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REPORT NO. 154
HISTORICAL SECTION
CANADIAN MILITARY HEADQUARTERS

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Clearing the Scheldt Estuary and Opening the Port of
Antwerp: Operations of First Canadian Army in North-
West Europe, 1 Oct - 8 Nov 44 (Preliminary Report).

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1 Oct - 8 Nov 44 (Preliminary Report).

Reference Maps: G.S.G.S. 4336, N.E. France and Belgium,
1/100,000, Sheets 2, 3 and 4; G.S.G.S.
2541, Holland, 1/100,000, Sheets 3, 4
and 5.

1. This is a preliminary report on the operations of First Canadian Army from 1 Oct to 8 Nov 44 to clear the Scheldt Estuary and open the port of Antwerp. It continues the sequence of Reports Nos. 131 and 146, and is similar to them in purpose and scope; that is to say, it is intended only for immediate reference purposes and as a foundation for more detailed treatment at a later date.

2. The principal sources include copies of correspondence between C.-in-C., 21 Army Group and G.O.C.-in-C., First Cdn Army, Lt-General Crerar's despatches to the Minister of National Defence and memoranda received from officers of No. 2 Canadian Field Historical Section. Little use has been made of war diaries, with the exception of that kept by the Army Commander.

THE PORT OF ANTWERP AND THE PROBLEM OF SUPPLY

3. As has been seen (Report No. 146), it had already been appreciated that the freeing of the port of Antwerp must provide a solution to the problem of supply which threatened to retard the entire offensive in the northern sector of the western front. Clearing the estuary was indispensable for the later offensives across the Rhine and into north-western Germany.

4. The situation has thus been described by Lt-General Crerar:

On the same day on which Le Havre fell, and other troops of First Canadian Army occupied Bruges, news was received that the Second British Army had entered Holland south of Eindhoven, and that the First U.S. Army had crossed the German frontier in two places. Yet these advances served to emphasize the serious nature of the problem of maintenance, troublesome alike to all the Allied forces in France. It had been deemed necessary by the 21st Army Group to hand over the port of Le Havre to the Americans, while looking to the north and the future development of Antwerp to meet the necessities of the British and Canadian Armies. Meanwhile, First Canadian Army, continued to be based on Bayeux in Lower Normandy, supplemented by the nearer and rapidly developing facilities of Dieppe.

(Hist Sec file AEF 45/First Cdn Army/C/E: Lt-Gen Crerar's Despatch to Minister of National Defence, 8 Nov 44).

"The advance", Lt-General Crerar continues, "had been so rapid, however, that the line of supply to the front from Dieppe itself was already so long as to constitute a very serious administrative problem." (Ibid.).

5. While the operations to capture the Channel ports were proceeding, plans were being made for the next phase in which First Cdn Army would be committed to the task of opening the gateway to the large and still workable port of Antwerp. A message from the C.-in-C., 21 Army Group on 12 Sep indicates both the urgency and the nature of Lt-General Crerar's responsibility.

The early opening of the port of Antwerp is daily becoming of increasing importance and this cannot repeat cannot take place until Walcheren has been captured and the mouth of the river opened for navigation. Before you can do this you will obviously have to remove all enemy from the mainland in that part where they are holding up north-east of Bruges.

(G.O.C.-in-C. file 1-0: Message M195, C.-in-C., 21 Army Gp, to G.O.C.-in-C., First Cdn Army, 12 Sep 44).

The suggested weight of air support is indicative of the strength of the permanent fortifications which the Germans have prepared to protect the entrance to the river. "I have ordered", the C.-in-C. informed the Army Commander, "that bombing to destroy the forts on Walcheren Island is to begin at once. On the day concerned we can lay on for you the whole weight of the heavy bomber effort from England, both Bomber Command and Eighth Air Force." (Ibid., Letter, Montgomery to Crerar, 13 Sep 44).

6. Subsequent developments are thus explained by Lt-General Crerar:

On 13 Sep I had been asked by the C-in-C whether, in view of the urgency of this requirement, I considered it advisable to give up the projected operations against Calais and Dunkerque in order to accelerate the clearance of the estuary. This problem was examined at a joint staff conference held at my headquarters on 14 Sep, when it appeared, from the naval point of view, that while there was no immediate necessity to capture Dunkerque, providing it could be closely invested, the operations against Calais could not be entirely abandoned because the heavy guns in the area prevented full use being made of the harbour at Boulogne. On 19 Sep, as the result of detailed study, my Plans Section produced an appreciation and outline plan of operations to serve as a basis for further discussion. On the same day an inter-service planning conference was convened at my headquarters to decide the policy with regard to the selection and priority of targets for air attacks prior to the opening of the main operation against the island of Walcheren and South Beveland. On 21 Sep I conferred with the C-in-C, Allied Naval Expeditionary Force, and the Chief of Staff, 21st Army Group, on the problems involved in mounting combined operations across the West Scheldt.

On 23 Sep I held a full conference attended by representatives of the Royal Navy, the 21st Army Group, the First Allied Airborne Army, the R.A.F., the Commander, 2 Cdn Corps, and his Chief of Staff, together with my staff and heads of services. On that occasion the basic plan was approved by which the 2nd Cdn Corps, after concluding its immediate task at Calais, would concentrate on the operations to open the Scheldt.

(Lt-Gen Crerar's Despatch, 8 Nov 44).

7. The basic requirements which I have decided upon, and which are quite necessary to secure before Army operations against Walcheren and Beveland Islands can be undertaken are to clear the enemy from the left bank of the West Scheldt and to advance the right of Cdn Corps to the general line Roosendaal - Bergen Op Zoom. 1 Brit Corps, on right of 2 Cdn Corps, will advance in conjunction with 2 Cdn Corps, protecting its right flank and linking up on its own right with 12 Corps, and left of Brit Army.

Having secured the left bank of West Scheldt, and sealed off the isthmus connecting Zuid Beveland with the mainland to the East, then the difficult assault and capture of Zuid Beveland and Walcheren will be successively carried out.

(W.D., G.O.C.-in-C., First Cdn Army, Sep 44: Appx 9, Notes for Conference on Operation "Infatuate", 22 Sep).

After informing the meeting that the paratroops would not be available, the Army Commander went on to say that the following tentative plans were under consideration by Lt-General Simonds:

A direct land assault up the isthmus connecting Zuid Beveland with the mainland.

A waterborne landing, launched from East of Terneuzen, directed on Beveland, in the Hoedekenskerke area.

These operations to take place concurrently, or successively and, finally,

After the capture of Beveland, a seaborne combined operation, involving, from this Army, 4 SS Bde launched against the SW coast of Walcheren Island - in conjunction with an attack launched from Zuid Beveland.

(Ibid.).

8. When the essential preliminaries had been completed, Lt-General Crerar on 27 Sep was compelled by ill-health to return for treatment to the United Kingdom, having nominated Lt-General Simonds as Acting Army Commander, and Maj-General C. Foulkes as Acting G.O.C., 2 Cdn Corps. (Lt-Gen Crerar's Despatch, 8 Nov 44).

9. By this time the disasters overtaking the German armies on all sides, together with the enemy's shrinking power in the air and on the sea, made it appear that resistance might conceivably collapse before the end of the year. On the eastern front, the Russians had captured the whole of Estonia; they were fighting in the outskirts of Warsaw and had reached the Czech frontier; in the Balkans, Bulgaria had been overwhelmed and, together with Finland, followed the Roumanian example and declared war on its former German Ally. In Italy, the Gothic Line had been broken and the Allies stood at the entrance to the Po Valley. In the west, the liberation of France was nearly complete. American armour was across the Moselle, and French and American troops were closing in on Belfort. The Siegfried Line had been breached near Aachen and, for the first time, there was fighting on German soil.

10. Developments in the west had combined to intensify the need for a port. 21 Army Group was now stretched across a wide, crescent-shaped front extending from the Nijmegen salient to Calais. On the right flank, the long corridor driven towards Arnhem by Second British Army had been retained and expanded in the face of savage counter-attacks. On the left the Canadian Army occupied the sector which included Calais and followed roughly the Leopold and Antwerp-Turnhout Canals as far east as the Dutch-Belgian frontier north of Turnhout.

11. On this broad front 1 Brit Corps held the eastern sector and 2 Cdn Corps the western. Within 2 Cdn Corps (which included 4 S.S. Bde and 2 Cdn Armd Bde), 4 Cdn Armd Div held the line of the Leopold Canal, and the area between Terneuzen and the Scheldt, while 3 Cdn Inf Div was regrouping after the capture of Calais. In order to allow Lt-General Simonds to give his undivided attention to the Scheldt, and also to protect the left flank of Second British Army, Lt-General Crocker had been given the responsibility for the front east of the Scheldt with the added strength of 2 Cdn Inf Div and 1 Pol Armd Div from 2 Cdn Corps. In this sector, northeast of Antwerp, 1 Pol Armd Div had penetrated as far as the Dutch-Belgian frontier north of Turnhout, 49 Brit Inf Div had established a bridgehead over the Antwerp-Turnhout Canal and 2 Cdn Inf Div had occupied Brecht. (Ibid.).

12. The outlook was promising. As the Field-Marshal observed on 27 Sep, "...we are very favourably situated in that we hold main road crossings over the Meuse and the Rhine on the Eindhoven-Nijmegen axis, and thus have the ability to operate south-eastwards between these two rivers. Such a thrust, in conjunction with a strong advance eastwards on Koln and Dusseldorf by First U.S. Army on our right, would be difficult for the enemy to hold." (G.O.C.-in-C. file 1-0: Directive M 527, from C.-in-C., 21 Army Gp, 27 Sep 44). But the qualifications were significant. "These operations will be begun as early as the maintenance situation will allow... The opening of the port is absolutely essential before we can advance deep into Germany." (Ibid.).

