

were all able to attend a CO's cocktail party — "the first time all the officers of the battalion were together in an officers' mess since coming to France," reported the War Diary.

The occasion served to acquaint the officers with one another, as there have been so many changes in officer personnel since the battalion has been in action . . . It was felt that the evening was a success by making the junior officers feel at home and become acquainted with the older officers.

The RHLI went back into the line December 1, relieving the Fusiliers Mont-Royal in the Mook area of 6th Brigade's sector. The new positions were in a neck of woods strewn with refuse and old equipment and enemy dead that had lain unburied for weeks. There was also mud and a great deal of water about. Drivers of the newly issued amphibious Weasels argued whether they should follow Admiralty Regulations or rules of the road! A Company had six men wounded and one killed moving into their new area and the inevitable trickle of casualties that marked life in the front line resumed.

Once again Division was clamouring for a prisoner. Lieutenant Harry Oliver went out the next night with Sergeant Herb Prince and Privates J. Y. Leroux and E. Payne. With faces blackened, they inched across the swampy ground toward the enemy positions on the edge of the Reichwald. It was a night of full moon, and fluffy white clouds raced across a bright sky. The patrol moved toward a haystack, the last bit of good cover before crossing the dangerous ground at the edge of the forest. Prince led, sounding two thumps of his fist on the ground as a signal to move ahead, one to stop. Twenty feet from the stack, and just as the moon slipped behind a cloud, he heard a rustle of hay. He pounded once, and wriggled forward alone. "Mickey", he challenged, half-expecting to hear the friendly counter-sign "Mouse". Instead there was silence.

"I then said 'Put up your hands' in German," Prince recalled. There was no reply, and the patrol rushed the haystack, expecting momentarily the heart-stopping stutter of automatic fire or the blast of a grenade. Then the moon slipped from behind the cloud as quietly as it had hidden itself, and revealed a lone German in front of the stack. Oliver seized him, and Leroux and Payne went around one side of the stack while Prince took the other. They returned with two Schmeisser-carrying and obviously frightened Germans of the 3rd Company 1st Battalion, 1224 Grenadier Regiment, 190th Division.

Whitaker, of course, was overjoyed by this turn of events. The patrol was summoned to the CO's dug-out, a bottle of rum was broken out to celebrate the capture of Division's first prisoners in some time, and the promised Paris leaves were granted.

Prince later had to abandon his newly-acquired Schmeisser and the US Army helmet he wore. He liked the rapid-firing weapon better than his own issue, and claimed that the American headwear provided better protection. But on subsequent patrols the distinctive fire of the Schmeisser and bucket-like silhouette of his helmet often drew "friendly" fire on his patrol, and he gave them up before the official order came through.

On December 6 a "patrol reception centre" was opened in Mook. Despite the many advantages it offered, however, it was not besieged by customers. The Diary reported that:

The centre offers baths, food, beds and recreation to men returning from patrols. These men are taken back at night after these patrols as a reward. The men of the unit who have gone there speak highly of it and return next day to their companies flaunting in the faces of their comrades (a) a clean skin (b) clean heavy winter underwear, towels, soap, socks (c) chocolate and things supplied by Auxiliary Services. In spite of (a) (b) and (c) there has been no line up on the company rosters for patrol work.

Snow fell at the end of the first week of December, the first that the unit had seen in Holland. It provided a pleasant change of scenery and perhaps some thoughts of home, but it also made it much more difficult to keep positions hidden from the enemy's view. Patrols laid on for that night — December 9 — were cancelled due to the snow and the battalion had more time to devote to the endless discussion of the conscription issue.

On November 1, 1944, General McNaughton — who believed that compulsory overseas service was not necessary — had replaced as Minister of National Defence, Colonel J. L. Ralston, who believed that it was. But when he had accepted office McNaughton had been out of the politico-military mainstream for nearly a year, and it had been a most significant year. Before that he had been commanding the army in England, and he had never really been in touch with the home army since he had left Canada in 1939. He did not understand the "zombie" mentality and the complex reasoning that had led so many men to refuse to volunteer for overseas service. But he was soon put in touch with reality. On November 10 he appealed

for conscripts to volunteer for General Service, but a mere 280 men transferred to GS engagements in the following week. By November 22 McNaughton, too, was convinced that only conscription would produce the necessary reinforcements, and the next day an Order in Council authorized the shipping of 16,000 conscripts to "operational theatres". The week that followed saw a series of bitter debates in the House of Commons, a mutiny at Terrace, B.C., and a great deal of repetitious abuse of both zombies and anti-conscriptionist politicians by the men overseas. The War Diary reported the Rileys' attitudes in some detail.

The current topic of conversation among the officers and men of the unit is the political situation in Canada. The whole 'Zombie' question has been in the hair of the men overseas ever since it was first conceived and now it seems to be rubbed well into the hair of certain members of the cabinet of the Canadian government — namely Messrs. W. L. M. King, Ralston and Power — so much so that it is reported that it may be the cause of the Liberal party splitting from stem to gudgeon and the government's overthrow on a want of confidence motion. The comments from the men are unanimous on the subject and can be stated fairly briefly:

(A) That at this crucial stage of the war when every last ounce of energy is required, it is no time to play politics on the 'Zombie' question; that they should be sent overseas immediately where they are required and that the government would gain much in prestige if it took the strong hand now.

(B) That the Canadian Army overseas is more or less a pawn of the government which, if the war had been over by 1945 (sic), would have shone in the reflected glory which the Canadian Army achieved. However, the nice but inaccurate calculations of war's end and the scraping of the pan for reinforcements from other arms to build up infantry units as the result of stop-gap governmental tactics, has disgusted the average soldier. He considers all the verbiage which has been flying about "volunteer army" utter poppycock and dryly comments that nothing else in Canada is on a voluntary basis, so why should the most important thing, the Canadian Army, still be on that basis.

(C) Because of a dearth of reinforcements in October and November and the first part of December, the soldier in the line knows that he works that much harder, is exposed to danger longer, gets sick and exhausted, and after a time can only make half-efforts. He compares his total effort of the previous months with the weak effort of the government in obtaining reinforcements and gets sick at heart, if not at his stomach.

(D) Everyone seems to be resigning, according to the press.

First, Mr. Ralston, next his deputy, then follows Lt.-Gen. Stuart, Chief of Staff Overseas, then Mr. Power, and all because they don't like their jobs. Says Johnny Canuck: 'I'm not in love with mine either! How far can this resigning business go?'

(E) There was great speculation about Gen. McNaughton's appointment vice Mr. Ralston. 'Now watch the Zombies come.' And were we ever fooled? Gen. McNaughton is reported to agree with the Prime Minister and doesn't want to mix up the Zombies with the 'volunteer army,' and all is going to be well, and the reinforcements as well as Christmas will be coming. But now the picture has changed again! Sixteen thousand Zombies are to be sent overseas as the reinforcements did not come through as expected. Gosh, was that a decision, after all these years!

And now let's get on with the war. Thirty-two reinforcements arrived and were distributed to the rifle companies.

Two days later the Diary reported that the reinforcements in the last two drafts seemed to be well trained and of good calibre. One of these at least, was a really cool hand.

Most are soldiers re-allocated to infantry from other arms and many are tradesmen. Their feeling upon finding themselves in infantry seems to be one of awe. The shoemaker and storeman gaped pretty widely when welcomed by a Company Commander in a forward position and told 'See that house and haystack? Well, Jerry's there.'

'Fine', said the shoemaker. 'I'll just lean out of my slit and ask him if he wants to be SHOD!'

Snow had made patrolling more difficult, and the enemy had moved his outposts closer to the unit's Forward Defence Lines. Schu mines* were strewn everywhere, and sniping made operations even more hazardous. Mannequins were "requisitioned" from Nijmegen store-windows and, dressed appropriately, were used to entice enemy snipers to reveal their positions. On December 14 the pioneer platoon worked with the Engineers to clear mines about C and B Company positions. They also found the hitherto undiscovered bodies of three Americans and two Germans. Their throats had been cut, and they had lain unnoticed for weeks only yards from the RHLI positions in that dank limbo of brown grass and water, mud, snow and dark pines across from the Reichwald.

