end of the beach near some reinforced concrete and shortly afterwards LVTs and Weasels which had been trapped in the LCT came ashore. At 1115 the situation was that the Belgians were ashore and mopping up the western area of Westkapelle in support of the No 41 Commando Troop assigned to clearing the village, and had suffered eight casualties, all wounded. At the same time the Norwegians were clearing up German opposition in the northern part of Westkapelle, and were advancing towards the large German battery, W.15, situated just north of the village, and had had ten casualties, two of them dead.

"The Norge Commander, seeing 41 Commando attack the battery W.15 from the landward, across open ground, attacked across the dunes and obtained a strategic position from which they had the defenders under fire, and forced them below ground, thus enabling 41 Commando to complete their advance and make the kill. They then took over the battery positions and made a screen around them to the north, while the Belge completed the mopping up

of snipers with the aid of an AVRE,* which pumped a few 'dustbins' into the lighthouse, and finally set it on fire."[13]

With both Troops off the landing beach, HQ, which had by now been reduced to the CO, the 2 i/c, the Signals Officer and fifteen other ranks, moved into Westkapelle and set up in, of all places, a coffin-maker's shop, before moving later into the captured W.15 battery which had fallen at about 1215. One member of the Norwegian Troop had landed with a Norwegian flag wrapped around his stomach, and this was produced and flown on the battery.

With the No 41 Commando Troop assigned to clearing Westkapelle were two members of No 3 Troop, Sergeant Gray and Corporal Latimer. When Germans in the tall tower on the landward side of the village continued to fire, Gray gave his weapons to Latimer so that the Germans could see he was unarmed and walked out into the street. "I went along the main street shouting in German for the Germans to surrender, telling them they didn't have a chance. A German sergeant came out and said he'd lay down his conditions for surrendering. While I was arguing with him Latimer went into the tower. Latimer was a Czech socialist who thought that the common man was much better than those in charge, so he went behind my back, and the German sergeant's, and got the Germans in the tower to surrender without any conditions at all! He led them out the back way so their sergeant wouldn't see them and when they were out of the way told him he might as well surrender anyway as he had no troops left."[14]

While the two Troops of the Inter-Allied Commando took up defensive positions to ward off a possible counter-attack, No 41 Commando had advanced up the coast towards the next large battery, W.17, situated on the outskirts of the small town of Domburg, taking it before dark, and then moving on into Domburg itself.

While the attack north of the gap in the dyke could be said to be proceeding satisfactorily, Brigadier Leicester was being pressed to silence the batteries south of it as quickly as possible so that the minesweepers could enter the Scheldt and start their work. He therefore ordered all but two Troops of No 41 Commando to move back from Domburg to support Nos 47 and 48 Commandos, which had landed south of the gap, and at 1300 Laycock was ordered to move up the coast to take over No 41's positions. By 1630 the Belgians and Norwegians had moved to their new positions and the two remaining Troops from No 41 Commando came under Laycock's command.

At that time only half the town had been captured and there was a good deal of sniping and machine-gun fire. At 1730 a fighting patrol from the Belgian Troop, commanded by Lieutenant Roman, was sent out by Laycock to get, as

* Assault Vehicle Royal Engineers: this was a Churchill Mk IV tank which had fitted, instead of its gun, a 12-inch spigot mortar which fired a 25lb explosive charge up to 80 yards to break down concrete obstacles and defences.

the War Diary put it, the "lie of the land", and the Commando's position was much improved when half an hour later the remnants of the 1st Lothians that had managed to get ashore, two Sherman tanks and two AVREs, arrived on the outskirts of the town. Their presence soon put an end to snipers and any small arms fire, but mortar and shell fire continued to rain down throughout the night.

The tanks laagered at the southern end of Domburg for the night and were protected by a sub-section from the Norwegian Troop, and next morning they were put to good use by shelling a large water tower on the north-eastern outskirts of the town by the dunes that was being used by German snipers. Behind this tower were high dunes which were the centre of the German defensive positions.

After the Norwegians had reconnoitred the area in the morning they launched an attack on the German positions in the afternoon, supported by a rolling barrage from the Canadian guns at Breskens and by two of the Sherman tanks. The Germans had reinforced their positions by high barbed wire, among which they had laid mines, and in trying to surmount this, with the aid of a ladder, the Norwegian Troop Commander, Captain Rolf Hauge, was wounded in the arm by mortar fire. Eventually, a way was found through the wire and, though one man was killed and the Sergeant-Major wounded by the Germans' sporadic fire, the position was overrun.[15] Lieutenant Gausland started the Germans' surrender by lobbing a hand grenade with great accuracy through the entrance of one of the concrete emplacements and its occupants appeared with their hands held high.