13. The Germans were fully aware of the potentialities of the situation. On 7 Oct General von Zangen, commander of the German Fifteenth Army, issued the following:

I order commanders as well as National-Socialist doctrinal officers to instruct troops in the clearest and most factual manner that should the allies

succeed in overrunning the Scheldt fortifications they would be in a position to land great masses of material in a large and completely protected harbour. With this material they might deliver a death blow at northern Germany, and even at Berlin itself, before the winter.

(The Times, 1 Nov 44).

By this time the Germans had made the most of the natural defences of the estuary. The West Scheldt had been mined and the coastal fortifications at places on Walcheren, like Westkapelle, and Flushing and Breskens, on the southern shore, had been strengthened. On that side of the water, the landward defences were closely integrated with the extensive system of canals.

14. The implications for First Cdn Army were thus described by Lt-General Simonds:

Following my assumption of the acting command on 27 Sep and the fall of Calais three days later, I issued a directive to the Commanders of the 1st British and 2nd Canadian Corps on 2 Oct defining the objects and requirements of the operations on which the Army was then free to concentrate its efforts, and outlining the general situation as it appeared at that time. I explained that it was the C-in-C's intention that the Second British Army would project a thrust between the rivers Meuse and Rhine on the north-west corner of the Ruhr at Krefeld, while the First U.S. Army was developing an offensive through Aachen on the south-west corner of the Ruhr at Cologne.

In the course of these operations, bridgeheads across the Rhine might be secured and possibilities opened for a drive eastwards into central Germany. These operations had a prior call on administrative resources. To enable the Second British Army to regroup and advance south-eastwards, it was necessary for First Canadian Army to clear Lt-Gen Dempsey's western flank by an advance north-eastwards. In conjunction with this joint attack on the Ruhr the whole weight of the strategic air forces was to be thrown against western and south-western Germany. Nevertheless, as already agreed in the planning stage of First Canadian Army's operations, Bomber Command was to make an all-out attempt to cut the dykes and flood the island of Walcheren. In the necessary regrouping, the 51st (Highland) Division had passed to the command of the Second British Army to be employed offensively to assist in the advance of 1st British Corps, while the 1st Czechoslovak Brigade Group was coming under my command to relieve the 51st (Highland) Division of its responsibility for containing Dunkerque, the early capture of which continued to be regarded as of no importance.

I appreciated that the greater the success of the British and American armies, the greater would be the demand for the use of the port of Antwerp, and

that concurrently with this, First Canadian Army might be required to extend its right both northwards and eastwards to cover the outer flank of the Second British Army and isolate the German forces in Holland. I emphasized the importance of releasing, as soon as possible, the large forces required to clear the estuary for operations further northward.

It was my intention that the 1st British Corps would carry out the task of clearing the left flank of the Second British Army by a thrust north-eastwards from Turnhout on 's Hertogenbosch, and direct the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division to drive the enemy from the area to the north of Antwerp and close the eastern end of the isthmus of South Beveland. Operations to clear the estuary and open the port of Antwerp were to be carried out by the 2nd Canadian Corps which would direct the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division to capture the territory still occupied by the enemy south of the West Scheldt. South Beveland would then be attacked across the water with the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division coming along the isthmus after its right flank and rear had been secured by the operations of the 1st British Corps towards Breda and Roosendaal. The task would be concluded with the capture of Walcheren.

(AEF 45/First Cdn Army/C/E: Report by Lt-Gen Simonds, 22 Nov 44, forwarded by Lt-Gen Crerar as Despatch to Minister of National Defence).

The resources of 79 Brit Armd Div, 2 Cdn and 9 Brit A.G.R.As. were to be available to Maj-General Foulkes for these operations. (W.D., G.O.C.-in-C., First Cdn Army, Oct 44: Appx "A").

THE ADVANCE TO WOENSDRECHT

15. At the beginning of October, Lt-General Simonds continues, "the 1st British Corps was making rapid progress north-eastward from its bridgehead over the Antwerp-Turnhout canal. The 1st Polish Armoured Division had elements as far as Poppel. During the next two days it became apparent that the enemy was fighting a delaying action, while withdrawing on his left flank under pressure of the Poles onto Tilburg and giving way more gradually before the 2nd Canadian Infantry Division on his right north of Antwerp." (Lt-Gen Simonds' Report, 22 Nov 44). With the C.R.A., Brigadier R.H. Keebler, as acting commander, the division had its left flank carried into Merxem by 4 Cdn Inf Bde (Brigadier F.N. Cabeldu) on 1 Oct; in the centre, 6 Cdn Inf Bde (Brigadier J.G. Gauvreau) held the northern bank of the canal; and on the right 5 Cdn Inf Bde (Brigadier W.J. McGill) was consolidating in Brecht. On the right flank 49 (West Riding) Division had taken over St Leonard.

16. At first the enemy offered only spasmodic resistance here with elements of two divisions. In the environs of Brecht contact had been made with a depleted 346 Inf Div, its fighting strength estimated as being equivalent to three battalions of infantry. West of Antwerp a new formation, 70 Inf Div, appeared in the line, being fairly well up in numbers, although both the

physical condition and the morale of the troops were reported as low. (AEF/2 Cdn Corps/L/F: 2 Cdn Corps Int Summary No. 63, 5 Oct 44, Appx "B"). Prisoners captured on 4 Oct, after a disheartening series of retreats, had a pessimistic view of the future. Contrasting the previous headlong flight of the German Fifteenth Army with the present effort to defend Walcheren, they gloomily quoted an epigram attributed to one of their battalion commanders: "You can't turn a hare into a porcupine." (AEF/2 Cdn Inf Div/L/F: Interrogation Report on PW of 1018 GR, 4 Oct 44).

17. On 4 Oct, the division being committed to continue the advance through Merxem to Bergen Op Zoom and maintain a protective screen covering the approaches to Antwerp westwards from Brecht (AEF/2 Cdn Inf Div/C/I: Op Instr No.1, 4 Oct 44), 4 Cdn Inf Bde penetrated as far north as Putte and 6 Cdn Inf Bde captured the important junction of Cappellen. On the following day, the area of the Antwerp docks was reported clear of enemy. The momentum of the advance was maintained and on 7 Oct, 5 Cdn Inf Bde moved north through 4 Cdn Inf Bde, then concentrated between Ossendrecht and Santvliet, for an attack on Korteven, the capture of which would sever the connection between the highway from South Beveland and the main road between Antwerp and Bergen Op Zoom. Thus faced with the imminent isolation of his forces on Walcheren, the enemy offered determined resistance with troops of 6 Para Regt in the vicinity of Woensdrecht.

18. The first phase over, 2 Cdn Inf Div, together with a regiment of 2 Cdn Armd Bde, reverted to Lt-General Simonds. At the same time (7 Oct), 7 Brit Armd Div and 51 (H) Div came under command of Lt-General Crocker whose responsibilities were extended north-eastwards to the River Maas. (W.D., G.O.C.-in-C., First Cdn Army, Oct 44: Letter, Simonds to Crocker and Foulkes, 12 Oct).

THE CLOSING OF THE ISTHMUS

19. The second and more intensive phase did not end until 22 Oct. Attacks launched from Hoogerheide by 5 Cdn Inf Bde on 8-9 Oct with the object of blocking the isthmus failed to overcome more determined opposition reinforced by armour. A subsequent attempt on 13 Oct, supported by flame-throwers mounted on Bren carriers and known as Wasps, was intended to dislodge the paratroops who had dug themselves in behind the railway embankment and the dyke west of Woensdrecht. But the natural strength of the positions, the water-logged fields, the quality of the defenders and our own difficulties of reinforcement again held up the advance. 5 Cdn Inf Bde suffered heavy casualties, one battalion losing all its company commanders in a single day. (AEF/5 Cdn Inf Bde/C/D: The Action at Woensdrecht, 8-14 Oct 44, account by Lt W.J. Shea, I.O., R.H.C., 15 Oct 44). It was not until after 4 Cdn Inf Bde had broken the enemy's grip on Woensdrecht during the night 15/16 Oct that the situation began to improve. (AEF/4 Cdn Inf Bde/C/D: Capture of Woensdrecht, accounts by Officers of R.H.L.I., 22 Oct 44). The time had come, moreover, to afford relief to the pressure on the division's right flank.

20. Conferring with his two Army Commanders on 16 Oct, Field-Marshal Montgomery ordered Lt-General Simonds to "develop a thrust on the right of 2 Cdn Inf Div to release it for offensive operations to the West of Zuid Beveland". (G.O.C.-in-C. file 1-0: Minutes of C.-in-C.'s Conference, 16 Oct 44). Similarly, Lt-General Dempsey was instructed to attack westwards, along the 's Hertogenbosch-Breda axis in order "to threaten and cut off the enemy" in front of Lt-General Simonds. (Ibid.).

21. On the same day 1 Brit Corps was given the responsibility of clearing the north-eastern flank of 2 Cdn Corps and the area north-east of Antwerp. (W.D., G.O.C.-in-C., First Cdn Army, Oct 44: Letter, Simonds to Crocker and Foulkes, 16 Oct). Meanwhile, 4 Cdn Armd Div, under Maj-General H.W. Foster, after assisting 3 Cdn Inf Div in the vicinity of the Leopold Canal, had been moving to a concentration area north-east of Antwerp, and now came under the command of 1 Brit Corps (17 Oct) for Operation "Suitcase".