The 4th Brigade was relieved by the 5th on December 15 and the battalion completed its change-over with the Calgary Highlanders without a casualty (though the Calgarys suffered

* Wooden-cased anti-personnel mines that would blow a foot off and were not susceptible to electrical detectors that were normally used for clearing mines.

several) and moved to its rest area across the Maas at Cuijk. It seemed that nothing had changed; but the unit had been in these familiar surroundings for less than a day when it came under heavy shelling that cost it two casualties. Several houses and a brewery were destroyed along with the Black Watch's ammunition dump which was only a hundred yards from the RHLI Battalion Headquarters. Their stay in Cuijk lasted only eight days. It was enough. A man at the front was conditioned to unceasing vigil and inevitable losses, but to be shelled continually in a rest position made survival seem that much more uncertain and imposed different psychological stresses. The worst barrage fell on Support Company positions on December 17, killing Sergeant J. McFie and seriously wounding four of his anti-tank platoon who were playing cards with him at the time.



Major J. M. Pigott (left) receiving the Distinguished Service Order and CSM E. C. Knott, the Military Medal, from Field Marshal Montgomery at an investiture at Grave, Holland on December 18, 1944.

It was also at this time that CSM Gordie Booker announced at his Company Headquarters that he was very likely the unit's foremost wrestler, boxer and strong-man. "I got my issue that day," he recalled later, "and I guess that I should have left it alone. To start with, I got a bit fresh with a private named Norris — he was formerly a guard with Sarnia Imperials — and he thumped me. And then I got cocky at CHQ." What happened next got recorded in the War Diary.

A modest young officer, Lieutenant Ken Dugal, quietly suggested that perhaps heavyweight Booker could be restrained. He was, and Booker admits it very readily, and it soon got

around the unit how it was that Booker had a slightly swollen eye. The modest young officer, incidentally, was Canadian Golden Gloves champion in 1938, a finalist in 1939, and lightweight Canadian Army champ for 1940.

Nearly twenty years later Booker, a firefighter in Hamilton, recalled that he ended that evening "having a lot more respect for everyone. I had been thumped by a private and a lieutenant all in one night. But there was one bright spot. When I got out of CHQ — I had lost my cap and I was pretty bruised up — my driver said to me: 'Can't you fight anyone?' Well, I got him with one swing."

During the first two weeks of December, British and Canadian headquarters hammered out details of Operation *Veritable*, a drive through the Reichwald designed to clear the enemy from the west bank of the Rhine so that a large-scale attack could be launched into the heart of Germany. The British XXX Corps would launch the attack on January 1, 1945, and II Canadian Corps would secure the left flank to provide, in the second phase, a two-Corps front.

On December 20, Hitler's last desperate gamble — an attack through the Ardennes aimed at splitting the Allied armies by reaching the Channel coast — changed all that. Slashing through snowy forests with all the armour and infantry that could be mustered,* the full weight of the German General Staff's last brilliant stroke fell on the First United States Army. Bad weather kept Allied aircraft on the ground and German spearheads penetrated more than 50 miles from their start-lines. North of Ardennes, the enemy patrolled aggressively in the Reichwald sector. The 4th Brigade diarist recorded: "Everyone is very hopeful that the German has put his last reserves into this battle . . ."

The prospect of a quiet Christmas was not good. The RHLI went back into the line on a clear and cold December 23 relieving the South Saskatchewan Regiment of a reserve position in the Groesbeek woods. The possibility of diversionary attacks to distract attention from the Ardennes and prevent reserves from moving south caused another change the next day, as the 3rd Division took over the front line and 2nd Division moved into a mobile reserve, to be committed if the enemy attacked from north of the Maas.

Consequently, most of Christmas Day was spent moving

* This was the so-called 'Battle of the Bulge'.

over icy roads under a pale blue sky to Driehuizen, on the southern outskirts of Nijmegen. On Boxing Day, officers served a Christmas dinner with all its trimmings at staggered hours because there was not enough space for the battalion to eat together. Whitaker "once again" assured his men of a Christmas at home next year, reported the Diary, somewhat cynically. Christmas dinner at the officer's mess began at 1900 hours and it ended, according to the Diary, "with a long table being set up to provide a crap shooter's paradise."

The part I remember best (one officer recalled) is that some paymaster was rolling the bones with us. He had a big leather satchel filled with cash beside him, and kept dipping into it every time he needed money to bet. We just couldn't help wondering if it was someone's pay. Anyway, it must have been alright because we never heard of a court-martial and we all got our pay O.K.

Amid talk of possible German paratroop raids, the battalion moved northward again on December 29, from Driehuizen to Bokstel, just south of s'Hertogensbosch. The roads were icy and the same fog that was preventing Allied airpower from making itself felt in the Ardennes made the move slow and difficult. The next day, however, the weather began to improve. As it cleared, Allied fighter-bombers pounded at the German armour in the Ardennes and Hitler's last offensive effort in the west ground to a halt.

Within a week the Americans had recovered the ground they had lost and the threat of diversionary German attacks had petered out. The battalion returned to billets at Driehuizen before going to the Groesbeek sector as Brigade reserve on January 12. The watch on the Maas now wore white camouflage suits, a layer of snow having been added to the mud and water of the trenches. Perhaps believing that the weather might do what German arms could not, the enemy stepped up his propaganda and mortared the RHLI with leaflets asking Canadians to surrender while the Allies also dropped leaflets in the Reichwald sector promising the Germans a two-hour "open front" for those tired of war. Neither effort was successful. "I remember the night that some officers came up," Gordie Booker recalled, "and a public address system was set up on a tower for the Germans to listen to. Well, the next day, when they got a line on that tower, they tore it apart with machine-guns until it was barely waist-high."

The unit began a strenuous training and conditioning program for the coming offensive in the dark pine forests along the Rhine, with PT in the mornings followed by vigorous route marches and training in fieldcraft and on the ranges. Officers were tutored on platoon and company tactics and the War Diary reported that "Captain W. H. Burton, Captain J. D. Bell and Lieutenant G. R. Holder attended a lecture on insanity and bomb happiness at 11 Canadian Field Ambulance. Captain Burton emphatically states that there is NO significance in the fact that all are from Support Company." When there was time, the men went into Nijmegen for a hamburger at the Blue Diamond or a movie and dance at the Winter Garden.

For the first time since landing in France the battalion had no battle casualties during the month, although casualties due to sickness and accidents were particularly high. These casualties kept a constant flow of reinforcements coming to the unit which in turn meant constant training . . . The end of the month sees the battalion well up to strength, well trained and ready for any job that might be given it."

Sadly, however, the connection with the Hamilton area was becoming very tenuous in human terms. The Regimental affiliation was still there, and as strong as ever — perhaps even stronger for Hamilton was proud of its Regiment and the local newspapers always played up to the limit any stories about the RHLI. But the exigencies of war had played havoc in the ranks of the battalion of local men who had rallied to the colours in 1939. Since arriving in France in July the turnover due to casualties had been approximately a hundred per cent and the replacement system was not geared to accommodate local loyalties. Hamilton men still coaxed their way to the RHLI from time to time, but only two officers — Whitaker, CO, and Arrell, 2 i/c — and fifty other ranks were still serving from among the nearly 800 who had sailed from Halifax in July 1940.

Chapter 20

THE DRIVE TO THE RHINE

The RHLI's next major job was to clear the east bank of the Rhine. Operation *Veritable*, originally scheduled for January but delayed by the German attack in the Ardennes, had been re-scheduled for February 8, 1945.