Hauge now regrouped his Troop and, finding his way clear, pushed forward another half-mile into the dunes, taking two additional enemy positions. He then ordered Gausland to take his section further forward and Gausland advanced until he could see below him a group of buildings that lay in a dip inland from the next large battery which had to be taken, W.18. But by now the enemy's resistance had stiffened considerably and Gausland halted, reported his position, and was told to withdraw. During this action a total of 175 prisoners were taken. Though quite seriously wounded, Hauge continued in command until he had consolidated his Troop into defensive positions for the night. When he was eventually examined by the Medical Officer he was evacuated to the mainland and was later awarded the Military Cross for his leading part in this successful skirmish.[16]

"The attack was planned in three phases; each should have been reported by wireless, but the first message we received was that the Norwegians had just completed phase three. They had met with serious opposition, had attacked with the utmost disregard for danger, clearing out the lot, but casualties were fairly heavy."[17]

While the Norwegians advanced along the dunes, the Belgians continued to

clear the wooded area on the southern flank of any remaining snipers. By nightfall, despite persistent mortaring and shelling, the two Troops had consolidated well to the north-east of Domburg, and had taken a total of 211 POWs. "The Kriegsmarine did not like close fighting," the War Diary commented succinctly.

To the south of the gap in the dyke No 47 Commando, along with Linzel and his men, had at last overrun the stubborn defenders of W.11. It had proved to be one of the fiercest battles of the whole operation and for No 47 Commando the position at one time had been critical. By the time they landed south of the gap the Support Squadron had been virtually wiped out and the German gunners had turned their attention to the LCTs bringing in No 47. As a result there were casualties and much confusion and delay, and at 0700 the next morning when the CO held an O Group he ordered Linzel and his men to join B Troop which had been depleted during the landing. The Commando's first attack on W.11, their main objective, was driven off that afternoon and had to be pressed home again the following morning. After a heavy artillery bombardment on the position, the Commandos charged and overran the German battery and bunkers, and their defenders began to surrender in droves. Then the Germans outside the position began to mortar the battery and seven of Linzel's men were wounded by shrapnel as they crouched by a casemate. Linzel himself had a narrow escape when a mortar bomb dropped right by him but did not explode.

With gathering momentum, the Commando swept on towards the final battery, W.4. But by now the Germans were in no mood to resist and the CO was soon accepting the surrender of the remants of the German garrison. "Captain Koll, handing me his Luger pistol, said. 'You will shoot me if you think I have not done my duty.' I was so relieved and delighted that I could have embraced him." Soon, No 47 Commando had linked up with No 4 Commando coming up from Flushing, and in the Scheldt the minesweepers could be seen at work clearing the estuary.[18] But the price had been high and Linzel remembers returning wearily through the dunes and seeing whole rows of dead bodies wrapped in army blankets, "looking like sardines waiting to be shipped back to Ostend. Since then I hate seeing an open tin of sardines and I never eat them anymore."[19]

But if the fighting to the south had ceased it had only just begun in the northern tip of the island. At 1215 on 4 November, No 41 Commando arrived back at Domburg and at 1300 the advance was resumed with the Belgians taking the southern half of the area through the wooded country and B Troop of No 41 Commando taking on the northern dune area, while the Norwegians, now under the command of Lieutenant Gausland, were rested. The attack was supported by both tanks and both AVREs. The going proved tough for the British Troop, but the Belgians were able to clear the wooded

area quickly – though sniping and mines caused casualties, including the Troop's Adjutant, Lieutenant d'Oultremont – and by the end of the day the Germans had been pushed back between 800 and a thousand yards nearer to their next big battery, W.18.

The next morning, D+4, the Belgians were relieved by the Norwegians and it was agreed that No 41 Commando would be responsible for the northern, seaward, half of the front while the Inter-Allied Commando would be responsible for the wooded southern, inland, half. Offensive patrols were sent out into the wooded area and several prisoners were brought in. Sniping and mortar fire was constant.