22. This was aimed at Esschen, a hamlet on the Dutch frontier, about seven miles north-east of Korteven. The place was to be captured in two phases by a thrust over the Roosendaal Canal, north of Calpouthout, with 4 Cdn Armd Bde Gp, under Brigadier R.W. Moncel, and 10 Cdn Inf Bde Gp, under Brigadier J.C. Jefferson. (AEF/4 Cdn Armd Div/C/I: Op Instr No. 11, 17 Oct 44). To assist in widening the wedge driven into the enemy on 2 Cdn Inf Div's flank, another attack was to be made by 49 (W.R.) Inf Div on the right to secure Wuestwezel, 2 Cdn Armd Bde (less one regiment) being under command.

23. Both operations began on 20 Oct, and went favourably. By noon on the following day, 1 Brit Corps had reached a line including Wuestwezel and Achterbroek. After hard fighting in the wooded area north-east of Camp de Brasschaet, 4 Cdn Armd Div made a rapid advance, and in the early hours of 22 Oct elements of 10 Cdn Inf Bde Gp entered the outskirts of Esschen which fell during the day. Its flank being now secure, 2 Cdn Inf Div could prepare for the advance into South Beveland, the exit from which was blocked on 23 Oct with 5 Cdn Inf Bde in control of the road and railway. (Personal Diary, Maj W.E.C. Harrison, 23 Oct).

THE CLEARING OF THE SOUTH SHORE

24. If the enemy had fought hard to defend the isthmus, he had held on with even greater tenacity to the defensible south shore of the estuary behind the Leopold and Ghent-Terneuzen Canals. The task of forcing the Germans to evacuate the dykes and strongpoints across the saturated fields northward to the coast opposite Flushing (Operation "Switchback") had been assigned to 3 Cdn Inf Div, under the command of Maj-General D.C. Spry. The transition from siege warfare in the Pas de Calais to operations over the polder country of Zealand Flanders was rapid; and by 4 Oct a detailed plan had been produced. (AEF/3 Cdn Inf Div/C/F: Operation "Switchback", Memo No. 4; AEF/3 Cdn Inf Div/C/I: Op Order No. 9, 4 Oct 44). In support the division had 30 Brit Armd Bde, a regiment of 2 Cdn Armd Bde, 2 Cdn A.G.R.A., 9 Brit A.G.R.A. and, for the time being, the artillery of 4 Cdn Armd Div. As for the enemy, the force to be sacrificed for a last stand to hold open the route between

Breskens and Flushing was comprised largely of 64 Div which contained a high proportion of men on leave from units fighting on the Russian front who had been drawn on to help form the division as an emergency measure. (AEF/21 Army Gp/C/F: Clearing of the Scheldt Estuary, Oct-Nov 44). The fighting quality of these troops soon became apparent.

25. The assault across the Leopold Canal by 7 Cdn Inf Bde, under Brigadier J.G. Spragge, opened on 6 Oct with a terrifying flame-throwing attack by twenty-seven Wasps, a short distance east of the junction with the Canal de Derivation de la Lys. It was hardly surprising that Maj-General Eberding, G.O.C. 64 Inf Div, admitted after his capture that "his men feared our flame-throwers more than any other weapons at our disposal". (AEF/3 Cdn Inf Div/L/F: Conversation, G.O.C. 3 Cdn Inf Div with G.O.C. 64 German Inf Div, 1 Nov 44). Nevertheless, the enemy recovered quickly and offered such strenuous resistance that for nearly a week 7 Cdn Inf Bde was unable to do more than retain a very precarious hold on its narrow bridge-head. "Against this foothold the enemy directed innumerable counter-attacks, constantly introducing fresh sub-units. Mortar, small-arms and machine-gun fire from the front and flanks was incessant." (Operation "Switchback"). Although diversionary attacks were made by 4 Cdn Armd Div at the south-western extremity of the Braakman Inlet (1), it was not until 12 Oct that our lodgement was extended sufficiently far westward to enable the canal to be bridged along the main northern axis through Baldegem and Aardenburg. On the following day the divisional sappers, after labouring continuously under fire, had two Bailey bridges across.

26. Meanwhile, on 9 Oct, an amphibious force comprising 9 Cdn Inf Bde Gp under Brigadier J.M. Rockingham, had been launched from the vicinity of Terneuzen to take the enemy in the flank at the north-western point of the Braakman Inlet. For this bold undertaking a hundred amphibians, called Buffaloes, were used for carrying loads of 4-5 tons or 25 armed men across "beaches consisting mostly of mud, with layers of sand, and a hinterland intersected with high dykes and ditches". These craft were provided and driven by 5 Assault Regt, R.E., of 1 Assault Bde, R.E., the occasion being memorable as "the first operation in the European Theatre involving the use of Landing Vehicles Tracked by British formations". (AEF/3 Cdn Inf Div/C/F: C.O.H.Q. Bulletin Y/43, Amphibians in Operation "Switchback").

27. After training with the Buffaloes near Ghent, 9 Cdn Inf Bde Gp had embarked and moved in them to the northern extremity of the Ghent-Terneuzen Canal on 7-8 Oct. Damaged locks at Terneuzen caused delay and it was not until the night 8/9 Oct that the assault group formed up at the mouth of the canal. The landing on the north-western shore of the Braakman Inlet early on the following morning achieved tactical surprise, the German commander afterwards conceding that he had not anticipated the use of special equipment to achieve this end. (Conversation with G.O.C. 64 German Inf Div). A spectacular feature of the operation was the use of smoke to

(1) The name commonly used at the time, the Savojaerds Flaet, refers not to the inlet itself, but to the shoal at its mouth.

blind enemy observation from the northern shores of the estuary. (AEF 45/First Cdn Army/C/F: Report on Smoke Screens, Sec III, 15 Jul).

28. Nevertheless, the enemy reacted quickly. Sporadic machine-gun fire opened up, and after daylight guns sited in the area of Flushing, and inland, began to shell the beaches and the returning Buffaloes. (Amphibians in "Switchback"). Yet the ferrying of troops and supplies went on, amphibious lorries, called Terrapins, being used to carry stores across the inlet. With the capture of Hoofdplaat, on the day following the assault, the success of the venture was assured. "From there on we had not much opportunity for other than a straight pounding attack, using lots of guns and biting off 1,000 or 2,000 yards of very difficult polder land each day. The progress was maddeningly slow, and the troops, always wet and cold, became tired and fed up with it. The contrast with the flag-waving, bouquet-throwing, cheering dash across France from Normandy must have been pretty tough for them." (AEF/2 Cdn Corps/K/F: Personal Diary of Brig N.E. Rodger, C. of S., 2 Cdn Corps, 29 Sep 44). But the effectiveness of the plan soon became apparent. The growing menace to the enemy's left flank had the inevitable result of weakening his desperate resistance along the Leopold Canal. Our next task was to link up the two bridgeheads and capture Breskens, the core of the German defences on the southern shore of the estuary.

29. The comparative ease with which a foothold had been gained on the enemy's side of the water as the result of the amphibious operation led to the decision to exploit with 8 Cdn Inf Bde, under Lt-Colonel T.C. Lewis (2) "The divisional axis was thus turned at right angles, for the main thrust was now to be made from the east, instead of from the south." (Operation "Switchback"). Thoroughly alarmed by these ominous developments, the enemy stiffened his resistance, and on 11-12 Oct there was very heavy fighting in the vicinity of Biervliet, the commander of 9 Cdn Inf Bde reporting that it "was the bitterest and heaviest his troops had yet experienced". But by 15 Oct, 8 Cdn Inf Bde succeeded in linking up with 10 Cdn Inf Bde which had forced its way between the southern tip of the inlet and the end of the Leopold Canal to capture Watervliet. (Ibid.).

30. The withdrawal of 4 Cdn Armd Div was made possible by bringing in 52 (Lowland) Division, recently arrived from the U.K. and trained for mountain warfare, and now to be committed in the flats of the Scheldt estuary below sea-level. On 16 Oct, 157 Inf Bde Gp of this division came under the command of Maj-General Spry for the purpose of relieving 10 Cdn Inf Bde along the southern bank of the canal and 7 Cdn Inf Bde in the original bridgehead. (AEF/3 Cdn Inf Div/C/I: Op Instr No. 3, Op "Switchback", 16 Oct 44).

31. By 19 Oct, the bridgeheads had been joined at St Kruis and Moershoofd, and the enemy's extended positions being thus rendered untenable, it became evident that he had been forced

(2) Lt-Colonel Lewis was killed on 17 Oct, command of the Brigade devolving successively upon Lt-Colonel P.C. Klaehn, and Brigadier J.A. Roberts.

to fall back to a shorter line following the main road south and west from Breskens through Schoondijke, Oostburg and Sluis and along the Sluis and Leopold Canals to the sea. It remained to reduce the defensive system narrowly based upon Breskens and Fort Frederik Hendrik.

32. The advantages to follow were set forth by Lt-General Simonds in his directive of 19 Oct.

This gives us the base and gun deployment areas to mount the assault on Walcheren Island, or a ferry assault against Zuid Beveland.

When we can site medium and heavy guns in this area, we may be able to destroy, or neutralize, hostile batteries on the north shore of the Estuary and thus enable the Navy to start mine sweeping in the mouth of the Scheldt.

(W.D., G.O.C.--in-C., First Cdn Army, Oct 44: Letter, Simonds to Foulkes, 19 Oct).