General Crerar had planned *Veritable* in three phases. First the Reichwald was to be cleared, to the line Gennep-Asperden-Cleve; then another push east and southeast of the Reichwald and the capture of Weeze, Udem, Calcar and Emmerich; and finally a drive through the Hochwald to the Geldern-Xanten line. The initial assault and completion of the first phase would be the responsibility of XXX British Corps, although the 5th Brigade's Calgary Highlanders and Régiment de Maisonneuve would go in on the primary attack to secure the start line for the second phase. In the second and third phases II Canadian Corps would be committed on the British left, with the 2nd Division closest to the British and the 3rd Division coming in on the flooded Rhine flats, between the 2nd Division and the Rhine proper, as the front opened up. On February 2, the RHLI returned to the line, and, until the 8th, the Rileys dug, sand-bagged and camouflaged their position in preparation for the counter-mortaring that might well be the enemy's reaction to what would be the greatest Commonwealth artillery barrage of the war.

When the barrage fell on the Germans it came from the muzzles of more than a thousand guns, a third of them mediums, heavies and super-heavies. In five bombardments during the day an average weight of more than nine tons of shells was fired at each of 268 targets and this artillery support was augmented by four divisional "Pepper Pot" groups, that swept the front continuously with the fire of all available tank and anti-tank guns, Bofors anti-aircraft guns, heavy machine-guns and mortars. "Matresses" of rockets, salvoed from the projection of the 1st Canadian Rocket Battery, RCA, added a new element of the weight of firepower. As a result,

... The enemy's fire was negligible. From the area as viewed about 0900 hours, one got the impression that every haystack and house on the front was ablaze. Description is difficult, for even along the front that was visible from our OP, the whole

picture of destruction was too vast for conception.

At 0930 hours, the infantry moved forward onto the reverse slope to our front and formed up, followed by tanks, AVRE's and flails, while on the high ground to our left three of our tanks threw devastation into the few intact or suspect buildings still standing. In that area also, more masses of manpower moved forward into position. At one time during this preparation four enemy tanks or SP guns appeared on the horizon and tried to find out what was going on, but unfortunately (sic) an artillery rep spotted them and they soon beat a hasty retreat, leaving one of their number as the price of their folly. How badly our own armour's effort was affected by the deplorably muddy condition of the ground is not yet clear, but aside from two flails and one armoured car bogged down, the rest of the armour advanced beyond our line of vision without difficulty.

At 1030 hours the barrage lifted and the first wave of infantry advanced. Twelve minutes later the same performance took place (again) and by the third lift the whole attack had passed beyond our line of vision. All seemed (to be) going well and when the OP was vacated about 1130 hours the only casualties to our own troops appeared to be a few men who got too close to our own artillery.

On the 2nd Division's front the Calgary Highlanders and the Régiment de Maisonneuve, captured Den Heuvel and Wyler and opened the Nijmegen-Cleve road to just short of Kranenburg. This, in turn, opened the way for the 15th (Scottish) Division. At 1800 hours, 3rd Canadian Division moved to secure the left flank of the 2nd Canadian and 15th Scottish Divisions and clear the area between the Nijmegen-Cleve road and the Rhine. At the end of the day, XXX British Corps had broken through the enemy's strong outpost screen and closed with the main Siegfried Line defences. The 53rd (Welsh) Division was astride those defences, and the 51st (Highland) Division had penetrated deep into the south-west corner of the Reichwald. Six German battalions had been virtually destroyed.

On February 15, the 3rd Canadian Division took over the 15th Division's front, at the same time coming under command of II Canadian Corps. The next day, the 4th Brigade moved on to German soil over a quagmire of a road and arrived in the late afternoon of a miserable day at Cleve. During the previous night nearly 500 heavy bombers of Bomber Command had attacked Cleve and not a building had escaped the bombing and the morning artillery strike. The RHLI spent that night in dank and foul cellars, well protected from any hostile

action by immense piles of rubble.

On the next day, in a heavy mist under low clouds, the RHLI, the Essex Scottish and the Royal Regiment of Canada advanced astride the main Cleve-Calcar road, their axis for a February 18 attack through the 7th Brigade to take Calcar. The 7th Brigade, however, ran into trouble. The enemy in the Moyland Wood just west of the road became as difficult to rout as he had been in the Forêt de la Londe, seven months earlier.

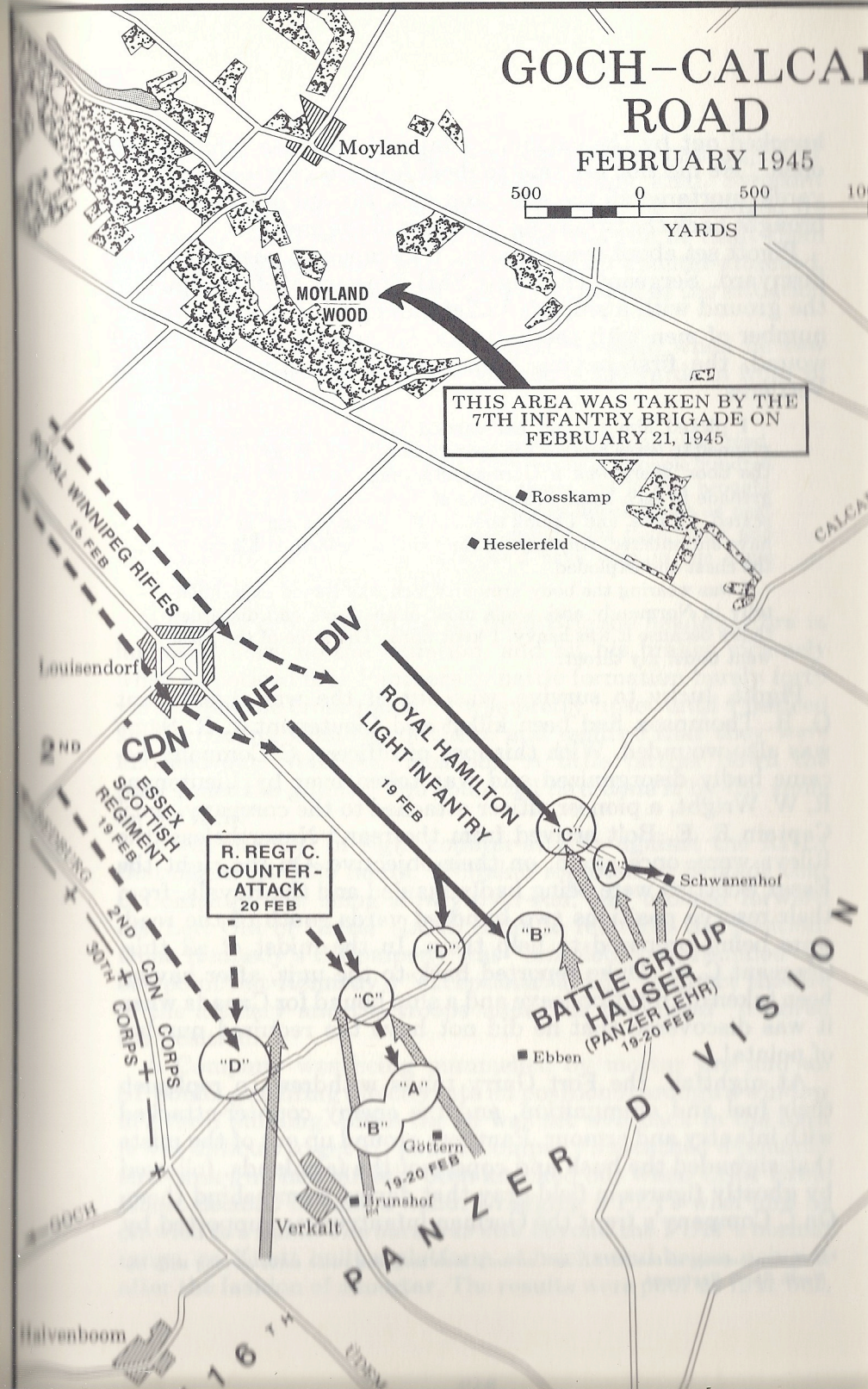
Corps headquarters decided that the 4th Brigade's attack should go in farther to the right, avoiding opposition in the Moyland sector and exploiting the open, undulating farmlands leading to the Goch-Calcar road. The objective was a high feature of land offering good observation just north-east of the road, and Brigadier Cabeldu placed the RHLI on the left and the Essex Scottish on the right for the attack, with the Royals in reserve. Each unit had the support of a squadron of the Fort Garry Horse.