In the afternoon effective air support was to be laid on for the attack on W.18 to the north of Domburg and the two Troops of the Inter-Allied Commando were put under command of No 41 Commando for it. The Norwegians were given the task of clearing the flank and advanced through this inland wooded area, while No 41 attacked the battery, which fell just before dark. That night a chance sniper's round hit Lieutenant Rommetvedt of the Norwegian Troop, wounding him in the chest, and his section was taken over by 2/Lieutenant Gudmundseth.

Early the next morning some Germans in an anti-tank position ahead of the Norwegians called out that they wanted to surrender. The Norwegians, fearing a trick, refused to go and collect them and told the Germans to come forward with their hands up, but the Germans did not come. Gausland reported this to the Belgians when they took over at dawn and a little later a sub-section of the Belgian Troop ran into an ambush and suffered casualties. However, the Belgians pressed on with tremendous *élan*, but were pinned down by fire from four different machine-gun positions. How they dealt with them must be put down as one of the most outstanding feats of arms performed by the Inter-Allied Commando in any of the operational zones in which its members fought during the war.

"The Belgians were ordered to clear the woods on the flank as far as the first bound of the next day's attack. This they carried in brilliant style, mopping up all opposition and occupying a feature which had been set as one of the first objectives for the next day, taking thirty POWs in the process."[20]

Even the unit's War Diary noted the Belgians' feat with unusually warm appreciation. "It can be noted here," it commented, "that this small battle was an absolute classic of determination to get through at all costs and obtain one's objective, and, after the objective had been taken, to appreciate the situation and realize that something further must be done in order to make the position tenable. This in fact was carried out, and there is no doubt at all that that extra piece of ground gained that night through 4 Troop Commander's own initiative made a vast difference to the speeding up of the final outcome of the battle for the north coast."[21]

It was not taken, however, without cost and the decorations awarded to the Belgian Troop for that one action shows how bravely they reacted to the Germans who so bitterly opposed them.* The woods through which they attacked that day were thick with undergrowth, ideal cover for the defenders. A Section, under Lieutenant Meny, who had already led a fighting patrol earlier on in the day to clear some machine-gun nests and snipers, was on the right of the advance, with B Section, under Lieutenant Roman, on the left. The Troop HQ, with Captain Danloy, was in the centre.

Just after A Section was forced to move further inland because of a minefield, intense enemy fire pinned them down and Lieutenant Meny was hit in the chest and killed. Moments later another Belgian, Dive, was also killed by a burst of machine-gun fire and the section sergeant, Artemieff, took command. He led his men forward and, though wounded twice in the shoulder, destroyed an enemy machine-gun position with his tommy gun, for which he was later decorated with a palm to the Croix de Guerre he had won in Italy.

With its two most senior leaders out of the battle and pinned down by heavy enemy fire, the position of the section was now desperate. Sergeant de Leener and Lance-Corporal Legrand now took over command of the two sub-sections and attempted to continue the advance, but, as Sergeant de Leener later recorded in his diary, "The enemy's fire at that time became so intense that we were forced to take cover. The least movement of one of us meant a hail of machine-gun fire. We were stuck and it became impossible to go forward or back."[22]

Danloy now acted by swinging his B Section to the right so that Roman and his men attacked the Germans on their flank. As they went in Legrand was ordered by Danloy to cover the attack and Legrand personally gave the fire orders to his sub-section. At 1530 he was wounded by a machine-gun bullet in his shoulder, but refused to relinquish command until the German machine guns were finally wiped out, which was done by Roman and his men "at the point of the bayonet", supported by covering fire from No 41's Heavy Weapons Troop.

Earlier in the day, Legrand, who was the NCO in charge of the mortar section of A Section, had been wounded in the back by shrapnel, but had said nothing about this until the task allotted his section had been completed. He was then treated by the Medical Officer but insisted that he return to duty with the Troop. For this, and for his leadership in covering Roman's attack while wounded in the shoulder, Legrand was later decorated with the Military Medal. "Lance-Corporal Legrand set a very fine example of leadership and courage to the men under his command," part of the citation read. "Although severely wounded, his devotion to his duty was such that he refused to leave his post, and continued to lead his men in the final assault."

* Besides the decorations mentioned in the text the Belgian Troop won no less than eight Croix de Guerre of various grades on that day.