33. Although Maj-General Eberding said later that "he had never intended to defend Breskens itself in any great strength but rather to deny us the eastern approaches to the port" (Conversation with G.O.C., 64 German Inf Div) such interesting intelligence was unknown to us at the time, and full preparations were made to bring confusion to the garrison. The special assault equipment of 30 Brit Armd Bde was to be used; but a disastrous explosion on the eve of the attack seriously reduced the measure of this assistance. (Operation "Switchback"). Powerful aid from the R.A.F., however, was not lacking when the assault was begun by 9 Cdn Inf Bde on 21 Oct. "It was a notable day for air support; heavy bombers attacked Flushing, medium bombers launched an attack on the batteries at Cadzand, and fighter-bombers strafed Fort Frederik Hendrik. Altogether 232 fighter-bomber sorties were flown in support of the division! (Ibid.). Breskens fell on 22 Oct, Schoondijke on the following day. The capture of the fort on 25 Oct removed the last obstacle to our control of the southern shore and the long coastline of Walcheren Island and South Beveland was now exposed to amphibious attack across the estuary.

34. The breach made in the enemy's secondary line was soon exploited. On 25-26 Oct, 8 Cdn Inf Bde captured Oostburg, the importance of which appears in Maj-General Spry's record of his interview with Eberding:

I asked Gen Eberding if it had been his intention to hold Oostburg in strength as a hinge on which to swing his left flank NW by a series of delaying actions until he reached the area of the concentric dykes about Cadzand and Zuidzande. He replied that this was so, and he showed some amusement that our appreciations had coincided. He said that was why he had reinforced Oostburg but that his plan had been somewhat upset by the rapidity with which 7 Cdn Inf Bde struck westward from Breskens.

By 29 Oct, this swift advance had compelled the enemy to abandon Cadzand and on the same day Zuidzande fell to 8 Cdn Inf Bde. At this point, the progress on the right flank was delayed by the necessity of dealing with the coastal defences north-west of Cadzand.

The occupants had to be cut off and slowly extricated from their emplacements and bunkers; Crocodiles, which would have been of valuable assistance, could not be used over the sandy soil. The process of reducing them consumed several days, during which time 7 Cdn Inf Bde could not wholly join in the pursuit and final destruction of the main enemy body.

(Operation "Switchback").

35. That body, in the meantime, had retired behind the lesser Derivation Canal. The respite was brief. "The intention was now to gain a bridgehead over the lesser Derivation Canal, and, at this propitious moment, to break into the Knoeke area with 9 Cdn Inf Bde and finish the enemy off." (Ibid.). This consummation was virtually achieved on 1 Nov when our troops entered Knoeke and captured Maj-General Eberding, together with 2,500 of his men. Sluis was also taken. Fighting continued in the vicinity of Knoeke and Heyst until 2 Nov, but by the following morning, the operation had been completed. It is a notable fact that with the elimination of the enemy in this northern corner of the kingdom, Belgium became the first occupied country to be rid of the Germans.

36. The enemy's stubborn effort had cost him 64 Div and nearly 13,000 prisoners, yet it cannot be denied that he had made the most of the hard bargain forced upon him. For the port of Breskens and, more briefly, that of Terneuzen, had provided General Schwalbe, specially appointed for the purpose early in September after the defeat in Normandy, to evacuate the remnants of eight shattered divisions, and in sixteen days, according to his estimate, to bring back to safety on Walcheren some 65,000 men, 12 heavy and over 200 field and medium guns, 750 vehicles and nearly 1,000 horses. His fear that by a rapid advance we would cut off the Beveland isthmus was constant, although in such a case, he had planned to accept the long hazard of an evacuation through the canals of Schouwen and Overflakkee to Dordrecht and Rotterdam. But by 21 Sep the last tired columns of the Fifteenth Army had made the forty-five minutes' crossing to Flushing, and that part of Schwalbe's task was done. (AEF 45/First Cdn Army/L/F, Docket III: Special Interrogation Report, Gen der Inf Eugen-Felix Schwalbe, Comd 344 Inf Div, 719 Inf Div and 88 Corps). But the enemy did not fail to appreciate the importance of continuing to deny us access to Zeeland Flanders and its coast. As Lt-General Simonds wrote,

...From the beginning of this operation, the fighting had been bitter. Neither the terrain nor the weather were favourable. The low-lying fields were a honeycomb of polders, often flooded, affording scanty cover to attacking troops but enabling the defenders to dig in at the base of the dykes with comparative immunity from artillery fire. The enemy throughout had brought down heavy shelling and mortar fire upon our restricted lines of advance.

(AEF/First Cdn Army/C/E, Docket I: Report by Lt-Gen Simonds, 22 Nov 44).

37. Our own fire support had not been light, although in the later stages it was necessary to divert a considerable

weight of artillery to assist the operation against Walcheren. "The rate of ammunition expenditure, while enormous, was made necessary by the vastness of the enterprise. At no time was the weight of artillery in excess of the demands imposed on it." (Operation "Switchback"). A great contribution was made by the R.C.A.S.C. Supplies were brought to the forward troops with extreme difficulty.

Driving conditions were perhaps the poorest we have ever faced. Continued rain, heavy mud, slippery narrow roads added to which were deeply flooded ditches, making travel extremely hazardous and difficult. On one occasion an NCO i/c sec of vehs made a recce in a rowboat before continuing ahead.

(AEF/3 Cdn Inf Div/RCASC/C/F: War History: "Scheldt", Oct 44).

38. For 3 Cdn Inf Div "Switchback" represented the final act of the lengthy programme of clearing the infested Channel coast. It was a project in which the division had played a major part, in the siege and capture of fortresses to which its strength might at first appear unequal. The achievements of "Switchback" were not unworthy to rank with those of Boulogne, Calais, and Cap Gris Nez.

(Operation "Switchback").

THE CAPTURE OF SOUTH BEVELAND AND THE ATTACK ACROSS THE CAUSEWAY

39. The contemporaneous achievements of 2 Cdn Inf Div in clearing South Beveland were no less considerable. This operation had three phases. First, 4 Cdn Inf Bde was required to invade along the isthmus and 6 Cdn Inf Bde to secure bridgeheads over the formidable Beveland Canal, ("Vitality I"). Secondly, an amphibious assault was to be made across the Scheldt against the coast of South Beveland to the west of the canal, with the object of linking up with the force coming in from the east, ("Vitality II"). 5 Cdn Inf Bde was tentatively chosen for this undertaking. Thirdly, the advance was to be carried forward to capture the causeway leading on to Walcheren.

40. The first phase opened in miserable weather in the early hours of 24 Oct. The enemy's positions, strongly entrenched and well reinforced with concrete strongpoints, were hotly defended, but under heavy artillery concentrations 4 Cdn Inf Bde succeeded in gaining entry to the peninsula, and, to quote Lt-General Simonds, "notwithstanding the difficulties imposed by the narrow line of approach along the one main road and the minor road along the dykes to the south, an advance of two and a half miles was made". (Report by Lt-Gen Simonds, 22 Nov 44, para 24). By the end of the second day (25 Oct) the advance had been carried to positions near the hamlets of Krabbendijke and Gawege. (AEF/4 Cdn Inf Bde/C/D: Capture of South Beveland, account by Brig F.N. Cabeldu).. 6 Cdn Inf Bde then passed through for the assault across the Beveland Canal.

41. There were three possible routes: two through the locks located at the northern and southern ends of the Canal, and one in the centre, where

the main highway to Goes crossed the Canal. Both of the lock crossings presented possibilities of "jumping" them - that is, obtaining crossings before the enemy was able to destroy them - but, in any event, Brigadier Keebler was not prepared to miss losing command of the route along the main highway in the centre. Ultimately it was decided to make a simultaneous advance with three battalions, one in the direction of each of the above crossings. A magnificent effort was made by the men and all three battalions reached their allotted positions on the Canal by dawn 27 Oct.

(AEF/2 Cdn Inf Div/C/D: Capture of South Beveland, account by Brig R.H. Keebler, 11 Nov 44).

On the night 27/28 Oct the assault boats were launched and in spite of heavy counter-attacks a bridgehead was established along the main axis leading towards Goes, the picturesque capital of South Beveland. (AEF/6 Cdn Inf Bde/C/D: Crossing of the Beveland Canal 27/28 Oct 44, account by Lt-Col V. Stott, O.C., S. Sask R., 22 Nov 44). Bridging the three-hundred-foot canal was carried out despite heavy and accurate shelling. (Keebler, loc. cit.). 4 Cdn Inf Bde was immediately pushed through, 6 Cdn Inf Bde assuming responsibility for the defence of the lock gates. Had these been blown as the enemy had intended them to be, the incoming tide would have swept up the canal, poured through gaps cut in the dykes, and flooded the countryside in the path of our advance. (AEF/6 Cdn Inf Bde/C/D: Capture of South Beveland, account by Major R.L. Rutherford, 7 Nov 44).