The weather on the morning of February 19 was not ideal; it was cold with heavy clouds promising rain and denying the possibility of effective close air support. Vehicle movement would be difficult in the mud. But promptly at mid-day, the inexorable rumble of artillery announced the attack, and the Kangaroos set off with A and B Companies while C and D followed on foot to mop up. The Carrier platoon angled out on the flanks to provide support with Brens and flame-throwers, and Lieutenant Gordie Holder, its leader, was killed in the first slashing burst of fire from the German 88's.

The fighting was fierce (Joe Pigott recalled). The previous day the Winnipeg Rifles were given the assignment to take a section of the road. They were pretty badly smashed up. We walked to the start line over the bodies of the Rifles, which did nothing to improve the morale of my men.

We were following our barrage, but the Germans had a counter-barrage just 100 yards behind ours, and we were taking one hell of a licking. The 88's made it so hot for the Kangaroos that some of the companies were dropped short of their objective. We finally got there, but we had about fifty per cent casualties.

Corporal Art Kelly was one of the few NCOs still on their feet. He took command of the remnant of his platoon, re-organized them with the survivors of another, and pressed on to the objective, cleaning out a strong point manned by paratroopers en route. Later, after the new position had been consolidated, he spotted a Fort Garry tank that had been



knocked out by the enemy, its injured crewmen lying in the open. "He did not hesitate to dash forward over one hundred yards, mortared all the way, and with the aid of a companion brought back the two living members of the crew."

Pigott set about consolidating C Company's position near a farmyard. Sergeant (Acting CSM) Stewart Moffatt spun to the ground with a sniper's bullet through his jaw. As with a number of men with the battalion by now, it was his second wound, the first having been suffered on August 1, near Verrières.

I picked him up and half-carried him to a house where I planned to leave him for the bearers to pick up. When I opened the door, there was a German standing there with a stick-grenade in each hand. We stared at each other. He was pretty scared, I guess, and I think that if I had yelled at him he would have surrendered. Anyway, he flipped the grenade. It hit me on the chest and exploded.

I was wearing the body armour which was issued experimentally in Normandy and, while most of the boys had discarded theirs because it was heavy, I kept mine. The force of the blast went under my throat.

Pigott, lucky to survive, was out of the war. Lieutenant G. R. Thompson had been killed and Lieutenant J. R. Sams was also wounded. With this loss of officers, C Company became badly disorganized and was taken over by Lieutenant R. W. Wright, a pioneer officer attached to the company, until Captain R. E. Bolt arrived from the rear.* Nevertheless, the Rileys were, once again, on their objective. On the right the Essex Scottish were being badly mauled and the Royals, from their reserve positions two hundred yards south of the road, were being prepared to help them. In the midst of all this, Sergeant C. H. Dyke reported back to the unit, after having been taken off rotation leave and a ship bound for Canada when it was discovered that he did not have the required number of points!

At nightfall, the Fort Garry tanks withdrew to replenish their fuel and ammunition, and the enemy counter-attacked with infantry and armour. Panthers ground up out of the mists that shrouded the bush and copses of the farmlands, followed by ghostly figures in field-gray that darted from behind them. On C Company's front the German infantry was supported by

three tanks. Despite the fact that his platoon had no PIAT bombs left and no anti-tank support of any kind, Sergeant Robert J. McLelland "tenaciously refused to be dislodged by the enemy. With two men and one machine-gun he dealt them fearful punishment and when the battalion counter-attacked, the redoubtable sergeant was still in command of the situation in his area."

"It scared hell out of us," Froggett recalled, when he saw four Panthers emerge from a wood about 300 yards in front of his D Company positions.

My headquarters was in a house along the Goch-Calcar road, and I ran over to Battalion HQ, which was only a couple hundred yards away. There was an SP gun there, and it was brought over to the cross-roads. Those tanks were knocked out as neat as ten-pins. If they'd have swung around our right flank and cleared out our position there, we'd have been in the same trouble as the Essex Scottish.

Whitaker came barrelling up from Brigade headquarters in his jeep to size up the situation, and hit his brakes viciously when he noticed four Panthers in battle formation barely forty yards from the cross-roads. "I was pretty upset until I noticed smoke coming from one of them, and realized that they were knocked out" Whitaker recalled. "A little farther down the road I met the gunner. You could tell he'd done it by the smile on his face!"

It was the first of eight counter-attacks against the RHLLI that night. At 0135 hours, Whitaker reported to Brigade that C Company was being slowly over-run, and ordered forward his 'Left Out of Battle' (LOB) cadre to reinforce the position. Dunc Kennedy's B Company was "completely surrounded" at one point but Kennedy's "exceptional ability to direct the fire of the artillery and the troops under his command" restored the position.

A Company was being pummelled by mortar fire and an SP 88mm gun firing directly into its positions through a window in a farm building. Since the 88 was set well back in the barn it was difficult to get at, and A Company's attached 6-pounder anti-tank gun had already been knocked out when CSM Ernie Knott decided to take a hand. Dragging a PIAT with him he crawled to a flank. The barn was still beyond the PIAT's normal range, so Knott built a platform of bricks and began using it after the fashion of a mortar. The results were poor at first but,

*Bolt, a newcomer to the RHLLI, had already been wounded twice while serving with the North Shore Regiment.

by carefully adjusting the bricks after each shot he finally dropped the fourth bomb through the roof, silencing the gun. The forward platoons had run short of PIAT bombs and under covering fire from their armour German infantry reached the cottage that housed company headquarters. Private Allan MacDonald, the company jeep driver, blazed away with his Sten from a window "inflicting heavy casualties as they approached." After one officer and four other ranks in the cottage with him had been killed, MacDonald was severely wounded by a grenade thrown through the doorway behind him. Falling to the floor, he was kicked and turned over by the German soldiers who came into the room but he lay still and was left for dead until an RHLI counter-attack re-occupied the building. The counter-attack, across "five hundred yards of open country in the face of extremely heavy enemy shelling and machine-gun fire" was carried through by D Company, led by 'Froggy' Froggett.

Private Leo Sloat, of the Regimental Aid Post team was attached to the Company. The enemy's mortars were causing a steady stream of casualties and some of the wounded were lying on exposed ground under "extreme" fire. Sloat:

... made three separate trips to rescue wounded men and his absolute disregard for his own safety saved the lives of these soldiers. Later in the night, during another counter-attack, Private Sloat had his vehicle knocked out but commandeered another and carried on his relief work for many hours.

Then, on the morning of the 20th, with visibility down to four hundred yards, enemy tanks outflanked and cut in behind the unit's positions on the left. "The situation was critical", Whitaker reported. At 0630 hours another armoured and infantry assault was launched against A and B Companies in their battered positions near Ebben and Schwanenhof farmsteads. It was again beaten off, with a troop of Fort Garry Horse in support. Three Panthers were knocked out and during the day nearly a hundred prisoners passed through the RHLI lines on their way to the rear, some of them Panzer Lehr men and others from a parachute battalion. Captured documents indicated that the enemy had direct, unqualified orders to re-take the feature captured by the RHLI. Nevertheless, Whitaker's men not only held their ground but gradually began to extend it. On the right, the Royals had gone in to extricate the Essex Scottish and restore the right flank.