Although the German machine guns had now been taken out, Danloy knew it was tactically essential to take the dunes that lay north of the wood. He therefore ordered Roman to advance and take this high ground, and Roman and his men successfully cleared it of Germans. Two hours later he led a patrol to find out what enemy activity there was in the adjoining wood east of the Belgians' positions. He carried this out successfully, too, and returned at 2000. For his leadership during that afternoon, and for successfully leading a reconnaissance patrol in the morning to report the position of a German mortar which was subsequently silenced, Roman was awarded the Military Cross. "Throughout this action," part of the citation read, "Lieutenant Roman showed a complete disregard for his personal safety, and by his fine qualities of leadership and courage, he set a splendid example to the men under his command."

The next morning, 7 November, No 41 Commando, which had been reinforced by the Heavy Weapons Troops of the other two Royal Marine Commandos, launched an attack on a commanding feature known as the Black Hut area which lay between W.18 and the last big battery, W.19, which was still holding out. The Norwegians took over from the Belgians and were given the task of clearing the wood that ran the length of the line of advance, and this was satisfactorily carried out, with "many prisoners taken, also many killed".[23]

The Black Hut area was taken in the afternoon but then No 41 Commando were caught in heavy machine-gun enfilade fire, and were also heavily mortared. It was then learned from a POW that the majority of the garrison in W.19 had moved out into the wood in the south, and that this was where the enfilade fire had been coming from. Air support was called for and the woods containing the Germans were plastered by rocket-firing Typhoons. Under cover of this fire the British Commandos who had been pinned down were withdrawn and Brigadier Leicester, with all his Commando units now at his disposal, began to plan a Brigade attack for the following morning.

Before dawn the next day Gray and Latimer were involved in what by now had become a typical No 3 Troop activity of infiltrating the enemy's lines and taking a prisoner. "We set out at about 3am, crossed the minefields and established ourselves behind the German lines. We picked up a few prisoners who were carrying coffee and interrogated them, and asked where their Commanding Officer was. They were very reluctant to tell us. I told them I'd shoot them and they cried. While I was interrogating them Latimer drifted off somewhere. Then I suddenly saw a figure come out of a bunker and stand there in the half light asking where his coffee was. I knew this was the man we wanted and was about to tackle him when out of the sky – or so it seemed – flew Latimer and landed right on this officer. Latimer was small and wiry but he was one of the world's best rugby tacklers. He knocked the man to the ground

and that was the end of him. Then Palmer [the CO of No 41 Commando] arrived and I translated what he wanted to say to the German. He persuaded him to surrender and the German agreed to go round his own strongpoint to tell his men to give up, but he wouldn't go to any other strongpoint. We pushed on north but he refused to help any more, however much we threatened him. So we sent him back and pushed on towards W.19. Later we took another officer prisoner who assured us that the order had been given to surrender."[24]

This turned out to be no less than the truth for when, under cover of darkness the following morning, No 4 Commando passed through the position held by No 41 Commando and the Norwegians, W.19 fell with only a few shots fired, with many prisoners being brought in from the surrounding woods. The Commandos then moved to within a mile of Vrouwenpolder.

Soon after daybreak four Germans turned up in full battle kit at Dawson's HQ where all the surrendering enemy were being collected. When asked why they had not thrown down their weapons along with the other prisoners they produced a note written by Lieutenant Vourc'h whose Troop was right up near Vrouwenpolder. "These four enemy soldiers have the task of discussing the terms of surrender. They are not prisoners and I have therefore allowed them to keep their arms."[25] A ceasefire was arranged and the emissaries took an officer from No 4 Cdo to meet the senior German officer, and soon afterwards Dawson accepted the Germans' official surrender.

11. From article on No: 2 Dutch Troop at Arnhem by W. Boersma printed in "Maandorgaan van de Documentatiegroep '40–45' no: 119 (September, 1974)", a pamphlet given to author by Martin Knottenbelt.
12. Hendrik Beekhuisen, quoted in "August F. M. Bakhuys Roozeboom, the forgotten Commando of Arnhem, 1944", an article published in 1980 by Major A. L. J. van Vliet, Military History Section, Royal Dutch Army Service Corps.
13. From letter of recommendation printed in "Maandorgaan van de Documentatiegroep '40–45' no: 119 (September, 1974)".
14. From English MS of *Rudy, Een Strijdbare Jood*, lent by Rudy Blatt to author.
15. ibid.
16. de Koning, in conversation with author, August, 1983.
17. William van der Veer, in conversation with the author, July, 1984, and from narrative supplied by him. Van der Veer has written several best-selling books in Holland about his wartime experiences.