42. In the meantime, during the early hours of 26 Oct, Operation "Vitality II" had been launched across the Scheldt against the enemy's exposed right flank with the intention of gaining a foothold on the peninsula between Hoedekenskerke and Molenberg. (AEF/156 Inf Bde/C/I, Docket III (C): Op Order No. 1, 24 Oct 44). As 5 Cdn Inf Bde was still committed at the entrance to South Beveland, it fell to 156 Inf Bde of 52 (L) Div to make the crossing, together with 1 Assault Brigade R.E. of "the ubiquitous and unique" 79 Armd Div. (3) As the landing had to be made in Buffaloes, the experience gained in the previous attack across the Brackman Inlet proved a useful guide. In the words of the naval officer who served as navigator, "the new operation, however, was more ambitious in that we had to cross the river instead of going along the shore, and this time we had about eight miles to go from Terneuzen to near Hoedekenskerke - instead of the previous five". (AEF/156 Inf Bde/C/D: Assault across the Scheldt 26 Oct, as seen by Lt Cdr R.D. Franks, R.N.). Again special equipment was employed on a large scale. "176 LVTs were used for the initial assault and follow up, 80 under command 5 Assault Regiment RE, and 96 under command 11 R Tks. In addition, 25 LCAs were available and 27 Terrapins were used in the build-up and maintenance programme." (21 Army Gp Report). Smoke

(3) Thus referred to later by Gen Crerar (W.D., G.O.C.-in-C., First Cdn Army, Feb 45: Appx 3 (a)).

screens were similarly laid to baffle the enemy's observers on the shore. (Report on Smoke Screens, Sec IV). The incursion of the 'Mountain Bde' over the mud flats was successful, a strong counter-attack from the north was repulsed and our lodgement enlarged during the day to include Oudelande. "The enemy indulged in spasmodic rifle and MG fire during the night and there was some infiltration, but the bridgehead was firmly in our hands." (21 Army Gp Report).

43. By 28 Oct, elements of 157 Inf Bde had also been ferried over the estuary and rapid progress was made towards clearing the southern part of the peninsula. As Lt-General Simonds had anticipated, this waterborne distraction weakened the enemy's resistance to the Canadian advance westward from the canal. Reconnaissance elements of 2 Cdn Inf Div, together with 4 Cdn Inf Bde, were thus enabled to push on to meet 156 Inf Bde north of Hoedekenskerke on 29 Oct. The technique of Operation "Switchback" had been repeated with like success.

44. On the same day, happily without bombardment, Goes fell to 5 Cdn Inf Bde, our troops meeting with an enthusiastic welcome from the inhabitants. Meanwhile, the divisional reconnaissance swept through the northern parts of the peninsula. Discovering Dutch barges, used to evacuate troops to North Beveland, these elements showed considerable initiative by improvising a crossing and capturing the island, together with 455 prisoners. (Keefler, loc. cit.; AEF/8 Cdn Recce Regt/C/Ds: Capture of North Beveland (31 Oct - 2 Nov 44), account by Maj C.R.H. Porteous, O.C., 27 Nov 44). On the Canadian left flank, 4 Cdn Inf Bde, after driving swiftly westwards by night on 28/29 Oct and picking up a number of the enemy found sleeping along the road, passed through Gravenpolder, Nisse and Nieuwdorp to reach the edge of the channel between the peninsula and Walcheren on the morning of 30 Oct. (Cabeldu, loc. cit.). In the afternoon, 4 Cdn Inf Bde approached the causeway to the island, only to be at once pinned down by enemy fire and to discover that the whole area was mined. Under cover of darkness, however, the brigade attacked and drove the last of the enemy back from the eastern end of the causeway. By the morning (31 Oct) South Beveland was ours.

45. Even at high tide there was not a sufficient depth of water covering the muddy floor of the channel to enable an attack to be made across it in storm-boats; at low tide small tracked amphibians could not surmount the many runnels; and most of the Buffaloes had already been withdrawn for the assault across the estuary. The only access to Walcheren by land lay across the causeway. The task of 5 Cdn Inf Bde to force an entry was thus a bitter one, and along that narrow avenue of fire severe casualties were suffered, in some instances company strengths being reduced to barely a score. (Ibid.). The Calg Highrs managed briefly to gain a foothold on the island, only to lose it again in the face of enemy counter-attack and heavy machine-gun fire; but on 2 Nov, after fierce fighting, a narrow lodgement was effected by R. de Mais and taken over by 157 Inf Bde of 52 (L) Div. (AEF/5 Cdn Inf Bde/C/D, Folio 1: Personal Narratives).

46. After being continuously engaged since leaving Dieppe on 6 Sep, 2 Cdn Inf Div were withdrawn to rest south of Antwerp.

...In Brigadier Keebler's opinion, the undoubted success of the advance made by 2 Cdn Inf Div could be attributed entirely to the enthusiastic effort on the part of the troops, who seemed to be aware of the urgency of the task, and who appreciated that the enemy had been confused. There was never any hesitation to take bold risks in striking deeply into the enemy positions.

In the period from 23 Oct to 3 Nov, covering the capture of Zuid Beveland Peninsula and the initial attack along the causeway to Walcheren Island, 2 Cdn Inf Div captured a total of 14 officers and 2467 O.Rs. During the same period, the casualties of the Division were 64 officers and 932 O.Rs. The preliminary operations, leading up to the advance along the peninsula, had actually commenced on 29 Sep, when 2 Cdn Inf Div crossed the Antwerp-Turnhout Canal. During the whole period, from that date to 3 Nov, 2 Cdn Inf Div captured more than 5,200 P.W. The divisional casualties during this same period were 207 officers and 3443 O.Rs. These figures gave a clear indication of the severe fighting which the division had encountered.

(Keebler, loc. cit.)

THE ASSAULT ON WALCHEREN

47. By the end of October sufficient progress had been made over the sodden lowlands on either side of the estuary to enable these operations, so persistently and ingeniously pursued, to be brought to a climax in the amphibious assault against Walcheren. But while the attention of commanders had been focussed and the weight of resources concentrated on the narrow waters of the Scheldt, the enemy had also been continuously engaged on the mainland, where on the Army's right flank he was being pressed steadily back upon the Maas.

Still resisting strongly on his right, the enemy was now pulling in his centre, and had thus succeeded in falling back without loss of control to the line through Bergen, Roosendaal and Breda. Between him and the Maas the polder-land of southwestern Holland offered better possibilities for defence. His new line, however, did not hold for long. By 29 Oct the Poles had thrust into Breda and the lateral roads were cut. On the left the 4th Canadian Armoured Division met with stiff opposition from the paratroops who were disputing the Roosendaal-Bergen Canal with their usual tenacity...

(Lt-Gen Simonds' Report, 22 Nov 44).

48. As long as the Germans held Walcheren, however, their great rearguard action would continue to be powerfully effective and our further progress towards the Rhine and Ruhr held up through lack of a port. For the passage of the Scheldt

would remain closed to shipping until the heavy coastal defences on the island, like those at Westkapelle - described as "some of the strongest defences in the world" - had been destroyed or captured. (Hist Sec file C.O.H.Q./Y/3: C.O.H.Q. Bulletin Y/47, Apr 45: Combined Operations against Walcheren).

...The West and South sides of the island were protected by underwater obstacles, wire and infantry positions on the dykes and dunes, with gun batteries in support behind. Flushing had a perimeter defence system, including two anti-tank ditches. The strong points on the SW coast, as far North as Westkapelle, were fairly heavily fortified, though less heavily than those at Flushing. It was reported that the beaches and dunes, and their exits, were thoroughly mined.

(21 Army Gp Report).

Intelligence indicated further that no fewer than eighteen batteries covered the approaches from the sea. The strength of the garrison was estimated as between 6,000 and 10,000 men, mostly from 70 Inf Div.

49. The undoubted strength of the fortress was subject, however, to one possible limitation. It was observed that the greater proportion of the land surface of Walcheren lay below sea level, the life and economy of the island being made possible by its broad and ancient dykes. Lt-General Simonds appreciated that if these dykes could be cut, the salt water would flow in and flood the interior, thus isolating and demoralizing the enemy and enabling our troops to take full advantage of their amphibians. It was argued for days beforehand, however, whether the island would flood quickly enough if the dykes were breached, or even, in view of their strength, whether an attempt to breach them by bombing was likely to prove to be a practical proposition. The experts were not unanimous, many of them being either sceptical or definitely opposed. No part of the island's perimeter was more formidable than the dyke at Westkapelle. Originally built in the fifteenth century and compact with age, this great work had been reconstructed and extended late in the nineteenth. At its base it was three hundred and thirty feet wide and it stood at an average height above high water level of sixteen feet. Nevertheless, "by applying sound, basic common sense", Lt-General Simonds had "refuted the theoretical experts and persuaded the Army Commander that we had little to lose by trying and a great deal to gain". (AEF 45/2 Cdn Corps/K/F, Docket III: Personal Diary of Brig N.E. Rodger, 29 Sep 44).

50. The attempt was made on 3 Oct at Westkapelle. That evening the sea was observed to be flowing in through a gap seventy-five yards wide. "The ultimate effect of this and subsequent attacks was to face the Germans with a situation which grew rapidly more serious." (Lt-Gen Simonds' Report). The required width of the breach at Westkapelle was three hundred yards; the width eventually attained was three hundred and eighty. (21 Army Gp Report). New gaps were opened at Nolle and Veere, and a fourth at Remmekens. "Substantial portions of the prepared defences were flooded. The troops remaining on the island could hold only a limited number of positions in isolation on the dunes and dykes." (Lt-General Simonds' Report). "The reduction of this fortress", Field-

Marshal Montgomery said afterwards, "presented many novel problems. These were overcome principally by very remarkable precision bombing by Bomber Command, which breached the dykes and submerged a large part of the island." (Journal of the Royal United Service Institution, November 1945, Vol. C, No. 560, p. 438). Air photographs showed that on 21 Oct the only dry area of any size lay at the eastern end of the island; Flushing and Middelburg had become islands themselves. (21 Army Gp Report). In addition, between 11 and 31 Oct Bomber Command flew nearly nine hundred and fifty sorties and dropped nearly five thousand tons of bombs on other targets. During the four days preceding the landings Spitfires and Typhoons flew over eight hundred sorties against gun-positions and radar sites. (21 Army Gp Report). By the end of the month it could be said that for the first time in history an island had been "sunk" by air power, an expedient which, however, terrible in its effect upon the civil population, left the wretched garrison with stomach enough for only a week's fight after the amphibious assaults went in on 1 Nov.