During the course of the day all the RHLI company positions were continually mortared and several counter-attacks were successfully beaten off with many enemy casualties. The remnants of Kennedy's B Company came under another strong attack at 1900 hours, mortared and shelled by SP guns as four tanks and a company of paratroopers moved in on them. Lieutenant D. W. Ashbury took out one enemy tank with a PIAT bomb,* slowing up the German assault, and Lieutenant Johnny Lawless led the Scout Platoon on what the War Diary described as "an amazing counter counter-attack", in behind the enemy. They dashed across a barnyard and, closing on farm houses, began hurling grenades and screaming like banshees. So sudden and brutal were they, the platoon returned with 50 prisoners and at least 25 Germans were killed. Lawless, injured slightly by shrapnel from one of his grenades, was the only casualty and after this setback the German efforts to retake this key ground slowly petered out. After nearly 48 hours of most bitter fighting the Rileys slept on their arms, still holding their ground. Whitaker, whose "inspiring leadership and great tenacity" had "restored situation after situation by cool and deliberate planning" was rewarded with a bar to the DSO he had won at Dieppe; Kennedy, whose company had borne the brunt of the battle, got an MC for his "devotion to duty and complete disregard for his own safety, an example to all those under his command." Knott was awarded a Bar to the MM he had won at Verrières and McLelland, Kelly, MacDonald and Sloat each got an MM for their work.

The 21st dawned fair and clear, ideal for close air support. A morning "sitrep" from Brigade reported that the RHLI and supporting armour had knocked out nine Panther tanks, three SP 88mm guns and two half-tracks, but there were still targets left for the deadly rocket-armed Typhoons of 2nd TAF. On the ground the situation seemed stabilized but was still far from quiet. Lieutenant W. V. Smith was killed while returning to his platoon position when the platoon was suddenly attacked. His men fought off the attack and "wrote off a large number of the enemy." Two troops of Fort Garry tanks were recalled to firm up the position.

That night a pencilled note from the divisional commander,

*The Essex Scottish attributed their inability to knock out enemy armour with the PIAT during that afternoon to plates that had been hung on the front and flanks of the German armour, creating a primitive form of "spaced armour".

Major-General A. Bruce Matthews reached Whitaker. Matthews wrote that "2nd Canadian Division is proud of the recent achievements of the RHLI. My congratulations to all ranks. You are making history — keep up the good work." This note was supplemented by a formal letter passing on congratulatory messages received from the Army Commander, General Crerar, and the Corps Commander, General Simonds, but by the time that the letter reached the RHLI they were, once again, in the thick of a hard fight.

Sporadic German counter-attacks were still being launched from woods to D Company's front and Whitaker decided that the only way to secure his position was to drive the enemy out of the excellent cover that the woods offered to the German armour. On the night of February 23 D Company made a 500-yard silent, unsupported night advance into the woodland.

We seized a little farmhouse area, (Froggett reported later). It was an ideal defensive position on the reverse slope of a hill. We had hardly dug in when a patrol came over. We captured it. Then we really had time to get our feet down. An hour later, a platoon in strength came creeping in on us, and we knocked it out, too. Before we knew it, there were about 35 German dead and wounded around our positions.

When the mists lifted next morning, Froggett found himself in a familiar position — 150 yards from well-entrenched enemy paratroopers. Woensdrecht all over again: night attack, reverse slope, a farmhouse as headquarters, and paratroopers in strength around him. This time, however, the platoons were well-sited and D Company had learned its lessons well. It held the farmhouse, where German peasants still crowded fearfully in the cellar, and trenches were dug along the stone-walls and among the few trees that surrounded it. The Germans had slightly better cover in an orchard.

During the morning a number of casualties, "both enemy and our own," began to move and moan in the gathering light. Nothing else stirred. Herb Prince and Lieutenant Joe Boulet were in a forward slit trying to spot a machine-gun that had given some trouble when hot food had been brought up during the night. Suddenly, two Germans stepped from a hedge under a white flag of truce, and walked up to their foxhole. Prince got up to meet them.

"They were a young, blond-haired officer and a sergeant who was the toughest German I'd ever seen," Prince said later.

He had an Iron Cross ribbon, and looked like a mighty capable fellow. The sergeant spoke English and said that he wanted a two-hour truce to pick up the wounded and dead.

I thought this would be a pretty good chance to ask them to surrender, but the sergeant only smiled when I did, and replied: 'No, I didn't join the army for that'.

Prince reported the request to Froggett, who, unarmed and accompanied only by his batman, met another German officer and the sergeant between the Canadian and German positions. Froggett offered cigarettes and, while they took their first puffs, asked them: "Isn't it about time that you fellows surrendered?"

"We are quite prepared to die for the Fuhrer," the captain replied. The sergeant then enquired if Froggett would care to give up and was given "a very definite refusal," reports the War Diary. A two-hour truce being agreed to, Froggett contacted the Canadian artillery and mortars and told them to cease firing until further orders. Fifteen enemy Red Cross men came into the Canadian positions to pick up the dead and wounded, and D Company's bearers went out to look after theirs. Each side carefully noted the other's positions.

As the last casualties were cleared, the German sergeant approached Prince and with unexpected sincerity told him that he hadn't expected such courtesy from Canadians. "We understood that all of you are barbarians and are to be treated as such", he said. "Thank you very much."

When the truce ended, Froggett ordered down mortar fire on the Germans to emphasize that the war had resumed and that night the Germans launched another abortive attack. It was only a prelude, however, to the very heavy counter-attack by tanks and parachute infantry in the early hours of February 26 which almost certainly would have annihilated less-experienced men.

When Froggett reported this attack, he was told to hold the position at all costs because it was part of the start line for a large-scale attack a few hours later. Any loss would prejudice the entire operation. Froggett later recorded that:

We were completely overrun. There were tanks all around us, and my men were fighting hand-to-hand with the paratroops. It was the grizzliest sight of the war for me, I guess. Men were shouting, punching, heaving grenades, firing pistols and swinging everything they could put their hands to.

Lieutenant Edwards, my Forward Observation Officer, was with me in the little frame cottage when all of a sudden a tank

was pushing the wall down. The forty or so German civilians in the cellar were screaming. Edwards had sighted all his guns the day after we got in position, so he called the artillery down on all of our targets.

Then, it looked like the first wave we were fighting was just softening us up. We weren't making much headway, and tanks were soon all around company headquarters. One of the boys crawled along a hedge and got one with a PIAT. Then Edwards called down everything artillery could send on our positions. All the Germans were above ground, and they got it. We were pretty well dug in.

Boulet fell fatally wounded, and Lieutenant Ken Dugal came up and took command of the platoon in the right forward position. Boulet's batman was badly covered with phosphor and the whole pitch-black night sort of turned into a nightmare and we felt that even daylight would be a blessing.

Froggett, who had personally killed with a pistol three Germans who entered his headquarters, held the position until relieved next morning by a troop of tanks. Daylight revealed a scene as ugly and frightful as the hours that preceded it. All the buildings were still smouldering and cows and horses had been burned alive. The living animals were being put out of their misery, and among the human casualties, the German officer who had said that he was willing to die for his Fuhrer while negotiating the truce less than twenty-four hours earlier, had fallen on the steps of company headquarters. Froggett's "bravery and sound tactical judgement" in this bloody little action were considered to be "typical of his conduct throughout the entire campaign in Western Europe" in the citation for his DSO.

The RHLI had held firm again, this time to secure the jumping-off point for Operation *Blockbuster*, and by mid-morning units of the 6th Brigade were moving through RHLI positions heading, with 4th Armoured Division support, for the higher ground south of Calcar. The weather had turned fine and Herb Prince was showing D Company positions to the relieving company when a sniper's bullet struck him in the back.

'They got Herb Prince', I heard someone say as I hit the ground. Then one of our tanks took apart the only farmhouse where the sniper could have been hiding, while machine-guns ripped through the bush around it to make sure he couldn't crawl away.