CHAPTER 10

1. *I Understand the Risks* by Norman Bentwich, pp105–6.
2. *Donnez-Nous un Champ de Bataille* by Carlo Segers, p166.
3. ibid, p167.
4. *Don't Cry for Me* by Donald Gilchrist, p44.
5. De Ruiter, in conversation with the author, 1983. De Ruiter was awarded the Dutch Bronze Cross for this episode.
6. Kieffer narrative in PRO DEFE 2/40, which is part of a much longer account of how Flushing was taken. The exploits of the French during Infatuate I is almost wholly taken from this definitive history though I have also drawn on accounts given by Kieffer in *Beret Vert*, pp167–87 and by Major-General J. L. Moulton given in *Battle for Walcheren*, pp143–9.
7. ibid, Lofi narrative in PRO DEFE 2/40.
8. ibid, Vourc'h narrative in PRO DEFE 2/40.
9. ibid, in PRO DEFE 2/40 from which the rest off the description of No 5 Troop's attack on the Dover strongpoint is also taken.
10. War Diary in PRO 218/40. Except where otherwise noted, the narrative in this chapter is taken from the War Diary, from *The Battle for Antwerp* by Major-General J. L. Moulton, and from the narrative "No 10(IA) Commando's Role in the Walcheren Operation" by C. R. Featherstone in PRO DEFE 2/977.
11. Van der Bossche in conversation with the author, 1983.
12. Privately printed booklet by Bill Watson, p35.
13. Narrative of "No 10(IA) Commando's Role in the Walcheren Operation" by C. R. Featherstone in PRO DEFE 2/977.
14. Manfred Gans in conversation with author June, 1984.
15. *Klar Til Storm* by Arnfinn Haga, p117.
16. Details from Hauge's citation for the MC and from a conversation with Olav Gausland, November, 1985.

17. Narrative of "No 10(IA) Commando's Role in the Walcheren Operation" by C. R. Featherstone in PRO DEFE 2/977.
18. Official narrative of action by No 47 Commando at Walcheren by Lt-Colonel C. F. Phillips. He prefaced his description of the attack on W.11 with the words, "a complete and accurate account can never be written, so great was the confusion".
19. From narrative supplied to author by Brig-General Jan Linzel, March, 1986. Linzel had a distinguished career in the Dutch army. He fought in Korea and was reported killed there during one battle.
20. Narrative of Infatuate II in PRO ADM 202/407. This also contains detailed accounts of the individual actions of the Support Squadron.
21. The War Diary of 10(IA) Cdo erroneously states that W.18 was taken on 6 November when in fact it was taken on 5 November.
22. Segers, op.cit., pp173–4. The narrative for this action is taken from the War Diary and from the citations for the decorations awarded Lieutenant Roman and Lance-Corporal Legrand which are given in full in the above book, pp205–7.
23. War Diary in PRO 218/40.
24. Manfred Gans in conversation with author, June, 1984.
25. Kieffer, op.cit., p201.

EPILOGUE

1. Typescript of "History of No. 47 (RM) Commando", p29, in author's possession.
2. *Klar Til Storm* by Arnfinn Haga, p161.
3. Narrative supplied to author by Colonel Kaspar Gudmundseth, January, 1986.
4. ibid.
5. Haga, op.cit., p171.
6. In PRO DEFE 2/843.
7. Details of these raids are in "Les operations de Schouwen par le 1er bataillon de F.M. commandos" which is in the file TTF 1 bis, Service Historique de la Marine, Château de Vincennes, Paris.
8. Report on activities of 10(IA) Commando between 29 April 1945 and 13 September 1945 in PRO DEFE 2/977.
9. *Clash by Night* by Derek Mills-Roberts, p119.
10. ibid, pp170–1.
11. Details of this incident come from letters written to the author by Sir Maxwell Harper Gow, who was the Brigade Major, and by Mr Keith Thompson, who was his driver.
12. Mills-Roberts, op.cit., p107.
13. Letter from Major-General A. P. Willasey-Wilsey RM, dated 18 September, 1970, in the Archives of Royal Marines Museum, Eastney. Willasey-Wilsey was the patrol leader during Operation Cuckoo.
14. *The Unknown Warrior* by James Leasor, p257.
15. Peter Levy during interview with author, June, 1984.
16. "No 10 Commando – An International Experiment" by Bryan Hilton Jones in PRO DEFE 2/977.