51. These were to be made on the same morning from Breskens into Flushing and from Ostend through the gap at Westkapelle. The military component comprised 155 Inf Bde of 52 (L) Div and 4 S.S. Bde and attached troops, including elements of the R.C.A.M.C. The urgency of the situation, the uncertainties involved, the decisions made, and the resultant action gave rise to a statement in the House of Commons by Mr A.V. Alexander, First Lord of the Admiralty.

In view of the vital need to clear the Scheldt as early as possible, General Simonds, commanding the 1st Canadian Army, decided to put in the Breskens-Flushing attack on November 1, by which time our troops would be on South Beveland causeway, whether or not the Westkapelle attack, which would be very dependent on the weather, could go in. Weather prospects for the latter were unfavourable for air support on October 31, but sea conditions were not too bad. In view of the unreliability of meteorological forecasts at this time of the year, and of the great advantages to be gained from assaulting from three directions simultaneously, Admiral Ramsay and General Simonds decided to sail the Westkapelle force from Ostend and to leave the final decision whether to assault or not to the two force commanders, Captain A.F. Pugsley, Royal Navy, and Brigadier B.W. Leicester, Royal Marines. Conditions next morning were generally more favourable than expected, but all aircraft were reported grounded owing to fog. With full knowledge that the assault troops would initially lack close air support, and that the bombardment squadron composed of H.M.S. Warspite, Erebus, and Roberts would have no air spotting, they decided to go on with the attack in view of the paramount advantages to be gained by simultaneous assaults.

(The Times, 16 Nov 44).

52. Events on a wider front, affecting both 21 and 12 Army Groups, placed further limitations on our capacity to bring down the full weight of support as originally expected. The following notes written by Brigadier Churchill Mann, Chief of Staff at Army Headquarters, are suggestive.

While we were busy clearing the Scheldt prior to assaulting Walcheren, Second British Army had had to deal with a counter thrust in the Meuse pocket to the West of Venlo. While this operation was done successfully, and did not unbalance us, it had the effect of diverting a proportion of our air effort and other resources. Farther to the South the thrust of the left wing of 12 US Army Group, directed on Cologne, was NOT being developed with the power which was desirable owing to the long front over which that Army Group now stretched, and due also to the fact that certain US formations had had to be allotted temporarily to 21 Army Group.

The assault on Walcheren took place on 1 November as planned but for the reasons just mentioned, very much less preliminary bombing of the heavy batteries had actually been carried out than was intended, and although there was no question that it was essential to proceed with the operation, the result was that the Royal Navy's losses in landing craft, and in their crews, largely Royal Marines, were very heavy indeed. Fortunately, at a critical moment in the landing operation, the weather, which had not permitted close tactical air support, lifted sufficiently to allow some Typhoon attacks to be pressed home successfully, enabling the landings in the end to succeed.

(Mann, loc. cit.).

53. The landing of 4 Commando at Flushing (Operation "Infatuate I") was carried out as planned before daylight and without casualties, artillery support being given from the other side of the estuary by five field and two medium regiments hastily got into position in the neighbourhood of Breskens. The invaders were soon in position along the water-front, and although considerable opposition developed, 155 Inf Bde, under cover of smoke and the command of Brigadier J.F.S. McLaren, followed them in during the day, though the landing craft and crews which brought them in frequently came under heavy fire. "The situation by nightfall was that the main town area was firmly in our hands, and that the possibility of reinforcement by the enemy was stopped, though some strong points still remained to be mopped up." (C.O.H.Q. Report as above, para 48).

54. The action at Westkapelle (Operation "Infatuate II") was thus described to the House of Commons by the First Lord of the Admiralty.

Some three and half hours later, in daylight, the time of assault being dependent on tidal conditions, the Westkapelle force approached the coast and when close inshore was heavily engaged by the coast defences, all known batteries going into action against them. The gun support squadron composed of converted landing-craft of various types manned by Bluejackets and Marines, under command of Commander K.A. Sellar, Royal Navy, stood close inshore and engaged these batteries at point-blank range, while tank-landing craft carrying the Royal Marine Commandos (4 S.S. Bde less 4 Commando) beached in succession and discharged their vehicles.

This process was slow as they could only beach two at a time in the gap in the dyke previously breached by the R.A.F. By their determination and gallantry the landing-craft support squadron drew most of the enemy's fire, and the Marine Commandos were landed successfully without heavy casualties. Once ashore, however, Commandos came up against tough opposition at nearly all the enemy batteries and strong points, which they cleared in succession with utmost resolution. As the weather improved during the forenoon close air support was afforded by the R.A.F. in increasing degree and air spotting became available to the bombarding squadron during the afternoon.

The gallantry and determination of landing craft crews and of the Royal Marine Commandos were equalled by that of the naval beach party, which had to work under gun and mortar fire throughout D Day, and for a large proportion of D-plus one, during which enemy fire could still be brought to bear on the gap in the dyke. Difficulties were experienced in landing stores for the force because of this, and later the weather worsened and prevented supply by sea. Stores were dropped by air on D-plus four, and these and rations captured from the enemy enabled the Commandos to complete the clearance of the western half of the island.

...The great success of these operations, which had perforce to be undertaken under difficult and somewhat unfavourable conditions against a desperate enemy, was not achieved without relatively heavy casualties to craft and personnel. Of the total of 25 support craft engaged, nine were sunk and eight damaged, and of their crews 172 officers and men were killed and 200 wounded. Of 47 other major landing craft engaged, four were sunk and others damaged. The casualties in these craft and in the attack on Flushing were 21 officers and men killed and missing, 81 wounded. The Royal Marine Commandos suffered 37 officers and men killed, 77 missing, 201 wounded.

(The Times, 16 Nov 44).

55. Once ashore, the Commandos were not slow in exacting toll for toll. In a rapid advance they reached and captured all but the eastern outskirts of Domburg by the evening of the first day, and in the other direction, towards Flushing, they swept along the coast to take Zoutelande, and, after silencing the batteries and strong points which held out grimly on the dunes, reached the gap at Nolle on 2 Nov. The advance was the more remarkable for the difficulty of the going.

It was seldom possible to get any form of transport, even Weasels, anywhere near the forward troops. All ammunition had to be carried forward by manpower over exhausting loose sand and steep dunes. At times even 3-inch mortars were maintained in action by this method.

(Combined Ops Report).

No time was lost, either, by 155 Inf Bde and 4 Commando who made steady progress in clearing the Hun out of Flushing. "The enemy was putting up a stubborn resistance from strong points and concrete pill-boxes. In the dock area, suicide squads lodged themselves in cranes and gantries, and from these points of vantage were able to pin the attackers." These simioid antics were discouraged by 3.7-inch guns appropriately re-assembled on the upper floors of houses by 452 Mountain Battery, R.A. (21 Army Gp Report). The situation at the eastern end of the island was also improved by an amphibious operation mounted by 156 Inf Bde across the Slooe Channel, south of the causeway, on the night 2/3 Nov. Here,

the salt marsh was a formidable obstacle, and at times the troops were well over their waists in liquid mud. Attempts to use Weasels were unavailing; they dug their prows into the far bank of the runnels and slewed round.

(Ibid.).

But the enterprise succeeded and the enemy was gradually forced back to the line of the canal between Veere and Middelburg.

THE PORT IS OPENED

56. On 5 Nov the Lowland Division reported that all the dry land with the exception of these two places was in our hands. (Personal Diary, Maj W.E.C. Harrison, 5 Nov 44). On the next day, while eight Buffaloes sufficed to cover the roads out of Middelburg, the German Commander, Lt-General Daser, was persuaded to surrender to a subaltern. "Antwerp", said Lt-General Simonds, "can now be used as a base for a knock-out blow against Germany." (AEF/2 Cdn Inf Div/C/D: Lecture by Lt-Gen Simonds, 6 Nov 44). Minesweepers were already at work and some three weeks later (28 Nov) a convoy entered the fairway, the first ship to tie up at the quay-side being the Canadian-built "Fort Catarauqui". (AEF 45/First Cdn Army/C/E: Gen Crerar's Despatch, 31 Jan 45).

57. Some part of the huge total of British and American imports pouring into France and Belgium and taxing the capacity of road and railway, truck and barge, from distant base to forward maintenance area, could now enter at a point within two hundred and fifty miles of Nijmegen or Aachen - that first great German city to fall into our hands before the onslaught of First U.S. Army on 28 Oct. Hitherto the pressure upon the extended line of our communications had been measured by the arrival every week by sea of some 48,000 men, between 9,000 and 10,000 tons of vehicles, more than 40,000 tons of petrol, and over 275,000 tons of supplies. (Hist Sec file C.O.S. Resume/44/4: War Cabinet: Chiefs of Staff Committee Weekly Resume (No. 274) 23-30 Nov 44). Three days after the arrival of the convoy, on 1 Dec 10,000 tons of stores were unloaded onto the docks at Antwerp. (21 Army Gp Report). This world port, by volume of seaborne freight comparable to Hamburg and considerably larger than Montreal, had now become a vent through which a vast tonnage was soon to flow in for the winter offensive.