Getting the sniper made him feel a little better, Prince recalled

later. There was also another recollection of being taken back to the Regimental Aid Post.

The guy on the stretcher across from me was the young German officer I met under the white flag only two days before. He smiled at me, and I was so woozy that I couldn't smile back. But — just imagine! — he reached over and squeezed my hand. Here we'd just been through a scrap as bloody as Dieppe!

Of course, we were both out of the war.

The RHLI had suffered 125 casualties, out of the 400 inflicted on the 4th Brigade during the previous week, and they had taken a disproportionately higher toll of the enemy than the other units of the brigade. About 200 Germans had been killed around D Company positions alone. The Brigade diarist recorded that:

All units have done an exceptionally fine job of fighting, and the RHLI 'fortress' is an outstanding example of a well-planned and executed operation and of the ability of our troops under good leadership and by sheer guts and determination to take and hold difficult ground against the enemy's best.

Driven slowly back by the weight and impetus of *Blockbuster*, the enemy retreated towards the Rhine but, fighting quite literally on their own ground now, their resistance was often quite fanatical and more than compensated for their lack of air and artillery support. The core of their opposition, where the Canadians were, was the remnant of several parachute and Panzer divisions, reinforced by "old men and young boys with their hearts full of hate." The RHLI followed about a thousand yards behind the 4th Division spearhead formed by the Lincoln and Welland Regiment as the two divisions leap-frogged their way forward.

The Essex Scottish assaulted strong German defences on the edge of the Hochwald Forest, the last enemy defence line west of the Rhine, on February 29. The Essex managed to get two companies into the forest but their attack then bogged down with heavy casualties. The RHLI was ordered to move through the battered Essex Scots on March 2, and take limited objectives in the Hochwald. Whitaker, weighed the heavy opposition, and decided to try the tactic so successful earlier at Oorderen, a feigned frontal assault with flankers swinging wide to the rear. The quarterback called a screen pass.

The enemy was on higher ground with good observation. Whitaker guessed he had placed strong but thin machine-gun defences on the forest edge and a mobile force deeper which

could be moved to where it was most needed. He sent D Company under Froggett on a wide sweep to the left of the Essex with C Company following on a shorter radius, B Company, under Major E. L. Smith, made the frontal attack, pinching up the road along the original axis of attack behind a heavy mortar barrage.

After following the forest edge for several hundred yards, Froggett angled back toward the road, hoping to intersect it at a crossroads. "It was a set-piece operation," Froggett recalled later.

I was worried that I wouldn't pick the right one of five trails that cut through the forest. But we burst right in on the enemy. They didn't have a weapon sited in our direction. They thought they were in a protected position.

Ken Dugal's platoon headed right for the crossroads, and there was a guy in a slit firing an MG 42, a light machine-gun with a high rate of fire. Ken shot him in the shoulder and, without waiting, jumped right into the slit with him. Ken swung the German around. With his Sten at his back, he made him fire on his own counter-attack. We didn't have a single casualty — D Company didn't — until the counter-attack.

While we held the crossroads, Major Smith pressed down the main axis with B Company and we collected about 60 prisoners. About 80 Germans were killed. There was a fair bit of mortaring and MG fire, but Denny had really pulled this one off. We made the five hundred yards to our objective with only half the fuss we expected.

The next day, in a driving, cold rain, The Royal Regiment of Canada passed through the RHLI positions and gained about 800 yards against slight enemy opposition. The Hochwald fighting was over for the Rileys and their brigade. They rested while 5th and 6th Brigades completed the occupation of the Hochwald on March 4 and approached the strongly fortified town of Xanten, the legendary home of Siegfried. The assault on Xanten would mark the RHLI's last major assault of the war.

Chapter 21

XANTEN — THE LAST BATTLE

While the Canadians had been storming the Hochwald, pressing south along the west bank of the Rhine towards Wesel, American troops of the Ninth US Army had been pushing north, over rather easier ground. Now the Allied pincers were about to close on the most favourable axis of advance into the heart of Germany. To the north the flooded Rhine flats made a major assault impossible; farther south the Americans already had a toehold on the east bank, having captured a bridge at Remagen, halfway between Dusseldorf and Mainz, three days earlier. But the Remagen lodgement (and the one that the Third US Army established even further south on March 22) led only to the rolling wooded hills of Hesse and Thuringia, and the certainty of more of the close, brutal infantry fighting that overwhelmingly favoured the fanatical defenders. Allied strategy required that the point of main effort be located to the north, yet short of the flooded flats, where there was the prospect of a break out into the North German plain and armoured columns and tactical aircraft would be able to make maximum use of their speed, flexibility and hitting power. Wesel, only two or three miles south of the flooded area and with two major bridges over the Rhine, was the Allied objective.

On the Canadian front the approach to Wesel was covered by Xanten and General Simonds assigned its capture to the 2nd Division, which held the left on the Canadian front, with the British 43rd (Wessex) Division on its left, against the bank of the Rhine. The original Canadian plan was for the 6th Brigade to capture the town and the 5th Brigade to follow through and take the slightly higher ground beyond. However, an initial attack by the 6th Brigade was repulsed and the Canadians were regrouped for a larger attack by the 4th and 5th Brigades and the 129th Brigade of the 43rd Division. This latter formation included the 4th Battalion of the RHLI's affiliated regiment, the Somerset Light Infantry. After a three day "rest" that included a YMCA show, a major fire in the barn that adjoined Battalion headquarters, an issue of liquor and the fall from a second-storey window of one soldier from B Company, the Rileys found themselves assigned to lead the assault on Xanten, with the Essex Scottish once again on their left, and the Royals

in reserve. When the first objectives had been taken the Royals were scheduled to move through the Essex and consolidate five hundred yards further on and, finally, the 129th Brigade would come up on the left flank and take the higher ground beyond the town that was the final objective.

"We knew this would be a really tough one," Whitaker said later.

It was a long advance across open ground, and D Company under Froggett and A under Jimmy Bostwick started out in the lead. Bostwick ran into the worst of it right off because on his side there was a rise of land that we thought we held. But the enemy had it and could see everything.

Lieutenant Ken Wharton took up the story:

We were moving ahead on a compass bearing through a smokescreen, and the Jerries were dropping all the artillery they could into the smoke. That's when Jimmy Bostwick got it. I was running towards him, then suddenly saw him go up about eight feet and come down dead . . . It was a great shock, because he was the kind of guy who gave you so much confidence to be near him. It was hard to believe that suddenly he was dead. The last five words of Bostwick's life were 'Ken, take the company through!'

Major Roger Carroll, who had returned from two months sick leave on the eve of the attack, followed Bostwick with B Company, on the right side of the road and railway leading into Xanten. He had covered only half the distance to the objective when he, too, was killed by artillery fire. His company became split up. The two leading platoons pressed on, but were finally pinned down in a house where it became impossible for them either to advance or withdraw.

Froggett led the advance on the left side of the road.

It seemed that we leaned against that barrage for an hour and a half. It must have been one of the longest advances the unit ever made behind a barrage . . . Anyway, after wading over that low, wet ground — it had rained the night before — we reached our objective and pushed on an additional hundred yards or so. We picked up about 40 prisoners, and we were pretty happy. It looked like another Whitaker sweep.

But he was deceived. The Germans had devised a new and effective tactic, whereby they allowed the leading wave of attackers to pass through their forward defences and then opened fire on them from the rear, and a hail of fire fell about the Rileys from every side.

Major Ben Bolt and C Company had been late over the start

line. A curve in the road, lengthening their advance, compounded their danger as they punched forward without artillery support. At one time, in tough hand-to-hand fighting, Bolt faced a German with a jammed Sten. The German's Schmeisser, fortunately, was also jammed. Bolt beat him to the ground with the butt of his Sten and thus ended a tense confrontation.