58. In a message to Lt-General Simonds, Field-Marshal Montgomery said:

The operations were conducted under the most appalling conditions of ground - and water - and the advantage in these respects favoured the enemy. But in spite of great difficulties you slowly and relentlessly wore down the enemy resistance, drove him back, and captured great numbers of prisoners.

It has been a fine performance, and one that could have been carried out only by first class troops.

The Canadian Army is composed of troops from many different nations and countries. But the way in which you have all pulled together, and operated as one fighting machine, has been an inspiration to us all.

I congratulate you personally.

(W.D., G.O.C.-in-C., First Cdn Army, Nov 44: Appx "A").

In the view of the Supreme Commander when the war was over, in these operations First Cdn Army produced its greatest climax. "The end of Naziism", he said, "was in clear view when the first ship moved unmolested up the Scheldt." (Address by General Eisenhower to Canadian Club, Ottawa, 10 Jan 46).

59. Elsewhere on the Canadian Army front,

the pace of the general advance by the 21st Army Group quickened, the resistance of XV Army being now reduced to a decreasing semi-circle covering Willemstad and the Moerdijk bridges. On 5 Nov the 1st British Corps reached the Maas at four places and the enemy's perimeter south of the river was cut in two, although he still continued to make a vigorous stand to cover the withdrawal of his remaining elements to the north bank. For the final clearance south of the Maas, the 1st Polish Armoured and the 104th U.S. Divisions were directed on Moerdijk and the 49th British Infantry Division on Willemstad.

...The remnants of the enemy south of the Maas were soon liquidated... Willemstad fell on 7 Nov... On the following day the Poles reported that they eliminated the rearguards at Moerdijk.

The number of prisoners taken on First Canadian Army front during this phase of the operations from 1 Oct-8 Nov was 38,820. A further 2,223 were evacuated through medical channels. These additions brought the grand total of prisoners taken from 23 Jul through 8 Nov to 112,521. The enemy's losses in killed and wounded were correspondingly heavy.

(Lt-Gen Simonds' Report).

Our own casualties, including British and Allied, were reported by Lt-General Simonds as 703 officers and 12,170 other ranks, killed, wounded and missing. Of these, 355 officers and 6,012 other ranks were Canadians.

60. The Army's operations had been carried to a successful conclusion under the most difficult conditions of ground and weather, and against an enemy who exploited every defensive opportunity that offered. By flooding or saturating the areas in front of his positions, he was able to deny us all the advantages which we would normally possess in the offensive. He could concentrate his fire power on narrow fronts, keep his own positions concealed and dispersed, and make the most effective use of mines and obstacles. In the Breskens bridgehead, as in South Beveland and Walcheren, the approaches had to be made along single strips of road bordered by impassable fields and fully covered by the enemy's fire. Hence, by distracting the enemy's attention and drawing off his forces, the assault landings were of decisive importance in bringing this phase to an earlier conclusion than would otherwise have been possible. The invaluable support provided by the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force gave further demonstration of the effectiveness of combined operations. The persistence and determination of all troops under command in wearing down the enemy were worthy of the high commendation bestowed on them by the C.-in-C.

(Ibid.).

61. The C.-in-C. 21 Army Group, already busy considering re-grouping for the next major battle which would precede the capture of the Ruhr, intended "to have the Second British Army facing east along the Meuse with its left about Middelaar, whilst First Canadian Army faced east and north from the river at that point through the Nijmegen bridgehead to the sea at Walcheren". (Gen Crerar's Despatch, 31 Jan 45). These new responsibilities in the salient and along the Maas were assumed on 9 Nov.

62. Most of the material for this report was originally compiled by Captain T.M. Hunter, R.C.A. It has been revised by Lt-Colonel W.E.C. Harrison, General List.

W.E.C. Harrison
for (C.P. Stacey) Colonel,
Director Historical Section.

APPENDIX "A"