Bayonet fighting was very rare in the north-west Europe campaign but this was one occasion when the fighting reached that level of primitive and savage intensity. Reporting on the RHLI at Xanten, Matthew Holton, the CBC radio reporter, told a nation-wide audience that "in these operations I've seen Canadians as well as Germans with bayonet wounds." Harry Oliver, now a captain, reorganized the remnants of the third platoon of B Company and brought them over to join Bolt's men. The survivors of the two platoons trapped in the house by fire from higher ground had managed to get moving again during Bolt's diversionary probes on the left, and were later joined on the B Company objective by the third platoon.

Wharton, who had taken over A Company after Bostwick's death, had 28 men.*

Our objective was a group of farm buildings in the west end of Xanten. When I got there I didn't have the slightest idea what I was going to consolidate with. Jerry was throwing everything at us, and we were all mixed up fighting among the houses. It soon began to look like we had reached a stalemate. We didn't have enough men to be as aggressive as we would like to have been, and they somehow or other didn't think they could dislodge us, which at that moment suited us just fine.

Then we lost contact with the battalion when our own artillery, bracketing one of the buildings that was giving B Company trouble, knocked down the wall of a cottage, burying our 18 set. Fortunately, the Germans had left their set behind in the building, and eventually we got that going.

A section in a house to my right was being fired at by an 88mm. We called on our artillery, and it was taken care of twenty seconds later with a terrific barrage. Whenever things got really bad we'd call on the artillery, and they would tell us to direct the fire. So all we had to do was call the number, like "Mike target Mike target five-one, five rounds gunfire, fire!"

*One of the A Company casualties was Private David Harrop, Wharton's batman and runner. "He was Private Harrop, from up Bronte way. We called him Shorty. He was a good kid, a stocky little country boy, strong as a horse, a terrific kid. He would scrounge anything you wanted. But he had real Canadian ideas about this business of being a batman . . . He would carry rations and ammunition, do all the running, but he wouldn't press a pair of pants for anyone. He said to me (Wharton) once, just after he had been sent to me as batman, 'Mind you, boss, I don't shine shoes. I don't buttle for nobody.'"

Once when I was out checking on the sections, there was a great whoosh of artillery and I wondered what in hell was going on. When I got back to my headquarters there was Johnny Simkins, my wounded platoon commander, at the wireless set. When I asked him what was going on, he said, 'I just got a little itchy, Ken, and called down a Mike 51.'

Do you know you're probably costing the taxpayer 25 dollars apiece for every one of those shells?' I said.

'Yeah', Johnny said, 'isn't it wonderful?'

Wharton held on for fifteen hours, skillfully directing and controlling the fire of supporting artillery to suppress enemy counter-attacks before they could develop too much momentum. This was one occasion when the reinforcement difficulties that had beset the Canadian infantry throughout most of the campaign paid off in practical terms: Wharton had been trained as an artillery officer and knew what he was doing. Had he not been able to hold on, "the launching of further phases of the operation would have been prejudiced" said the citation for his MC.

Two acting corporals of the company, Ivan Wright and Tom Davidson, also distinguished themselves by taking over platoons and moving from one position to another, encouraging their men and inspiring everyone by their example. When ammunition for the PIAT in one strong point was getting dangerously low they volunteered to get more from another post which had been taken by the enemy in the relentless struggle that swayed back and forth throughout the day. Under covering fire from the company Brens they raced across fifty yards of open ground, throwing a grenade into the building as they reached it. The grenade killed two German paratroopers and they brought back the bombs and another PIAT and a 2-inch mortar as well. They then destroyed another enemy strong-point with one shot from the PIAT, and altogether made themselves thorough nuisances to every German in the vicinity. Each was subsequently awarded the MM.

Whitaker, worried about lack of communications with his forward companies, raced toward Xanten in an armoured half-track to see what could be done. "I thought we'd be able to get through, but Jack Drewry (his artillery liaison officer) and I ran smack into a German anti-tank position. We jammed the half-track into reverse gear, and went back the way we came. The Germans were so surprised they only had a chance to fire a couple of hurried shots."

Froggett's wireless set had disappeared. Since the fighting seemed to have subsided behind him, he set off for Battalion headquarters taking his runner, to re-establish communications.

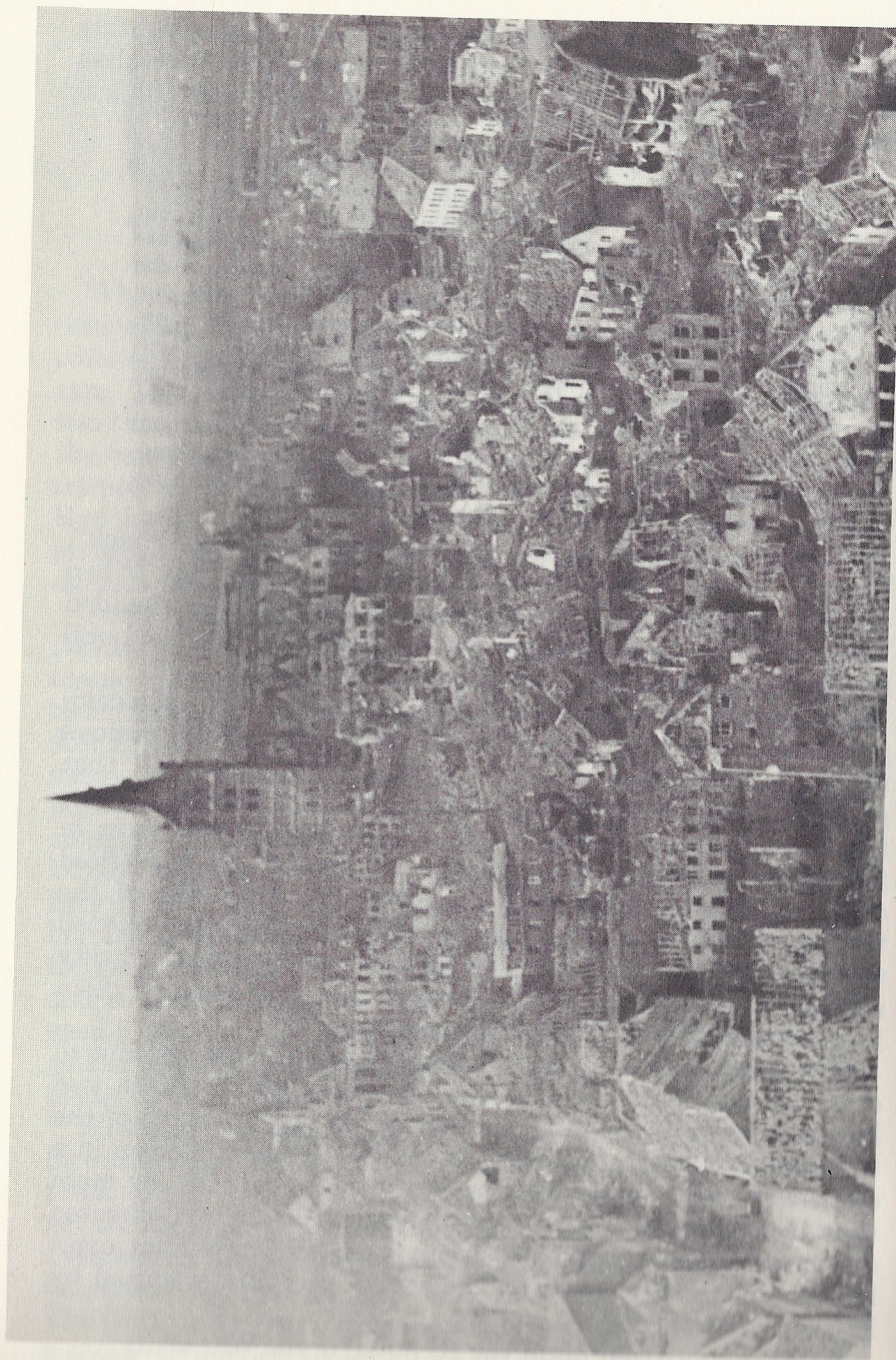
We walked straight into the enemy. When we got over a little crest of ground, several machine-guns opened fire all around me. It was obvious that they didn't want to hit me. It turned out that they were some prisoners that I'd sent back a couple hours before with a few men. They had been freed by the fire of the strong German forces behind us. 'We've decided to take you back', one of the officers told me. I felt this would be interesting. 'Back' was through my own positions. But that night I went back with about 70 of their men, a Luger pressed against my neck. To make matters worse, we went right through my own men. When we got to the Wesel bridge, it was under air and artillery fire. They sent me across unescorted, with shells clanging off the girders and me under their sights all the time. However, I was a prisoner for only three weeks.

While the Germans were trying to work their way "back", Froggett's runner was hit by RHLI machine-gun fire. When they finally withdrew, taking Froggett with them, the wounded Riley was left in a convenient cellar where his comrades found him in the course of their "mopping-up" operations.

Still worried about his communications with the rifle companies, Whitaker had ordered battalion headquarters to move forward at 0630 hours. After moving down the road that constituted the axis of advance for about six hundred yards, the headquarters vehicles were stopped by a huge crater in the middle of the road. Just then two 75mm shells were fired at the leading half-track, one landing on either side of the vehicle. At the same time machine-guns and snipers opened up from both flanks and the whole headquarters beat a hasty retreat, thanking heaven for a crater that had stopped them from driving right into the Germans' arms.

The Scout Platoon went out along the road in an attempt to clear the enemy out of the way. It advanced to within two hundred yards of a house that seemed to be the source of the trouble when fire from a flank completely pinned it down in a ditch filled with water. The scouts were held there for more than three hours, in icy water up to their necks, by well-directed sniper and machine-gun fire from a second house that overlooked their entire position. The enemy was finally routed by British flame-throwers.

At 2300 hours that night the IO noted in the War Diary:



Air photograph of Xanten after its capture by the 2nd Division March 9, 1945.

5th Canadian Infantry Brigade passed through the Royal's position and took their objectives on the far side of Xanten, without firing a shot. This strongly indicates that we were again given the responsible job of cracking the nut for the entire Division.

During the night, too, the RHLI's sister regiment, the Somerset Light Infantry, advanced into Xanten to relieve the pressure. By late afternoon of the next day, British and Canadian soldiers met in the heavily-bombed town. The battle was won. The RHLI had 134 casualties, the heaviest in 2nd Canadian Division. Two company commanders had been killed and a third taken prisoner.

That evening Brigadier Cabeldu gathered together his 4th Brigade officers and spoke of the successes of the past month. The reason for these successes, he said, was one that he had referred to upon taking command of Brigade after the action at the Forêt de la Londe seven months earlier: 'Ground once taken is never given.' It was a principle that none had pursued more tenaciously than The Royal Hamilton Light Infantry, who were nevertheless glad to hear that the whole division was going out of the line for a period of between ten and fourteen days.

By nightfall on March 10 elements of the 3rd Canadian, 52nd British and 35th US divisions had linked up in a tight semi-circle around the last German rearguards on the west bank of the Rhine, opposite Wesel, and the next day their spearheads took the surrender of the last Germans on the west bank. The British 21st Army Group — with the Ninth US Army temporarily under command — now lined the Rhine from Dusseldorf to Nijmegen.

The next day, March 12, the RHLI moved to Kranenburg for this "rest and recuperation". Nijmegen, where an Other Ranks Club and a cinema were established, was within easy reach, and local leaves were given to Paris, Brussels and Ghent. The paymaster made his rounds. Several drafts of reinforcements arrived and were distributed to the companies, and a bombed-out building was put into condition to be used as an officer's mess. Once again, unfortunately, there was a real need for "officers old and new to become acquainted with one another." Even out of the line there were dangers to be met. "When the pioneers were lifting mines in A Company area, a new anti-handling device was discovered on the handle

of one of these mines . . . so designed that when the mine is picked up by his handle it explodes in the face of the person lifting it."

A visit from Ross Munro, the Canadian war correspondent, brought the RHLI a "dashing two-column write-up" in the pages of the Canadian Army newspaper, *Maple Leaf*, reported the War Diarist, adding that, "At long last the strenuous efforts of the battalion are being made public . . . This will certainly help to ease the pain that (the) previous lack of recognition has caused." The implied criticism was certainly justified for a review of the *Maple Leaf*, thirty-odd years later, makes it clear that the RHLI had not been getting the recognition that went to the Highland or Armoured regiments, for example, and an examination of the photographic archives of the Public Archives of Canada leaves the historian wondering why so few army photographers ever visited the RHLI, which must surely have been the least photographed combat unit of the Army.

At the end of the month the Rileys said goodbye to Lieutenant-Colonel Whitaker, posted to England to take command of a training regiment after a most distinguished career in the field that had brought him the DSO and Bar and the respect and admiration of all those who had served under him. "There isn't one amongst us who doesn't regret his leaving the unit," recorded the War Diary, a sentiment that was surely shared by Whitaker himself. The new CO was Hugh Arrell, now the only officer left in the battalion who had been with it when it left Canada nearly five years before.

While the RHLI rested, trained and re-equipped, I Canadian Corps was joining First Canadian Army. From the late spring of 1944 an entire Canadian corps — the 1st Infantry and 5th Armoured Divisions, plus the 1st Canadian Armoured Brigade — had been fighting in Italy. In the months after First Canadian Army had gone into action for the first time, in Normandy, there had been intermittent and uncertain pressure from Canada to have the two corps united, so that Canadian ground forces could fight as an integrated, national force. That pressure had been applied more consistently and with increasing urgency after General McNaughton had become Minister of National Defence in November, 1944. The logistic difficulties and expense of moving the force would fall largely upon Anglo-American resources, however, and our allies were not

enthusiastic. Not until the Combined Chiefs of Staff meeting on the island of Malta, in January 1945, when the British chiefs accepted the American view that "the right course of action was to reinforce the decisive western front at the expense of the Mediterranean Theatre", did the strategic moment arise. The transfer of "up to five" divisions was authorised and arrangements to move the Canadians began at once. Their first elements began to arrive in Belgium in late February and by April 3 the move was complete. A Canadian army of five divisions was ready to cross the Rhine.

The initial assault, between Wesel and Emmerich on the night of March 23/24, was directed by Second British Army, however, and the first Canadian unit across was the Highland Light Infantry of Canada, of the 3rd Division's 9th (Highland) Brigade. The whole division was soon in action again, driving north this time, down the east bank of the Rhine, back towards the Dutch border, and a week later the 2nd Division was back in the line, on the 3rd's right flank. The first RHLI vehicle across the Rhine crossed at approximately 1510 hours on March 30, 1945, a move that had "a tremendous moral effect on every officer and man in the battalion." The Rileys marched northwards, out of Germany this time, and by April 2 had reached the Twente Canal, just west of Zutphen. On the 3rd they began rafting across the canal, since the Engineers' bridge-building was being hampered by artillery fire. By first light the next morning the whole battalion was across and pressing forward against light, sporadic opposition provided chiefly by young boys of a Hitler Youth parachute training battalion. One scared prisoner had been in the army only two weeks.

The 5th Brigade was pressing ahead, by-passing pockets of local opposition. After passing through Holten on the morning of April 9, riding on Kangaroos and tanks of the Fort Garry Horse with the battalion's carriers out in front, the RHLI column came under fire on the road to Nijuerdal. Ken Wharton remembered it well:

We had just passed through (Holten) when we ran into this line of Jerries across the road and extending out into the fields on either side. Many of them were in drainage ditches. When we came down the road some of them nearest us jumped up and put up their hands to surrender, but the Jerries at the other end of the line were firing at us with *Panzerfausts*. It was a nasty situation.