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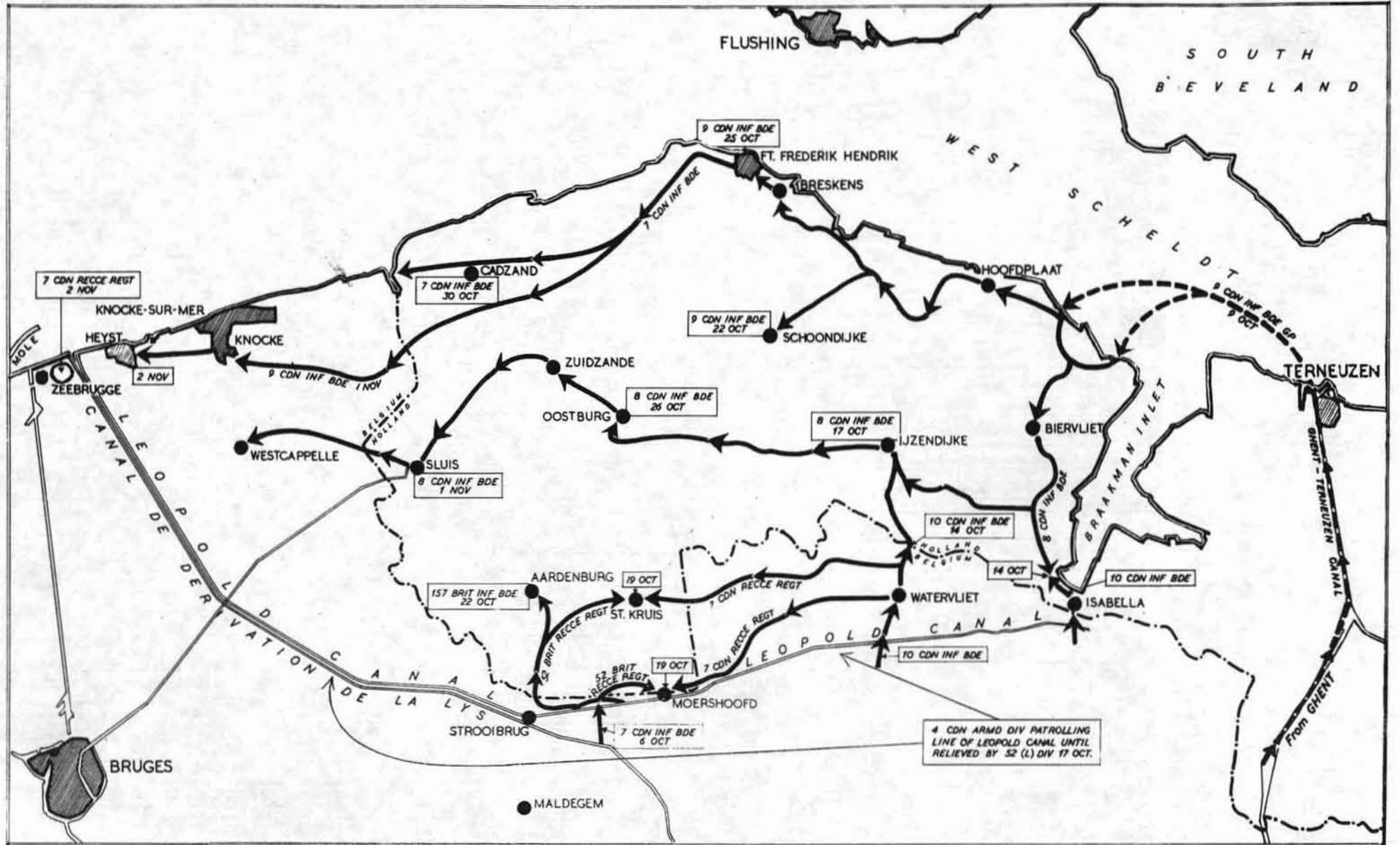
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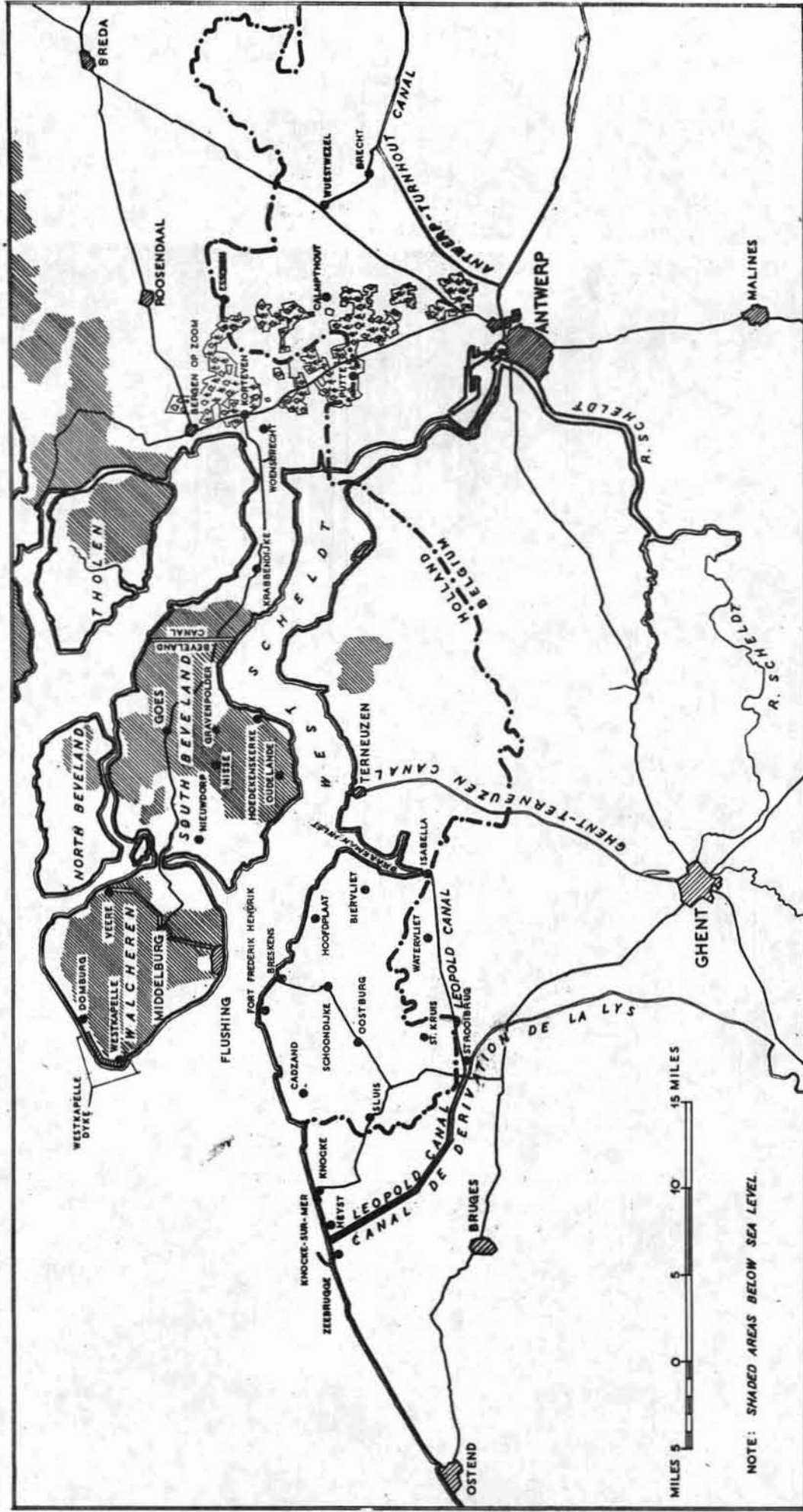
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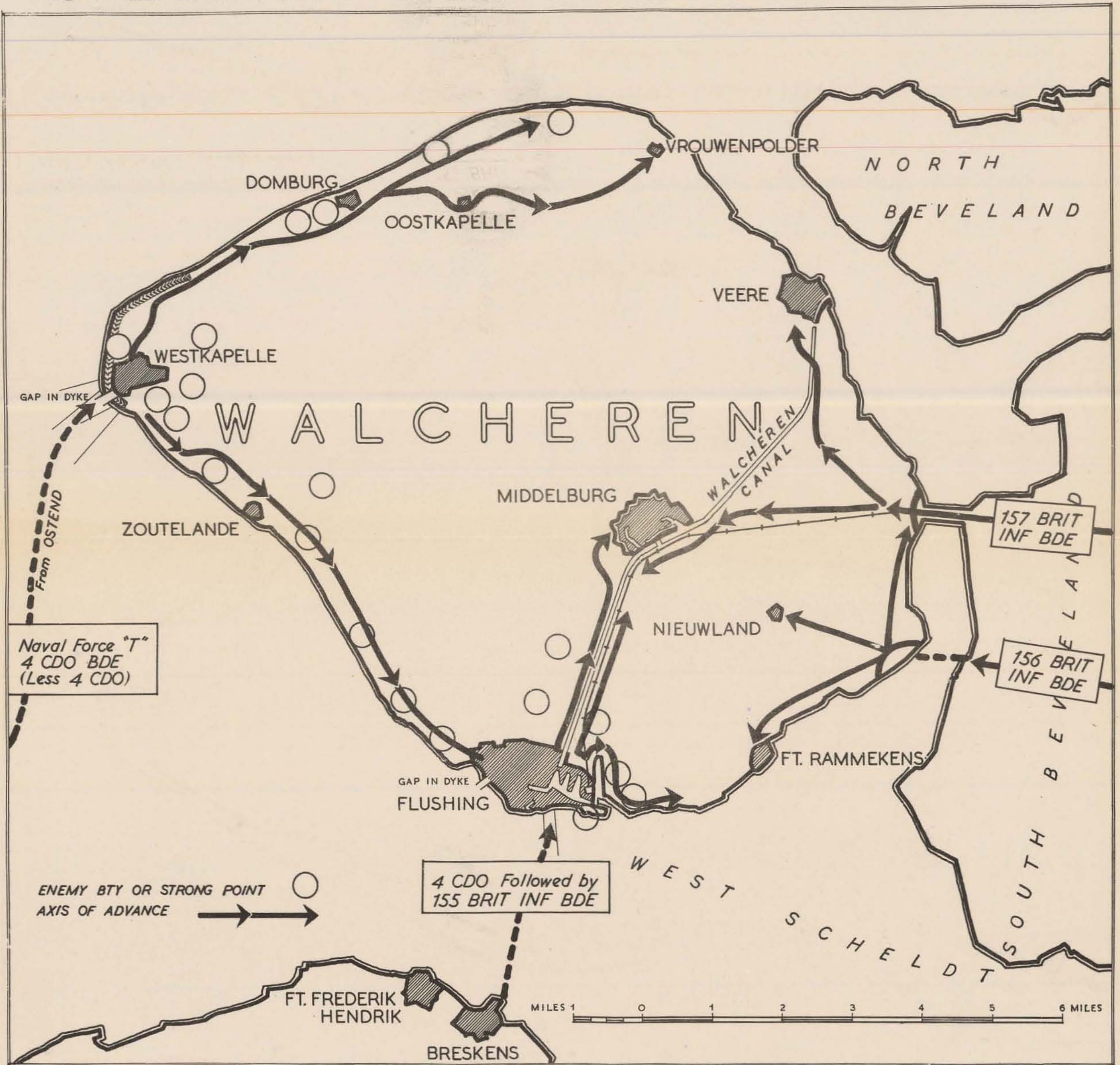
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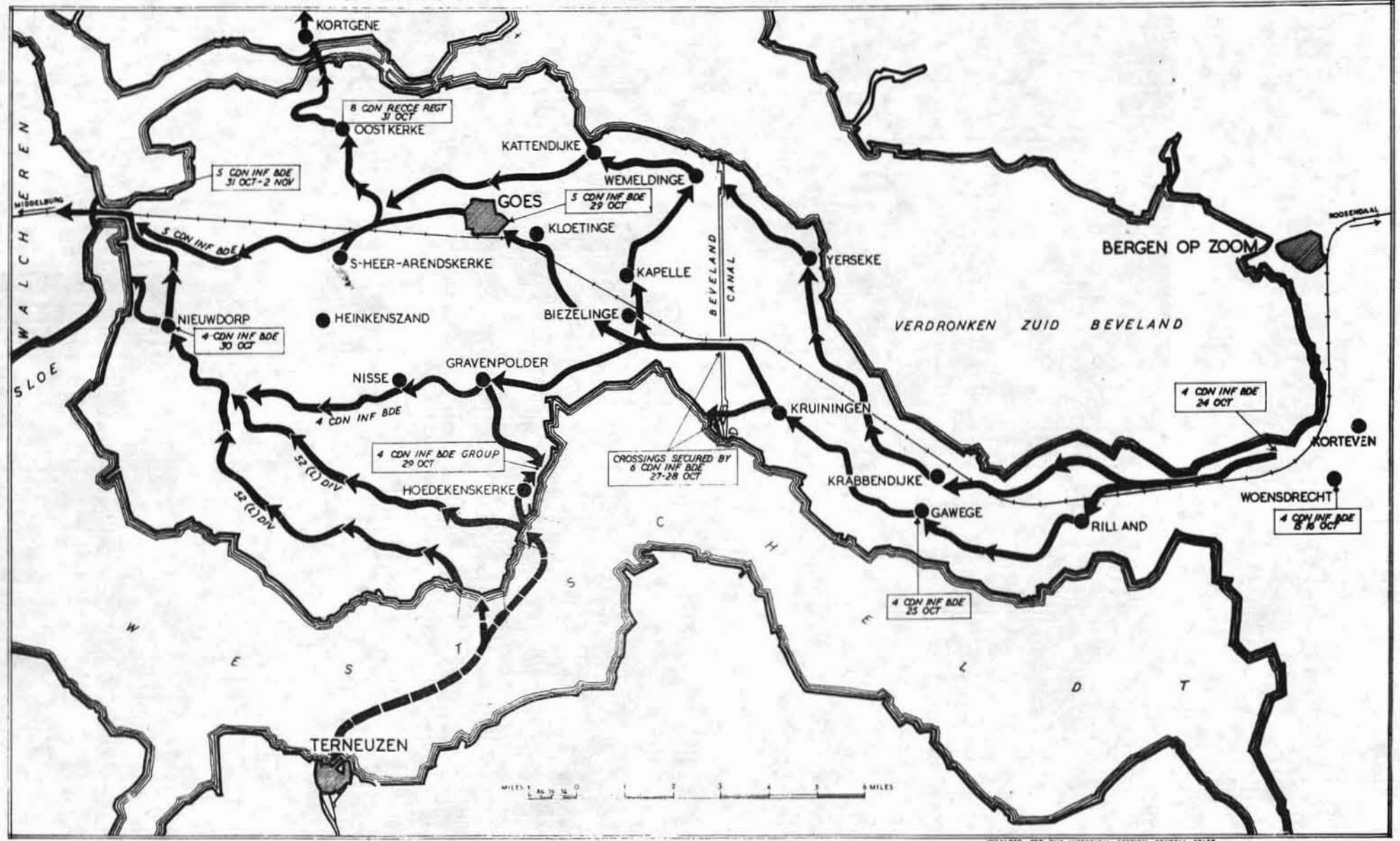
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